The Melian Debate: Study Questions on an excerpt from Thucydides’ Histories

<http://lygdamus.com/resources/New%20PDFS/Melian.pdf>

Note: The Melian Debates were conducted some time in the summer of 416 BC; Thucydides’ History (or at least parts of it) was written after the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War

On which side of the Peloponnesian War were the Melians and why?

Who are the Athenian delegation addressing? And why are they upset with this?

Why do the Melians say the Athenian claim to simply wish to present a persuasive argument is a false one?

The Athenians say they are going to be honest and not make certain claims. What claims do they say they will NOT bother to make?

What does this mean: “…standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.”?

Why do the Melians say the Athenians are forcing them to leave justice out of the picture?

What do the Melians say should not be ignored, even if there is no consideration of justice?

What, do the Athenians claim, would be worse than being conquered by a superior power?

Why do the Athenians reject the Melian’s offer of neutrality? And what does this have to do with Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant”? Is the comparison valid or not – and on what grounds?

What impact does the fact that Melos is weak and neutral have on the Athenian desire to force them to become part of their empire? What do you think of this argument?

What argument do the Melians use to counter this Athenian position? What do you think of this rebuttal?

On one word and one word only, what do the Melians themselves say will cause them to fight the Athenians even though they are outnumbered? (And which the Athenians dismiss as potentially ruinous.)

What is the Melian rebuttal to the Athenian argument: “Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can.”

What are the specific terms of the offer that the Athenians make clear they are proposing?

What are the specific terms the Melians counter-offer?

The Athenians warn the Melians of being “led astray by a false sense of honour”. In your view, were the Melians led astray by a false sense of honor or unreasonable dedication to principles? What would you have advised them to do? What are similar situations in our world today?