IRENA AVSENIK NABERGOJ

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Human and Divine Authority and Human Emotions in Hebrew Narrative and Greek Tragedy

Abstract: This article examines the narrative of the compassionate response of two Hebrew midwives and Pharaoh's daughter to Pharaoh's command that Hebrew boys be killed at birth (Ex 1:82:10), and of Medea's vengeful to her husband Jason's infidelity in Euripides' tragedy *Medea*. The paradox of Medea's character is reflected in her decision to murder her two sons, whom she loves immeasurably, because by this absurd act she hurts the traitorous Jason to the utmost humanly possible degree. The Hebrew midwives save Hebrew children because they "fear God," Pharaohs daughter saves a Hebrew child from her father's murderous plan without explaining the reasons, and Medea, in preparing and carrying out the murderous plan invokes the authority of the gods who mercilessly punish human transgressors. The aim of the article is to show how the Hebrew story, on the one hand, and the Greek drama, on the other hand, present, indicate or explicitly express the reasons for the behaviour of literary characters in relation to human and divine authority.

Keywords: fear of God, adoption of the Hebrew child, Medea and Jason, Medea's infanticide, punishment in the name of the gods

Władza ludzka i boska oraz ludzkie emocje w narracji hebrajskiej i tragedii greckiej

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje narrację o współczującej reakcji dwóch hebrajskich akuszerek i córki faraona na polecenie faraona, by hebrajskich chłopców zabić przy narodzinach (Wj 1,82,10), oraz o mściwej reakcji Medei na niewierność jej męża Jasona w tragedii Eurypidesa Medea. Paradoks charakteru Medei przejawia się w jej decyzji zamordowania swoich dwóch synów, których kocha bezmiernie, ponieważ tym absurdalnym czynem krzywdzi zdradzieckiego Jasona w stopniu po ludzku najwyższym z możliwych. Hebrajskie akuszerki ratują hebrajskie dzieci, bo "boją się Boga", córka faraona ratuje hebrajskie dziecko przed morderczym planem ojca, nie wyjaśniając przyczyn, a Medea, przygotowując i realizując morderczy plan, powołuje się na autorytet bogów, którzy bezlitośnie karzą ludzkich przestępców. Celem artykułu jest pokazanie, w jaki sposób opowieść hebrajska z jednej strony i dramat grecki z drugiej przedstawiają, wskazują lub wprost wyrażają przyczyny zachowań bohaterów literackich w odniesieniu do autorytetu ludzkiego i boskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: strach przed Bogiem, adopcja dziecka hebrajskiego, Medea i Jason, dzieciobójstwo Medei, kara w imię bogów

Introduction

Exodus contains the narrative of two God fearing Hebrew midwives and of Pharaoh's compassionate daughter (Ex 1:82:10), which only takes on its full meaning in the narrower context of the first two chapters of the book, in wider context of the first 15 chapters of the book, and in the inter-textual relationships in the Old and New Testaments. The narrative of Exodus 1:1-14 speaks of the extraordinary fertility of the children of Israel in Egypt, of the fear of the new king, "who did not know Joseph" (1:8), that the children of Israel would outnumber the Egyptians, and consequently how he imposed hard works on them in order to prevent this. The passage Ex 1:15-21 reports Pharaoh's instruction to two Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah who assisted in childbirth: "When you act as midwifes to Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." (Ex 1:16) But the Egyptian midwives, out of compassion for their children, did not carry out Pharaoh's order, "Then Pharaoh commanded all his people" to throw every boy that was born into the Nile (Ex 1:22). When Levi's daughter gave birth to a beautiful baby boy, she hid him for three months, then laid him in a papyrus basket in a pool on the banks of the Nile. Then it happened that the basket was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter while she was bathing in the Nile. She immediately thought: "This must be one of the Hebrews' children" (Ex 2:6), yet she did not hand him over to death to do her father's will, but she "drew him out of the water," took care of him, and finally adopted him. She gave him the name Moses.

The first two chapters of Exodus therefore contain poetic narratives of the clash between the formal power of the highest human authority and the power of compassion of the female characters in the story: the natural emotion of the status-weaker midwifes who "feared God" (1:17), and the natural compassion of Pharaoh's daughter, who "took pity on" the crying child (2:6). A thematic and linguistic analysis of these passages in the context of Exodus 115 and in the broader inter-contextual relations of Scripture shows that the irony of this contrast is far more significant than the narrower context of Exodus 12 might suggest. It is obvious that the mild women, the Egyptian midwives and Pharaoh's daughter, played a tremendous role in God's plan to save the Hebrew people, without even realising it.

The passages in Exodus 12 express in a uniquely poetic way the use of irony, which is manifested in the contrast between the position of political power and the power of compassion of the female biblical characters, which in the Bible is the highest criterion of the attitude towards humankind and therefore also in human relations. The uniqueness of the biblical story is even more evident when we compare it with the character of Medea in Euripides' tragedy of the same name, who so intensifies her sense of justice that she ends up completely suppressing her motherly compassion and killing her own growing children. The character of Medea in Euripides does not play a role in a divine plan, as in the case of the Egyptian midwives and the Pharaoh's daughter, although Medea does appear in a mixed human-divine role. Medea does not seek her justice by trusting in a higher justice, but takes

justice into her own hands for vengeful purposes. In her unrelenting vengefulness, she goes so far as to murder her own two sons, whom she loves most, in order to hurt her unfaithful husband Jason to the extreme.[1]

1. Contrasting Characters in the Narrative Exodus 12

The narrative of Exodus 12 is linked by the theme of the contrast between God's plan for the good of the Hebrew people and the wicked plan of the king of Egypt. With the rise of a new Egyptian king, the period of prosperity and happiness of Jacob's children in Egypt turns into oppression for their descendants. The crisis that is the theme of Exodus 1-2 begins with the rise of Pharaoh, "who did not know Joseph" (1:8): "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." (Ex 1:9-10) The theme of the multiplication of the children of Israel recalls the priestly source of the emphasis on this theme already at the beginning of prehistory: in the account of the creation (Gen 1:7, 28) and in the account of the great flood (Gen 9:1, 7).

The passage in Exodus 1:15-21 reports Pharaoh's genocidal plan, which backfired because "the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live" (Ex 1:17). Nahum M. Sarna sees in the midwives' response to Pharaoh's murderous order a "dictate of conscience":

> Faced with a conflict between the laws of God and those of the pharaoh, the midwives followed the dictates of conscience. Their defiance of tyranny constitutes history's first recorded act of civil disobedience in defence of a moral imperative. It is stated that they were actuated by "fear of God," a phrase frequently associated with moral and ethical behavior. "Fear of God" connotes a conception of. God as One who makes moral demand on humankind; it functions as the ultimate restraint on evil and the supreme stimulus for good. (Sarna 1991, 7).

The danger of the ruin of the tribe of Israel is reminiscent of such dangers already described in Genesis: the barrenness of Sarah (Gen 11:30), Rebekah (Gen 25:21) and Rachel (Gen 29:31). In such cases, God's saving hand is revealed. The opposite move of God in the face of Pharaoh's abuse of power is the murder of the Egyptian firstborn on the Passover night (Ex 11:4-8; 12:29-30). The disobedience of the two Egyptian midwives to the command of conscience results in the very opposite of Pharaoh's plan: "So God dealt well with the

[1] The article includes parts of the author's contribution in Slovenian language for the magazine *Edinost in dialog / Unity and Dialogue*, 75 (1), 2020, 1739: Sočutje faraonove hčere v Svetem pismu in maščevalna pravičnost Medeje v grški drami / The Compassion of Pharaoh's Daughter in the Bible and the Vengeful Justice of Medea in Greek Drama. In this English version, the title and abstract have been changed because the focus is on the issue of divine and human authority. From a theological point of view, this is the most important content of the discussed texts in the Bible and in Greek tragedy.

midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families." (Ex 1:20-21)

Pharaoh received an explanation from the midwives as to why his first murderous plan had failed: "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." (Ex 1:19) This is where first appears the title "Hebrew" in the feminine form *hā'ibriyyôt*, "the Hebrew women." The midwives indulge in a lie of the simplest kind in order to save themselves from Pharaoh's deadly arbitrariness.[2] Pharaoh then "commanded all his people" that at birth every boy should be thrown into the Nile, and every girl should be kept alive (Ex 1:22). The response to this second command of his is even more ironic: even Pharaoh's daughter disobeyed her father's command, but out of compassion rescued a Hebrew boy from the Nile, took care of him, adopted him, and gave him the meaningful name Moses; for she said, "I drew him out of the water." (Ex 2:10) The miraculous rescue of the Hebrew boy from the water and the unexpected affection of Pharaoh's daughter for him hint at the question that would later be asked at the birth of John the Baptist: "What then will this child become? For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him." (Lk 1:66)

In the narrative of Exodus 1:12:10, two female figures are presented as saviours: the daughter of Pharaoh, who took pity on the weeping Hebrew boy in the basket on the Nile and therefore ensured his survival and development in the court, and the daughter of Levi, who was the mother of the beautiful boy and protected him from the threat of death. The account of Pharaoh's daughter's unexpected encounter with a Hebrew child in the Nile River (Ex 2:5-10) does not even indicate whether the princess knew of her father's command that Hebrew boys should be killed at birth. She also does not mention what emotions she felt upon meeting the child. The reader understands from the context that she must have known about her father's order, but compassion for the helpless child prevailed in her. With this, the narrator without explanation points out the complete contrast between the cruelty of the ruler and the compassion of his daughter. At the same time, he can conclude from the context that it is not a coincidence, but a paradoxical plan of God to save the endangered Hebrew people even with the help of the weakest members of the ruler's family, who asserts his authority in opposition to the moral principles of God's authority and therefore in opposition to God's plan of salvation for the nations and the world.

Out of the ordered conflict between the Hebrews and the Egyptians arose the cooperation in the rescue of the child between Levi's "daughter" and Pharaoh's "daughter," because both acted in accordance with the natural feminine compassion with the child as such, whatever its origin. Umberto Cassuto says of the reaction of Pharaoh's daughter to the child's fate: "The thing that immediately attracted her attention was his weeping. He is crying, therefore

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[2] "The Old Testament shows beyond doubt that the measure of righteousness and truth is not the powerful, but the poor. The pagan gods are on the side of the powerful, but the God of the Bible is on the side of the poor." (Petkovšek 2018, 252).

he is not dead, but is suffering and arouses compassion." (Cassuto 1983, 19) Cornelis Houtman, on the other hand, sees a dilemma in the surprisingly positive reaction of the Pharaoh's daughter when she meets the helpless child, which is logical: "Knowing what is in the basket, the reader's absorbing interest is what Pharaoh' daughter will do once will do when she discovers the child. There is no reason not to think that she, the daughter of the Pharaoh who issued the order, will right away carry out that order. It is a highly critical moment. The reader holds her breath, but then breathes more easily when Pharaoh' daughter does not immediately do the expected thing. An inner struggle, not wanting to do what she knows is expected of her, seems to momentarily paralyze the princess. She pities the child in the basket, but also knows that he is a Hebrew boy who is not allowed to live." (Houtman 1993, 268)

And a third compassionate female figure played an important role in solving predicament of Pharaoh' daughter: the sister of Moses. When she secretly followed the basket out of the separation and perceived from afar the compassion of Pharaoh's daughter for the crying Hebrew child (Ex 2:6), she ran to her and addressed her, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse child for you?" (Ex 2:7) Surprisingly, Pharaoh's daughter agreed. Moses' sister then called her and the child's mother to nurse. John I. Durham describes the moment of resolution of the inner tension in the mind of Pharaoh's daughter as follows: "The implication is that discovery was not a part of the plan, for an Egyptian discovery certainly put the baby in harm's way. The suspense of the discovery is that it was unintended and dangerous. The delight of the discovery is the totally unexpected way it turned out. The climax of the discovery is the quick and bold action of the little boy's sister, who comes forward (with a convenient offer to find a wet nurse) when she sees the princess's reaction to her brother's tears." (Durham 1987, 16)

The role of Pharaoh's daughter, who seemingly accidentally stumbled upon the child in the basket while bathing in the Nile, plays a remarkable role in the immediate context of Exodus 12, even extending to the whole message of God saving his people in dire need. The role of irony is evident, and Umberto Cassuto recognises "the poetic character and the simplicity" of the presentation of the tale (Cassuto 1983, 13). William H. C. Propp observes: "There are also grimmer ironies, and significant connections with the Exodus tradition. The encounter between Moses' sister and Pharaoh's daughter at the Nile foreshadows, at least in the composite text, the riverside meetings of Pharaoh and Moses (7:14; 8:16 [E] (Propp 1999, 154). This typological role of the text is echoed, among other places, in the Book of Wisdom (18:5):

> When they had resolved to kill the infants of your holy ones,
> and one child had been abandoned and rescued,
> You in punishment took away a multitude of their children;
> and you destroyed them all together by a mighty flood.

The use of symbolism to suggest the contrasting events at the Nile River leads Propp to reflect, "Indeed, one might regard Pharaoh's daughter as symbolizing God himself,

who rescues Israel from the waters and claims him as a son; her servant, then, represents Moses." (Propp 1999, 154)

The extraordinary symbolic significance of Moses' rescue from Pharaoh's genocidal hand by the irresistible power of his daughter's compassion leads to the logical conclusion of the primary significance of Exodus 2:1-10 in the context of Exodus 12: "Ch. 2 provided the primary tradition to which ch. 1 was secondarily joined." (Childs 1974, 11) Brevard S. Childs relates the symbolic significance of the typology of characters in the narrative of both chapters to the biblical wisdom tradition: the Pharaoh represents the typical figure of the autocrat, the piety of the two midwifes reflects the religious ideal of the wisdom circles, and the Pharaoh's daughter is presented in a wholly positive way in relation to the Hebrew child: "It is not because of ignorance or deception that she adopts the child. Rather, the narrator discloses her spontaneous pity for the child, as well as her awareness that he is "one of the Hebrew children" (Gen 2:6). This positive attitude toward the foreigner is characteristic of the international favour of wisdom circles." (Childs 1974, 13) The noble humanity of Pharaoh's daughter presents a diametrical contrast to the cruelty of her father, who chose to take genocidal measures against the enslaved Hebrews. The contrast, however, is so complete and unexpected that it creates multiple facets of irony in the narrative, as Carol Meyers notes:

> Ironies abound in this episode. The Nile, for example, is meant to be the pharaoh's instrument for killing male children; and instead it becomes the vehicle for saving Moses. And a member of the powerful pharaonic household agrees to the suggestions of a lowly member of society, a foreigner whose people are in bondage to the royal administration: Indeed, the ability of the powerless (including the midwives) to achieve their goals and disrupt political hierarchies through cleverness is a strong message of this segment of the exodus tale and the diplomacy of their leaders. (Meyers 2005, 4243)

These aspects of irony suggest that in the narratives of Exodus 12 God does not intervene directly, but indirectly, and this does not fit well with the tradition of Exodus. The way in which the course of events is narrated is more reminiscent of the narrative of the Egyptian Joseph in Genesis (chaps. 3750): "Nowhere does God appear to rescue the child; rather, everything everything has a 'natural' cause. Yet it is clear that the writer sees the mystery of God's providence through the actions of the humans involved." (Childs 1974, 13) Werner H. Schmidt reflects:

> God does not intervene in the action, either by word or deed, but guides it in secret. As in the immediately preceding narrative of the disobedience of the midwives, the preservation of life is done by human agency: there the midwives oppose Pharaoh out of fear of God, here the daughter, probably out of compassion, responds differently than her father's command requires. Thus, in both narratives, in a strict sense, no miracle happens. The eventsthe rescue of the child, the return to the mother, and the adoption by Pharaoh's daughterare indeed unforeseen,

> unexpected, and in this respect wonderful, but not miraculous; for they take place within the range of what is humanly possible. (Schmidt 1988, 75).

The story of the rescue of the saviour of the oppressed Hebrew people in Egypt is linked to the New Testament story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, which causes King Herod to fear being threatened. An important aspect of the narrative in Matthew's Gospel is the command of the angel of the Lord, given to Joseph in a dream, to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus in the face of Herod's murderous threat. The return of the Holy Family from Egypt after Herod's death is reminiscent of the statement of the prophet Hosea (11:1), "Out of Egypt I called my son." The juxtaposition of the narratives in Exodus 12 and Matthew 2 highlights the distinctive biblical truth that God's plan of salvation for the covenant people gets off to a shaky start in circumstances where the powers of the world seem to be invincible. In both cases, the power of God's redemptive plan intervenes unexpectedly in a situation that is hopeless in human eyes; in both cases, the condition of the weak people is linked to suffering. The link between the Old Testament and the New Testament story of the birth of a saviour according to God's plan finally highlights the multiple meanings of the role of Egypt: "The deliverance from Egypt had not brought true freedom, but Israel still awaited her true redemption. The Messiah identifies himself with the history of his people, descending into Egypt, and coming out as a true son." (Childs 1974, 25) It is in this range of typological and symbolic interpretation that we finally see the key to the Church's belief that the power of God's grace has at all times rescued a weak people from the forces of evil.

2. Medea's Internal Conflicts and Directions of Interpretation

Euripides' tragedy Medea is notable for the simplicity of its dialogue, its tendency to approximate as closely as possible to the ordinary human way of speaking, its rich use of images, wordplay, paradox and backstage action.[3] The heroine is considered a very unusual human being, full of anger and vindictiveness. She is unpredictable, and the reason for her unpredictability is the fierce inner struggle between her natural sense of love and motherhood and the consequences of her frustration with male domination in a society that degrades women. From the very beginning of the play, Medea presents herself as a warrior for women's rights (214-266).

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle singles out Euripides as "the most tragic of the poets." In Chapter 13, when discussing the structure of action in an artistically accomplished tragedy, he points out that the main characteristic of tragedy is that it is about a human person who goes from happiness to unhappiness because of some fatal mistake, and he says:

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[3] For the text of the play Medea see especially Euripides 1980; Euripides 2006.

> Originally, the poets recounted any and every story, but nowadays the finest tragedies are composed about only a few families, such as Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and as many others as have suffered or perpetrated terrible things. So the finest tragedy of which the art permits follows this structure. Which is why the same mistake is made by those who complain that Euripides does this in his plays, and that most end in adversity. For this, as explained, is the right way. And the greatest indication of this is that in theatrical contests such plays are found the most tragic, if successfully managed; and Euripides, even if he does not arrange other details well, is at least found the most tragic of the poets. (1453a: 17-31; Aristotle 2005, 71–73).

In chapter 14 of *Poetics*, Aristotle explains that tragedy evokes "horror and pity at what comes about." Then he explains what he means with this experience.

> Let us, then, take up the question of what sorts of incidents strike us as terrible or pitiable. Now, such actions must occur between friends, enemies, or neutrals. Well, if enemy acts towards enemy, there is nothing pitiable in either the deed or the prospect of it, except for the suffering as such; nor if the parties are neutrals. What tragedy must seek are cases where the sufferings occur within relationships, such as brother and brother, son and father, mother and son, son and motherwhen the one kills (or is about to kill) the other, or commits some other such deed. (1453b: 1-23; Aristotle 2005, 7375).

The starting point of Euripides' tragedy is the decision of Medea's husband Jason, with whom Medea had been living in Corinth after fleeing her homeland of Colchis, to leave her and her children and accept the offer of the Corinthian king Creon to marry his daughter, Glauce. The narrative describes Medea's great anguish and pain at betraying her home, her native land and her father for the man who finally took her honour from her. Shocked by Jason's betrayal, the unhappy Medea refuses food and wishes to die; is experiencing the fate of homelessness, now destitute after a long journey to Corinth.

In Scene 9, Jason comes to Medea after the nurse's intervention. Medea pretends to him that she is still devoted to him. She assures her husband that she knows how he only wants what is good for her and the child with a prudent plan. She regrets, in her words, that she was so foolish as to be angry with him and not act in the best interests of his new marriage. Jason assures her that he understands her earlier anger and does not hold anything against her. After it is obvious that the king is expelling her, Medea accepts his command and assures Jason that she will not be a nuisance to him or the ruler. She asks him, however, to beg of Creon not to send the children into exile (918). Since Jason does not know whether he will be able to convince the ruler, Medea suggests that he ask his new bride to convince her father.

In scene 13, Jason appears looking for Medea. He is worried about the child (1293-1305) and explains the reason for his arrival on the scene to save the children. But the chorus tells him the terrible news: "With her own hands Medea killed your sons" (1283) Jason feels

that Medea has destroyed him and wants to see the dead children, but from inside the house Medea replies that they are destroyed because of his ingratitude and betrayal. Medea also refuses his request: "Let me bury our sons Let me mourn them properly" (1352).

In conclusion, Jason laments his fate and calls on the gods to witness this terrible development in his own family. He regrets ever having conceived a child and seen them die at Medea's hand. Finally, the chorus tells us that the story has unfolded in an unexpected way:

> The gods love surprise, so what men want
> is often denied, and yet the gods prevail
> for us. Think of the story we've just listened to:
> Who won? Who lost?
> Zeus stores our destinies in his great house,
> some glitter brightly, but most are hidden.
> (1392-1397; Euripides 2007, 82)

Euripides' tragedy *Medea* touches on fundamental ethical issues. The starting point of Euripides' view is that every human action, done whether consciously or unconsciously, has consequences which humans must face and seek a way out. Everything revolves around Medea and her husband Jason, who are the main subjects of the tragedy and who are in conflict from beginning to end over Jason's guilt. The consequences of the rift between Medea and Jason escalate as Jason never admits his responsibility for the suffering that his infidelity has caused to the whole family. His performance is characterised by a constant denial of his own guilt, while Medea is characterised by falling victim to her extreme sensitivity to her honour and her consequent passionate zeal for revenge. The main victims of the confrontation between Medea and Jason are their two immature children, who are not yet fully aware of the origins or the consequences of the tragedy caused by the rift between their parents. The nurse cannot understand why Medea will "make the children pay for their father's treachery" (110-111). Medea's insistence that there is neither excuse nor forgiveness for Jason's betrayal suggests that her response transcends her own weaknesses and strengths, and symbolically represents the law of cosmic order or the will of the gods, who will in no way forgive a promise made in the face of their supreme authority.

The chorus of Corinthian wives, which appears in the denouement of the tragedy, plays an important role in the whole play. Sometimes they are mere observers and interpreters of events, in which they express sympathy for the suffering Medea and condemn the culprit of the accident, a few times but they only express speculation and anticipation about what will happen. Their main task is to give their judgement of the rightness of humankind's actions. They therefore represent a normative perspective on the assessment of human responsibility and duty. Their sympathy for the suffering Medea is mixed with the fear that Medea, in her unpredictability, will do something reckless and thus transgress the normative order. Medea surprises and embarrasses all in turn, because she persistently stands for a higher moral order and therefore for the fulfilment of the law of justice, which in her emotion is the same as

unrequited vengeance. Medea carries a firm conclusion of vengeance, while the nurse and the chorus of women express above all the fear of the consequences of her decision.

In Scene 6, Jason justifies his act of infidelity with supposed higher goals, which are also good for Medea and the child, and identifies himself with conventional authority, which cannot stand criticism (458-466). Medea, however, gives nothing away about the pride of the Greeks, who glorify their own culture and regard all others as "barbarians." The culmination of the act of betrayal is Medea's persecution. When Jason visits her to ease her path of exile so that she and her children will not suffer poverty and deprivation, Medea replies using the form of irony that she has "faithful honest husband" who sends her in exile together with their sons (518-519). She reproaches her husband with perversity and shamelessness, and reminds him of the past, when she herself rescued him, even committed murderous acts for him, and helped him to great achievements, and then, unreasonably devoted, followed him and betrayed her father and home for his sake. Despite admitting that Medea did help him, Jason insists that she gained more by saving him than she gave him (529-557).

Medea expected loyalty and justice thus showing the character of a heroine, while Jason's qualities as a pragmatist reflect those of a celebrity. As a man who closes his eyes to the truth, he is a typical representative and spokesman for his place and time: an outwardly orderly but in reality deceitful Greek society, built on false pride rather than on the strength of the human spirit and dignity. The clash with pride finally seals the fate of the heroine of the tragedy. In that moment, her decision is final. To the end, she has remained faithful to the force of anger to satisfy the demand for justice. At the end of Euripides' tragedy, Medea assumes the role of the cruel gods. But her character is deeply tragic, for the fact that she is transformed into a victorious creature on a flying chariot does not absolve her of guilt. She lacks the tragic catharsis of ascending to apotheosis purified.

Interpreters have seen Medea's character primarily as a crime of passion. They were particularly disturbed by the inner struggle that Medea fights when she decides to murder her own children. We can trace a psychological development in which jealousy and vengeful passion gradually overwhelm her motherly sense of love. The "passion of a proud heart" (*thymós*) is stronger than its rational judgement (*bouleúmata*). Jason, on the other hand, is shown in his belief in humankind as a being who can reach happiness and success in a rational way, with his rational faculties and without fear of the gods. He represents a sophistic, non-tragic understanding of the world, which contradicts the tragic nature of human existence, which is the fundamental task of tragedy, and excludes the elements of the irrational.

In this Greek tragedy, the heroine seems to be playing with human destinies, as is typical of the Greek gods, but the irony is that by committing infanticide she also commits the worst sin against the gods, as she sins against the blood of her own grandfather Helios. In the introduction to *Medea*, translators of the play, Michael Collier and Georgia Machemer, note:

> Up until Jason's betrayal and her unjust abasement, she had managed to conceal her true nature behind a facade of restrained solicitousness, obliging her husband and his friends when necessary (9–12/11–15) and like a true lady, showing just the

> right amount of reserve and dignity to make others, like the Corinthian women who have extended their friendship to her (131/138; 177–80/178–79, 181), think that she is a perfect wife –modest, chaste, and temperate (sophrosyne, or "soundness of mind/integrity of heart," includes all these attributes of a woman capable of controlling her passions, cf. line 636). But as soon as her anger is unleashed by Jason's betrayal, she starts to behave differently. Instead of passively enduring her fate, or in shame committing suicide like some wilting Madame Butterfly, she becomes totally resistant to moderation, indifferent to the propriety of her actions, incapable of bowing to the will of her betters, much less of her equals. (Collier and Machemer in Euripides 2006, 15)

The background is said to be the question of honour, which was considered the highest good in Greek culture. However, a comparison of the various stories depicting the reactions of those who have been wronged, dishonoured and humiliated, shows that revenge, especially unrestrained revenge, cannot adequately satisfy the natural demand of justice:

While the compensation demanded by the gods for the violation of a powerful, sacred oath might explain the bloody outcome of the plot, it does not explain how Medea, who knew what she was doingshe was not a "frightened housewife"was able to bring herself to commit an act that amounted to suicide, to shed her own blood. From the first, demonic perspective, she was justified in doing so; from the second, ethical perspective, she was not: hence the play's emphasis on her corrosive anger and how deeply she felt the insult of the blow Jason had dealt her (Collier and Machemer in Euripides 2006, 30).

When Medea killed her own sons, she broke the unwritten law of naturethe bond between mother and child:

> Beyond the wildest imaginings of even the most callous Athenian, Medea had succeeded in wreaking total vengeance on her betrayer, but in so doing she had betrayed herself. In the grip of this palpable paradox, chances are that the audience, as they marveled at Medea rising in her chariot with the sun, sat in dumb silence, afraid not just for themselves and their own precarious honorwhat man in that audience did not fear the power of women, especially able women they could not control, to undo them behind their backsbut for mankind's inability to fathom the Underworld'sand Zeus'sinexorable logic. (Collier and Machemer in Euripides 2006, 31

After analyzing the emotional state that is manifested in the unfolding of Euripides' play *Medea*, it is useful to conclude by looking at the characteristics of the emotions expressed by ancient Greek myths and dramas. David Konstan notes that in the ancient Greek world, our concept of "emotion" best corresponds to the word *pathos*. Here we note that this word does not express a person's internal emotional state so much as the external circumstances that cause emotional changes in a person: "In classical Greek, *pathos* may refer more generally to what befalls a person, often in the negative sense of an accident or misfortune, although it

may also bear the neutral significance of a condition or state of affairs. ... insofar as a *pathos* is a reaction to an impinging event or circumstance, it looks to the outside stimulus to which it responds." (Konstan 2006, 34)

Euripides' drama *Medea* shows precisely that Medea's anger and hatred towards her husband Jason was caused by a radical change in his attitude towards her. Instead of loyalty and gratitude, she experienced him discarding her and sending her and her children into exile because he chose Creon's daughter as his wife. Due to an unexpected difficult new life situation, an emotionally affected person narrows his view of the new position to the extent that he can make big mistakes, even a crime, as actually happened to Medea (Sissa 2006).

Conclusion

A comparison of the behaviour of the two midwives and Pharaoh's daughter in the narrative of Exodus 12 and Medea in Euripides' play of the same name led us to the conclusion that the key to understanding one side and the other is the question of authority. The Egyptian midwives, by a natural sense of acknowledging their responsibility before God, do what they feel is right and therefore cannot follow the orders of Pharaoh, who claims divine authority. It is worth bearing in mind that the midwives did not have to defend their faith in God in the face of a severe test such as that experienced by Medea. The Pharaoh's daughter, on the other hand, clearly had enough freedom at court to make decisions in accordance with her compassionate nature without coming into conflict with her father's authority.

The biblical story is set in the intertextual and theological context of the Hebrew Bible. It sees and acknowledges in God an absolute authority that demands obedience, even if this means disobedience to human authority in cases where it demands a violation of God's law. The compassion of Pharaoh's daughter points to an action that is consistent with "natural" law when, in the biblical context, it presupposes faith in God's supreme authority. Medea's life story, however, is set in the context of the Greek pantheon, which did not recognise God's absolute authority. Therefore, Medea could express herself and act as an autonomous human person, or sometimes as a goddess who invokes God's supreme authority in manipulative rationalizations to justify her misguided actions. She expected loyalty from her husband Jason on the basis of an agreement and favours she herself had shown to him. At the same time, the taken-for-granted expectation of loyalty out of gratitude reflects Medea's extreme sensitivity to a sense of honour which, given the common experience of human weakness, is a pure construct, already predestined to disappointment.

When Medea experienced Jason's betrayal, she could only formally invoke the honour that underpins human pride. When she was humiliated, she saw no alternative but to avenge Jason to the extreme, even to the point of killing her own children. She justified this act by appealing to divine justice, which, she believed, knew absolutely no mercy for those who violated the demand for honourable deeds. At this point, there is not even a hint of Medea's

ability to recognise the pre-condition of acting out of compassion and leniency towards weak partners, and in particular of transferring justice from her own domain into God's hands. If, like the Egyptian midwives, she had seen the possibility of the "fear of God," her anger would have stopped at least at her children and she would have provided for their future with even greater zeal than she moved Pharaoh's daughter when she provided for the strange "Hebrew" the boy Moses. In that case, her concern for the future would have not only a human basis, but above all a basis of hope in faith in God's providence, which in the Bible is the pillar of faith in the history of salvation.

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