

# The *Iliad* of Homer

## Book 1

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## Book 1

### Anger and Frustration

#### Achilles & Agamemnon, Zeus & Hera

**W**RATH! SING, GODDESS, about the destructive wrath of Achilles, the son of Peleus—the anger that caused so much pain and suffering among the Achaeans. Who could possibly measure it all?

His anger sent many strong souls—the breath-like phantoms of men—down to the dark halls of Hades, while above, their fallen bodies became food for wild dogs and scavenging birds.

In this way Zeus' plan advanced to the very end.

Sing from the exact moment when the lord of men Agamemnon and godlike Achilles stood apart quarrelling with each other. Reveal the god that urged them forward, face to mighty face, in strife and disputation.

Ah—it was Apollo, the son of Leto and Zeus. He was angry with lord Agamemnon. [10] So he fired a wicked plague down upon the army, and the men were dying a violent death all because Agamemnon refused to honor Apollo's priest Chryses.

Now Chryses had come to the Achaean ships to free his daughter. He brought with him a whole load

of treasure for ransom and carried in his right hand the golden scepter of far-shooting Apollo. Standing there, he begged the Achaeans to release his prized daughter, but most of all, he entreated the two sons of Atreus, Agamemnon and Menelaus, the army's commanders.

"Sons of Atreus and all you other well-greaved Achaeans," he called out, "may the gods who dwell upon Olympus allow you to sack the great city of Priam. And later, may you safely come to your homes. [20] In return, all I ask is that you release my dear child—that you accept this ransom for her out of respect for Zeus' son Apollo, who strikes from afar."

Hearing this, all the Achaeans shouted and clapped their hands in approval, giving their assent to Chryses. They wished to respect the priest of Apollo and accept his shining payment.

But not the son of Atreus! No, the proposal didn't please Agamemnon at all. Instead, he wickedly sent off Chryses by means of this cruel speech:

“Old man,” he said, “don’t let me find you hanging around our ships. Hear me when I command you to never come to our camp again. If you do, the god’s golden scepter will not protect you. Listen to me. I will not let her go! No, your prized daughter will grow old in [30] my house at Argos far away from her own home. There she will busy herself by working the loom and by visiting my bed. So go! And if you wish to return home safely, alive and well, then do not any longer provoke me to anger.”

That’s what lord Agamemnon said. And hearing him, the old man feared the leader and obeyed his command.

Chryses walked off and silently ambled along the shore of the loud and roaring sea, quietly praying to lord Apollo, whom fair-haired Leto bore. “Hear me,” he cried, “god of the silver bow, you who protect the port city of Chryse and holy Cilla, and you who mightily rule Tenedos. Hear me Sminthian god! If I have ever pleased you in building up a temple [40] or in offering the burnt thighbones of great bulls or goats wrapped in layers of fat, then may the Danaans pay for my tears with your deadly arrows tipped with disease and suffering!”

*43-100 Hearing Chryses’ prayer, a furious Apollo steps down from Olympus and fires his arrows upon the Achaeans. He rains death upon them, beginning with the mules and swift dogs first, before hitting the men. All day long the pyres of the dead crackle and burn, reducing the remains to bones and ash.*

*Nine days pass by. On the tenth, Achilles calls together the assembly of men, spurred on by Zeus’ wife, Hera. Standing in the middle of the gathering, he wonders aloud why Apollo is so angry with the Achaeans. He asks if some seer, priest, or reader of dreams will rise to explain.*

*Calchas, the son of Thestor, and the best of those who read the flight patterns of birds, stands to give the reason for Apollo’s wrath. But first, he makes Achilles promise to defend him against Agamemnon, who is, he observes, the most powerful ruler among the Achaeans. Once the son of Peleus agrees to this defense, Calchas explains that the god is not angry because of a broken vow or a missed sacrifice. Rather, he’s upset with Agamemnon for not honoring his*

*priest Chryses. And so he will go on angrily destroying the army with disease until Agamemnon restores Chryses’ daughter without expecting anything in return. Lastly, Calchas adds that when the Achaean leader sends her home, he must include the offering of a hecatomb if he hopes to appease Apollo’s wrath.*

101-187 With these words Calchas sat down, and the hero Agamemnon, the wide-ruling son of Atreus, stood up annoyed. His heart was black with raging passion, and his eyes flashed fire as he scowled at the seer.

Uttering words that foretold evil, he started off by shouting, “Prophet of miserable shame! You’ve never yet spoken a useful word for me—one that’s agreeable. No! Instead, you like to spout off ugly words, those fit for a coward. Nor have you ever accomplished a noble word for me. And now you come haranguing me in the assembly of the Danaans, [110] asserting that the far-shooting god is raining down his arrows all because I do not wish to accept the shining ransom for the maiden girl, Chryses’ daughter.

“But since I desire to keep her in my house, why should I return her? For I prefer Chryseis to my own wedded wife, Clytemnestra. Indeed, her body’s form is in no way inferior to my wife’s in shape and size. Moreover, she’s smart and she works well upon the loom and at other tasks. Even so, I’ll give her up if that’s best. I’d rather the men be safe than suffer destruction. Just prepare for me another honor-prize so that I’m not the only man among the Argives without one. That wouldn’t be right—[120] not when you all witness my honor-prize going off to another man and place.”

After Agamemnon had spoken, godlike Achilles said in response, “Most glorious son of Atreus, of all men a super-lover of everything valued and esteemed! Tell me how the great-hearted Achaeans will now deliver up for you an honor-prize. Nothing at all remains from the great haul of goods we brought back with us after sacking and pillaging city after city along the plain. It’s all been divvied up and distributed—the gold and silver, and all the women,

children, and other property. It wouldn't be right to call everyone together again to make a collection of their prizes. Instead, you should give the girl up to the god. And if Zeus ever lets us sack the well-fortified city of Troy, we'll make up for your loss by repaying you three and four times over from all the plunder."

[130] In reply, lord Agamemnon said to him, "You won't deceive me like that, Achilles. Even though you're a good and noble man, you'll not slip by me, nor will you win me over. What—will you keep your own honor-prize while I sit here without one? I tell you what, have the Achaeans hand over something that is pleasing to me, an honor-prize that is suitable to my status and worth just as much as the girl is. But if they refuse to offer it up, I'll come myself and seize one with my own mighty hands! I'll come for your prize or that of Telamonian Ajax or Odysseus! And once I take it, I'll carry it off! Then we'll see who's angry!"

[140] "But let's consider this matter again later on. For now, let's drag a black ship down into the sea and find a crew for her. Drive a hecatomb of cattle onboard along with the beautiful girl, Chryseis. And may one of the leading men serve as captain—Ajax or Idomeneus or godlike Odysseus, or you, son of Peleus, most fearful of all men. Go and offer sacrifice to Apollo, the one who works from afar, so that you might appease him for us."

Looking grimly at Agamemnon, swift-footed Achilles said to him, "I can't believe it! Now you've thrown a mantle of shame upon your shoulders! You're always scheming and plotting, greedy for gain! [150] But think about it—why would any of the Achaeans now do your bidding? Why would any man march for you or fight against the mighty foe? I didn't come to Troy because *I* had a problem with the Trojans. *I* have no quarrel with them. They didn't raid *my* cattle or *my* horses. Nor did they waste *my* fields by cutting down the harvests on the rich plains of Phthia. Why would they? There's a vast distance between my land and theirs that's all filled up with shadow-casting mountains and the roaring sea. But *you*—you great shameless one! Even though no one

else had a problem with the Trojans, we followed you here to make you happy, to delight *you*, hoping to win back from them Menelaus' honor and the same for your whole family—you dog-faced bitch! [160] Yet now you turn away and won't trouble yourself with this one inconvenient fact.

"More! Now you threaten to come up to me and strip me of the honor-prize I fought and suffered for—the very one that the sons of the Achaeans awarded me when we divided the plunder. You should already know that whenever we divvy up the goods, I never have an honor-prize that is equal to yours. No! When the Achaeans sack a Trojan city, I'm there managing much of the furious battle. But when the time comes for dividing the loot, you get the biggest honor-prize of all, and I get very little, taking back to my ship's hold just a few things of value, even though I'm bone-tired with fighting.

"Fine. I'll go to Phthia since that is by far the better thing for me to do. [170] I'll return home in my curved ships. That way I'll no longer pile up riches and more for you while I myself have no honor."

The lord of men Agamemnon answered him by saying, "Run away if you want! I'm not begging you to stay. There are others who will honor me—most of all Zeus the counselor. Anyway, of all the lords raised up by Zeus, you are the most distasteful to me—hateful even. I give you this simple reason: strife is always pleasing to you, and wars and battles. So what if you are super-heroically strong! Some god gave you that power anyway. Go home, then, with your ships and your comrades in arms. [180] Go and rule over the Myrmidons. I've already put you and your anger out of mind!"

"But I promise you this. After I send Chryseis to her father at Apollo's bidding, I myself will come to your shelter and take from you your own girl with the beautiful face. I'll seize your honor-prize, Briseis, so that you will know how much better and braver I am than you. And when that happens, another man will hesitate to declare himself my equal or liken himself to me."

188-225 *Hearing this, Achilles feels the pain of being*

*shamed by another man. Part of him wants to draw his sword and murder the son of Atreus. The other part thinks it may be better to check his rising anger. Finally, just as he is pulling out the long bronze blade to slay him, Athena appears and commands him to stop and fight Agamemnon with words alone. Knowing he must obey the goddess no matter how angry he feels, he agrees, thrusting the sword back into its scabbard.*

*After Athena flies off to Olympus, the young Achaean hero turns against the older man and rails on him, beginning with: You dog-faced drunkard, you who possess the courage of a prancing deer!*

226-231 “You never venture out to fight with the men of the army, nor do you dare to join the best of the Achaeans in an ambush. No—you shun these tasks just as you shun death itself! You’d rather go around seizing [230] gifts from the man who has the courage to speak against you. You people-eating king! Ha! When in fact you rule a bunch of worthless nobodies!”

232-274 *Saying this, Achilles vows to stop fighting for Agamemnon. He goes on to predict that Agamemnon will one day regret his refusal to honor “the best of the Achaeans” when Hector eventually destroys his army and Achilles is already far away. Then the hero sits down.*

*Nestor, the old and long-time ruler of Pylos, stands to speak. He explains that Agamemnon and Achilles are doing exactly what Priam, the lord of Troy, and his sons would like for them to do. They’d rejoice to see you quarrel! he says. Before going on, Nestor explains why the Achaeans should listen to him. He came from and fought alongside a better and stronger generation of men, he asserts. And they, as great as they were, nevertheless listened to him. Getting back to the Achaeans, he advises them to obey his words. Turning to Agamemnon and Achilles, he says . . .*

275-284 “Even though you are a good man and strong, Agamemnon, you should not carry off the girl from Achilles. The reason is simple—the sons of the Achaeans awarded her in front of everyone.

“And you, son of Peleus, you should not wish to strive with a king, your force against his. Let me tell

you something. Sceptered kings do not have just any ordinary honor from Zeus. Not at all. Rather, Zeus has given them glory. [280] So even if you are strong and have a goddess for your mother, Agamemnon is better and stronger than you since he rules over far more men.”

Turning to Agamemnon, Nestor finished, “And you, son of Atreus, check your wrath. I implore you to let go of your anger against this man, who is a towering wall for the Achaeans against all the evils of war.”

285-291 *Hearing Nestor’s counsel, Agamemnon agrees that he has spoken well. Still, he must not let Achilles usurp his power as he surely wishes to do.*

292-296 But godlike Achilles interrupted him. “The men will call me a coward and a worthless nobody if I give in to you! Order other people around—not me! I won’t obey you!”

297-351 *Still, Achilles agrees to give up Briseis to the chief leader. But, he declares, I won’t hand over any of my other possessions to you! And if you try to take anything else, my spear will soon be reddened by your dark blood!*

*Finishing their verbal scuffle, they break up the assembly. Achilles returns to his own camp with his dear friend Patroclus, the son of Menoetius, and Agamemnon prepares the ship with the hecatomb and Chryseis. He appoints Odysseus of many counsels to serve as its captain.*

*When the ship sails off, Agamemnon orders the men of the army to purify themselves in the sea’s salty water. He offers many sacrifices nearby. All along, however, he doesn’t forget his quarrel with Achilles and his promised threat. Consequently, he sends Talthibius and Eurybates to retrieve Briseis. The henchmen go, and with Patroclus’ help, Achilles willingly hands her over while swearing before the blessed gods and other men that he will never fight for Agamemnon again—a man, he charges, who is mad with rage.*

*After Briseis unwillingly walks away, the young hero sits by the gray and limitless sea and mournfully raises his hands in prayer to his immortal mother, Thetis.*

352-356 “Mother,” he cried, “you brought me into this world doomed to live a brief life. Surely, therefore, Zeus, who thunders from Olympus, owes me honor. Yet now he has given me very little. And the wide-ruling son of Atreus has dishonored me since by force he has robbed me of my honor-prize.”

357-412 *Hearing her weeping son, Thetis rises from the depths of the sea and asks him to reveal what’s wrong. Even though she already knows, Achilles explains. They went to Thebes, he says, sacked it and carried off all the plunder. After, when the Achaeans divided the loot, Agamemnon got Chryseis. But when Apollo’s priest, her father, came to fetch Chryseis with an aptly large ransom, Agamemnon refused to give her back because it didn’t please him. At least that’s what he said! So he told the old man to buzz off. This disrespect infuriated the priest. As a result, Chryses prayed to Apollo for revenge, for the restoration of his own honor. The god delivered by sending the plague on us. So when Calchas told us why Apollo was so angry, I was the first to stand and recommend giving the girl back. It was the only way to appease the god, I said. But Agamemnon didn’t see it that way! Not exactly. Rather, he said that he would take my girl to make up for his loss.*

*After Achilles recounts what happened, he begs his mother to go to Olympus to enlist the help of Zeus in regaining his honor. Remind him, he says, of what you did to free him when Hera, Poseidon, and Athena bound him that time—how you called the hundred-hander, Briareus, to the rescue. Remind him of how all the blessed gods feared him then.*

413-430 Thetis wept and answered him, “Dear son! My heart aches because I gave birth to you. If only you could have remained unharmed by your ships without all these tears! For I know that your allotted time will be short anyway. Out of all men, you will be miserable and die early. Therefore, it was for a wretched fate that I bore you in my great home.

[420] “Nevertheless, I will go to the snowy heights of Olympus and report your story to Zeus, who delights in thunder, if indeed he will listen to me. Meanwhile, stay here and stoke your wrath against the Achaeans. Let them feel it. And hold back from the

fight until Zeus returns from feasting with the Ethiopians. He only left yesterday, traveling toward Oceanus with the other gods. But he’ll be back in twelve days. Then I will go to his bronze-floored house, clasp his knees in supplication, and I imagine I’ll be able to win him over for you.”

Saying this, she left Achilles who was still furious at the loss of the well-dressed girl Briseis—angry that Agamemnon and his men were able [430] to wrest her away from him by force against his will.

431-502 *While Achilles prays to his mother, Odysseus and the other Achaeans sail to Chryse in order to return Chryseis to her father.*

*When they come to the port city, the old man rejoices to see his daughter. Straightaway, Chryses asks Apollo to stop striking the Achaeans with his deadly arrows. The god hears the prayer and is appeased by the Achaean sacrifice. The following morning, they sail back to Troy.*

*Twelve days go by, and the immortal gods return to Olympus after feasting with the Ethiopians. Remembering Achilles’ request, Thetis rises from under the sea and goes to the ridges of the mountain to talk with Zeus.*

503-516 “Father Zeus, if among the immortals I ever did anything for you in word or deed, hear my prayer and honor my son, whose life will be cut short anyway. The lord of men Agamemnon has dishonored him by seizing his honor-prize and keeping her. Make up for this lost honor and pay my son back, Olympian lord of counsel. Grant might to the Trojans, and victory that follows from such might, until the Achaeans [510] pay back my son and increase his honor.”

That’s what Thetis said. And Zeus, the son of Cronus, just sat there in silence for a moment, not saying a word.

Finally, Thetis grabbed his knees and begged him a second time. “Nod your head,” she implored, “and promise to do what I ask. Or, if you wish, deny my request since you fear nothing and can refuse if you want. If you do, though, I’ll know how much I’m honored among the gods—the very least!”

517-539 *Frustrated, Zeus explains his hesitation. It is his wife, Hera. The whole business will cause them to fight. She will accuse him of aiding the Trojans again, and then she will tell everybody. Still, he will do it. He nods his head in favor of Thetis' request—the most solemn sign Zeus can offer to indicate his deepest intentions.*

*After they plan together, Thetis flies back to the sea and plunges into its depths, and Zeus walks down from the ridges of Olympus to his great house. When he arrives, the gods stand up and nod out of respect for him. The respect doesn't last, though. When he sits down, it is to a full measure of Hera's indignation—for she has just seen Thetis leave the mountain and dive into the sea.*

540-550 “You cunning sneak!” she tore into him. “Which of the gods have you been talking to now? You are always negotiating and secretly making agreements behind my back! You never tell me what you intend to do!”

The father of men and gods replied, “Hera! You mustn't expect to know the substance of every conversation I have. Even though you are my wife, my judgments will be hard for you to bear. When it is appropriate for you to listen, then no one will know before you do—neither god nor man. But when I intend to keep a matter to myself, [550] then you must not pry or ask questions.”

551-564 *Feigning astonishment, Hera denies any such nosiness and vows to abide by whatever Zeus has planned. Still, she is worried that he has pledged honor to Achilles by allowing harm to come to the Achaeans. Zeus admits it—she has guessed the plan. So what? As for Hera, the cloud-gatherer orders her to be quiet.*

565-611 “Sit down, hold your tongue, and obey my words. For if I lay my invincible hands on you, none of the Olympian gods will be able to help you.”

So he spoke, and the cow-eyed queen Hera was afraid and sat down. Silently, she forced herself to obey, bending her dear heart to his will. [570] Still, all the heavenly gods in Zeus' house were upset. They felt troubled, frustrated.

That was until Hephaestus, famous for his art,

attempted to talk to and pacify his mother, white-armed Hera. “It will be intolerable,” he said, “if you two start quarrelling like this over mortals. It will cause a brawl among the gods. And if that happens, there won't be any pleasure at all in the noble feast—not if inferior matters such as mortal human beings get the better of us. Here's what I advise, mother, though you already know it yourself. Turn on your charm and show our dear father Zeus some affection.” Hephaestus paused and turned to the other gods. “Otherwise the father may have to school all of us with violence, and the feast will be ruined. [580] Think of it! What if the one who loudly thunders and flashes lightning strikes so hard that we go flying from our seats? He can do it, too, for he is by far the best of the gods. But if you lay hold of him with soft and conciliatory words, then the Olympian will be appeased, and at once he will be gracious to us.”

When Hephaestus was done speaking, he jumped up from his chair and put a two-handled cup into his dear mother's right hand. Then he spoke to her, saying, “Endure, mother. Hold yourself up through all your troubles. Because you are dear to me, I don't want to see you beaten before my eyes. I would help you, but there's no chance of making a stand against Zeus. Don't you remember? [590] Once before when I was trying to help you, he seized me by the foot and hurled me from the heavenly threshold. All day long, from morning until evening, I was falling—falling until at sunset I eventually came to the ground upon the island of Lemnos. There I lay in pain with very little life in me until the Sintian men came along and took care of me.”

That's what Hephaestus said, and the white-armed goddess Hera smiled. And smiling, she took the two-handled cup in hand from her child.

At this, Hephaestus drew sweet nectar from the mixing bowl and served it around to all the other gods, moving from left to right as he did so. And the blessed gods busted out with unstoppable laughter [600] when they saw him rushing around all out of breath, up and down the great hall of Zeus' house.

So it was that they feasted all day long until the sun set. Every god had a full share of the spread—no

## BOOK 1 ▪ ANGER AND FRUSTRATION

god's hunger went unsatisfied. Apollo played his beautiful lyre, and the Muses sang to one another with their lovely voices.

But when the sun's glorious light had faded, they went home to bed, each to his own abode that was skillfully built by the glorious smith Hephaestus, the

one with two disabled feet but an understanding heart and mind. And Zeus himself, the Olympian lord of thunder and lightning, crawled into bed [610] where he usually slept when sweet sleep came upon him. There he stepped up and slept next to Hera of the golden throne.

So ends Book 1. **See you in Book 2**, "To Battle Men! The Catalogue of the Best."

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