

THUCYDIDES

THE MELIAN DIALOGUE

TRANSLATED BY BENJAMIN JOWETT

PRELUDE TO THE WAR

(84) The Athenians next made an expedition against the island of Melos with thirty ships of their own, six Chian, and two Lesbian, twelve hundred hoplites and three hundred archers besides twenty mounted archers of their own, and about fifteen hundred hoplites furnished by their allies in the islands.

The Melians are colonists of the Lacedaemonians who would not submit to Athens like the other islanders. At first they were neutral and took no part. But when the Athenians tried to coerce them by ravaging their lands, they were driven into open hostilities.⁷⁶

The generals, Cleomedes the son of Lycomedes and Tisias the son of Tisimachus, encamped with the Athenian forces on the island. But before they did the country any harm they sent envoys to negotiate with the Melians. Instead of bringing these envoys before the people, the Melians desired them to explain their errand to the magistrates and to the dominant class. They spoke as follows:

ATHENIAN PROPOSAL: 'Since we are not allowed to speak to the people, lest a multitude should be deceived by seductive and unanswerable⁷⁷ arguments which they would hear set forth in a single uninterrupted oration (for we are perfectly aware that this is what you mean in bringing us before a select few), you who are sitting here may as well make assurance yet surer.

Let us have no set speeches at all, but you reply to each statement of which you disapprove, and criticise it at once. Say first of all how you like this mode of proceeding.'

The Melian representatives answered: **MELIAN RESPONSE:** 'The quiet interchange of explanations is a reasonable thing, and we do not object to that. But your warlike movements, which are present not only to our fears but to our eyes, seem to belie your words. We see that, although you may reason with us, you mean to be our judges; and that at the end of the discussion, if the justice of our cause prevail and we therefore refuse to yield, we may expect war; if we are convinced by you, slavery.'

(87) **ATHENIANS:** If you are only going to argue from fancies about the future, or if you meet us with any other purpose than that of looking your circumstances in the face and saving your city, we're done; but if this is your intention we will proceed.'

(88) **MELIANS:** 'It is an excusable and natural thing that men in our position should neglect no argument and no view which may avail. But we admit that this conference has met to consider the question of our preservation; and therefore let the argument proceed as you propose.'

(89) **ATHENIANS:** 'Well, then, we Athenians will use no fine words; we will not go out of our way to prove at length that we have a right to rule, because we overthrew the Persians;⁷⁸ or that we attack you now because we are suffering any injury at your hands. We should not convince you if we did; nor must you expect to convince us by arguing that, although a colony of the Lacedaemonians, you have taken no part in their expeditions, or that you have never done us any wrong.

But you and we should say what we really think, and aim only at what is possible, for we both alike know that into the discussion of human affairs the question of justice only enters where there is equal power to enforce it, and that the powerful exact what they can, and the weak grant what they must.'

(90) **MELIANS:** 'Well, then, since you set aside justice and invite us to speak of expediency, in our judgment it is certainly expedient that you should respect a principle which is for the common good; that to every man when in peril a reasonable claim should be accounted a claim of right, and that any plea which he is disposed to urge, even if failing of the point a little, should help his cause. Your interest in this principle is quite as great as ours, inasmuch as you, if you fall, will incur the heaviest vengeance, and will be the most terrible example to mankind.'⁷⁹

(91) **ATHENIANS:** 'The fall of our empire, if it should fall, is not an event to which we look forward with dismay; for ruling states such as Lacedaemon are not cruel to their vanquished enemies. With the Lacedaemonians, however, we are not now contending; the real danger is from our many subject states, who may of their own motion rise up and overcome their masters.'⁸⁰

But this is a danger which you may leave to us. And we will now endeavour to show that we have come in the interests of our empire, and that in what we are about to say we are only seeking the preservation of your city. For we want to make you ours with the least trouble to ourselves, and it is for the interests of us both that you should not be destroyed.'

(92) **MELIANS:** 'It may be your interest to be our masters, but how can it be ours to be your slaves?'

(93) **ATHENIANS:** 'To you the gain will be that by submission you will avert the worst; and we shall be all the richer for your preservation.'

(94) **MELIANS:** 'But must we be your enemies? Will you not receive us as friends if we are neutral and remain at peace with you?'

(95) **ATHENIANS:** 'No, your enmity is not half so mischievous to us as your friendship; because enmity is in the eyes of our subjects an argument of our power, friendship, of our weakness.'

(96) **MELIANS:** 'But are your subjects really unable to distinguish between states in which you have no concern, and those which are chiefly your own colonies, and in some cases have revolted and been subdued by you?'

(97) **ATHENIANS:** 'They don't doubt that both of them have a good deal to say for themselves on the score of justice, but they think states like yours are left free because they are able to defend themselves, and that we do not attack them because we don't dare to. Consequently, your subjection will increase our security, as well extend our empire. For we are masters of the sea, and you who are islanders, and insignificant islanders too, must not be allowed to escape us.'

(98) **MELIANS:** 'But do you not recognise another danger? For, once more, since you drive us from issues of justice and force us to accept your doctrine of expediency,⁸¹ we must show you what is for our interest, and, if it be for yours also, may hope to convince you.'

[If you destroy us,] won't you be making enemies of all who are now neutrals? When they see how you're treating us they'll expect you some day to turn against them; and if so, are you not strengthening the enemies whom you already have, and making others who, if they didn't have to, would never dream of being your enemies at all?'

(99) **ATHENIANS:** 'We don't consider our really dangerous enemies to be any of the mainland cities who are secure in their freedom and can defer indefinitely any precautions they take against us, but islanders who, like you, happen to be under no control, and may already be irritated by the necessity of submitting to our empire. These are our real enemies, for they are the most reckless and most likely to bring themselves as well as us into danger which they must see coming.'

(100) **MELIANS:** 'But surely, if you and your subjects will brave all this risk to preserve your empire, and others brave the same risks to get out of it, it would be

base and cowardly for us, since we retain our freedom, not to do and suffer anything rather than be your slaves.'

(101) **ATHENIANS:** 'Not so, if you calmly reflect. You're not fighting against equals to whom you cannot yield without disgrace. You're discussing whether or not to resist an overwhelming force. The question is not one of honor but of good sense.'

(102) **MELIANS:** 'But we know that the fortune of war is sometimes impartial, and not always on the side of numbers. If we yield now, it's all over; but if we fight, we have some hope that we can come through on our feet.'

(103) **ATHENIANS:** 'Hope is a good comforter at times of danger, and when men have something else to depend upon. She may be hurtful, but not ruinous. But when her spendthrift nature has induced them to risk everything, they see her as she is only the moment of their destruction, and not till it happens. While knowing her might enable them to beware of her, she never fails.⁸²

You are weak and a single turn of the scale might be your ruin. Don't be deluded. Avoid the error so many make – people who might still be saved if they would be realistic, but when they have no visible grounds of confidence, turn to the invisible: to prophecies and oracles and so on, which ruin men by the hopes they inspire.'

(104) **MELIANS:** 'We know only too well how hard the struggle must be against your power, and against fortune, if she does not mean to be impartial. Nevertheless we do not despair of fortune; for we hope to stand as high as you in the favour of heaven, because we are righteous, and you against whom we contend are unrighteous.

And we are satisfied that our deficiency in power will be compensated by the aid of our allies the Lacedaemonians; they cannot refuse to help us, if only because we are their kinsmen, and for the sake of their own honour. And therefore our confidence is not so utterly blind as you suppose.'

(105) **ATHENIANS:** 'As for the Gods, we expect to have quite as much of their favour as you: for we are not doing or claiming anything which goes beyond common opinion about divine or men's desires about human things. For of the Gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a law of their nature wherever they can rule they will.

This law was not made by us, and we are not the first who have acted upon it; we did but inherit it, and shall bequeath it to all time, and, we know that you and

all mankind, if you were as strong as we are, would do as we do. So much for the Gods; we have told you why we expect to stand as high in their good opinion as you.

And then as to the Lacedaemonians--when you imagine that out of very shame they will assist you, we admire the innocence of your idea, but we do not envy you the folly of it. The Lacedaemonians are exceedingly virtuous among themselves, and according to their national standard of morality.⁸³

But, in respect of their dealings with others, although many things might be said, they can be described in few words--of all men whom we know they are the most notorious for identifying what is pleasant with what is honourable, and what is expedient with what is just. But how inconsistent is such a character with your present blind hope of deliverance!

(106) **MELIANS:** `That is the very reason why we trust them; they will look to their interest, and therefore will not be willing to betray the Melians, who are their own colonists, lest they should be distrusted by their friends in Hellas and play into the hands of their enemies.'

(107) **ATHENIANS:** 'But do you not see that the path of expediency is safe, whereas justice and honour involve danger in practice, and such dangers the Lacedaemonians seldom care to face?'

(108) **MELIANS:** 'On the other hand, we think that whatever perils there may be, they will be ready to face them for our sakes, and will consider danger less dangerous where we are concerned. For if they need our aid⁸⁴ we are close at hand, and they can better trust our loyal feeling because we are their kinsmen.'

(109) **ATHENIANS:** `Yes, but what encourages men who are invited to join in a conflict is clearly not the good-will of those who summon them to their side, but a decided superiority in real power. To this no men look more keenly than the Lacedaemonians; so little confidence have they in their own resources, that they only attack their neighbours when they have numerous allies, and therefore they are not likely to find their way by themselves to an island, when we are masters of the sea.'

(110) **MELIANS:** `But they may send their allies: the Cretan sea is a large place; and the masters of the sea will have more difficulty in overtaking vessels which want to escape than the pursued in escaping. If the attempt should fail they may invade Attica itself, and find their way to allies of yours whom Brasidas did not reach: and then you will have to fight, not for the conquest of a land in which you

have no concern, but nearer home, for the preservation of your confederacy and of your own territory.'

(111) **ATHENIANS:** 'Help may come from Lacedaemon to you as it has come to others, and should you ever have actual experience of it, then you will know that never once have the Athenians retired from a siege through fear of a foe elsewhere. You told us that the safety of your city would be your first care, but we remark that, in this long discussion, not a word has been uttered by you which would give a reasonable man expectation of deliverance.

Your strongest grounds are hopes deferred, and what power you have is not to be compared with that which is already arrayed against you. Unless after we have withdrawn you mean to come, as even now you may, to a wiser conclusion, you are showing a great want of sense. For surely you cannot dream of flying to that false sense of honour which has been the ruin of so many when danger and dishonour were staring them in the face. Many men with their eyes still open to the consequences have found the word "honor" too much for them, and have suffered a mere name to lure them on, until it has drawn down upon them real and irretrievable calamities; through their own folly they have incurred a worse dishonour than fortune would have inflicted upon them.

If you are wise you will not run this risk; you ought to see that there can be no disgrace in yielding to a great city which invites you to become her ally on reasonable terms, keeping your own land, and merely paying tribute; and that you will certainly gain no honour if, having to choose between two alternatives, safety and war, you obstinately prefer the worse.

To maintain our rights against equals, to be politic with superiors, and to be moderate towards inferiors is the path of safety. Reflect once more when we have withdrawn, and say to yourselves over and over again that you are deliberating about your one and only country, which may be saved or may be destroyed by a single decision.'

(112) The Athenians left the conference: the Melians, after consulting among themselves, resolved to persevere in their refusal, and made answer as follows:--

MELIAN RESPONSE: 'Men of Athens, our resolution is unchanged; and we will not in a moment surrender that liberty which our city, founded seven hundred years ago, still enjoys; we will trust to the good fortune which, by the favour of the Gods, has hitherto preserved us, and for human help to the Lacedaemonians, and endeavour to save ourselves. We are ready however to be your friends, and the enemies neither of you nor of the Lacedaemonians, and we ask you to leave our

country when you have made such a peace as may appear to be in the interest of both parties.'

(113) Such was the answer of the Melians; the Athenians, as they quitted the conference, spoke as follows:-- **ATHENIAN RESPONSE** 'Well, we must say, judging from the decision at which you have arrived, that you are the only men who deem the future to be more certain than the present, and regard things unseen as already realised in your fond anticipation, and that the more you cast yourselves upon the Lacedaemonians and fortune and hope, and trust them, the more complete will be your ruin.'

THE RESULTS OF THE WAR:

(114) The Athenian envoys returned to the army; and the generals, when they found that the Melians would not yield, immediately commenced hostilities. They surrounded the town of Melos with a wall, dividing the work among the several contingents. They then left troops of their own and of their allies to keep guard both by land and by sea, and retired with the greater part of their army; the remainder carried on the blockade...

(115) The Melians took that part of the Athenian wall facing the agora by a night assault, killed a few men, and brought in as much grain and other necessaries as they could; they then retreated and remained inactive. After this the Athenians set a better watch. So the summer ended.

(116) Then the Melians took another part of the Athenian wall; for the fortifications were insufficiently guarded. At this point the Athenians sent fresh troops, under the command of Philocrates the son of Demeas. The place was now closely invested, and there was treachery among the citizens themselves. So the Melians were induced to surrender at discretion. The Athenians then put to death all who were of military age, and made slaves of the women and children. They then colonised the island, sending five hundred settlers of their own.