The Melian Debate:  *Printable Documents*

**Important:** You do not need to print these documents if you are working online.

**Structure of the Negotiations (416 BCE)**

Melos is attempting to remain neutral in the Peloponnesian War. The Melians insist negotiations be private. They also suggest that the outcome is already set because Athens is preparing their military.

The Melians are a colony of Lacedaemon that would not submit to the Athenians like the other islanders, and at first remained neutral and took no part in the struggle, but afterwards upon the Athenians using violence and plundering their territory, assumed an attitude of open hostility. ... [T]he generals, encamping in their territory ... before doing any harm to their land, sent envoys to negotiate. These the Melians did not bring before the people, but bade them state the object of their mission to the magistrates and the few; upon which the Athenian envoys spoke as follows:

_Athenians:_ Since the negotiations are not to go on before the people, in order that we may not be able to speak straight on without interruption, and deceive the ears of the multitude by seductive arguments which would pass without refutation (for we know that this is the meaning of our being brought before the few), what if you who sit there were to pursue a method more cautious still? Make no set speech yourselves, but take us up at whatever you do not like, and settle that before going any farther. And first tell us if this proposition of ours suits you.

The Melian commissioners answered:

_Melians:_ To the fairness of quietly instructing each other as you propose there is nothing to object; but your military preparations are too far advanced to agree with what you say, as we see you are come to be judges in your own cause, and that all we can reasonably expect from this negotiation is war, if we prove to have right on our side and refuse to submit, and in the contrary case, slavery.

from *The History of the Peloponnesian War*

**Athenian Position (416 BCE)**

The Athenians argue that nature allows the strong to dictate terms to the weak. The Melians want to remain neutral and argue that Athens will make enemies if it does not respect Melian neutrality. Athens sees the situation differently.

_Athenians:_ ... [W]e shall not trouble you with specious pretences—either of how we have a right to our empire because we overthrew the Mede, or are now attacking you because of wrong that you have done us—and make a long speech which would not be believed; and in return we hope that you, instead of thinking to influence us by saying that you did not join the Lacedaemonians, although their colonists, or that you have done us no wrong, will aim at what is feasible, holding in view the real sentiments of us both; since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.

_Melians:_ ... Since you enjoin us to let right alone and talk only of interest ... [Y]ou are as much interested in this as any, as your fall would be a signal for the heaviest vengeance and an example for the world to meditate upon.
Athenians: ... We will now proceed to show you that we are come here in the interest of our empire, and that we shall say what we are now going to say, for the preservation of your country; as we would fain exercise that empire over you without trouble, and see you preserved for the good of us both.

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

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

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

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

... 

Athenians: As far as right goes they think one has as much of it as the other, and that if any maintain their independence it is because they are strong, and that if we do not molest them it is because we are afraid; so that besides extending our empire we should gain in security by your subjection; the fact that you are islanders and weaker than others rendering it all the more important that you should not succeed in baffling the masters of the sea.

Melians: But do you consider that there is no security in the policy which we indicate? For here again if you debar us from talking about justice and invite us to obey your interest, we also must explain ours, and try to persuade you, if the two happen to coincide. How can you avoid making enemies of all existing neutrals who shall look at our case and conclude from it that one day or another you will attack them? And what is this but to make greater the enemies that you have already, and to force others to become so who would otherwise have never thought of it?

Athenians: ... [I]t is rather islanders like yourselves, outside our empire, and subjects smarting under the yoke, who would be the most likely to take a rash step and lead themselves and us into obvious danger.

from *The History of the Peloponnesian War*

Melian Position (416 BCE)

The Melians argue that they cannot accept Athenian demands and suggest that the gods or the Spartans will rescue Melos. The Athenians argue that Melians should not risk sure defeat in defense of their principles.

Melians: ... [T]o submit is to give ourselves over to despair, while action still preserves for us a hope that we may stand erect.

... 

Melians: ... [W]e trust that the gods may grant us fortune as good as yours, since we are just men fighting against unjust, and that what we want in power will be made up by the alliance of the Lacedaemonians, who are bound, if only for very shame, to come to the aid of their kindred.
Athenians: ... Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: we found it existing before us, and shall leave it to exist for ever after us; all we do is to make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do. ... But when we come to your notion about the Lacedaemonians, which leads you to believe that shame will make them help you, here we bless your simplicity but do not envy your folly. The Lacedaemonians, when their own interests or their country's laws are in question, are the worthiest men alive; of their conduct towards others much might be said ...

Athenians: ... [Y]ou are well advised ... to submit to the greatest city in Hellas, when it makes you the moderate offer of becoming its tributary ally, without ceasing to enjoy the country that belongs to you; nor when you have the choice given you between war and security, will you be so blinded as to choose the worse.

from The History of the Peloponnesian War

Concluding Events (416 BCE)

The Athenians now withdrew from the conference; and the Melians, left to themselves, came to a decision corresponding with what they had maintained in the discussion, and answered: "Our resolution, Athenians, is the same as it was at first. We will not in a moment deprive of freedom a city that has been inhabited these seven hundred years; ... [S]o we will try and save ourselves. Meanwhile we invite you to allow us to be friends to you and foes to neither party, and to retire from our country after making such a treaty as shall seem fit to us both."

The Athenian envoys now returned to the army; and the Melians showing no signs of yielding, the generals at once betook themselves to hostilities ... [T]he Melians attacked by night ... and killed some of the men ...

... [T]he siege was now pressed vigorously; ... the Melians surrendered ... to the Athenians, who put to death all the grown men whom they took, and sold the women and children for slaves, and subsequently sent out five hundred colonists and inhabited the place themselves.

from The History of the Peloponnesian War