

## Gorgias: Defense of Palamedes

Gorgias imagines himself as Palamedes defending himself against Odysseus's accusation of treason against Greece.

**1. *To the Jury:*** This trial is concerned not with death, which comes to all, but with honor: whether I am to die justly or unjustly, under a load of disgrace.

You have the power to decide the issue; you can kill me easily if you wish, whereas I am powerless.

If the accuser Odysseus were bringing the charge because he knew or believed me to be betraying Greece to the barbarians, he would be the best of men, as ensuring the safety of his country, his parents and all Greece, as well as the punishment of the traitor. But if he has concocted this charge through malice, he is equally the worst of men.

## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

**2.** Where shall I begin my defense? A cause unsupported by proof engenders fear, and fear makes speech difficult, unless truth and necessity instruct me—teachers more productive of risk than of the means of help.

The accuser cannot know for certain that I committed the crime, because I know for certain that I did not. But if he is acting on conjecture, I can prove in two ways that he is wrong.

**3.** First, I cannot have committed the crime. Treasonable action must begin with discussion; but discussion implies a meeting, which was impossible since no one could come to me and I could not go to anyone, nor could a written message be sent.



Nor was direct communication possible between myself, a Greek, and the enemy, a barbarian, since we did not understand each other's language, and an interpreter would have meant having an accomplice.

**4.** But even supposing communication could have been arranged, it would have been necessary to exchange pledge, such as hostages (which was impossible), or perhaps money. A small sum would not have sufficed in such a great undertaking; a large sum could not have been transported without the help of many confederates.

Conveyance of money would have been impossible at night because of the guards, and by daylight because all could see. Nor could I have gone out, or the enemy have come into the camp.

Back to 12



## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

Nor could I have concealed any money received.

5. But suppose all this achieved—communication established and pledges exchanged—action had then to follow. This had to be done with or without confederates. If with confederates, were they free or slaves? If any free man has information, let him speak. Slaves are always untrustworthy: They accuse voluntarily to win freedom, and also under compulsion when tortured.

Nor could the enemy have entered by my help, either by the gates or over the walls, because of the guards; nor could I have breached the walls, as in camp everybody sees everything. Therefore all such action was completely impossible for me.

## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

**6.** What motive could I have had? Absolute power over ourselves or the barbarians? The former is impossible in view of your courage, wealth, prowess of body and mind, control of cities.

Rulership over the barbarian is equally impossible. I could not have seized it or won it by persuasion, nor would they have handed it to me voluntarily: no one would choose slavery instead of kingship, the worst instead of the best.

Nor was wealth my motive. I have moderate means, and do not need more. Wealth is needed by those who spend much; not by those who are masters of their natural pleasures, but by those who are enslaved by pleasures, or wish to buy honor with riches. I call you to witness that my past life proves me not to be one of these.

## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

My motive cannot have been ambition: honor accrues to virtue, not to a betrayer of Greece. Besides, I had honor already, from you for my wisdom.

Safety cannot have been the motive. The traitor is the enemy of all: law, justice, the gods, his fellow-men.

Another motive could be the desire to help friends and injure enemies; but I would have been doing the reverse.

The remaining possibility would be a wish to avoid trouble or danger. But if I betrayed Greece, I should have betrayed myself and all that I had.

## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

My life would have been unbearable in Greece; and if I stayed among the barbarians, I would have thrown away all the rewards of my past labors, through my own action, which is worst.

The barbarians too would have distrusted me; and if one loses credit, life is intolerable. The loss of money or throne or country can be retrieved; but the loss of credit is irretrievable.

It is thus proved that I neither could nor would have, betrayed Greece.

*7.To the Accuser:* I now address my accuser: do you base your accusation on knowledge or conjecture? If on knowledge, either this is your own or hearsay.

## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

If it is your own, give exact details of time, place, method; if hearsay, produce your witness.

It is your place to produce witnesses, not mine: no witness can be produced for what did not happen; but for what did happen, it is easy and essential to produce witnesses. But you cannot produce even false witnesses.

**8.** That you have no knowledge of your accusations is clear. Hence they must be conjectural, and you are the most villainous of men, to bring a capital charge relying on opinion—which is a most unreliable thing—and not knowing the truth. Conjecture is open to all in everything, and you are no wiser than anyone else in this. One must believe, not conjecture, but truth.



## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

**9.** You are accusing me of two opposites, wisdom and madness: wisdom in that I am crafty, clever, resourceful; madness in that I wished to betray Greece. It is madness to attempt what is impossible, disadvantageous, disgraceful injurious to friends and helpful to enemies, and likely to make one's life intolerable. But how can one believe a man who in the same speech, to the same audience, says the exact opposite about the same things?

Do you consider the wise to be foolish or sensible? If you say 'foolish', this is original but untrue. If 'sensible' then sensible men do not commit the greatest crimes, or prefer evil to the good they have. If I am wise, I did not err. If erred, I am not wise. Therefore you are proved a liar on both counts.

## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

I could bring counter-accusations, but I will not. I would rather seek acquittal through my virtues than your vices.

**10.***To the Jury:* I must now speak of myself, in a way that would not be suitable except to one accused. I submit my past life to your scrutiny. If I mention my good deeds, I pray that no one will resent this: it is necessary in order that I may refute serious charges with a true statement of merits known to you.

Above all, my past life has been blameless. My accuser can bring no proof of this charge, so that his speech is unsubstantiated obloquy.

## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

I claim also to be a benefactor of Greece, present and future, by reason of my inventions, in tactics, law, letters (the tool of memory), measures (arbiters of business dealings), number (the guardian of property), beacon-fires (the best and swiftest messengers), and the game of draughts as a pastime.

I mention these things to show that in devoting my thoughts to them I am bound to abstain from wicked deeds.

I deserve no punishment from young or old. I have been considerate to the old, helpful to the young, without envy of the prosperous, merciful to the distressed; not despising poverty, nor preferring wealth to virtue; useful in counsel, active in war, fulfilling commands, obeying the rulers. But it is not for me to praise myself; I do so under the compulsion of self-defense.

## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

**11.** Lastly I shall speak of you to you. Lamentations, prayers, and the petitions of friends are useful when judgment depends on the mob; but before you, the foremost of the Greeks, I need not use these devices, but only justice and truth.

You must not heed words rather than facts, nor prefer accusations to proof, nor regard a brief period as more instructive than a long one, nor consider calumny more trustworthy than experience. Good men avoid all wrongdoing, but above all what cannot be mended; things can be righted by forethought, but are irrevocable by afterthought. This happens when men are trying a fellow-man on a capital charge, as you now are.

## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

If words could bring the truth of deeds clearly and certainly before their hearers, judgment would be easy; since this is not so, I ask you to preserve my life, await the passage of time, and pass your judgment with truth. You run the great risk of a reputation for injustice; to good men, death is preferable to a bad reputation: one is the end of life, the other is a disease in life.

If you put me to death unjustly, you will bear the blame in the eyes of all Greece, as I am not unknown and you are famous. The blame will be yours, not my accuser's, because the issue is in your hands. There could be no greater crime than if you as Greeks put to death a Greek, an ally, benefactor of yours and of Greece, when you can show no cause.

## LANGUAGE IS A MIGHTY LORD: A GORGIAS READER

Here I stop. A summary of a long speech is worth while when one is speaking to a jury of inferiors; but before the leaders of Greece it is uncalled-for, as is the exhortation to pay attention or to remember what has been said.