

The *Iliad* of Homer

Book 4

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Book 4

The Gods in Council

Agamemnon & the Army

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This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Homer's Iliad.

NOW THE GODS were sitting with Zeus in council upon the golden floor, while queenly Hebe poured out nectar for them to drink. And with the golden cups they acknowledged one another while looking down upon the city of Troy.

Right away, the son of Cronus tried to irritate Hera, speaking to her maliciously with barbed words. "Menelaus has two goddesses on his side, Argive Hera and Athena the defender. But what do they do? Here's what—they sit apart taking their [10] pleasure while looking on from afar, while laughter-loving Aphrodite is always rushing to Paris' side to defend him and ward off the fates of death. Just now

she did it again. She saved him right when he thought he would die for sure.

"Regardless, the victory clearly belongs to Menelaus, so we must consider what to do. How should we move things forward? We could either urge them on to destructive war again, to the dread sound of battle, or we could separate them in friendship. If the latter option is pleasing to you and a welcome development, then Menelaus can lead Argive Helen home again and Priam's city can go on being inhabited."

[20] That's what Zeus said. And sitting side by side, Athena and Hera whispered to each other, planning harm for the Trojans. Athena was furious with

her father Zeus with a wild anger that had seized her. Nevertheless, she was silent and said nothing. Hera, however, could no longer hold in her anger, so she confronted him.

“Dread son of Cronus, what are you suggesting? What a word you have spoken! I’ve worked hard to topple and flatten the city of Priam and his Trojans. I’ve urged my horses all over the land and have sweated to gather an army for one purpose alone—to harm Priam and his sons. So do it. Separate them in friendship and let Priam’s city stand. But if you do, you should know that not all the other gods will approve of you or applaud you.”

[30] Cloud-gathering Zeus suddenly felt very disturbed and said, “Crazy goddess, what harm have Priam and his sons done to you that you so intensely desire to flatten the well-built city of Ilium? What, do you also want to go through its gates and long walls in order to eat Priam raw along with his children and the other Trojans? Will *that* appease your anger? Do as you wish, then. I don’t want this to be a reason for us to quarrel in days to come. But let me tell you something else you better store in your heart. [40] When in the future I eagerly desire to sack a city and flatten it—one of my own choosing, where there are men who are dear to you—then don’t try to hinder me in my anger, but allow me to destroy it. You must let me do this in exchange for what I’m doing now—I’m giving in to you even though I don’t want to. Of all inhabited cities under the sun and the stars, there was no other that I honored in my heart like Ilium, with Priam and his people. For my altar never lacked an abundance of the equally shared feast—neither wine libations nor the smoky savor of burning fat that is the honor-prize due to us gods.”

[50] In return cow-eyed queenly Hera said, “My own three favorite cities are Argos, Sparta, and Mycenae with the wide streets. Utterly destroy them whenever they inflame the hatred of your heart. I won’t make a stand or think it is too much. Anyway, even if I burn with envy and don’t want you to flatten them, it won’t matter since you are much stronger than I am. Still, I won’t have my own work wasted! I’m a god like you, born from the same family line. I am the oldest daugh-

ter of scheming Cronus—[60] famous because I am your wife and because you rule over all the other immortals. So let’s give and take from each other. Whatever we decide, the rest of the immortal gods will follow our lead. Tell Athena, then, to quickly go into the dread battle between the Trojans and Achaeans. Have her arrange it so that the Trojans violate the oath first.”

73-219 Like a falling star, Athena eagerly rushes down from the peaks of Olympus in the form of the man Laodocus, the son of Antenor, and she approaches Pandarus of Zeleia, the son of Lycaon. Speaking to him, she advises Pandarus to shoot Menelaus with an arrow and reminds him of all the glory and gifts he will receive in turn. Vowing a hecatomb of lambs to Apollo, the wolf-born, he does so, and the arrow flies toward the Achaean leader. The blessed gods, Athena foremost among them, deflect the arrow, even as a mother would swat a fly away from a sweetly sleeping child. Nevertheless, the arrow hits Menelaus, and his blood flows.

Agamemnon shudders at all the blood. He’s afraid the wound is mortal and his brother will die. If that happens, the army will wish to leave, the expedition will be a failure, and they will have to leave Helen as “a glory-boast” to the Trojans. Agamemnon says he would rather die than hear someone recount such a failure.

Menelaus tells Agamemnon not to worry; the wound isn’t mortal. They call Machaon, the son of Asclepius, to take care of it. He comes and does so, extracting the arrow and sprinkling healing herbs on the wound, even as the centaur Cheiron once taught his father to do.

220-225 While Machaon was taking care of Menelaus, good at the battle cry, the lines of Trojan warriors marched forward as the Achaeans rearmed and felt once again a lust for battle. And suddenly, it was as though godlike Agamemnon was a new man—he was no longer cowering or unwilling to fight but was rapidly moving into battle that confers glory on men.

226-233 What was Agamemnon’s goal? Leaving his chariot and horses behind, he ranges through the ranks of the army, stirring them on to battle by promising victory and revenge.

234-239 “Argives! Don’t give up yet! Don’t drop your shield—your battle courage! For father Zeus will not support liars or falsehoods! The Trojans swore, and yet they were the first to violate their oaths. Therefore, I say that vultures will peck at their soft flesh and devour it, and we will carry off their dear wives and infant children when we sack their city!”

240-256 *Agamemnon angrily schools the archers, who hang back from battle. Then he comes to the Cretans, to Idomeneus and Meriones. Rejoicing at their battle readiness and that Idomeneus was out front leading while Meriones was pushing the men from behind, he explains why the Cretan leader should be eager to fight for him.*

257-264 “Idomeneus, above all the Danaans with swift horses, I honor you during battle and in other matters and at other times, as well as during the feast when [260] the best of the Argives mix the shining wine for the chief men. Although the other long-haired Achaeans drink their allotted portions, your cup is always full just like mine. You always drink as much as you desire. Even so, urge yourself on to battle! Be the warrior you’ve boasted yourself to be!”

265-438 *Idomeneus heartily agrees. So Agamemnon passes on to the two Ajaxes, who are arming with a mass of men. He praises them before striding off to old Nestor, who is organizing and directing his footmen and chariot-eers, explaining how the latter should fight. Hearing this, Agamemnon rejoices, wishing Nestor was still as strong as he used to be. Nestor agrees, acknowledging his lost youth. Next, Agamemnon comes to Menestheus, the son of Peteos, who is surrounded by his men, the Athenians. Then he sees Odysseus. Homer tells us their men hadn’t yet heard the call to battle. Even so, Agamemnon rousts Menestheus and Odysseus for always hearing the call to eat—the invitation to devour roasted meat and drink wine. They should therefore stand among the foremost of the warriors, he says, and join in blazing battle. When Odysseus hotly denies this judgment, Agamemnon gently rescinds it. He then moves on to Diomedes, asking him why he is hanging back and not fighting like his father, Tydeus. Diomedes takes his speech to heart. But not his comrade Sthenelus,*

the son of Capaneus. He claims they are better than their fathers. Diomedes hushes his friend and tells him to focus on the battle at hand.

They all do. The two armies march toward each other and clash violently.

439-451 The Trojans were roused by Ares, and the Achaeans by bright-eyed Athena, [440] Terror, Fear, and Strife, who is always hungry. Strife is man-slaying Ares’ sister and comrade. She starts small and grows bigger and taller until her head is sky-high and her feet drag along the earth. Strife lobbed distressful contention between them, and when it came among them, it increased their lamentation. And when the men met one another, shield clashed with shield and spear with spear in the rage of battle, [450] . . . and the earth flowed with blood.

452-456 *The sound of battle is enormous, like that of a torrential flood thundering down a mountainside.*

457-461 Antilochus first killed one of the armed Trojans, a noble man fighting out front, Echepolus, the son of Thalysius. He hit him on that part of the helmet where the horsehair rises up and shakes. [460] Then he drove the spear down through the helmet and between his eyes, and the point passed through the bone as the dark gloom of death covered him.

462-542 *After Echepolus falls, the two sides fight ferociously for his body. Telamonian Ajax strikes next, killing Simoisius, the son of Anthemion. Homer explains that Simoisius will never pay back his parents for his rearing. After this, Antiphus, the son of Priam, strikes one of Odysseus’ comrades Leucus, even though he hoped to hit Ajax. Angry, Odysseus steps forward to throw at the Trojans. He hits Priam’s bastard son Democoon with a throw that enters one side of his head and punches out the other. With this, Hector and the foremost Trojans fall back, and the Achaeans advance.*

Observing this, Apollo calls down to the Trojans from Mount Pergamos. Fight! he urges. Don’t give ground to the Achaeans! Their flesh is not made of stone or iron! Now is the time when Achilles is not with them! Athena likewise rouses the Achaeans.

BOOK 4 ▪ THE GODS IN COUNCIL

Many die by stone, spear, and sword—Diores, the son of Amarynceus, and Peiros, the son of Imbrasmus, among them. 543-544 That day, many Trojans and Achaeans lay stretched out side by side, their faces in the dust.

So ends Book 4. **See you in Book 5**, “The Raging River Diomedes.”

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