

Not Superstitious Not an Atheist:

Hobbes's Defense of Thucydides against the charge of Atheism

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“OF THE LIFE AND HISTORY OF THUCYDIDES” By Thomas Hobbes

Below is Paragraph Two of Hobbes’s essay which appeared in his translation of Thucydides in 1629:

Agreeable to his nobility, was his institution in the study of eloquence and philosophy. For in philosophy, he was the scholar (as also was Pericles and Socrates) of Anaxagoras; whose opinions, being of a strain above the apprehension of the vulgar, procured him the estimation of an atheist: which name they bestowed upon all men that thought not as they did of their ridiculous religion, and in the end cost him his life. And Socrates after him for the like causes underwent the like fortune. It is not therefore much to be regarded, if this other disciple of his were by some reputed an atheist too. For though he were none, yet it is not improbable, but by the light of natural reason he might see enough in the religion of these heathen, to make him think it vain and superstitious; which was enough to make him an atheist in the opinion of the people. In some places of his history he noteth the equivocation of the oracles; and yet he confirmeth an assertion of his own, touching the time this war lasted, by the oracle’s prediction. He taxeth Nicias for being too punctual in the observation of the ceremonies of their religion, when he overthrew himself and his army, and indeed the whole dominion and liberty of his country, by it. Yet he commendeth him in another place for his worshipping of the gods, and saith in that respect, he least of all men deserved to come to so great a degree of calamity as he did. So that in his writings our author appeareth to be, on the one side not superstitious, on the other side not an atheist.

In 1629 Hobbes began his publishing career with his translation of Thucydides’, The Peloponnesian War. By then he was over forty years of

age and he had not yet published anything under his own name. Along with the translation he included an essay titled “Of the Life and History of Thucydides.” In this terse and dense essay, Hobbes presents both his interpretation of Thucydides’ thought and of his own political, religious, and philosophical ideas. Most importantly, Hobbes teaches us, his readers, how to read Thucydides. Hobbes gives us stories about Thucydides’ life as well as specific examples from Thucydides’ writings. By having his readers work through all these examples, Hobbes indicates how a careful reader can sort the spurious anecdotes about Thucydides from the actual written work and discover Thucydides’ own thoughts.

Here, I will just focus on part of the second paragraph of Hobbes’s essay. In this section Hobbes attempts to defend his author against the charge of Atheism. Hobbes declares that philosophers are always in danger of being called atheists. In his defense of Thucydides, Hobbes indicates both the spurious and genuine basis for those charges. In order for us to sort these things out for ourselves, Hobbes gives us very carefully chosen examples from Thucydides’ writings, which Hobbes invites us to think through. It is by working out the details of the examples in Thucydides that we develop a picture of how Hobbes understood the relationship between a wise person and his/her polity as well as what Hobbes considered to be Thucydides’ actual religious thought.

The Defense of Thucydides

Hobbes devotes most of this second paragraph to defending Thucydides against the charge of Atheism. This defense is like the second trial of Thucydides, a trial summoned by Hobbes, who acts as both the chief accuser and the defender. It is a trial held more than 2,000 years after Thucydides’ own trial in Athens on the charges of treason.¹ Hobbes seems more concerned with the trial that he puts his author through than the

¹ In 424 B.C. Thucydides was put on trial after failing to prevent the Spartans from taking the city of Amphipolis. Thucydides was the general in command of the area. For his failure Thucydides was exiled from Athens for life, but his exile in fact lasted 20 years.

actual charges for treason that Thucydides actually faced. For Hobbes the danger and consequences of being called an atheist are more pertinent than the charge of treason.

Hobbes bases the charge of Atheism solely upon sources and conjectures external to Thucydides' book. The charge of atheism against Thucydides, according to Hobbes, is made by people who have no real knowledge of Thucydides' real thoughts, because these are people who are incapable of understanding what it is that philosophically minded people think about. In making his defense, Hobbes points us to specific aspects of Thucydides' writings and in this defense indicates to us how to interpret Thucydides' real thoughts. However, in pointing us to his author's thoughts, Hobbes ends up demonstrating that the real evidence for the charge of atheism against Thucydides is to be found in the internal evidence of the book.

The question arises, why did Hobbes bring up the charge of Atheism against Thucydides in the first place? In spite of Hobbes's avowed fears², he was a bold writer, even here at the beginning of his publishing career. He probably did this in order to show attentive readers how to read Thucydides in a way that such a reader can ferret out Thucydides' own thoughts on religion. But it also allows us to discover Hobbes's own thoughts on religion. Hobbes has a personal interest in the subject of the probability that a wise person will be reputed to be an atheist. Further along in the essay we will encounter other incidents in which Hobbes tells us stories about Thucydides that are highly dubious, improbable, hearsay, and completely based upon unreliable sources. In all these cases the source of the story is external to Thucydides' own writings. In each case Hobbes is teaching us, his reader, how to read Thucydides, and how to read Hobbes himself. He is showing us the distinction between the vulgar and the attentive reader and giving us the opportunity to develop into attentive

² In Hobbes's "Letter to the Reader," of the translation, Hobbes emphasizes his fears of publishing.

readers.

Hobbes's Defense:

Hobbes's defense of Thucydides consists of seven parts and a conclusion.

Those whose are better educated are thought to be atheists.

Anyone who did not believe the ridiculous Greek religion was considered an atheist.

By natural reason Thucydides could see the Greek religion was "vain and superstitious."

Sometimes Thucydides showed that the oracles equivocated.

Thucydides confirms that the oracles did predict the length of the war.

Thucydides argues that Nicias was too religiously observant.

Thucydides praises Nicias' piety.

Conclusion: he was neither superstitious or an atheist.

Hobbes's whole defense seems equivocal, on the one hand and on the other. At the end of a thorough and careful reading, the suspicion that in Hobbes's view, his author was an atheist is not diminished but strengthened. In the first place Hobbes leaves no doubt that in his view Thucydides did not believe in the Greek gods. Therefore from the point of view of the Athenians, Thucydides was certainly guilty of atheism.

There are two different sorts of defenses that Hobbes mounts on Thucydides' behalf. The first type of defense is based upon Thucydides' reason and his ability to see through the Greek religion. The second sort of defense is based upon citing what Thucydides wrote. Hobbes does not say anything explicit about how Thucydides made use of the "light of natural reason" to see through the Greek religion. However, the examples Hobbes cites from Thucydides in order to make this second sort of defense, serve to show the attentive readers how Thucydides could have used his reason to think through the problematic character of the Greek religion.

The defense based upon evidence found in Thucydides is also divided into two parts. Hobbes first offers evidence without citing the specific references in Thucydides, although Hobbes tells us that this evidence is to be found in the writings. Then, secondly he makes references to specific sections in Thucydides.

Hobbes writes of Thucydides “In some places of his history he noteth the equivocation of the oracles....” Here Hobbes does not tell us to what Hobbes is referring. There are a number of passages to which this statement could apply. Let us look at a couple of possible candidates.

The Oracles Equivocate:

One of the most telling examples in Thucydides of the equivocation of the Oracles is the story of Cylon and his attempt to become tyrant of Athens. The story of Cylon is actually one of the most comic episodes in the work. As part of his plan to make himself tyrant of Athens, Cylon consulted with the Delphic Oracle in order to decide when he should try to seize control. To this “the God answered that on the greatest festival day he should seize the citadel of Athens”(1.125). Cylon decided that the greatest festival day was during the time of the Olympic holidays, “esteeming the feast of Jupiter.” Cylon had been an Olympic victor and this helped confirm his decision that this was the right time to act. Thucydides then tells us, “But whether the feast spoken of were meant to be the greatest in Attica or in some other place, neither did he himself consider nor the oracle make manifest.”(1.125) Thucydides tells us that there were other possible festivals that could also rightly have been called the greatest festival. Needless to say, the whole conspiracy was a complete disaster.

As for Cylon, Thucydides makes clear that his error was that “he, supposing he had rightly understood the oracle, laid hand to the enterprise.”(1.126) What Cylon failed to grasp was that the oracles are not clear, that they require interpretation. In short, the oracles equivocate.

His series of mistakes began because he relied upon his assumption that he knew what the god meant. He thought that because he himself had been blessed by the god with an Olympic victory, that the Olympic festival was the only possible time to which the god referred. This mistaken assumption led him to his most serious error which was not making his own independent decision about when to act. If he had understood the equivocation of the oracles, he would have chosen a time when he had the best chance of success and worked out a logical plan.

If the gods equivocate this means that knowing what the gods want people to do requires that people interpret the gods. And if human wisdom is required in order for people to decide what to do, then people cannot act properly just by assuming that they understand what the gods want of them.

Another place where Thucydides notes the equivocation of the oracles is in regard to the prediction of the oracle that a war would come and with it a plague. Thucydides writes:

Such was the misery, into which the Athenians being fallen were much oppressed; having not only their men killed by the disease within, but the enemy also laying waste their fields and villages without. In this sickness also, (as it was not unlikely they would), they called to mind this verse, said also of the elder sort to have been uttered of old:

A Doric war shall fall,
*And a great plague withal.*³

Now were men at variance about the word, some saying it was not λοιμός [loimos, plague] that was by the ancients mentioned in that verse, but λιμός [limos, famine]. But upon the present occasion the word λοιμός [loimos, plague] deservedly obtained. For as men suffered, so they made the verse to say. And I think, if after this there shall ever come another Doric war, and with it a famine, they are like to recite the verse accordingly. (Book II. 54)

³ The blue number 1 refers to this “An ambiguous prophecy expounded by the event. year ii. A. C. 430. Ol.87. 2.” This is a footnote by Molesworth, who interprets this as a place in which Thucydides notes the equivocation of the gods. This supports my choice of this example.

Here again we can see that the oracle is open to interpretation. It is not clear the oracle predicted a plague or a famine. However since a plague followed the start of the war, the Athenians chose to believe that the oracle had predicted a plague. Thucydides makes clear his opinion that the Athenians chose to believe that the outcome was determined by the prediction and not that the prediction was determined by the outcome. And if the outcome would have been a famine, the Athenians would have seen that as proof of the truth of the prediction. The Athenians are mixed up about cause and effect, or in their terms between the prediction and the outcome. The outcome determined the prediction. Because many Athenians felt that the gods were punishing them for the war by giving them the plague, they found the interpretation of the oracle that confirmed their divine punishment. Their punishment is their proof of the potency of the gods.⁴

Just as Cylon failed to grasp that it was only his actions that could vindicate the oracle, the Athenians at the time of the plague failed to grasp that it was their interpretation that made the oracle appear to be true. In both cases the protagonists misunderstood and were unaware of the actual relationship between themselves and the oracle. It is not that the oracle predicts the outcome, but the outcome -- and the actions people take to bring about the outcome -- allows people to recreate what the oracle was alleged to have said.

The Oracles Vindicated?:

Whereas Hobbes does not refer us to specific examples of the equivocation of the oracles, he does point to a specific case where

⁴ It is like the statement that Aristophanes ascribes to his Nicias in the "Lysistrata," "I know the gods exist because I am god hated."

Thucydides vindicates the oracle.⁵ Thucydides confirms in his own voice that the oracle predicted the length of the war. There Hobbes translates “As everything came to pass... To which time from the beginning of the war, it is in all twenty-seven years.” (5.26. 3)

Hobbes says of Thucydides that “he confirmeth an assertion of his own, touching the time this war lasted, by the oracle’s prediction.”(pa.3) The manner in which Hobbes states this is unusual and tells us about how Hobbes himself understands the prediction. Hobbes seems to be saying that the length of the war is not simply and undeniable fact, but is itself open to interpretation. In Hobbes’s understanding, the length of the war is an assertion made by Thucydides. Hobbes says that Thucydides uses the oracle to confirm this assertion, that he uses the oracle for his own purposes. Thucydides does not confirm the oracle as much as the oracle confirms Thucydides.

Thucydides’ discussion of the oracle and the length of the war take place at a point in the book that is somewhat unexpected. It occurs as part of his discussion of the reasons he consider the peace after ten years of war to be no peace at all, but part of one long war. Towards the center of the book, he tells us that he, Thucydides wrote the full account of the war, until the final defeat of the Athenians by the Spartans. He says that final defeat occurred when the Spartans:

Had made an end of the Athenian dominion and had taken their long walls and Pieraeus. To which time from the beginning of the war, it is in all twenty-seven years.” (V.26)

Thucydides is the one who decides when the war began and when it ended. He completely dismisses the peace treaty sworn to by the combatants after the first ten years of fighting. Thucydides strongly asserts that any person who thinks that the peace was not part of the war, “he shall

⁵ If we look for a reason why Hobbes only gives us an example of the oracle being correct and eschews citing incidents when the oracle equivocated, this may have to do with Hobbes wanting to demonstrate that Thucydides was not an atheist.

think amiss.” (V.26)⁶

It is here in his dismissal of the peace that follows upon his assertion of the length of the war that Thucydides brings in the prediction of the oracle. And to further underscore the importance of this section, it is in this same section that Thucydides finishes relating the story of what happened to him as a result of his failure as a general. (IV. 105- 107) It is only here in Book V.26 that Thucydides tells us about being exiled.

Thucydides writes:

And I remember yet, that from the very beginning of this war and so on till the end, it was uttered by many that it should be of thrice nine years' continuance. And for the time thereof I lived in my strength, and applied my mind to gain an accurate knowledge of the same. It happened also that I was banished my country for twenty years, after my charge at Amphipolis: whereby being present at the affairs of both, and especially of the Lacedæmonians by reason of my exile, I could at leisure the better learn the truth of all that passed. (5.26)

In this section, which functions as a brief interlude, before Thucydides returns to the narrative -- like the interlude of “peace”-- Thucydides has co-joined several important issues. He gives us:

- a) His understanding of the length of the war.
- b) The reasons why the peace was no peace at all.
- c) The story of his exile.
- d) The confirmation of the oracle.
- e) The coincidence between the end of the war, the prediction of the oracle and the end of his exile.

Why does Thucydides tell us these things at this point? Why does he discuss his exile, together with the oracle, and the peace? What, if anything do these three things have to do with one another? Thucydides himself links his fate with the length of the war and the prediction of the oracle foretelling the end of the war. It appears that Thucydides is commenting on the relation between his wisdom and the wisdom of the oracles. Either

⁶ One of Hobbes's famous assertions is that peace is only the time between wars. He seems to have generalized what Thucydides only said of a specific case.

the two wisdoms confirm each other, or either one or the other is the true wisdom. In the former case there is no necessary rivalry between Thucydides and the oracle, whereas in the two other possible cases there is.

The first thing Thucydides argues is that the so called “Peace of Nicias,” was not really ten years of peace, but part of one continuous long war. And if one looks at the war as one long war, instead of two wars, then, the oracle that predicted the length of the war was correct. Note however, that the oracle is correct only if one agrees with Thucydides about the war being one long war. Even in one of the only cases in which Thucydides says the oracle proved right, the rightness of the oracle is dependent upon an interpretation, or in Thucydides’ case upon his argument. So that even if the oracle made a correct prediction, the accuracy of this prediction depends upon the interpretation which Thucydides himself provides.

In the case of Cylon, Thucydides shows that Cylon interpreted the oracle incorrectly, because he failed to note that the oracles equivocate. In the case of the plague, it is the Athenian people who interpret the oracle. They interpret it in such a way as to see a connection between the war and the plague, so that they can comprehend why the gods are punishing them. Here it is Thucydides who interprets the oracle in light of his understanding of the length of the war, or to vindicate his understanding of the war. In all three cases, although it at first appears that the oracle predicts and then the events transpire, it is actually the other way around. The events transpire and the ambiguous oracles are interpreted in light of the events.

In the same paragraph in which Thucydides tells us the peace treaty which was signed for fifty years and officially only lasted for ten, was no peace at all, he tells us about his exile and stresses only how exile helped his writing. In exile, Thucydides was strictly speaking no longer an Athenian; he was no longer a partisan, but an independent man. If the peace treaty was a false peace, perhaps the true peace was the peace that

Thucydides found in exile. The freedom from his political obligations, the leisure he had to pursue the truth, and the peace he found to be able to do his work undisturbed seem to be the true peace.

The largest part, however, of Hobbes's defense of Thucydides' alleged atheism-- alleged by Hobbes -- is based upon what Thucydides has to say about the Athenian general Nicias. In choosing to build his case largely around Nicias, Hobbes shows himself to be a very attentive reader of Thucydides. Of all the leading Athenians during the Peloponnesian War, Nicias is the most pious, the most religious, the one who took the gods most seriously, and whose behavior was most influenced by his belief in the gods.

There is also an important connection between the examples Hobbes gives us on the one hand of Thucydides, the oracle and the length of the war, and on the other hand the war the examples of Nicias in Sicily. That connection is that when Thucydides reinterprets the war to be one long war lasting 27 years, he is undermining what Nicias saw as his greatest achievement, the peace treaty that he brokered between Athens and Sparta. Thucydides argues the "Peace of Nicias," was no peace at all. He not only reinterprets the length of the war, he reinterprets Nicias' proudest moment. This must be kept in mind when we examine Thucydides' final praise of Nicias. Thucydides' vindication of the oracle's prediction of the length of the war is dependent upon contradicting Nicias. Thucydides himself seems to be making the case for the superiority of his political understanding to the political understanding of Nicias. Perhaps Hobbes is drawing our attention to this by having these two examples follow each other. Also by having examples of the different ways in which Thucydides and Nicias both dealt with the oracle follow one another, Hobbes makes the case for the superiority of Thucydides' religious understanding.

In order to evaluate Hobbes's defense of Thucydides against the charge of atheism, we need to look at what Hobbes says Thucydides says about Nicias and compare it to Thucydides' presentation of Nicias. We also

need to compare Hobbes's interpretation of Thucydides' conclusions about Nicias with Thucydides' conclusions about Nicias.

Nicias And the Gods

The proof Hobbes gives that Thucydides was not an atheist are the citations Hobbes gives from the history. Therefore we need to examine exactly what these citations show.

Hobbes says the following about Nicias:

He taxeth Nicias for being too punctual in the observation of the ceremonies of their religion, when he overthrew himself and his army, and indeed the whole dominion and liberty of his country, by it. Yet he commendeth him in another place for his worshipping of the gods, and saith in that respect, he least of all men deserved to come to so great a degree of calamity as he did.

Hobbes says that Thucydides criticizes Nicias "for being too punctual." Punctual is an interesting interpretation by Hobbes. In one carefully chosen word, Hobbes points us both to an essential point that Thucydides makes and a point Hobbes is making. Hobbes is not just arguing that Nicias should not have been observant, but that he acted piously at the wrong times. Let's look at an important case of this and we will better understand why "punctual" is the fitting word for Hobbes to use. The greatest imperial enterprise of the war was the Athenian invasion of Sicily. Through a series of self-inflicted wounds the expedition found itself on the edge of disaster. Nicias was the Athenian general in charge. At the point at which it was clear, that the Athenians could not hope to conquer Sicily, the Athenians could have saved themselves by departing for Athens immediately. If they did not board their ships as quickly as possible, the Syracusans and their allies would block their escape route out of the harbor, and they would all perish. Decisive and immediate action was called for. The decision to depart rested with Nicias.

At this point in his narrative, Thucydides relates two crucial instances in which Nicias could have ordered the departure from Sicily, but

failed to do so. In the first instance, the Athenian general Demosthenes, who had arrived from Athens with reinforcements failed to over-run the Syracusans defensive walls outside of Syracuse. This ended in a great rout for the Athenians (VII, 42- 46.) It was after this defeat that “Demosthenes thought fit to stay no longer.” (VII 47.)

Nicias, however, disagreed. He made a speech, citing his reasons for remaining, which Thucydides only gives us in indirect quotes. In this speech Nicias made the following arguments for remaining in Sicily.

If they state that they are leaving, then the enemy will know their present weakness and the enemy will be emboldened. They need to be able to leave secretly.

He, Nicias understood the true condition of the enemy better than anyone and he knew their real weakness. And therefore he urged continuing the siege.

There was a pro-Athenian party in Syracuse who was ready to betray the city to the Athenians.

If they returned to Athens, the Athenians would say that they abandoned their mission because they were bribed and that he would be put to death. The Athenians have much more money than the Syracusans and therefore the Syracusans won't be able to keep paying the mercenaries they have hired.

It is quite clear that all of Nicias' arguments are weak ones, in that they fail to address the very real danger of annihilation that the Athenian expeditionary force faces. It is also clear that the argument that has the most weight for Nicias, which in fact drives his “do nothing until you hear from me” approach, is the fourth argument, his fear of being put to death by the Athenians should he return. Thucydides ascribes these indirect words to Nicias:

That he was sure the people of Athens would take it ill, if he went thence without their order: for that they were not to have such judges as should give sentence upon their own sight of things done, rather than upon the report of calumniators; but such as would believe whatsoever some fine speaker should accuse them of. That many, nay most of the soldiers here, who now cry out upon their misery, will there cry out on the contrary; and say the generals have betrayed the state, and come away for a bribe. That he would not therefore, knowing the nature of the Athenians so well, choose to be

put to death unjustly, and charged with a dishonourable crime by the Athenians, rather than, if he must needs do one, to suffer the same at the hand of the enemy by his own adventure.” (VII 48.)

The second instance in which Nicias refused to order the expedition home occurs after the Syracusans receive both Sicilian and Peloponnesian reinforcements. The Athenian generals seeing the enemy with a new army again wanted to retreat. This time Nicias “was no longer against it.” However, the Athenians did not leave. Thucydides tells us what happened:

But when they were about it, and everything was ready, the moon happened to be eclipsed: for it was full moon. And not only the greatest part of the Athenians called upon the generals to stay, but Nicias also (for he was addicted to superstition and observations of that kind somewhat too much) said that it should come no more into debate whether they should go or not, till the three times nine days were past, which the soothsayers appoint in that behalf. And the Athenians, though upon going, stayed still for this reason. (VII 50.)

Whereas the first instance of Nicias refusing to depart turned out to be his second last chance, this refusal to leave really was his last chance. The twenty seven days they stayed and did nothing meant the complete destruction of the entire Athenian expeditionary force.⁷ Nicias himself died a horrible painful prolonged death in Sicily.

Thucydides is surprisingly clear and critical when he says that Nicias “was addicted to superstition and observations of that kind somewhat too much.” Hobbes concurs with his author, but Hobbes adds that because of this addiction, Nicias “overthrew himself and his army, and indeed the whole dominion and liberty of his country by it.” Hobbes is even harder on Nicias, than Thucydides is. Hobbes blames Nicias for losing not only the Sicilian expedition, but for bringing about the destruction of the entire Athenian empire and losing the liberty of Athens itself. These charges can rightly be made against Nicias. Thucydides does not spell

⁷ According to Victor Davis Hanson in his book, “A War Like No Other” Hanson estimates that “between 40,000 to 50,000 Athenians, allies, and slaves were dead missing or captured. Some 216 imperial triremes were lost. The Athenian treasury was broke.” (p.229)

out the consequences of Nicias' religious practice that Hobbes spells out. Thucydides seems to confine his criticism to how Nicias' behavior affected Nicias. Thucydides leaves it to his readers to see how Nicias' piety affected all Athenians.

It seems clear from what Thucydides writes that he thinks Nicias should have found a way of getting around what the soothsayers recommended. The generals, certainly, were against listening to the soothsayers. It was the majority of the Athenians soldiers who were frightened by the eclipse. And the soldiers had an ally in their fright: Nicias. His was the decisive voice and he squashed all debate on the subject. Nicias alone was responsible for the destruction that befell the Athenians.

Nicias had two basic choices in regard to the advice of the soothsayers: listen to or dismiss their counsel. The sole question with which Nicias should have concerned himself is which course of action would most likely save his army.

As to the additional twenty seven days that the Athenians remained, it does not seem to be a coincidence that the numbers 3 times 9 equaling 27 comes up three times in the sections to which Hobbes leads us. The number arises in the prediction of the length of the war, in Thucydides' interpretation of the length of the war, and from the soothsayers in Sicily. Hobbes seems to pointing us to look at the different ways in which Thucydides and Nicias dealt with oracles. Thucydides uses the oracle to verify his interpretation of the length of the war. Thucydides commands the oracle to obey his interpretation of events. In contrast the oracle, specifically the interpreters of the oracle, tell Nicias what to do. Nicias could have forced the soothsayers to interpret the oracle to mean that the eclipse was a sign that they should depart even quicker than they were planning. In order to secure the safety of his forces, Nicias had to interpret the eclipse, not the soothsayers. It is this lack of knowledge of the political use of oracles that Hobbes is clearly criticizing in his very harsh assessment of Nicias.

Hobbes concludes his interpretation of Nicias by telling us of Thucydides' final words of praise of Nicias:

Yet he commendeth him in another place for his worshipping of the gods , and saith in that respect, he least of all men deserved to come to so great a degree of calamity as he did.

Hobbes does not say that he agrees with this assessment. He just tells us that this is what Thucydides wrote. We have already read Hobbes's own assessment.

Hobbes is here referring us to Book VII. 86. And this is how Hobbes translates this passage:

For these, or for causes near unto these, was he put to death: being the man that, of all the Grecians of my time, had least deserved to be brought to so great a degree of misery. (VII. 86)

Although Hobbes refers to this sentence in his essay, for a wholly inexplicable reason he omits and fails to translate the final clause found in the Greek original. He omits the words, "having regulated all his life in accordance with what has been considered virtue." (David Greene P.498).⁸ Hobbes is entirely correct to point out the importance of Thucydides' final judgment of Nicias, as it is central to Thucydides' understanding of the relation between the gods and justice for human beings.

Thucydides' final appraisal of Nicias is silent about the gods. He only says that Nicias lived his life in accordance with what is considered virtue.⁹ Nicias did not deserve his fate, because -- as is commonly thought

⁸ In the "Advertisement" to the English works of Hobbes edited by Molseworth, the editor notes that "owing partly to the corrupt state of the Greek text of his day, partly to his habitual disregard of minute details so that accuracy were attained in essentials, manifold errors and omissions." (Volume 8 English Works)

⁹ Thucydides' appraisal of Nicias's virtue is qualified by inserting "with what has been considered virtue." This formulation raises some questions. First, is what is considered virtue actually virtue? Second, who are the ones who would consider Nicias' behavior virtuous, the Greeks (who are here mentioned by Thucydides) , or just the Athenians, or all peoples, or the gods? Third, in order to avoid a fate such as Nicias' are there more important elements than just being virtuous according to what is considered virtuous? These questions are more relevant to understanding Thucydides than to Hobbes' interpretation of his author, since Hobbes omitted these key words.

-- good behavior should be rewarded. Thucydides, in the part Hobbes omits, does not say that Nicias was blameless, or perfectly just, only that in comparison to the other Grecians of his time he least deserved his fate.

Whereas Thucydides and Hobbes have given us their account of Nicias' piety and justice, Nicias gives his own account in his last speech to the army. He makes this speech when the Athenians are terribly dejected after suffering a calamitous naval defeat, in which their option of escaping by sea is all but closed off. This speech addresses the gods and what the Athenians can hope for. Nicias argues that he has worshiped the gods according to the law ---thereby confirming Thucydides assessment of the conventional character of Nicias' piety -- and therefore he is hopeful about the future. Although, Nicias says, some of the gods may not have liked that the Athenian attempt to conquer Syracuse, they have already punished the Athenians with enough defeats. He goes on to say that they have been punished enough for their offenses and can now hope for the favor of the gods, "for our case deserveth their pity rather than their hatred." (VII. 77) Since Nicias argues that he and the Athenians have suffered enough and their suffering only increases after this speech, does this imply that the gods are unjust to human beings? None of the hopes that Nicias cites materialize. If Thucydides and Nicias are in agreement that Nicias was pious according to the law, perhaps the fate of Nicias is really a serious critique of the gods. The gods don't punish justly. They punish those deserving of reward. Nicias does not deserve a reward from the Athenians; he betrayed them and cost them their army, their navy, the lives of the entire expedition to Sicily, and finally the war. This however, may be irrelevant to the question of whether he deserves to be punished by the gods. Do the gods punish and reward individuals according to how individuals treat each other? Specifically do the gods punish the Athenians for being imperialists? Or, on the other hand do they reward and punish individuals for how they treat the gods, how they worship the gods? Could Thucydides' final word on Nicias simply mean that a man who piously

worshiped the gods as Nicias did should not be punished in this life by the gods?

However as we have seen in the various examples of Nicias' behavior, he was a mixture of virtue and vice. He was not just virtuous in all his deeds. Sometimes he acted for the common good and virtuously, such as his opposition to the Sicilian expedition when the idea was first proposed, (even if his good and the common good coincided), but at other times, such as when he refused to retreat because he feared death at the hand of his fellow Athenians, he acted narrowly and selfishly. Only in respect to the worship of the gods was he consistent. And this consistency cost him his life and the destruction of the Athenian expedition, when he made the final decision to delay their retreat because of the eclipse of the moon.

But if the gods punish unjustly this raises questions about the goodness of the gods and in fact whether the gods do in fact punish impiety, whether the fate of people is at all dependent upon the actions of the gods. And if the gods do not in fact control the fate of men, then perhaps believing that the gods have such control over one's life, leads one to abstain or to take actions which may lead to one indeed feel as if the gods are punishing them.

Hobbes's paragraph on the relationship between the wise man, politics and religion has as its penultimate thought Hobbes's paraphrase of Thucydides' final statement about Nicias. Hobbes writes that according to Thucydides, Nicias, "least of all men deserved to come to so great a calamity as he did."(P.2) Now when Hobbes actually translates Thucydides' statement directly from the Greek he writes that Nicias "being the man that, of all Grecians of my time had least deserved to be brought to so great a degree of misery."(VII. 86) The difference between the paraphrase and the translation is that Thucydides confines his comparison of what Nicias deserved to just the other Greeks of his time. In contrast Hobbes compares what Nicias deserves to all men, which presumably means all men of all

times. If Hobbes did this purposefully, it would be in keeping with the argument he has been making throughout this paragraph. The problem that Nicias has with both being pious and being politically successful is not just a problem confined to the pagan religion of the Greeks.

From the beginning of the paragraph Hobbes has been leading us to see that the problem of the relationship between religion and politics is not confined to the pagan religion. The danger to wise men of being called “Atheist” is not just a problem confined to the Athenians. If one is considered wise by the multitude, then one is also in danger of being called an atheist. Religious law, requires interpretation. It requires that reason be applied to the law, that the law be examined, that judgments be made about how to apply the law and to what degree in what circumstances. But because human reason must be applied to religion, there is always the danger that the person who subjects religious practice to reason will be considered an atheist.

Even a pious person like Nicias cannot escape the consequences of the necessity to apply his reason to the law. When a political leader such as Nicias fails to do so and fails repeatedly, this may not just be an abnegation of reason, but also a failure to fulfill ones fundamental political duty, to preserve the lives of those under his charge.

Whatever else one can say about Nicias, no one would ever accuse Nicias of being an atheist. And the reason is, because he did whatever the religious law proscribed. He did it without question. Being pious without question, led in the wrong circumstances to complete disaster. The alternative would have been for Nicias to question the law, to question and examine his religion. In his own life Nicias did not find a way to be both pious and political. He did not find the middle path between what he thought his religion demanded and what his political responsibilities demanded. In order to be politically responsible, this would have required that Nicias seek wisdom about the gods, to start on a Socratic path, to follow the path that Hobbes argues leads to being accused of atheism and

being put to death for being an atheist. So it seems that both the path of Nicias and the path of Socrates can lead to a violent death.

Not Superstitious not an Atheist

The paragraph ends with Hobbes's conclusion that "our author appeareth to be, on the one side not superstitious, on the other side not an atheist." (P. 3) Whether Hobbes in fact demonstrated this is questionable. The examples from the history that he cites, even though they point to a certain interpretation, are too cryptic to assess fully Thucydides' own religious views. We certainly do not know enough yet about Thucydides' views to be able to assess whether he was not superstitious and whether he was not an atheist. Hobbes tells us that Thucydides could have reasoned through the Greek religion and decided that it was just superstition. And the possibility that he did not believe in the gods of the city was enough for him to be considered an atheist.

From what Hobbes says can we derive his definition of superstition and atheism? Superstition is opposed to the "light of natural reason." A belief could probably be called a superstition if it could not be substantiated by a rational argument. Reason according to Hobbes can be used to critique a religion. Thucydides certainly had the ability to see through the inconsistencies of the pagan religion. There is nothing that Hobbes says that rules out the ability of a thinker critiquing any religion by examining it "by light of natural reason." Hobbes is for obvious reasons completely silent about the possibility of applying such a critique to Christianity. But he has certainly raised the possibility.¹⁰

According to what Hobbes writes, the Athenians would have been correct to view Thucydides as an atheist. From what Hobbes says it is highly unlikely that his author accepted the Greek religion. And since it seems it is the members of a particular religion who define who is and is

¹⁰ Although any religion can be subjected to the critique of reason, some religions may be able to stand up to such a critique. This is always a possibility. Reason might confirm what some of the faithful believe.

not a believer, the Athenians would have been correct to ascribe unbelief to Thucydides.

What is the meaning of the enigmatic statement that Thucydides was neither superstitious nor an atheist? What is the attitude to religion that falls somewhere between the pillars of superstition and atheism? As far as the Athenians were concerned, if Thucydides thought the Greek religion was “vain and superstitious” and he therefore did not accept the Greek religion, then he was an atheist. So from the Athenian perspective a person who equates the Greek religion with superstition is an atheist. The Athenians were not interested in the idea that there might be an alternative religion practiced somewhere else that stands up to the scrutiny of “natural reason.” So the question of finding what Hobbes means by the ground between the two pillars seems to depend upon who is asking the question and from what national and religious perspective.

Hobbes seems to be arguing from two perspectives at the same time. And these two modes of arguing actually contradict one another. On the one hand he is arguing that the Greek religion is ridiculous and therefore Thucydides could not have accepted it. On the other hand, Hobbes is arguing that his author also had good things to say about the Greek religion and the most pious of Athenians. And therefore Thucydides was a not an atheist. The argument is quite convoluted.

The essential steps of the argument are:
The Greek Religion is ridiculous.
Thucydides did not believe in this ridiculous religion.
Thucydides both criticizes and praises somebody who believed in this ridiculous religion.
Therefore Thucydides was not superstitious and not an atheist.

One cannot legitimately use as proof of a person not being an atheist, his praise of somebody who believed in a religion, that this person thought was ridiculous. For example, if Nicias believed in ghosts and

Thucydides praised Nicias' goodness, can that possibly be used to prove that Thucydides believed in ghosts or at the very least that Thucydides did not deny the existence of ghosts?

What does Hobbes actually prove about Thucydides' theism or atheism? If Thucydides thought the Greek religion was ridiculous, then he was certainly an atheist in regard to the Greek religion. Hobbes, however uses evidence from the Greek religion to argue that Thucydides was not an atheist. There is no indication, nor does Hobbes anywhere make the argument that Thucydides thought there was anything like the biblical god. And then there is Hobbes' conclusion that his author falls into that unknown field between not superstition and not atheism.

The words Hobbes uses in his final conclusion about his author's religious beliefs are very carefully chosen by Hobbes. To quote again, Hobbes concludes, "So that in his writings our author appeareth to be, on the one side not superstitious, on the other side not an atheist." The first thing to note is that Hobbes makes it clear that he is speaking about Thucydides' writings and not necessarily Thucydides the person. Hobbes is speaking about the Thucydides who presents himself in his book. This once again reiterates that the only reliable evidence of Thucydides' religious views, if it is to be discovered anywhere, is to be found in his writings. Second, Hobbes emphasizes the way his author appears in the book. This raises the possibility that even Thucydides in his writings only appears not to be an atheist and that this appearance may not reflect Thucydides' actual religious opinions. Still the possibility remains that Thucydides wrote in such a way that to most readers he appears to be a theist, but that the attentive readers may discover Thucydides' real religious thought. Hobbes certainly seems to be a proponent of the view that the attentive reader has access to Thucydides' deepest thoughts. And third, Hobbes uses negatives attributes to describe Thucydides' religious stance. He does not say his author was a theist, but that he was not an atheist. Of course, one obvious reason for not calling Thucydides a theist

is because, Thucydides did not have the possibility of being a Christian. But saying that he was not an atheist does not at all demonstrate that Thucydides would have been a Christian if he had the opportunity. Furthermore saying that someone is not an atheist does not make that person a theist. There is plenty of room on the line between atheism and theism on which Thucydides could sit where no believer would consider that person a believer, for example an agnostic. An agnostic is neither an atheist nor a believer. The language Hobbes uses here opens up all these possibilities. And all these openings should be taken seriously.

The rhetorical skill and the sophistication Hobbes employs is remarkable and deserves to be untangled. What Hobbes writes about superstition and atheism can be viewed as being directed at three imaginary sorts of readers. The first audience is the ancient Athenians, the second are the Christians of Hobbes's England, and the third are the wise readers of the present and of the future. In short form, the readers can be seen as the readers of the past, the present and the future. In order to understand what Hobbes is doing one must figure out what each of these three types of readers would say about Hobbes's discussion. The third group are those people whom Hobbes had earlier referred to as "the few and better sort of readers." In order to arrive at what Hobbes is saying to them, one must first work through what responses the ancient Greeks and modern Christians would make to Hobbes's argument.

Hobbes' rhetorical strategy plays on the trick of appealing to the modern Christian prejudice in favor of the truth and reasonableness of their religion. This unexamined equation of Christianity and reasonableness has the possible effect of leading these readers to see Thucydides as a writer who would have accepted the Christian religion if it had been available to him. And as a bi-product of coming to this conclusion, Hobbes's Christian readers might equate him with a believer in the Christian faith. How does Hobbes do this?

He does this because his Christian readers would not condemn Thucydides, because he did not accept the Greek religion. Modern Christians would have very little incentive to ask or to care about what the Ancient Greeks would say about an author who thought the Athenian religion to be ridiculous. Their acceptance of the truth of Christianity would lead them to think that the criterion by which one distinguishes superstition from Christianity is both obvious and clear. For Christians, the pagan religion melts under “the light of natural reason.” They are not interested in the fact that if Hobbes is right --- that if Thucydides thought through the pagan religion – he would be seen as an atheist by the Athenians. For the modern Christians the criterion by which superstition is distinguished from the one true religion is quite straight forward, whoever believes in a god other than the Christian god is under the sway of superstition. When a Christian Englishman of Hobbes’s time looks at a person such as Nicias, he would not call him an atheist, but a pagan, meaning that he believed in gods, but not the one true god. The gods in which Nicias believed would be judged just to be a foolish superstition.

Now when we turn to ask who Nicias would consider an atheist, we would get a different sort of answer. Nicias would say an atheist is a person who denies the existence of any and all gods, whose ever gods they may be. He might say, to the Christian that it was strange that you deny the power of our gods and claim one universal god for all people. Since your god does not belong to your city, or to any city, or to your people, or to any particular people this one universal god does not make sense. And to our way of thinking that is a very strange – way to be religious. Your form of piety precludes any other form of piety. It is closed to any religion other than your own. For the ancient Greeks, because every city seemed to have its own special gods, there did not seem to be this idea that there was one true and universal god.

However, both Christianity and the Greek religion have this in common, they both judge that anybody who is under their political

jurisdiction, who does not accept their god or gods is an atheist. The difference being that the Christian jurisdiction is the entire universe, and the religious jurisdiction of the Ancient Greeks is limited to their particular city. But the important point, at least in this context, is that it is a particular political-theological system that judges who is or is not an atheist.

If it is only a particular religion that judges whether another religion is just a superstition, then the designation is an entirely relative concept. Both Christianity and Greek Paganism are equally vulnerable to being called superstitions.

But the Christian does not see that calling another religion a superstition is a case of people living in glass temples throwing stones. When Hobbes speaks of using “the light of right reason” to examine a religion, the Christian has no reason to doubt that his religion is in conformity with right reason. The very tool that Hobbes designates as having the ability to cut through religious superstition is the very tool that the Christian assumes is already on his side. The Christian has no reason to think that reason and Christianity are opposed. Reason can show the folly of other religions, but reason confirms the truth of Christianity. And therefore if Thucydides freed himself from the stupidity of paganism through reason, that same method will only confirm the truth of Christianity. For the Christian what falls between superstition and atheism is Christianity. Doubting paganism does not make one an atheist in the eyes of Christians. It makes one a potential Christian. And the Christian does not at all care that the Athenian calls Thucydides an atheist, because from the Christian’s perspective, the Athenian is arguing from a perspective that is completely wrong.

What Hobbes’s rhetoric does is to use the prejudices of Christianity so the Christian reader will be satisfied with what Hobbes says. At the same time Hobbes leads the “better sort of reader” to ask questions about who decides what is a superstition, what is the criterion by which one is called an atheist, and is there a reasonable way to distinguish one from the

other? And perhaps there is no way to distinguish superstitious from non-superstitious religion.

Hobbes's Later Writings

The subject of superstition and atheism was one that continued to play a role in Hobbes's later writings. In both *De Cive* and in the *Leviathan* Hobbes attempts to explicitly define the difference between religion and superstition. Here, in the essay on Thucydides, he seems chiefly trying to demonstrate that Thucydides was neither superstitious nor an atheist, that there is a middle way between the two extremes. And the implication is that this middle way is the one true religion –Christianity. But in making this argument and by giving us the example that the Athenians called anybody who did not believe in “their ridiculous religion” an atheist, Hobbes raises the whole possibility that there is no objective way to distinguish superstition from religion. It is in his future writings that Hobbes makes this point more clear. In *De Cive* Hobbes Writes:

Now the fear of invisible things, when it is severed from right reason, is superstition. It was therefore almost impossible for men, without the special assistance of God, to avoid both rocks of atheism and superstition. For this proceeds from fear without right reason; that, from an opinion of right reason without fear. (XVI.1)

If we apply what Hobbes says in *De Cive* to what he writes about Thucydides, we will see that there is a consistency between his earlier and later thought.¹¹ The Greek religion was a superstition because it was based upon fears of invisible things for which the Greeks did not understand the right reasons.¹² Fear of things invisible without God's revelation leads to superstition. A superstitious religion is defined as a set of beliefs about invisible things without the benefit of revelation.

¹¹ . I am not making the error of interpreting retroactively, that is I am not reading the Thucydides essay in light of what Hobbes says in *De Cive*. The interpretation that I gave to the Thucydides essay is based solely upon the words in that essay.

¹² In referring to this section of *De Cive*, Strauss writes “Hobbes says that without revelation atheism is almost inevitable. (PPH p.77)

Thucydides, according to Hobbes could probably see that the Greek religion was just superstitious. And perhaps the Athenians suspected that he did this and viewed Thucydides as an atheist. But Thucydides was not an atheist either. This is what Hobbes asserts. He asserts this based upon the argument that Thucydides did not completely dismiss Greek piety. However, as we have seen by the examples to which Hobbes sends us, what Thucydides says about the Greek religion is highly circumscribed, tentative, and faint praise. One thing is certain is that Thucydides never “in his writings,” makes a statement as strong as Hobbes calling the Greek religion “ridiculous.” If Thucydides agreed with Hobbes that the religion was ridiculous, and it seems that Hobbes thought that his author agreed with him, then Thucydides displayed his wisdom by not being explicit about this. And Hobbes displayed his boldness and a certain recklessness by attributing such ideas to his author.

In any case Hobbes states that Thucydides achieved what Hobbes tells us in *De Cive* is impossible for almost all men without revelation; he avoided the rocks of atheism and superstition. However, Thucydides did not have access to the one true revealed religion. Therefore he did not know the true middle ground between the two rocks. Hobbes in the Thucydides essay tells us his author “by the light of right reason” might have concluded that the Athenian religion was a superstition. Here in *De Cive*, Hobbes, writes that atheism results “from an opinion of right reason without fear.” Since Thucydides did not have revelation available to him how could Thucydides not be an atheist? Thucydides had the combination of right reason without fear, the recipe of atheism.

On the other hand the recipe for theism seems to be right reason and fear, that is fear of invisible things, but an invisible thing that it is reasonable to fear: the one true god.

Turning now to the *Leviathan*, there Hobbes makes explicit what he seems to be strongly implying in his Thucydides essay. In the *Leviathan* he writes, “And this fear of things invisible is the natural seed of that

which everyone in himself calleth religion, and in them that worship or fear that power otherwise than they do, superstition.” (XI, 26) The distinction between religion and superstition here evaporates. It all depends upon the perspective of the person making the distinction. There is nothing that Hobbes says here in the Leviathan that in any way contradicts what he says in his Thucydides essay. Only in the Leviathan he makes his point crystal clear. And to underline his point even more clearly the next paragraph is devoted to arguing that political leaders use this fear of invisible things to gain and consolidate their power. Hobbes writes:

And this seed of religion having been observed by many, some of those that have observed it have been inclined thereby to nourish, to dress, and form it into laws, and to add to it, of their own invention, any opinion of the causes of future events by which they thought they should best be able to govern others, and make unto themselves the greatest use of their powers. (Leviathan XI 27.)

This statement by Hobbes is also consistent with Hobbes’s criticism of Nicias. Hobbes in his writing on Thucydides goes even further than he goes in the Leviathan. In Leviathan, Hobbes is only suggesting that some unscrupulous observers of the human propensity for ascribing what they don’t understand to gods, use it to create laws and gain control over others. In the essay on Thucydides, Hobbes implies that this is what a wise leader should in fact do. Furthermore, Hobbes points us to an example where Thucydides shows us, that he not only agrees with Hobbes, but Thucydides manipulates the prediction of the end of the war to bolster his interpretation that the peace of Nicias should not count as a cessation of

the war.¹³

But we can see that what Hobbes says in the Thucydides essay is consistent with what he writes in the Leviathan. The Leviathan section deals specifically with the distinction between superstition and religion and finds the distinction is wholly dependent upon the person doing the judging. On the other hand the section in De Cive focuses on the poles of superstition and atheism. Religion seems to be what happens when right reason -- guided by revelation -- is combined with fear. Atheism is the result of an opinion of right reason without fear and without the benefit of revelation. So it is revelation that turns right reason into either religion or atheism. But this revelation is only acceptable if it is the Christian revelation. Revelation other than the revelation of the God of the bible is equated with superstition. The only acceptable definition for the Christian of right reason is revelation. Right reason turns out to be accepting biblical revelation. Now who decided upon this definition of right reason? The answer: Christians. Did they come to this conclusion through reason or through accepting biblical revelation? Clearly, the proof of revelation is a belief in revelation. The argument is circular. If it is circular in that the proof depends upon believing the proof, then, Hobbes is right to conclude as he does, in the Leviathan, that the difference between superstition and atheism is in the eye of the beholder. The question for assessing whether or not there is a distinction between a superstition and a religion then becomes whether fear of invisible things is ever reasonable. If it is not, then this tips the argument to the side of atheism.

¹³ A.P. Martinich argues that Hobbes could not have meant what he said, here in the Leviathan because it does not square with what Hobbes had written in De Cive. The fundamental assumption that Martini makes is that Hobbes is a Christian and therefore what Hobbes writes must be reconciled with his Christianity. This however asserts what the discussion should be trying to demonstrate by building a case through using the evidence of Hobbes's words. Instead Martini works backwards from the conclusion to make the evidence fit his previously determined conclusion. According to Martinich Hobbes is just being sarcastic, poking fun at all the various Christian sects, when he says that "superstition is religion that is not allowed." Hobbes, Martinich thinks, does not actually mean what he says. (Martinich, "A Hobbes Dictionary"p.296-297.

The statements in De Cive and Leviathan far from contradicting each other, actually support each other. The statement about superstition in the Leviathan draws out the implications of the statement in De Cive. And both these statements are consistent with what Hobbes writes in the essay on Thucydides. One would venture to say that on this fundamental question concerning the difference between superstition and religion, Hobbes had already developed his basic position by the time of his writing on Thucydides. Hobbes never accepted the definition of right reason as meaning the acceptance of biblical revelation.

Hobbes, as can be seen from his work on Thucydides, held fast to the view that religion must be in the service of the political regime. The sovereign should in fact decide what religious practices are acceptable. In this way religion serves politics. The fact that it is sovereigns who should and usually do decide what is to be called a religion and what a superstition, may be of great benefit to the polity, but it is a problem to various individuals of a particular polity. In the first place it is a problem for those who profess a religion other than the one deemed acceptable to the sovereign. It is also a problem, as Hobbes has shown, for those individuals who are thought to be wise. Their loyalty to the sovereign religion be it the Greek religion, or any other religion is always suspect. People such as Hobbes and his author are always in danger of being considered atheists.

However, in favoring the view that religion is to serve politics, Hobbes is not simply failing to take into account the needs of people such as himself. Hobbes understands that what may be good for him may not be in accord with what is good for the regime. The need for the regime to make religion its servant may also entail that the wise person not be allowed to appear to question the gods of the city. In this paragraph Hobbes showed through the examples that unless the wise person becomes a ruler such as Pericles, and even he was limited in what he could do, then those thought to be wise will be in danger.

So if Thucydides were to stand a trial like Socrates' trial, and Hobbes was his chief defender, based upon the evidence that Hobbes presents what would the outcome be? What has Hobbes in fact demonstrated about Thucydides' theism? What has Hobbes demonstrated that would make Thucydides acceptable in the religious-political climate of Hobbes's time and place? This England after all is the time that Hobbes hoped to effect. And then what has Hobbes demonstrated about his own religious believes? At each turn in which Hobbes leads us to Thucydides' thought, we should be asking what this teaches us about Hobbes's own thought.

Answering these questions requires answering them at different levels dependent upon what an average reader would garner and what a better sort of reader would garner. Just confining ourselves to the logic of the argument, Hobbes has not at all demonstrated that Thucydides was no atheist. The examples that Hobbes cites to prove Thucydides' religiosity, at most might logically demonstrate that Thucydides was not dogmatic in his denial of the power of the gods. However, as we have seen by working through the cases that Hobbes cites, they seem to imply that human beings must interpret, an even manipulate, the beliefs of most people in order to bring about successful political outcomes. Human reason seems to be the most important tool human beings have for how to conduct their lives. Reason should not abnegate to religion.

At the same time Hobbes, has presented his understanding of the timeless relationship between the wise person and the political regime. The wise person will always be in danger of being called an atheist. Although most people will not understand the thought of a wise person, they will suspect that such a person does not accept the ideas that most other people hold. Therefore, such a person is very likely to be considered an atheist.

Was Hobbes successful in making Thucydides' religious views palatable to the people of Christian England, in particular to the nobility,

which Hobbes has told us were his main target audience? Did Hobbes's rhetorical strategy work? If the positive response to his translation is evidence of Hobbes's successful strategy, then, we would have to say that this was a redounding success. Hobbes seems to have found a middle ground for presenting Thucydides. He seems to have made possible the view acceptable to Hobbes's contemporaries that Thucydides had great doubts about the Greek religion but these doubts would not apply to Christianity. As we saw he makes this conclusion possible by using the prejudices of contemporary Christians in favor of the reasonableness of their religion against all other religions. Other religions are superstitions and if Thucydides used his reason to think through the unreasonableness of the Greek religion, then this same reason would -- in the right time and place --- allow him to accept Christianity.

This paragraph also leads us to think about Hobbes's own religious convictions. Clearly, Hobbes considers himself among the wise and therefore among those who are vulnerable to being called atheist. At one level Hobbes is placing himself on the side of those who are neither atheists or superstitious. Because Christianity is the religion meant to accord with reason, there is no danger, that Hobbes the Christian falls into the depths of superstition. This at least seems to be the public presentation that Hobbes wants to make.

But at another level the Hobbes that emerges from this paragraph could be accused of being an atheist. He calls the Greek religion ridiculous. He shows that wise people do not accept superstitions. He argues that wise people need to dissemble their true beliefs from the vulgar. He states that reason can be used to think through religious beliefs. And finally all the examples he cites in order to defend Thucydides from the charge of atheism all lead to the same conclusion: that religious beliefs must be subjected to the scrutiny of reason. And that religious beliefs should be interpreted so as to bring about pre-determined political ends. In the strongest case, Nicias should not have waited the extra twenty seven

days before departing, but he should have interpreted the eclipse to mean that they had to leave even faster than planned. When one puts all these things together, it is very difficult to avoid doubting Hobbes's own religious beliefs. The truly amazing thing is that in all the years in which Hobbes has been accused of atheism, and when one looks at all the evidence from Hobbes' writings that have been used to lay this charges, no one, as far as I know, has used this paragraph as evidence for these charges. This, I think speaks to how successful Hobbes's presentation here has been.