**God Influences Man’s Heart:**

**Divine Intervention in Human Behavior According to the Book of Samuel and the Iliad**

**in Light of the Socio-Historical Context**

Abstract

The cultures of ancient Israel and ancient Greece are at the conceptual core of contemporary western culture, in which we live. A central value in this culture is that of free choice. This value, fundamental in our lives, finds many forms of expression in our society’s formative literary works. Humankind’s diverse conceptions of free choice emerge primarily from the culture in which an individual lives and acts: Is there really such a thing as choice? Is it really free? To what extent is a person responsible for his or her decisions and actions? Do people understand their decisions as independent and autonomous? Or do they see them as influenceable? Freedom of choice, as a broad and general notion, furnishes the backdrop informing the present study.

One subject that arises with respect to freedom of choice in ancient literature is that of God’s influence on human behavior. This study sets out from the assumption that the way God’s influence on human actions is perceived, and particularly the degree of responsibility people take for their actions, manifest and reflect social and historical dimensions. This study’s goal is to contribute to the discussion on free choice: Through two formative, canonical texts—the Book of Samuel and the Iliad—God’s influence on human decisions is examined, along with the way this influence is perceived in society. The core of the study examines the literary expression of the interaction between the state of society and authority, and the definition of responsibility, based on a distinction between cultures of shame and cultures of guilt. Special attention is given to the motif of divine intervention in human acts. In other words: the central motif of this study is the perception of free choice as expressed in the decision-making process and attribution of responsibility for actions, as well as God’s influence on both. Against this backdrop, this study delves into the way changes in social structure influence these matters. The decision to focus on the Book of Samuel and the Iliad stems, in part, from the social changes that are reflected in these texts: transition from disparate tribes to a unified kingdom or unifying framework, in order to face great challenges. As a prelude to the literary investigation, the study establishes the socio-historical contexts of both texts, highlighting the similarities and differences between the cultures that produced them. These two formative texts are representative of the respective cultural codes of ancient Israel and ancient Greece—this is why they are so important, and this is why they have been chosen for comparison. Both texts furnish evidence about the connection between social change – the transition from a divided tribal structure to unified hierarchal one, centered around a leader – and changed perceptions of divine influence and human responsibility. Indeed, it seems that both Homer and the Book of Samuel’s redactor intended to draw attention to these changes. The study also examines the differences between the nature of the monarchy in ancient Israel, according to Samuel, and the unification around a leader regarded as a “first among equals” in ancient Greece, according to the Iliad, as well as their influence on perceptions of responsibility for deeds as reflected in the texts.

The study was implemented in several stages, incorporating different qualitative methodologies from numerous fields, among them literary studies, social psychology, anthropology, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. One important theoretical tool used in this study is sociological phenomenology; this approach assumes that our understanding of reality is socially structured, that is, that the structures through which we understand the world are generated by the interaction and interconnection between people using symbols, such as language and bodily gestures. The social conception of reality is endowed with meaning by social experience and the interpretation of social behavior. Using these tools, among others, the present study locates thick descriptions of the thought and behavior patterns of the literary heroes. In addition, tools for the analysis and synthesis of the text have been incorporated by breaking down the research question into categories. These categories were then located in the texts in a detailed manner, catalogued, and analyzed statistically in order to arrive at more comprehensive insights.

The insights gleaned from the research and used to substantiate the socio-political argument are presented on three social levels:

* The first level - individual: This level focuses on the individual person, and relates to their personal decision-making process, or to the decisions made by a single deity who appears in the narrative.
* The second level - tribal: This level relates to the decision-making process of a leader or tribal chief in his political dealings with his subordinate tribal members.
* The third level - monarchic: This level relates to the decision-making process of a king or centralized leader who consolidates the support of other leaders, tribal chiefs, or subordinate minor kings in his political dealings with them.

This study finds that the conduct of the “king’s court” internally and before the leader constitutes the social melting pot that changes and reshapes behavioral patterns in the context of decision-making processes. Therefore, it seems that the king's court is the link connecting the process of tribal unification under a central leadership with changes in behavioral norms and psychological organization. In addition, we find that this study’s distinction between cultures of shame and cultures of guilt cannot unequivocally distinguish between different types of social organization. That is, we should not consider the culture of shame as a categorical property of a tribal leader’s conduct, just as we should not consider the culture of guilt to be a general property of leadership in a culture that was consolidated through the unification of distinct tribes. These distinctions present us with certain behavioral patterns that may be found in any of the forms of social organization and leadership discussed above. This study reveals how the core values of free choice and free will were shaped in the texts: an individual has free choice when faced with multiple options whose consequences he can evaluate and predict. These options are limited by the individual’s sphere of possibilities—that is, what he or she is able to expect from a given, often limited, situation. The extent of this sphere, as we have seen, depends on an individual’s personality, wisdom, and experience, as well as on his social status. On the other hand, we can see that free will is almost entirely absent, both for man and the gods. The texts make clear that great plans, devised mainly by the God of Israel or by Zeus, are what determine the general course of events; and the gods, too, are subject to the fate these plans dictate.

The cultural comparison conducted highlights changes in the psycho-social modes of behavior characterizing tribal life as opposed to those that characterize unified societies ruled by a king. Although both cultures prefer unified and restrained behavior, one finds expressions of fundamental changes in certain ideologies or worldviews supported by the editors of the texts. For example, in ancient Israel, these values include the covenant with the God of Israel, collective acceptance of the covenant and its religious duties (*mitzvot*), social decency, and the acceptance of divine authority by worthy leaders, as a condition for the continuation of the kingdom. In the Iliad, such values include a preference for grace, as well as a preference for personal and social responsibility over hubris, selfishness, and the pursuit of personal glory. Such a comparison can better explain the way we understand these values. That is, we learn about ourselves more effectively when we look at ourselves from outside—or through the eyes of a different or distant culture.