

The *Odyssey* of Homer

Book 3

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"Homer enthusiasts say that Homer has been the educator of Greece, and for the education and government of humans, we should build up our entire lives with the assistance of this poet." —Socrates of Athens

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Book 3

Telemachus with Nestor in Pylos

BUT AS THE sun was swiftly rising up from the beautiful sea into a copper-colored sky in order to give light to the immortals and to mortal men who live among wheat-bearing fields, Telemachus and his crew came to Pylos, the well-built city of Neleus.

5-13 *Mooring on the sandy beach of Pylos, the ship arrives as some 4,500 Pylians are making sacrifice to Poseidon and feasting on the shore. Athena disguised as Mentor leads the way to them. She speaks to Telemachus to give him nerve in his mission.*

14-28 "Telemachus, you don't need to feel undue shame, not even a small amount. You've sailed across the sea for this reason—to discover news about your father. You want to learn where the earth covers him over and how he came to his destined end. But come now. Go straight up to horse-taming Nestor. Let's see what bit of counsel he has tucked away in his heart and mind. Go up yourself and ask him to speak truthfully to you. [20] He won't tell you a lie—no, he's a very wise and prudent man."

In turn mindful Telemachus answered her,

"Mentor, how should I go up to him? How should I greet him? I'm not used to speaking shrewdly with others. And isn't it shameful for a young man to pester an old man with questions?"

But the bright-eyed goddess Athena said to him, "Here's what will happen, Telemachus. Some things you'll think up by yourself in your own mind. Others will be provided by some god. Either way, I imagine that the gods have been with you from the time of your birth until now."

29-68 *Athena-Mentor and Telemachus make their way toward Nestor. When they see the strangers, Nestor and his sons Peisistratus and Thrasymedes, among others, welcome them, sitting them on fleece throws and giving them roasted meat and wine. Peisistratus first gives the cup to Athena-Mentor because he is older. He commands her to pour out a libation and pray to the Earth-shaker—since, he declares, "all men need the gods." Athena rejoices at his wisdom and observance of custom. Praying, she asks Poseidon to bless Nestor and his sons with glory, and to reward all the people for the hecatomb sacrifice. She finishes by asking for the successful completion of their journey.*

Homer finishes by declaring, “Like this she prayed, but she herself was making everything happen.” After her prayer, Telemachus pours out a libation and prays, and they all drink wine and eat roasted meat there on the seashore.

67-74 When they had set aside the desire for drink and food, the Gerenian horseman Nestor was the first among them to offer words. “Now that we are finished with that, it is a good time to seek out and ask [70] the strangers what men they are, since they’ve had their fill and delight of food. So strangers—guests and friends—who are you? Where do you come from, sailing over the watery ways? Are you out on business—on some trading voyage? Or do you aimlessly wander, as pirates roam the seas, risking their lives and bringing misfortune to people in another land?”

75-101 *Telemachus replies with courage supplied by Athena. After explaining that they sailed from Ithaca, he asks about his missing father, who, he declares, was brought into the world by his mother “to a miserable life.” Still, he says that he has heard that his father fought by the side of Nestor when the Achaeans sacked Troy, “where you Achaeans suffered woeful misery.” He asks Nestor if he can tell him anything at all, bidding him to speak truthfully.*

102-114 Then the Gerenian horseman Nestor answered him, “Friend, you remind me of the misery we endured in that land, we the irrepressible sons of the Achaeans in battle might. I recall what we suffered while roving after booty with our ships upon the misty sea, we who were led along by Achilles, and while we fought around the great city of lord Priam. How many of our best men fell there! Warlike Ajax lies there dead—and Achilles, [110] and Patroclus, a counselor equal to the gods. And there lies my own dear son, Antilochus. He was strong and blameless, a man quick at running, when compared to others, and a fighter. We suffered much more—what mortal man could possibly describe all the harm we suffered?”

115-192 *Nestor claims that not even five or six years would*

be enough time to recount all the suffering. They fought for nine years and finally took Troy. He explains how Odysseus was by far the best in counsel, and how he himself was always one in mind with him. He informs Telemachus how similar he is in speech to his father—if indeed he is his son, he says.

Nestor goes on to tell the story of how Zeus caused a sorrowful return for the Achaeans thanks to their lack of intelligence and failure to observe custom. “Many of them pursued an evil fate that arose because of the murderous wrath of the bright-eyed daughter of the mighty father when she put strife between the two leading brothers.” Just as the Achaeans were ready to return home, Agamemnon and Menelaus, drunk with wine, foolishly and without order called for an assembly as the sun was setting. Menelaus said he wanted to depart right then. Agamemnon didn’t agree. Instead, he wished to set sail after offering hecatombs to appease Athena. Nestor relays that they traded grievous words with each other. In the end, half of the Achaeans—Nestor among them—sailed off with Menelaus, and half remained with Agamemnon. Then, as if this weren’t unfortunate enough, the first half split in strife again on the island of Tenedos, thanks to Zeus the cruel and merciless god. Half of them, including Odysseus, returned to Agamemnon. The other half followed Nestor and sailed on quickly, knowing that a god was planning evil for them. Heeding a sign from a god, they sailed directly from Lesbos to Euboea, and from there to Argos, where they left behind Diomedes and his men. As for Nestor himself, he continued on to Pylos.

Otherwise, Nestor reports that the Myrmidons, with their leader Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, Philoctetes, the son of Poias, and Idomeneus, with his Cretans, returned home safely. He finishes by telling Telemachus about Agamemnon.

193-238 “Even though you live far away, surely you all have heard how Agamemnon, the son of Atreus, came home and how Aegisthus plotted a pathetic end for him—a sad, sad destruction. But he paid the gloomy price for it! How good it is, when a man is dead and gone, for him to have left a son behind. I say this because Agamemnon’s son Orestes took revenge. He made that father-killer—the scheming

man Aegisthus—pay the price because he murdered his own glorious father. And you, friend, since it's clear that you are noble looking and tall, [200] be brave so that men to come may speak well of you."

In turn mindful Telemachus answered him, "Nestor, son of Neleus, great glory of the Achaeans, it is true. Orestes made that man pay by taking revenge. And for that, the Achaeans will spread his glory and fame far and wide, singing about his great deed in the time to come. If only the gods would give me enough power to make the injurious suitors pay for their transgressions—those arrogant men who recklessly plot against me. But the gods haven't planned this kind of happiness for me—for my father or for me. Nevertheless, I must now endure."

[210] Then the Gerenian horseman Nestor answered him, "Friend, since you have spoken about it and have reminded me of all this, they say that there are many suitors who have disregarded your will and caused harm to you in your own halls—and all because of your mother. Tell me, have you given them permission to take over your house? Or do the people—you know, all those throughout the land—do they detest you, following after the voice of some god? But who knows? Odysseus may come home one of these days and make them pay for all their willful behavior. Maybe he'll do it by himself or maybe he'll come with all the Achaeans. If only bright-eyed Athena would choose to love and befriend you as she did Odysseus [220] in the land of the Trojans where we Achaeans suffered all sorts of pain—for I've never seen a god show affection as I did when Athena stood by that man. If she befriended you like that and cared for you from deep within her spirit, then all those men would totally forget about your mother and a wedding."

In turn mindful Telemachus answered him, "Old man, I doubt that what you've said will ever happen. No, your word is all too good. I'm amazed. I have no hope that this will happen, not even if the gods want it to happen."

The bright-eyed goddess Athena called on him, [230] "Telemachus! What's this word that has flown past the wall of your teeth? As long as the desire were there, it would be easy for a god to rescue a man, even

if he were in a faraway land. As for me, I wouldn't care how much I suffered before getting home as long as I were safe on the day of my return. I'd prefer this over getting home quickly only to be slaughtered by my own hearth as Agamemnon was drawn in, deceived, and destroyed by Aegisthus and his wife. Still, death that is common to all men is certain. Not even the gods have the power to defend a loved man against it when the destructive fate of death finally drops a man to the dust."

239-312 Telemachus tells Athena-Mentor to stop speaking in this way. He asserts that his father has already died and will not return home. Then he asks wise Nestor about Agamemnon's end and what happened to Menelaus.

Nestor explains how Aegisthus came to seduce Clytemnestra. She initially held him off thanks to her own noble heart and the bard assigned to guard her. But fated by the gods, Aegisthus murdered the bard by leaving him on a desert island, and so Clytemnestra willingly moved in with Aegisthus. In the end, Aegisthus killed Agamemnon upon his return home. As for Menelaus, after offering proper burial rites on Sunium, the cape of Athens, for Phrontis, the son of Onetor and the most excellent steersmen in a storm, Zeus blew him and his men southward from Cape Malea on the Peloponnese. Half drifted on the mountainous waves to Crete and escaped destruction even though their ships were lost on the reef. The other half—five ships—went on to Egypt with Menelaus. There he gathered much gold and other wealth among the Egyptians. During this very long time Agamemnon returned to Mycenae and was murdered by Aegisthus, who ruled until Agamemnon's son Orestes came in the eighth year of his reign and took revenge. Nestor recalls what happened.

307-318 "Orestes came from Athens and killed the murderer of his father, the cheating trickster Aegisthus, the man who had slaughtered his glorious father. The slaughter complete, Orestes held a funeral feast for the Argives [310] over his hateful mother and the now-impotent Aegisthus. Menelaus, good at the battle cry, came home that very day, bringing with him much wealth, as much cargo as his ships could carry.

“And you, friend, take my advice. Do not wander about for long so far from home. Don’t leave your possessions in your house with those arrogant men, or they may divide all your property and gobble up all your wealth. If that happens, then your venturing out will have been pointless. Instead, I call on you and direct you to go visit Menelaus—who has recently come home from abroad.”

319-370 *Nestor assures Telemachus that Menelaus will tell him the truth of what he knows rather than a lie, for Menelaus is prudent. Finally, the old man offers a chariot for the journey to Sparta and the escort of his sons.*

As the sun sets, Athena-Mentor recommends they finish the feast with proper libations and then go to sleep. Nestor declares that he cannot let them sleep in the ship when he can easily accommodate them in his house with all he has. He’s no poor man, he says. Athena-Mentor agrees that Telemachus should go to Nestor’s house and then speed on to Menelaus in the morning. As for her, she will return to the ship and to the young men, and in the morning she will sail on while Telemachus travels to Sparta.

371-385 After bright-eyed Athena said this, she flew away in the form of a sea-eagle, the osprey, and all marveled as they beheld it.

Nestor was astonished and took Telemachus by the hand. “My friend,” he said, “I don’t think you’ll turn out to be a cowardly man, one without battle strength, since the gods escort you in this way while you are still young. Of all the gods and goddesses who have their homes on Olympus, this could have been no other than the daughter of Zeus, most glorious Tritogeneia, the same goddess who honored your noble father among the Argives. [380] Be gracious queen, and grant noble glory to me, my children, and my highly regarded wife. In return, I will offer you in sacrifice a year-old broad-browed heifer, unbroken, one that no man has ever brought under the yoke. I will cover her horns with gold and will offer her up to you in sacrifice.” That’s what he spoke in prayer, and Pallas Athena heard him.

386-489 *When they finally come to his beautiful house,*

Nestor serves eleven-year-old wine. They pour out libations and pray to Athena. Then they all sleep—Telemachus with Peisistratus and Nestor deep within the house.

In the morning Telemachus gathers with Nestor and Nestor’s sons—Echephron, Stratius, Perseus, Aretus, Thrasymedes, and Peisistratus—in assembly. Nestor gives various orders. And after everyone comes together again, they sacrifice the promised bull with gold-covered horns to Athena. Washing their hands with water, they sprinkle barley grain and toss tufts of the bull’s hair into the fire. Then Thrasymedes cuts the hind side of the bull’s neck in order to slaughter it, and the women, led by Nestor’s wife Eurydice and his daughters and daughters-in-law, ululate in honor of Athena. Next, the men raise the bull’s head and Peisistratus cuts its throat, draining the animal of its dark blood. Finally, they cut up the body, wrap the thighs in fat, wholly burning them, and roast the rest of the bull over the fire.

While the meat is roasting, Nestor’s youngest daughter Polycaste bathes Telemachus, anoints him with fragrant olive oil, and clothes him with a fine tunic. Sitting down next to Nestor, Telemachus now looks like the immortals.

The party feasts on roasted meat and drinks wine. When they’re all satisfied, Nestor commands his sons to prepare a chariot so that Telemachus may continue on his journey. They do, and a house-woman packs bread and wine onboard. So it is that Telemachus and Peisistratus, the son of Nestor driving, ride off from Pylos in a chariot pulled by swift horses. They travel all day long across the plain, coming to the house of Diocles, the son of Ortilochus, just as the sun is setting and darkness is covering the earth.

490-497 Telemachus and Peisistratus spent the night there, and Diocles set before them the gifts of hospitality shown to guest-friends.

When the early-born rosy-fingered Dawn appeared, they again yoked their horses and drove out from the gateway and the echoing portico. Peisistratus lashed the horses on, and they flew forward willingly. Very soon they came to the wheat-bearing plain, and travelling on, they reached the end of their journey, so quickly did the swift horses carry them forward. As they came to their destination, the sun sank, and all the pathways grew dark.

So ends Book 3. **See you in Book 4**, “Telemachus with Menelaus in Sparta.”

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