A SACRED IMPERATIVE

Third person imperatives in ritual or sacred settings from Aeschylus to the New Testament

D R A F T

This is a "provocation" rather than a finished essay. My hope is that it will provoke others to improve this draft and to probe further in this area. There is much still to be done!

Bill Berg, Jacques Brombert, Joshua Katz, Leslie Kurke, Jeff Rusten, David Sansone and Richard Seaford are among the friends who have helped me on this project. The mistakes and blunders, however, are all mine.

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English knows how to give commands but unlike Greek has no third person imperative. Stated or unstated, there is always a 'you' in any true English imperative. Greek, both classical and <u>koine,</u> retained this old Indo-European verb form.[1] So when translating Greek English uses periphrases, "may " "let", or "be", as in "Hallowed be thy name," in <u>Matthew's</u> version of the Lord's Prayer. The King James Version of the bible rendered one such imperative with "suffer," -- "Suffer the little children…" , to the puzzlement or amusement of many subsequent readers. It's not easy to turn these Greek forms into plausible English.

The standard Greek grammars carefully describe the morphology, syntax and principal uses of the third person imperative but have little to say about how differing social settings affect its tone and nuance.[2]   That's unfortunate because the setting of a speech act can sometimes turn meaning on its head. That, as we shall see, can happen when the speaker enters, physically or mentally, into sacred space. Both in classical

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[1] Joshua Katz writes "Third-person imperatives are part of Proto-Indo-European, nicely attested in (e.g.) Sanskrit as well as in Greek and Latin. "

[2] Smyth <u>Greek Grammar</u> §1838 and §1840C; Goodwin <u>Mods and Tenses</u> §259.

and <u>koine</u> Greek, the third person imperative can function in a distinctive way in such settings.

This form of the imperative is most frequently used, however, not in sacral but in legal contexts.   When a governing body, the Athenian assembly for example, wanted some group or board to do something, it tended to say, "Let X be done," not, "Do X." [3]   As a result In Greek legal documents (and Plato's <u>Laws</u>) the third person is much more common than the second person imperative.[4] Masters also used this form with the indefinite pronoun τις when giving commands to slaves. [5]

This authoritative toine is also evident in an early uses of the third person imperative in poetry. In <u>Odyssey</u> 24. 478 ff. Zeus deflects the danger of warfare breaking out between Odysseus' supporters and the kin of the recently slain suitors.   When he declares his intentions to Athena he uses the third person imperative, in fact he uses three of them. (Third person imperatives, as we shall see, tend to cluster together.) Zeus declares "Let [Odysseus] rule forever (….ὁ μὲν βασιλευέτω αἰεί 483). Zeus goes on to promise that he will see to it that the kin of the suitors will forget Odysseus' massacre, adding "let them (sc. both factions) return to their old friendship (τοὶ δ' ἀλλήλους φιλεόντων / ὡς τὸ πάρος (484 f.). Zeus then concludes with an assurance about the future, "Let peace and prosperity abound' (πλοῦτος δὲ καὶ εἰρήνη ἅλις ἔστω (486). The three third person imperatives are more than ordinary commands -- one who has ultimate authority confers regal authority on another and decrees that civic amity be restored, and promises that good things will follow.

 The use of the third person imperative to make an authoritative statement can also be seen in other classical literary texts, both prose and poetry.[6] Hippolytus, for example, in Euripides' play ends his rant against women by saying,

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[3] L. Threatte <u>The Grammar of Greek Inscriptions</u> I (Berlin, 1980) ADD PAGE REFERENCE. See also the useful discussion of varying forms of in Adele Scafuro "The Role of the Prosecutor… Demosthenes 21.10"in <u>Dike</u> <u>http://www.ledonline.it/Dike/allegati/dike7_scafuro.pdf</u>.

[4] J.E. Harry "The Perfect Subjunctive, Optative and Imperative in Greek" <u>Classical Review</u> 19, 7 (1905) p.353 notes, "Plato … uses more imperatives in the third person than all the other prose writers combined (hundreds in the <u>Laws</u> alone)…".

[5] This can be inferred from Xenophon <u>Cyropaedia</u> 5.3.49 f; Xenophon's Cyrus, however, deplores this practice.

[6]   An author may use the form when stipulating what a reader is to do, as in Thucydides 5.20.2, where the author stipulates that his reader calculate on the basis of seasons

> Either let someone teach them to be chaste
> Or suffer me to trample on them forever.

<div align="center">Euripides <u>Hippolytus</u> 666 -67, trans. D. Grene</div>

Here, as often, two (or more) third person imperatives (διδαξάτω ... ἐάτω) occur in close proximity and provide a strong rhetorical ending to the speech.

But such usages do not exhaust the range of this form. For example, one suspects an apotropaic use of it in Clytemnestra's words in Aeschylus <u>Agamemnon</u> 904, "<u>phthonos d' apesto</u>, "Let envy keep iys distance." To be sure, this may be a conventional formula, similar to "God bless you" or "*absit omen*".

Although Clytemnestra's phrase may not reflect religious belief or ritual practice, the use of this verb form by the frenzied Bacchants in the opening chorus of Euripides' <u>Bacchae</u> is a different matter. They cry out (68 ff.)

> *τίς ὁδῷ; τίς ὁδῷ; τίς;*
> *μελάθροις ἔκτοπος **ἔστω**, στόμα τ᾽ εὔφη-*
> *μον ἅπας **ἐξοσιούσθω**:*
> *τὰ νομισθέντα γὰρ αἰεὶ*
> *Διόνυσον ὑμνήσω.*

> Who is on the road? Who is on the road? Who?
> Let him come outdoors; Let each one revere ritually pure speech.
> For I am going to sing the traditional hymn to Dionysus.

The Bacchants speak in an authoritative tone, empowered by their role in the Dionysiac cult. The words are more than a legalistic requirement to avoid impeding the chorus' hymn to Dionysus. They are ritual cry, part of the worship itself, a performative speech act.[7]

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rather than archon years. Similarly Euclid and Aristotle (e.g. <u>Categories</u> 3a) often use the form for the conditions of a geometrical or logical proposition.

[7] By a "performative" utterance I mean a speech act that partially at least performs the action it expresses. The Lord's Prayer in <u>Matthew</u> 6 provides good examples: "Let your name be holy" is itself a mode of sanctification. "Let your kingship come" itself affirms God's kingship over all others, and "Let your will be done" marks an acceptance of God's will over one's own

A ritual use of third person imperatives may also be detected in a refrain in Aeschylus' <u>Agamemnon</u> -- "αἴλινον αἴλινον εἰπέ. τὸ δ' εὖ νικάτω -- "Sing the Linus dirge, the Linus dirge; but let the good win out." The words first occur just after the chorus' chilling image of two eagles, swooping down on a pregnant hare.

> *..plunged their claws on a hare, a mother*
> *bursting with unborn young – the babies spilling,*
> *quick spurts of blood – cut off the race just bursting into life!*
>   <u>Agamemnon</u> 119 -   121, trans. R. Fagles

This glimpse of destruction from above, from Zeus' bird, alludes, of course, to the disasters confronting the royal house of Atreus, the imminent return of Agamemnon into a palace where his adulterous wife, Clytemnestra, stands ready to destroy him. But the refrain does not simply allude to this. It gives a command to recite the traditional dirge (θρηνος) mourning the death of the mythic youth, Linus.[8] To whom is the command addressed and how is it staged? Most likely, it seems , is that the chorus turns to the audience, addressing each individual member in the second person singular imperative, telling us each to recite the traditional lament. The chorus, however, will not let us stop at that. We must also bear in mind the hope that good will somehow prevail: "Sing the Linus dirge, the Linus dirge; but let the good win out."

The second occurrence comes at the end of the antistrophe that balances the strophe in which the refrain first occurred. Here a seer is imagined looking upon the destruction of Troy and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia which made that whole expedition possible. He sees it all :

>   *… I see*
> *pure Artemis bristle in pity –*
>   *yes, the flying hounds of the Father*
> *slaughter for armies … their own victim … a woman*
> *trembling young, all born to die – She loathes the eagles' feast*!"

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[8] The phrase τὸ δ' εὖ νικάτω need not be part of the dirge itself. Rather it can be seen as a cry expressing the Chorus' hope for an end to the Atreids' disastrous history of violence and revenge .

Then, again after this chilling section , comes for a second time the familiar injunction: "αἴλινον αἴλινον εἰπέ. τὸ δ' εὖ νικάτω -- Sing the Linus dirge, the Linus dirge; but let the good win out."

The refrain occurs one more time (line 159).   The chorus has restated its horror at what has happened in the house of Atreus, the cycle of violence and retribution.   The refrain, heard now for the third time, emphasizes the seemingly endless recurrence of hatred and death. It also, however, is juxtaposed with and marks the transition to the invocation of the only power that can bring about the end of the cycle, and make τὸ δ' εὖ νικάτω more than a pious hope.

> Zeus –whoever he is, if this is
>   congenial to him, to be called in this way,
>   I invoke him as Zeus.
>   <u>Agamemnon</u> 160ff.

If it is correct that the refrain enjoins each member of the audience to keep in mind the ancient lament for the suffering and death of Linus, but to hope as well for the ultimate triumph of the good, then each spectator is invited to move into a special psychic or spiritual space, where one can make bold to invoke the supreme divinity.

The allusion to Linus may hint at an ancient Near Eastern ritual behind the play -- the sequence suffering, death, mourning, followed by a restoration to life of a sacrificial victim. If so, the Greeks in adopting it are likely to have modified it as well, along the way using their third person imperative in this ritual setting.

 It is striking that something similar happened in another act of cultural adaptation, the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, the Septuagint. [9]   The account of creation in this translation of <u>Genesis</u> begins with a series of third person imperatives[10]:   "Let there be light," (Γενηθήτω φῶς 1.3), "Let there be a firmament … and let there be a separation …" (Γενηθήτω στερέωμα ...καὶ ἔστω διαχωρίζον 1.6), and "Let … the waters be

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[9] Note for example the triad of such forms in the canticle of Moses in <u>Deuteronomy</u> 32. 1 -2: ἀκουέτω γῆ   ... προσδοκάσθω ... καταβήτω ....

[10] Joshua Katz has pointed out to me that the Hebrew "*yehi* is sometimes called a third-person future (Biblical Hebrew doesn't have a future as such) and sometimes a jussive ... This may be   what the translators of the Septuagint turned into a Greek third-person imperative.

gathered together" (Συναχθήτω τὸ ὕδωρ 1.9) and "Let the earth blossom..
(Βλαστησάτω ἡ γῆ 1,11,), "Let there be lights in the firmament…"
(Γενηθήτωσαν φωστῆρες 1.14), "Let the waters bring forth .. " (Ἐξαγαγέτω
τὰ ὕδατα ...1. 20), "Let the earth bring forth living creatures …"(Ἐξαγαγέτω
ἡ γῆ ψυχὴν ζῶσαν... 1.24). The Creator seems to have a special fondness
for this verb form, for this is, I believe, the longest series of third person
imperatives in any ancient Greek text, [11] and surely as authoritative a
series of statements as one could hope to find!

When the Psalmist wants to praise this God he takes this manner of
speaking and turns it from authoritative statements from the divinity to his
own call for all people to worship him:

> *Let the people praise thee, O God;*
> *Let all the people praise thee!*
> *Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,*
> *…*
> *Let the people praise thee, O God;*
> *Let all the people praise thee!*
> <u>Psalm </u>67 vs. 4 -6 (66 in the Septuagint numeration)

In the Greek of the Septuagint all these verbs are third person
imperatives;[12] their endings, moreover, and the words that follow form a
rhythmic, rhyming series of verses that must be said aloud fully to savor
them:

> *(4)*   *exomologe**sasthosan soi laoi**, ho theos,*
>   *Exomologe**sasthosan soi laoi** pantes*
> *(5)*   *euphran**thetosan** kai agallias**thosan** ethne*
> ***…***
> *(6)*   *exomologe**sasthosan soi laoi,** ho theos,*
>   *exomologe**sasthosan soi laoi** pantes.* [13]

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[11] But when it comes to the creation of human beings the Creator is represented as
choosing the hortatory first plural, Ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον (1.26).

[12] As in classical Greek other ways of giving commands are prominent in the Septuagint,
most notably in <u>Exodus</u> 20 where the Ten Commandments are presented in the future
(with the exception of a second person imperative enjoining honor to one's parents (vs.
12).

[13] Compare Psalm 97 1 ff . (in the Septuagint number 96): Ἀγαλλιάσθω ἡ γῆ,
εὐφρανθήτωσαν νῆσοι πολλαί....

These verbs are not simple commands to worshippers; they are ritualized cries or acclamations, part of the worship they enjoin. Once again, in a very different cultural setting the worshipper is not just telling others to be reverent, his own words constitute a performative speech act of worship.

 Third person imperatives are used in similar ways in the New Testament[14] – often in authoritative statements or commands, rarely in petitionary prayers.[15]   By now we are used to seeing several such forms in close proximity, as when Matthew 16.24 represents Jesus as telling his disciples that if someone wishes to come after him, "Let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me -- three third person imperatives in one sentence.[16]

This form of the imperative is used with interesting effect in Matthew's Passion narrative (27.22 ff.). The setting is Passover in Jerusalem where a crowd has gathered awaiting the Roman governor's decision about Jesus of Nazareth. When Pilate asks the crowd what he should do with Jesus, they shout σταυρωθήτω, and even louder a second time σταυρωθήτω – not the second person imperative "*Crucify him*," found in Mark and Luke, [17] and some translations of Matthew, but the third person passive imperative, as if the crowd were asserting that it, not Pilate, was in command . Here the third person imperatives occur in the setting of a religious festival in wherein part of the hostility to Jesus involves the religious offence of blasphemy.[18]

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[14] New Testament scholars have paid much more attention to third person imperatives than their classical counterparts have. Note especially James L. Boyer "A Classification of Imperatives: A Statistical Study" Grace Theological Journal 8,1 (1987) 35 --54, Joseph D. Fantin *The Greek Imperative Mood in the New Testament: A Cognitive and Communicative Approach.* Studies in Biblical Greek 12. (New York and Berlin, 2010) and Kenneth L. McKay, "Aspect in Imperatival Constructions in the New Testament . Novum Testamentum 27 (1985).

[15] In Matthew 26. 42, Jesus prays that if it is not possible for the cup of suffering to be avoided, ,genetheto to thelema sou, "Let thy will be done". This echoes the Lord's Prayer as presented in Matthew 6.10, the verb form, γενηθήτω, however, is also that used in Genesis 1.3, and by Jesus in Matthew 9. 29. No single English verb will work in all these instances.

[16] The triadic wording can also be found in Mark 8.34 and Luke 9. 23.

[17] Mark's narrative (15.13) has the crowd uses the aorist imperative, σταύρωσον ; Luke 23. 21 has the progressive σταύρου (twice).

[18] Mark 14.63f and Matthew 26.65 make the charge of blasphemy explicit; it is implicit in Luke 22. 70f.

In sacral settings, shout and acclamations, repetitions and refrains are to be expected. Triads are especially favored.[19] The tendency of third person imperatives to cluster together can be seen again in <u>Revelation of John</u> 22.[20] Again there are three such imperatives in a few verses, intertwined with second person commands, In this passage, the last chapter in the New Testament, the elect have entered the heavenly city. Jesus himself has sent his messenger attesting to the churches that what John has written is true. But the work does not stop there. There is one thing more, an invitation, expressed at first in a second person imperative. Three third person imperatives follow in the passage, interlaced with those in the second person: *"The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come (ἔρχου).' "[21]* Then comes the first of the third person imperatives, as if conferring authority on the listener to become a speaker and extend the invitation to others: *And let him who hears say (εἰπάτω), 'Come (ἔρχου).'* The invitation is not, however, restricted to those who have already heard John's revelation; all who thirst are authoritatively invited as well: *And let whoever is thirsty come (ἐρχέσθω); let him who desires take (λαβέτω) the water of life as a gift."*

This third, culminating, third person imperative *(λαβετω)* then, is another example of performative speech, that is the process of reading the words of the text is the fulfillment of what those words are about, renewal, refreshment, the water of life.

Despite the use of the third person imperative in sacred settings both in classical and <u>koine</u> Greek it is rarely used to make specific requests – petitionary prayer. For that the second person imperative or the infinitive (sometimes in classical Greek the optative[22]) is preferred. The third person

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[19] In <u>Matthew</u> 24 16 f. we find another triad, "Let them flee… let him not descend…let him not turn back."

[20] Third person imperatives are also found together in the New Testament when an authoritative command is being given: as in Matthew 16. 24: "<u>aparnesastho heauton, kai arato… kai akoloutheteito mou,</u>"Let him deny hikself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

[21] On the juxtaposition of second and third person imperatives note Aeschylus <u>Agamemnon</u> … and Euripides <u>Heraclidae</u> 454 where Iolaus switches from the second person to the third person in begging Theseus to spare the children, and then suggests that his own life is of lesser importance –"Let it go:", καὶ μήτε κινδύνευε **σωθήτω** τέ μοι | τέκν'· οὐ φιλεῖν δεῖ τὴν ἐμὴν ψυχήν· **ἴτω**.(On this idiomatic use of the third person imperative in moments of despair cf. Cassandra [ ] in <u>Agamemnon</u> 1315 ἀρκείτω βίος.)

[22] Note the optatives in Socrates' prayer to Pan at the end of Plato's <u>Phaedrus</u> 279 b ff.

imperative seems better suited to expressions of hope and intent, to acclamations, and the preliminaries to requests and petitions. The contrast between the two types of imperatives is well illustrated in the most famous prayer of all, the Lord's Prayer as found in <u>Matthew</u> 6. This prayer consist of two triads. The first, after an invocation of "Our Father in heaven," consists of three affirmations or acclamations in the third person imperatives. This is obscured in the familiar English translation: " "Hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done." In Greek the three verbs are strictly parallel, and they rhyme, in a way similar to what we observed in Psalm 67. Again hearing the sound is important:

> *Hagias**theto** to onom**a sou***
> *El**theto** he basilei**a sou***
> *Gene**theto** to thelem**a sou**.*[23]

These three acclamations are followed by three petitions in the second person imperative , each with a specific request. Thus the prayer is a diptych.[24] Consisting of two triads of contrasting imperatives. The first triad is, in effect, preliminary to the second, an entranceway, in effect, into a space where petitions can properly be made: the recognition and affirmation of the sanctity of God's name, the imminence of His power and the acceptance of His will. Then, perhaps only then, can one go on to the type of prayer represented in the second triad, specific petitions.

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Summing up: This probe into one distinctive feature of the Greek language has not tried to be exhaustive, but it does show, I hope, that the third person imperative was used in sacred settings both in classical and <u>koine</u> Greek. When this verb form appears in such settings, it is often accompanied by others of the same type, and closely linked to them; together they are often affirmations or acclamations of the power and authority of a divinity, and in some cases they are performative , that is the speech act itself fulfills part of what it expresses. The speaker in such situations, moreover, often seems to reverse the normal flow of authority – addressing a divinity in a tone of authority, as if the speaker not the divinity were in charge. Language in such a situation can readily become

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[23] <u>Matthew</u> 6, 9 – 10. These three acclamations are followed by the three petitions in the second part of the prayer (verses 11 -13). If one pronounces ἁγιασθήτω as tetrasyllabic, each of the three acclamations consists of nine syllables.

[24] The doxology, "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory." is not securely attested in the manuscript tradition.

paradoxical. Who are we mere humans, after all, to tell some greater power to let something happen, as if He were standing in its way and needed to be corrected? Entry into the realm of the sacred empowers the worshipper and changes language and attitudes. Nothing is quite the same when one acclaims what in other settings might be inconceivable.

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