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# "To Kick Against the Pricks:" An Examination of the Oresteia and the Acts of the Apostles

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“To Kick Against the Pricks:”

An Examination of the Oresteia and the Acts of the Apostles

Daniel Luke Gonzalez

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## INTRODUCTION

To “kick against the pricks”<sup>1</sup> is an iconic phrase found in a foundational book of Western thought, the Christian Bible. Yet, this is not the only time the phrase is used. Another book foundational to Western thought used this phrase around half a millennium before, namely, the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus.<sup>2</sup> In the Christian Bible, the phrase is found in the book of Acts, a book providing the foundation of the beginnings of the Christian church in the Western world. The *Oresteia* provides the foundation for the use of the jury system in Ancient Greece, and by extension, the Western world.

These two books detail the emergence of a new system trying to break free from an older system. The book recounts this struggle with tales of bloodshed and persecution, and not a little help from the god(s). These two books defined Western understanding of the judicial system as well as religious institutions. Seeing as how foundational these two books are in Western thought and both contain this phrase, an examination of the two sources will be conducted in this paper.<sup>3</sup>

The author of this paper believes that since both of these books use the phrase in question, and both deal with similar themes, that the latter of the two books, the book of Acts in the Christian Bible, is stating the phrase as a literary allusion to the *Oresteia*. Therefore, this

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<sup>1</sup> Also seen as “kick against the goads” *The NET Bible*, (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Acts 26:14. Logos edition. All quotations from the Bible will use the NET translation unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (Penguin Classics, 1984) 170. All quotations from the *Oresteia* will come from the aforementioned source. Each citation will be the first letter of the play followed by the line numbers of the quote (ex. *A* for Agamemnon) to allow other editions of the text to be used to look up the quote in question. So, the above quote would be rendered as *A* 1656-7.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the above mentioned reasons, the author of this paper could find no studies comparing these two sources. This entails that this study will be predominantly of primary sources in the use of analyzing the two books.

paper will analyze similar major themes from the books in question and attempt to establish similarities between the two to establish whether a literary allusion is taking place.

### **JUSTICE: REVENGE KILLINGS OR BY COURT**

The theme of justice serves as the primary theme of the *Oresteia*. The progress from revenge killings to a judicial court system serves as the thread that binds all three of the plays together. In the first two plays, the problem of revenge killings as “self-perpetuating” is established.<sup>4</sup> This problem is rectified in the third play when the judicial process of a court and jury who examine killings is established.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, an examination of justice within the *Oresteia* is necessary to understanding the plays as a whole.

The first example of justice given is that of the destruction of Troy.<sup>6</sup> This sets the backdrop for the rest of the play, but does not become the focus. Even though Helen, the cause of the whole war, is Clytaemnestra’s sister, Clytaemnestra does not use her plight to justify killing her husband. Rather, Clytaemnestra justifies her killing of Agamemnon by citing two events: One, she claims that because Agamemnon killed their daughter as a sacrifice to appease the gods and go on his quest to conquer Troy she is allowed to seek revenge,<sup>7</sup> and, two, because of Agamemnon’s father Atreus killing almost all the children of Aegisthus’ father Atreus by cooking them as a meal for Atreus.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as it can be easily seen, justice as revenge killings

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<sup>4</sup> David Raeburn and Oliver Thomas, *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxx.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, xxxi.

<sup>6</sup> A 44-78, Richard Lattimore, *The Proper Study: Essays on Western Classics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962), 59.

<sup>7</sup> A 1440-1444.

<sup>8</sup> A 1526-1533.

quickly turns into a blood feud with no possible means of ending it as long as one relative survives the revenge killing. Richard Lattimore in his introduction to the *Oresteia* summarizes it thusly,

The whole house has been wrong since the quarrel of Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus was hideous in murder, but this does not justify Aegisthus in murdering Agamemnon, any more than the sins of Agamemnon justified his murder by Clytaemestra, or the sins of Paris and Helen justified the obliteration of Troy. All the executioners plead that they act for just retribution, but the chain of murder has got out of hand and is perpetuating itself, until it seems no longer to come from personal purpose but has grown into a Curse, a Thing. Every correction is a blood-bath which calls for new correction.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, justice within the *Agamemnon* is presented as a broken system. A never-ending cycle of killings and murder will destroy the whole household unless something changes. The next two plays attempt to provide answers

In the second play, the *Libation Bearers*, Aeschylus presents the first attempt at a solution to this blood feud. Orestes, son of Agamemnon, has come back to kill his mother and Aeschylus for their murder of Agamemnon. Orestes is presented as the epitome of justice, so far as to be called the embodiment of justice in several passages.<sup>10</sup> Now, the reader should notice that this solution is no different than the solution Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus had in killing Agamemnon. Yet, what makes Orestes' situation unique is that the god Apollo told him to perform the act and cleanses hands of the crime.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, this solution is still not enough to end blood feuds. The chorus of the play states, "It is the law: when the blood of slaughter wets the ground it wants more blood. Slaughter cries for

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Lattimore, *The Proper Study: Essays on Western Classics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962), 63.

<sup>10</sup> *LB* 121-126, 212-213, 628-627.

<sup>11</sup> *LB* 273-281, *E* 584.

the Fury of those long dead to bring destruction on destruction churning in its wake!”<sup>12</sup> Despite the attempts by Apollo to end the blood feud by means of divine justice, it continues and threatens to engulf Orestes in the process.

In the *Eumenides*, the proper solution to revenge killings in the form of a jury-based court system appears.<sup>13</sup> It is also in this play where Apollo declares the Furies as false representations of justice by saying, “Go [you Furies] where heads are severed, eyes gouged out, where Justice and bloody slaughter as the same.”<sup>14</sup> In this play, justice has come full circle and the blood feud has ended with the acquittal of Orestes of the crime of murdering his mother.<sup>15</sup> True justice overcomes the revenge killings by means of the establishment of the court system and Orestes walks a free man.

### **RELIGION AND THE GODS IN THE ORESTEIA**

Within the Oresteia, the gods take an active role in guiding the events that occur in the three plays. Human activity is merely a reflection of actions occurring within the realm of the gods, with the actions of those in the play being as it were mere extensions for the hands of the gods.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, before a full picture of the meaning presented in the Oresteia can be established, a study of the impact of the gods in the trilogy must be given.

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<sup>12</sup> *LB* 394-398.

<sup>13</sup> *E* 484-505.

<sup>14</sup> *E* 183-184.

<sup>15</sup> *E* 763-767.

<sup>16</sup> David Raeburn and Oliver Thomas, *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxxiii.

RELIGION AND THE GODS IN *THE AGAMEMNON* AND *THE LIBATION BEARERS*

References to the gods and other supernatural beings permeate the Oresteia trilogy. Yet, the supernatural takes a back seat within the first two plays.<sup>17</sup> For example, the furies, a major aspect of the third play, are referenced in passing and never have an active role in the first two plays as personal gods. For example, when Aegisthus is first introduced in *The Agamemnon*, he says, “now at last I see this man [Agamemnon] brought down in the Furies’ tangling robes.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, a few lines prior, Clytaemnestra stated, “I did it all. I don’t deny it, no . . . Our never-ending, all embracing net, I cast it wide for the royal haul, I coil him round and round in the wealth, the robes of doom.”<sup>19</sup> Then, a few lines later, she states, “You claim the work is mine, call me Agamemnon’s wife -- you are so wrong. Fledged in the wife of this dead man, the spirit lives within me, our savage ancient spirit of revenge.”<sup>20</sup> Here the Furies and Clytaemnestra are identified as being the same, or at least as Clytaemnestra being the embodiment of the Furies. With this example, the gods are identified as being partakers in the grand events portrayed in the

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<sup>17</sup> There are only three instances the author of this paper could find that had the gods acting directly in the first two plays. In the first play, Cassandra gives an account in lines 1189 through 1198 concerning how she can see the Furies clinging to the house of Agamemnon and describes them in a personable manner. Then, in lines 1207 through 1214 she describes how she made love with Apollo, but recoiled at the climax and became cursed. But, due to the discussion referring to something occurring offstage, how she was cursed by Apollo to not be fully understood, and speaks often in metaphors, I did not include these as viable references to personable supernatural elements. The other instance occurs in the second play when Orestes declares that he has been sent by Apollo to kill his mother in lines 272 through 281. While this is a direct reference to a personable god (something that is continued further in the third play), this occurs offstage. The best metaphor to describe the trilogy would be that the first two plays contain hints at the personable gods, but they work behind the scenes. It is not until the third play that the curtain is pulled back and the gods take a vested interest in the outcome of Orestes and make personal appearances in order to tip the scales in such a way as to save him from Fate.

<sup>18</sup> A 1609-1610.

<sup>19</sup> A 1400-1404.

<sup>20</sup> A 1526-1530.



play, but they are onstage references to events occurring offstage. This joining of divine and human causes is known as “multiple determination,”<sup>21</sup> the act of joining divine and human causes together.

If the third play of this trilogy were to be lost, one would conclude that the supernatural merely functions as embodiments of abstract concepts. Justice, Revenge, Fate, even Fury itself are seen as individual gods who imbue themselves within the individuals who carry out their bidding. Within the first two plays, the characters do not kill for justice, as an abstract concept, but for Justice, as an individual who works through them to perform the killings. In fact, when the individual is embodied with that particular god, the other characters in the play often refer to them as if they were that god. For example, the chorus, upon seeing Orestes kill Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra, cries out “Justice came at last to the sons of Priam, late but crushing vengeance, yes, but to Agamemnon’s house returned the double lion, the double onslaught, drove to the hilt -- the exile sped by god, by Delphi’s just command that drove him home.”<sup>22</sup> Here we see the chorus equating Justice (the god) with Orestes (the exile). Not only has Orestes brought about justice, he has brought Justice back to the home of Agamemnon.

To a modern reader, one may assume that these abstract concepts were impersonal apart from their human counterparts. To the Greek mind, this cannot be further from the truth. To offend Justice is not to offend an abstract concept, but to offend a deity. When Clytaemnestra welcomes the disguised Orestes into her house, she claims that the “eyes of Justice look on all we do,” which is being used in an ironic sense as the eyes of Orestes, the embodiment of Justice, has “looked” upon the deeds of Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra and will execute justice upon the

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<sup>21</sup> David Raeburn and Oliver Thomas, *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxxvi.

<sup>22</sup> *LB* 923-928.

house.<sup>23</sup> This irony is further substantiated in lines 870-871 where the leader of the slave women remarks, “Her head [Clytaemnestra’s] is ripe for lopping on the block. She’s next, and justice wields the axe.”<sup>24</sup> Upon entering the house of Clytaemnestra, Orestes starts to question his objective to kill his own mother. Pylades, his companion, responds to his questioning with “make all mankind your enemy, not the gods.”<sup>25</sup> Not only would Orestes offend Apollo, the god who sent him on this mission, but also he would offend the oaths he swore to the gods and to his father.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, in the first two plays, religion plays a minor role to the overarching theme of justice. The few mentions of religion seem to play a minor role in either setting up the coming religious themes in the third play or are merely plot devices created to allow the play to make logical sense.<sup>27</sup> It is clear that in the first two plays, justice and revenge killing are the primary themes. Until the introduction of the third play, religion and the gods play a minor role.

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<sup>23</sup> *LB* 653.

<sup>24</sup> This is probably a double reference as Clytaemnestra calls for a “man-axe” for herself in line 876 and is possibly a reference back to the *Agamemnon* when Clytaemnestra killed her own husband and claimed to be Justice (line 1429-1430). It is worth noting that the author could not identify what weapon was used by Clytaemnestra in killing her husband. While traditionally associated with a sword, each reference to a sword is that of a “two-edged sword” (*A* 1524-1525, 1550 for example), and seeing how it is closely associated with the god Fate, this could be more of a metaphor for how her killing of Agamemnon will seal her own fate with her son killing her later. Therefore, while there is no evidence for it, it would fit within the irony of the play if the weapon used by Clytaemnestra was an axe. This is the interpretation that John Collier takes in his painting *After the murder* (1882). However, this is mere speculation on the part of the author.

<sup>25</sup> *LB* 889.

<sup>26</sup> *LB* 886-889; 484, 561-565, 628-633.

<sup>27</sup> Cassandra’s interaction with Apollo to grant her the gift of prophecy and her subsequent curse by Apollo to make it that only the audience understands her prophecies are perfect examples of religion in the first two plays as mere plot devices.

RELIGION AND THE GODS IN THE *EUMENIDES*

In the third play, the gods take on a much more personal role, even to the extent that the humans involved take a backseat in a similar fashion that the gods took on in the first two plays. Apollo, the defender of Orestes and the god who told him to kill his mother, The Furies, the ancient gods who take up the case of Clytaemnestra and serve as the prosecution, and Athena, the arbiter and judge over the trial, all take on a personal role in deciding the case of Orestes.<sup>28</sup> Unlike the previous two plays where the gods are mentioned in passing, here the gods appear personally and speak on their own behalf. The case of Orestes has now become more than just a case concerning Orestes and the killing of his mother; it has now become a case concerning the religious and judicial future of Greece. Not only are the jurors voting either for or against the innocence of Orestes, they are voting concerning the old gods versus the new, the way of courts and juries or the way of household justice and revenge killings. Even the fate of the country hangs in the balance with the gods making threats of judgment and supernatural war if the court does not side with them.<sup>29</sup> With such issues hanging in the balance over this one man's fate, the gods intervene and hold the court session in *The Eumenides*.

Overall, religion and the gods play a major role in *The Oresteia*, even if the majority of personal involvement does not occur until the third play. The plan, performance, and justification of many actions in the play ultimately derive from the gods. Whether true or not, each individual attempts to side with a god in hopes to justify his or her own actions. Religion is not a separate concern, for when the actors in the play discussed justice, they spoke not only of the concept and secular use, but also of the god associated with it and the court created by Athena herself. It is

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<sup>28</sup> See *E* 419-767.

<sup>29</sup> See *E* 514-535, 792-819.

therefore impossible to separate religion from any aspect in the *Oresteia*, as it is so tightly interwoven that to attempt to separate it one would lose meaning and nuance from the secular use.

### **OLD VERSUS THE NEW IN THE ORESTEIA**

The *Oresteia*, at its core, is a story of the struggle between something old and something new. The two major themes outlined already, justice and religion, both have this dynamic in the *Oresteia*. The gods Apollo and Athena wish to pave the way for the new court judicial system while the Furies wish to maintain revenge killing as justice. The confrontation between the Furies and Apollo and Athena also represents the religious struggle between the old gods and the new gods. In the end of the trilogy, the new wins out over the old to pave the way for a happy ending, something unseen in most tragedy literature.

### **REVENGE KILLING VERSUS THE COURTS**

As it has been mentioned in the Justice: Revenge Killings or by Court section, the primary concern of justice within the *Oresteia* occurs in the conflict between the revenge killings taking place in the first two plays and the justice system by a court with a jury. This interplay serves as the focus of conflicting social ideals while presenting the problems of revenge killings that are solved by the judicial system.

Throughout the play, Electra seems to be the only human character who has a brief insight into the problem posed by revenge killings enacted as justice. In *The Libation Bearers*, Electra is about to offer up a prayer with several slave women, but has a conversation with their leader to discuss what should constitute the prayer. The leader, talking to Electra, says “Now for the murderers, Remember them . . . Let some god or man come down upon them.” Electra

responds by asking “Judge or avenger, which?”<sup>30</sup> By stating this, Electra recognizes the dilemma presented by the leader’s request. If they are asking the gods for an avenger, how does that make them any different from those who killed Agamemnon, seeing that Clytaemnestra killed on behalf of her daughter Iphigenia and Aegisthus killed on behalf of his father? She even goes so far as to say “how can I ask the gods for that and keep my conscience clear?”<sup>31</sup> But, this insight is short lived as the leader convinces Electra that to pray for revenge is a noble and just thing by saying “How not, and pay the enemy back in kind?”<sup>32</sup>

The conflict between the revenge killings and their blood feuds and the jury system highlights the struggle within the ancient Greek mind of conflicting judicial systems. Yet, this change was not merely a judicial one, but a religious one as well. Since it was Athena who brought about the court system and was responsible for it, it is clear that other deities, much older deities, would be in charge of the revenge killings and they would have issues with the establishment of a new judicial system.

#### THE OLD GODS VERSUS THE NEW GODS

In the *Oresteia*, the conflict between Apollo and the Furies may seem to be nothing more than representations of the upcoming jury judicial process and the revenge killing of tradition, but there is more than just that at play. Behind this conflict is an age old conflict within any religion that takes on new gods or beliefs, namely, what to do concerning the old gods and beliefs?

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<sup>30</sup> *LB* 119-121.

<sup>31</sup> *LB* 124-125.

<sup>32</sup> *LB* 125.

The Furies belong under the old gods category, or by its more technical term, the chthonian deities.<sup>33</sup> These deities “functions were associated particularly with death and fertility.”<sup>34</sup> These old gods were probably ancient gods worshipped by the local inhabitants of Greece and were connected to the cycles of harvest and of the earth in general,<sup>35</sup> hence the association to fertility and death. The transition from justice being carried out by the household to justice being carried out by the city-state thus became a confrontation between the old gods, particularly the Furies who oversaw primarily blood-related revenge killings.<sup>36</sup> This is clearly seen after Orestes is pronounced innocent by the court and Athena with the Furies exclaiming “You, you younger gods! -- you have ridden down the ancient laws, wrenched them from my grasp -- and I [have been] robbed of my birthright.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the removal of revenge killings in effect was a removal of these particular old gods’ domain, power, and any reason to worship or call for them.

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<sup>33</sup> Roy T Matthews, Thomas F. X. Noble, and F. DeWitt Platt, *Experience Humanities*, Complete. 8th. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013), 42. Kindle edition.

<sup>34</sup> David Raeburn and Oliver Thomas, *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxxiii.

<sup>35</sup> Roy T Matthews, Thomas F. X. Noble, and F. DeWitt Platt, *Experience Humanities*, Complete. 8th. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013), 43. Kindle edition.

<sup>36</sup> This identification as familial revenge killings instead of just killings in general stems from the statements the Furies make in the third play at the trial. In line 209, Apollo accuses the Furies of not being fair in their treatment of Orestes as they did not haunt Clytaemnestra after she had killed her husband. To this, the leader of the Furies responds with “That murder [a wife killing a husband] would not destroy one’s flesh and blood.” (E 210) This passage means that even though the wife and husband are related by law through marriage, since they are not blood related, those killings do not fall under the realm of the Furies. Apollo confronts this thinking in lines 211-222. While the entire scope of the Furies realm of which types of murders belong to them is debatable, since Clytaemnestra claims to work on behalf of the furies when killing Agamemnon (A 1526-1530).

<sup>37</sup> E 792-794.

Unlike the confrontation between revenge killings and the city-state judicial process where one completely overruled the other, the confrontation between the old gods and the new gods ends more like a merger. With the conclusion of the trial, the Furies exclaim that they will destroy everything around them as a means of revenge against the trial verdict.<sup>38</sup> In essence, the Furies feel threatened by the trial's verdict and consider it an unjust death sentence. Therefore, since they are the gods who take up revenge killings, especially in the case where there is no one else to, and since the Furies have in essence just been killed off as gods<sup>39</sup> with nobody who will take their case, they will kill humanity for killing them. In other words, since the Furies are no longer needed, due to the court system taking on their duty, they will kill all of humanity as one last act of mass revenge killing.

To the threat of complete annihilation of humanity, Athena offers the Furies a deal. Instead of destroying the land and becoming gods without any reason to exist, they can be worshipped in Athena's own city.<sup>40</sup> The conflict between the new gods and the old gods results in the unity of both into something stronger than it was before. This brings about the happy conclusion where the old gods and the new gods join into a new system of justice overlooked by both.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The two themes of the Oresteia, justice and religion, both are presented in terms of conflict between something new and something old. In the case of the judicial system, the new supersedes and cancels out the need for the old, yet, with the religion theme, the new and the old

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<sup>38</sup> *E* 792-805.

<sup>39</sup> At least, the Furies consider themselves killed off by the gods/humans by the loss of their "ancient powers" and consider themselves now "obliterate[d]" in *E* 886-888.

<sup>40</sup> *E* 856-878.

synthesize into something greater than either would be separately. With this theme of unification, the Oresteia brings about its happy ending.

### **LUKE-ACTS: A BACKGROUND**

One of the first questions that must be addressed before a study of the book of Acts is the question on what constitutes the literary unit of this book. Being that this is outside the scope of this study, the author of this paper assumes “that Luke and Acts together must be seen as some sort of two-volume historiographical work.”<sup>41</sup> With this in mind, themes that are present within the book of Luke are themes that are part of the whole of the Luke-Acts literary unit and will be treated as such.

The background to the literary unit of Luke-Acts is a contested issue. For the purposes of this paper, there are only two points that must be established concerning Luke-Acts’ background, namely the purpose of the document and the audience it was intended for.

The purpose of the document is given plainly in Luke 1:1-4, which states,

Now many have undertaken to compile an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, like the accounts passed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word from the beginning. So it seemed good to me as well, because I have followed all things carefully from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know for certain the things you were taught.

With this purpose statement, it follows that the author of Luke-Acts intended to write a history of the events surrounding the beginning of the Christian movement, beginning with Christ and concluding with Paul, a Christian convert, spreading the Christian message in the capital of the Roman Empire.<sup>42</sup> With this purpose though comes a problem, namely, why write the document

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<sup>41</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co 1998), 21. Logos edition.

<sup>42</sup> Acts 28:16-31.



in the first place when it is clear in Luke 1:2 that accounts like the one found in Luke-Acts have already been written down?

With this in mind, one must wonder about the intended audience for this literary unit. Since this literary unit is written using “methods and rhetoric of Greek historiography,” despite it being an “essentially Jewish” message, one must conclude that the audience is assumed to have had basic Hellenistic education.<sup>43</sup> Witherington even goes as far as to say that

To appreciate Luke-Acts’s style and historical method, such a background would have been not merely helpful but in various regards necessary. One must be able to compare Luke’s work not merely to and with the Hebrew Scriptures but also to the likes of Polybius and Ephorus, if not also Thucydides, as well as to writers on Greek rhetoric such as Aristotle and Isocrates.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, the purpose of the document is not merely the telling of the Christian movement, which had already been done before, but rather, the telling of this movement to those with a Hellenistic background who had apparently been left out as an audience in the previous documents.

### **THEMES IN LUKE-ACTS**

Within Luke-Acts, there are many themes, salvation, redemption, forgiveness, etc., but the two themes that this paper will focus on are judgment and the beginning of something new. These two themes are of particular importance as they are the two major themes within Luke-Acts that are reflected in the *Oresteia*. Due to the overt religious nature of Luke-Acts, the theme of Religion and the Gods<sup>45</sup> found in the *Oresteia* will be treated as sub-themes for the two previously mentioned themes.

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<sup>43</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co 1998), 65. Logos edition.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> See page 4 of this paper.

### JUDGMENT IN LUKE-ACTS

Judgment within the literary unit of Luke-Acts is the first theme presented. The book of Luke starts with an angel announcing to Zechariah that he will have a son and his name will be John, one who will “make ready for the Lord a people prepared for him.”<sup>46</sup> This child will have the “power of Elijah”<sup>47</sup> and it is implied that he will serve as the preparer for the coming of the Messiah. Yet, while the message is one of promise and hope, due to the disbelief of Zechariah, the angel pronounces judgment on him by stating, “because you [Zechariah] did not believe my words . . . you will be silent, unable to speak, until the day these things [the birth of John] take place.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the beginning of Luke starts with a message of hope mixed with a message of warning, namely, those who do not accept this message are subject to judgment.

This judgment theme continues with the prophecy of Simeon found in Luke 2. The parents of Jesus, the Messiah according to Luke-Acts, bring him to complete a purification ritual customary within ancient Judaism.<sup>49</sup> Upon arriving at the temple, a man named Simeon takes Jesus into his hands and tells Mary, Jesus’ mother, “Listen carefully: This child is destined to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be rejected. Indeed, as a result of him the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed -- and a sword will pierce your own soul as well!”<sup>50</sup> The author of Luke-Acts is forthright in establishing that the message found in this literary unit is a decisive one, namely, that judgment falls upon those who do not accept it.

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<sup>46</sup> Luke 1:17.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Luke 1:20.

<sup>49</sup> Luke 2:22-23.

<sup>50</sup> Luke 2:34-35.

Since the message of judgment is clearly an intended message within Luke-Acts, the establishment of what type of judgment and who receives this judgment is necessary. In Luke 11:29-32, the reason for judgment and who receives this judgment is specified. It reads,

As the crowds were increasing, Jesus began to say, “This generation is a wicked generation; it looks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be a sign to this generation. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon—and now, something greater than Solomon is here! The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented when Jonah preached to them—and now, something greater than Jonah is here!

As it is seen in the previous quote, the reason for the judgment is the rejection of God’s ultimate last message to the nation of Israel, namely, the message of Jesus as the Messiah. It is also clear that how an individual reacts to this message is the determining factor in if he or she will receive judgment.

Concerning what type of judgment those who reject this message receive, looking at Luke 9:51-56 hints at what it may be. In these verses, Jesus is rejected by a Samaritan village and told that he was not welcome there because “he was determined to go to Jerusalem.”<sup>51</sup> To this, some of Jesus’ disciples asked Jesus if they could call down fire upon the village as retribution for its rejection of Jesus. To this request, Jesus rebukes them.<sup>52</sup> While not explicitly stated, it is implied that those who reject Jesus and his message are not to necessarily receive their judgment shortly after their rejection of him.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Luke 9:53.

<sup>52</sup> Luke 9:54-55.

<sup>53</sup> There is a special judgment upon the city of Jerusalem though found in Luke 13:31-35, 19:41-44, 21:20-24, and 23:26-31. This judgment is a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Looking also at Luke 10:1-16, this theme of delayed judgment is also present. Jesus sends out seventy-two of his apostles to go and preach his message into various towns. Concerning towns which reject their message of him, he says to “wipe off” the dust on their sandals as a testament against them.<sup>54</sup> To this town, a message of judgment is given, but this judgment does not occur until the final day of judgment by the Lord.<sup>55</sup>

Overall, this message of judgment is for those who hear the message contained in the literary unit of Luke-Acts and reject it, resulting in condemnation for him or herself that is actualized in the judgment day. Therefore, the judgment called upon those who reject the message is primarily a heavenly or eschatological judgment, as opposed to an Earthly judgment.

#### OLD VERSUS THE NEW IN LUKE-ACTS

The literary unit of Luke-Acts is essentially the telling of the beginning of the Christian movement as it grew out of the Jewish religion. In the Oresteia, the new religion was merged with the old, creating a merged religion as it were. In Luke-Acts, the new religion is seen as something that fundamentally cannot merge with the old Judaism as some sort of eclectic religion. This is seen in Luke 5:36-39, which reads,

He also told them a parable: “No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old garment. If he does, he will have torn the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. Instead new wine must be poured into new wineskins. No one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, ‘The old is good enough.’”

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<sup>54</sup> Luke 10:11.

<sup>55</sup> Luke 10:12.

Here Jesus is stating that the new religion that he is bringing about cannot be combined with the old religion of the Pharisees.<sup>56</sup> This new religion that Jesus is setting up is a divisive message and forces the one who hears it to make a decision, with that decision being condemnation worthy if it is a rejection of Jesus' message.

### **TO KICK AGAINST THE PRICKS: OVERVIEW**

The phrase in question, to “kick against the pricks,”<sup>57</sup> occurs only once in the Agamemnon and the book of Acts respectively. A prick<sup>58</sup> was a sharpened wooden stick that was used to guide animals, particularly oxen, in fieldwork. The imagery of kicking against this wooden stick derives from when the driver of the cart would poke the ox to either guide it or force it to move and the ox would kick back against the pricks and thus hurt itself a second time.<sup>59</sup>

In the book of Agamemnon, the phrase is given by Aegisthus against the elders of the city who rise up and plan open rebellion against Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra because of the killing of Agamemnon.<sup>60</sup> To this rebellion, Aegisthus makes the statement “[torture techniques] can cure old men of pride and gall. Look -- can't you see? The more you kick against the pricks, the more you suffer.”<sup>61</sup> The context for this statement is that of Aegisthus threatening the elders

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<sup>56</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 186. Logos Edition.

<sup>57</sup> A 1656-7, Acts 26:14.

<sup>58</sup> Or “goad.” See Acts 26:14 NET.

<sup>59</sup> J. Rawson Lumby, *The Acts of the Apostles with Maps, Introduction and Notes.*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), 347. Logos edition.

<sup>60</sup> A 1676-1687.

<sup>61</sup> A 1655-1657.

into submission, seeing their attempts at an uprising as only bringing harm on themselves. The elders, in their attempt to right a wrong, would only bring down judgment upon themselves.

The context for the statement in the book of Acts is that of Paul, a Jewish convert to Christianity, has been arrested by the Romans in Caesarea on behalf of the Jews over a fight concerning religious practices and teachings.<sup>62</sup> Here, Paul recounts his conversion story to the Roman authorities as his defense to why he spreads his peculiar teachings. It is important to note that this is the third retelling of the conversion story in the book of Acts, and out of the three, it is the shortest.<sup>63</sup> <sup>64</sup> Yet, despite it being the shortest, this is the only retelling that includes the phrase to “kick against the pricks.” Within this account of the conversion story, the phrase in question functions in a similar fashion to how it functioned in the book of Agamemnon.

Paul explains that he was a vehement opposer to the Christian movement, going so far as to “lock up” many of its followers and even aid in sentencing many of them to death.<sup>65</sup> Yet, while on his way to Damascus, Jesus appears to him, telling him that he was not only persecuting the Christian movement, but also persecuting Jesus.<sup>66</sup> It is at this point that Jesus proclaims that Paul is “kicking against the goads.”<sup>67</sup> Paul is convinced of the divinity of Jesus in this encounter and is given a command to proclaim the message of Jesus as the resurrected Son of God, with

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<sup>62</sup> Acts 25:13-15, 18-19.

<sup>63</sup> John B Polhill, *Acts*. Vol. 26 of *The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 501. Logos edition.

<sup>64</sup> The other two conversion accounts can be found in Acts 9:1-30 and 22:5-21.

<sup>65</sup> Acts 26:10.

<sup>66</sup> Acts 26:12-15.

<sup>67</sup> Acts 26:14.

particular emphasis on proclaiming this to non-Jews.<sup>68</sup> The meaning of the phrase in question will be discussed more fully in the following section.

#### TO KICK AGAINST THE PRICKS: AN EXAMINATION OF ACTS 26:14

In order to establish the meaning of to “kick against the pricks” more fully, an exegesis of the phrase in Acts 26:14 is in order. One of the first aspects that helps to identify why this phrase is of peculiar interest is that the phrase, although a part of the conversion story, is left out of the other two recollections of this incident. Of particular interest is the audience in mind concerning the first two recollections of the event. In the first telling, found in Acts 9:1-30, the audience is that of the reader of Luke-Acts. While it has been established that this audience did have a Hellenistic background, they were nonetheless part of those who have already been initiated in the new Christian movement.<sup>69</sup> In the retelling of the conversion story in Acts 22, the audience is the Jews present in Jerusalem around the temple.<sup>70</sup>

The retelling in Acts 26 is unique in that the audience is several Roman authorities living in a Hellenistic city who have a limited background in the Christian or Jewish religion as they adhere to neither of them. It is in this context that the statement to “kick against the pricks” is made. The Roman authorities would have instantly recognized this phrase as a statement that Paul, in persecuting the Christians, was “fighting the will of the gods.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Acts 26:16-18.

<sup>69</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co 1998), 65. Logos edition.

<sup>70</sup> Acts 21:27.

<sup>71</sup> John B Polhill, *Acts*. Vol. 26 of *The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 503. Logos edition.

## CONCLUSION

Since it can be seen that several major themes exist between the Oresteia and Luke-Acts, and that the phrase to “kick against the pricks” was only used with a Hellenistic, non-converted audience, it can be reasonably concluded that the phrase in Acts 26:14 is functioning as a literary allusion to the Oresteia trilogy as a Hellenistic backdrop to understanding some of the core issues present in beginning of the Christian movement and particularly in the ministry of Paul. This phrase was primarily to serve as a reminder to the Hellenistic audience of the importance of following the commands of the god(s), even if that leads one into a new justice system, or even a new religion.



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