Abstract

**God Sways Man’s Heart: Divine Intervention in Human Behavior according to the Book of Samuel and the Iliad, in its Cultural-Historical Context**

The cultures of ancient Israel and ancient Greece are at the conceptual core of contemporary western culture, which gives a place of prominence to free choice. This value plays a central role in our lives and is expressed in many aspects of our society’s literary canon. 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 the will? Is the will really free? To what extent are people responsible for their decisions and actions? Do people understand their decisions as independent and autonomous or do they see them as shaped by external pressures? Freedom of choice, as a broad and general subject, forms the background to the present study.

One of the subjects concerning freedom of choice in antiquity is God’s influence on human behavior. This study sets out from the assumption that the manner in which God’s influence on human actions is perceived, and particularly the degree of responsibility that people take for their actions, reflects social and historical dimensions. This study’s goal is to contribute to the discussion on free choice. God’s influence on human decisions, and the way this influence is perceived in society, is examined through two formative, canonical texts, the Book of Samuel and the Iliad.

The core of this study examines the literary expression of the interaction between the state of society and authority, and the definition of responsibility, on the basis of 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 principle theme of this study is the understanding of freedom of choice as it is expressed both in the decision-making process and in taking responsibility for actions performed, and role the divine plays in both of these aspects. As part of this topic, the present study delves into the manner in which changes in the social structure influence this state of affairs. The decision to focus on the Book of Samuel and the Iliad stems, in part, from the social changes that can be glimpsed through these texts – a transition from disparate tribes to a unified kingdom, or some other large-scale, unifying framework, adopted in order to face critical challenges. As a prelude to the literary investigation, this study establishes the socio-historical context 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; hence their importance, and the justification for comparing them. Both texts furnish evidence about the connection between cultural shifts – the transition from a divided tribal structure to unified hierarchal one, centered around a leader – and changes in ways of understanding divine influence on human matters, as well as human responsibility for choices made and actions taken. Indeed, it seems that both Homer and the unknown redactor of the Book of Samuel intended to highlight these changes through the examples given in their respective narratives. This study also identifies the difference between the nature of the monarchy in ancient Israel, as narrated in the Book of Samuel, and the figure of the leader in ancient Greece, who was understood only as “the first among equals,” as it appears in the Iliad. These different conceptions of leadership, this study argues, result in the different understandings of human responsibility presented by the two texts.

The present 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 general insights.

The insights gleaned from the research and used to substantiate the socio-political argument are presented in three social strata. The first stratum focuses on the individual, and relates to an individual’s personal decision-making process, or to the decisions made by a single deity who appears in the narrative. The second stratum concerns the tribe, and relates to the decision-making process of a leader or a tribal chief, and his political actions vis-à-vis his subordinate tribal members. The third, monarchal layer concerns the decision-making process of a king or a centralized leader, and the political actions through which he consolidates the support of other, less powerful leaders or tribal chiefs who are subordinate to him.

This study finds that the “king’s court” constitutes a social melting pot that changes and redefines decision making patterns; this is true both when the court meets by itself, and when the court sits in session with the monarch. Moreover, it seems that the court is the link connecting the process of tribal and national unification under a central leadership with changes in behavior patterns and emotional 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 created by the crystallization of separate tribes. These distinctions present us with certain behavioral patterns that may be found in any of the modes of social organization and leadership strata discussed above. This study reveals how the core values of free choice and free will were shaped by texts: an individual has free choice when faced with a number of 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 and ethnic background. 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 the manner in which things come to pass has been devised by the God of Israel or Zeus, to which even the lesser, subordinate gods, must bow, accepting the fate they are dictated.

The cultural comparison conducted highlights changes in the psycho-social modes of behavior characterizing tribal life as opposed to those modes that characterize unified societies ruled by a king. Although both cultures prefer a unified and moderate form of action, important changes in ideology or weltanschauung are expressed by values supported by the editors of the texts. For example, in ancient Israel, these values include the covenant with the God of Israel, the collective acceptance of the covenant and the 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 as opposed to hubris, selfishness, and the pursuit of personal glory. Such a comparison can better explain the manner in which we understand these values. That is, we learn best about ourselves when we can observe ourselves from the outside, or view other cultures that are distant from us in space or time. Possible future research could focus on understanding the motive and the psycho-social need for loyalty to ideals, as well as on the ways in which new ideas, which strengthen social ideals and increase loyalty towards them, are adopted. Concerning loyalty, the focus will be on belonging and identification; concerning ideals, the emphasis will be on the political sphere and social conceptions. Such research will also attempt to locate the full range of aspects of loyalty and the ideologies to which it gives rise, to classify and sort these aspects, and to examine how they are expressed in relation to the main motif – the social motives for the adoption and preservation of these same values.