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Saviors in *Antigone*

In Aeschylus' play *Antigone*, the idea of *sōtēr* is displayed in a more symbolic and contextual sense than in the literal. Seeing as how almost all the named main characters are dead or die by the end of the story, there is not very much 'saving' or giving salvation in the literal sense of saving someone's life. That being said, the idea of *sōzein* (saving someone) and *sōtēr* (savior) is still present throughout the play, most particularly in the characters of Antigone and Teiresias.

According to Gregory Nagy's *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, the definition of *sōtēr* is : 'one who brings (someone) back to safety' or, mystically, 'one who brings (someone) back to life'. No one in *Antigone* is brought back to life, or even properly rescued from the risk of death. Eteoclês and Polyneicês are already dead before the beginning of the play. Antigone, Haimon, and Eurydice all die at the end. The only named characters still alive are Ismene, Creon, and Teiresias. Even then, Teiresias is the only person who doesn't suffer horribly or gets punished in the play. If no one is 'saved' in the literal sense, then is anyone saved at all?

Teiresias, in a sense, is an example of *sōtēr*. He and Creon butt heads about the fate of Antigone, with Creon belittling his skills as a prophet:

"Creon: The generations of prophets has always loved gold.

Teiresias: The generation of kings has always loved brass.

Creon: You forget yourself! You are speaking to your King.

Teiresias: I know it. You are a king because of me" (*Antigone* 233).

Teiresias is the cause of Creon's kingship, wealth, fame, and reputation. He is, in a sense, Creon's savior because he helped Creon get to where he is now. Not only this, but he also gives Creon counsel about the dishonor done to Polyneicês body, saying, "What glory is it to kill a man who is dead... It is for your own good that I speak as I do... yield for your own good" (*Antigone* 232). Teiresias knows Creon is fighting a losing battle here, and wants him to stop attempting something that will ultimately end in absolute suffering and death. He is a model of sōtēr, but his attempt to rescue Creon and his family from their fates is all for naught, because Creon listened to him too late.

Antigonê is also a model of sōtēr, although more in a symbolic sense too. Her actions in the play are motivated not by saving the living, but rather saving the dead. She tells her sister Ismene her plan:

"But I will bury him [Polyneicês] ; and if I must die,

I say that this crime is holy: I shall lie down

With him in death, and I shall be as dear

To him as he to me.

It is the dead

Not the living, who make the longest demands:

We die for ever..." (*Antigone* 192).

In Greek tradition, it is a horrible affront to the gods and the Underworld to neglect giving the dead a proper burial. Antigonê, despite Creon's order and threat to not bury

Polyneicês, does so. She buries her brother in order to let his spirit pass on to the House of Death and not linger restlessly. So she displays *sōzein* not by saving the living from death, but saving the dead from the torture of not being able to fully move on. Antigônê is a *sōtēr* in that sense.

Creon, too, can potentially be argued as showing a form of *sōzein*. Instead of killing both Antigone and Ismene for the former's crime of burying Polyneicês against his will, he decides on a different sentence:

"Choragos: These girls? You have sentenced them both?

Creon: No, you are right. I will not kill the one whose hands are clean.

Choragos: But Antigone?

Creon [Somberly: I will carry her far away

Out there in the wilderness, and lock her

Living in a vault of stone. She shall have food,

As the custom is, to absolve the State of her death" (*Antigone* 223).

So Creon does show Antigônê and Ismene some twisted form of salvation, leaving Antigônê to die alone of her own accord so Creon isn't guilty of 'killing' her, and letting Ismene live alone with no one left of her family to live for. He pays for it in the end, with the suicides of Antigônê, his son Haimon, and his wife Eurydice. Although she isn't in the last bit of the play, it's likely Ismene commits or will commit suicide too, as she explicitly states she has nothing to live for if Antigônê dies. Creon is left alone and wishing for death that the Choragos won't allow for him.

The idea of *sōtēr* and *sōzein* is present in the play *Antigone*, although not in a very traditional or literal sense. This is part of what defines a tragedy; salvation that comes too late

and salvation that comes in vain. That is why it's so important that we are gentle and compassionate with each other. Suffering exists, whether we want it or not. But when we show each other sōzein (salvation) by being with them and loving them and showing mercy and compassion, we prevent people from going down dark paths in their suffering and causing even more people more pain. It is through love and gentle correction that we can walk together through pain.