

Melian Dialogue¹

The leaders of Melos faced a terrible choice: Have their Countrymen die as free men or live as slaves. The powerful Athenian generals and their fleet of 38 ships carrying heavy infantry and archers waited at the shores of Melos ready for action as the Melians deliberated.

It was the sixteenth year of the Peloponnesian War, but for the last six years the two great feuding empires headed by Athens and Sparta (Lacedaemon) had avoided open hostile action against each other. Ten years into the War, they had signed a treaty of peace and friendship; however, this treaty did not dissipate the distrust that existed between them. Each feared the others' hegemonic designs on the Peloponnese and sought to increase its power to thwart the subversion to strengthen itself and weaken its rival. This struggle for hegemony by Athens and Sparta was felt most acutely by small, hitherto 'independent' states who were now being forced to take sides in the bipolar Greek world of the fifth century B.C. One such state was Melos.

Despite being one of the few island colonies of Sparta, Melos had remained neutral in the struggle between Sparta and Athens. Its neutrality, however, was unacceptable to the Athenians who, accompanied by overwhelming military and naval power, arrived in Melos to pressure it into submission. After strategically positioning their powerful fleets, the Athenian generals sent envoys to Melos to negotiate the island's surrender.

The commissioners of Melos agreed to meet the envoys in private. They were afraid the Athenians, known for their rhetorical skills, might sway the people if allowed a public forum. The envoys came with an offer that, if the Melians submitted and became part of the Athenian empire, their people and their possessions would not be harmed. The Melians argued that by the law of nations they had the right to remain neutral, and no nation had the right to attack without provocation. Having been a free state for seven hundred years, they were not ready to give up that freedom. Thucydides, an Athenian historian, captures the exchange between the Melian commissioners and the Athenian envoys:

Melians: "...all we can reasonably expect from this negotiation is war, if we prove to have right on our side and refuse to submit, and in the contrary case, slavery."

Athenians: "...we shall not trouble you with specious pretenses---either of how we have a right to our empire because we overthrew the Mede, or are now attacking you because of the wrong that you have done us---and make a long speech that would not be believed; and in return, we hope that you, instead of thinking to influence us by saying that you did not join the Lacedaemonians, although they are colonists, or that you have done us no wrong, will aim at what is feasible, ...since you know as well as we do the right, as the world goes, is only in question between equal power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."²

The Melians pointed out that it was to the interest of all states to respect the laws of nations: "you should not destroy what is our common protection, the privilege of being allowed in danger to invoke what is fair and right..."³ They reminded the Athenians that a day might come when the Athenians themselves would need such protection.

But the Athenians were not persuaded. To them, Melos' submission was in the interest of their empire, and Melos.

Melians: "And how pray, could it turn out as good for us to serve as for you to rule?"

Athenians: "Because you would have the advantage of submitting before suffering the worst, and we should gain by not destroying you."

Melians: "So [that] you would not consent to our being neutral, friends instead of enemies, but allies of neither side?"

Athenians: "No; for your hostility cannot so much hurt us as your friendship will be an argument to our subjects of our weakness and your enmity of our power."

When the Melians asked if that was their 'idea of equity,' the Athenians responded:

"As far as right goes...one has as much of it as the other, and if any maintain their independence, it is because they are strong, and that if we do not molest them, it is because we are afraid..."⁴

By subjugating the Melians, the Athenians hoped not only to extend their empire, but also to improve their image and thus their security. To allow the weaker Melians to remain free, according to the Athenians, would reflect negatively on Athenian power.

Aware of their weak position, the Melians hoped that the justice of their cause would gain them the support of the gods, "and what we want in power will be made up by the alliance with the Lacedaemonians who are bound, if only for very shame, to come to the aid of their kindred."

Athenians: "...Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made; we found it existing before us, and will leave it to exist forever after us; all we do is to make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else having the same power as we have would do the same as we do. Thus, as far as the gods are concerned, we have no fear and no reason to fear that we shall be at a disadvantage. But...your notion about the Lacedaemonians, which leads you to believe that shame will make them help you, here we bless your simplicity but do not envy your folly. The Lacedaemonians...are most conspicuous in considering what is agreeable, honourable, and what is expediently just...Your strongest arguments depend upon hope and the future, and your actual resources are too scanty as compared to those arrayed

against you, for you to come out victorious. You will therefore show great blindness of judgment unless, after allowing us to retire, you can find some counsel more prudent than this."⁵
The envoys then left the conference giving the Melians the opportunity to deliberate on the Athenian offer and decide the best course for them to follow.

Footnotes:

1. Adapted from Thucydides' **The Pelopponesian War** (New York: Random House, 1951), by Suresht Bald, Williamette University.
2. Thucydides' **The Pelopponesian War** (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 331.
3. Ibid, p 331.
4. Ibid, p 332.
5. Ibid, p 332.