

The *Odyssey* of Homer

Book 4

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Book 4

Telemachus with Menelaus in Sparta

Reading 4

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This reading comes from the Cave's

The Best of Homer's Odyssey.

TELEMACHUS AND PEISISTRATUS came to the low-lying valley of Lacedaemon, full of hollows, where they drove straight to the house of glorious Menelaus. They found him there feasting with his many clansmen in honor of his son's wedding and also that of his blameless daughter, whom he was sending off to the son of Achilles, the breaker of men's ranks.

6-58 Menelaus' attendant Eteoneus informs him that two men have arrived. He says they look like the offspring of Zeus. He asks Menelaus if they should host the two or send them on to another house. Menelaus answers by reminding

Eteoneus of all the times men hosted them on their way home from Troy. The answer is clear. Consequently, Eteoneus and a few other men unyoke the horses, feed them, and invite Telemachus and Peisistratus into the shining house that awes them. Inside, female slaves bathe and anoint them and dress them in fresh tunics. Finally, after washing their hands in order to feast with the meat and wine set before them, Menelaus addresses them.

59-64 Yellow-haired Menelaus greeted them and said, [60] "Take hold of the food, men, and enjoy it. And when you are finished with the meal, we'll ask you who among men you are—for your father's line-

age has not been lost in you, but you are the kind of men that come from scepter-bearing kings fostered by Zeus. Common men do not bring sons into the world such as you are.”

65-75 *The two guest-friends feast on bread and meat and drink wine. Once they are satisfied, Telemachus quietly whispers his amazement at Menelaus' house, decorated as it is with gold, silver, amber, and precious ivory. He judges it must be like Zeus' house, with its unfathomable wealth.*

76-122 Yellow-haired Menelaus overheard Telemachus as he spoke and addressed them with winged words: “My dear sons, no mortal man can strive with Zeus since his house, possessions, and everything about him is immortal. [80] But among mortal men, there may be another who can compete with me and my possessions—or there may not be such a man.

“Whatever the case, I have wandered and suffered much over eight years to bring these riches home in my ships. I wandered over Cyprus, Phoenicia, and the land of Egypt. I visited the Ethiopians, the Sidonians, and the Erembians. I came to Libya where the lambs grow horns as soon as they are born and where the sheep bear their young three times per year. And whether he is a lord or a shepherd in that land, every man has plenty of cheese, meat, and sweet milk, for the ewes give their milk throughout the year. No one goes without.

[90] “But while I was roaming about and gathering great riches among these people, another man secretly murdered my brother, unexpectedly, with his damnable wife’s help—it was *her* treachery, *her* deceptive plan. Consequently, I have no pleasure in being lord of all this wealth, all these things.

“Whoever your parents are, they must have told you the story. I have suffered much. . . . If only I had stayed home! I wish that I had only a third of my possessions and that all those who perished on the plain of Troy, far from horse-nourishing Argos, were still safe and alive. [100] It is for all these men that I lament and mourn as I sit here in my house. At times I delight my heart in weeping for them. Then I stop—for crying suddenly becomes a bitterly cold form of satisfaction.

“There’s one man I grieve for more than all the others. I can’t think of him without loathing both food and sleep, so miserable I am at the thought of him. The reason is that no other man of all the Achaeans toiled as he did or took on so much. And what did Odysseus get in the end? It seems his destiny was nothing but distress and trouble. And mine? I feel insufferable and everlasting pain for that man since he has been gone a long time and we don’t know [110] whether he is alive or dead. I imagine that his father, the old man Laertes, and his thoughtful wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus, whom he left behind an infant in his house, lament him.”

That’s what Menelaus said, and the heart of Telemachus yearned to weep as he thought about his father. Tears fell from his eyes to the ground when he heard his father’s name. To cover, he raised his purple-stained cloak over his eyes with both hands.

When Menelaus observed this, he considered in his heart and spirit whether he should permit Telemachus to identify his own father or whether he should bring it up and ask him about him. [120] While he was pondering what course to take in his heart and spirit, Helen came down from her sweet-smelling high-roofed room, looking as lovely as Artemis of the golden distaff.

123-167 *After sitting down upon a chair covered with soft wool, Helen begins to question her husband about the two guests. She whispers that one looks like Odysseus—so much so that she’s amazed. Menelaus agrees, saying that he looks like him in his feet, hands, head and hair, and the way he darts his eyes about. He tells her how the young man hid his tears with his cloak. Hearing them, Peisistratus confirms the identification. He is in fact Telemachus, he says, the son of Odysseus. He then explains their mission and how his prudent friend is afraid to speak recklessly to Menelaus. Still, Telemachus needs his help since a son lacks a defender when his father is gone.*

168-188 In reply yellow-haired Menelaus said, “It’s incredible! The son of that very dear man has come to my house—[170] the man who suffered so much hardship enduring so many contests for my sake. I

had always hoped to entertain him here in my home and love him above all the other Argives when he came back—if far-seeing Olympian Zeus granted us a safe return in our swift ships over the salty sea. I would have prepared a city for him in Argos, and a house for him to dwell in. I would have led him on from Ithaca, bidding him to come with all his property and possessions, his son, and all his people. I would have sacked one of the neighboring cities that I rule and emptied it of its inhabitants for his sake. Then we would have joined together often, being together, and nothing would have separated us, one from the other, in our love and pleasure, [180] until the black cloud of death shrouded us. I suppose, however, that some god begrudged him this destiny—for this wretched man alone was not granted his return home.”

That’s what Menelaus said, and his words stirred in them the desire to weep. The one born of Zeus, Argive Helen, cried, as did Telemachus and Menelaus, the son of Atreus. Nor could Peisistratus keep his eyes from filling with tears when he remembered how his blameless brother Antilochus was killed by the son of bright Dawn.

189-350 *Peisistratus explains how tears are shed and hair is cut in honor of those who have died. They are the fallen man’s honor-prize, and so there is no shame attached to one mortal crying for another whose fate has drawn him to death. Menelaus praises Peisistratus for his wisdom and declares his father Nestor happy and fortunate in his marriage and children. He will grow old in the halls of his house, and after him, his sons will do the same, full of wisdom and skill in handling a spear.*

Diverting their minds from their painful memories and plaintive mourning, Menelaus suggests they wash their hands and eat. They’ll talk more in the morning, he says. So they do. Asphalion pours water upon their hands, and they begin to eat. Following her own plans, Helen slips a drug into the wine bowl, one that quiets heartache and anger. She learned about it from Polydamna, an Egyptian woman and the wife of Thon.

Then Helen recounts a story about Odysseus. Some time during the Trojan War, he entered Troy disguised as

a beggar and fooled all the Trojans. She alone recognized him. Even so, she swore not to tell anyone because her heart was already set on returning home to Sparta. The truth is she regretted the blind infatuation from Aphrodite that had caused her to forsake her land and child, as well as her wedding bed and excellent husband. Consequently, she was pleased when Odysseus slaughtered many of the Trojan men with his sword.

Menelaus adds his own story. He claims that he has never met a man like Odysseus. He recalls the time during the end of the war when the Achaean heroes were holed up in the great wooden horse before Troy. Helen (then the wife of Paris) and Priam’s son Deiphobus, he says, tried to tease them out by imitating their wives’ voices and calling each man by name. Many wished to go, including Menelaus and Diomedes, but Odysseus held them back, saving all the Achaeans.

Ah! Telemachus bemoans the fact that his father’s heroic action didn’t save him. Exhausted, he bids they all go to bed rather than talk. There they will find the relief of sweet sleep. Hearing his wish, Helen orders her slaves to prepare beds for them on the porch—purple blankets and woolen throws. There they rest while Menelaus and Helen sleep deep within the house.

In the morning, Menelaus asks Telemachus what his need is—why he has come. Is it the people’s business or your own? he asks. Telemachus tells him about the oppressive suitors, who are devouring his household’s wealth, and asks if he has any news of his father, who was born to suffer pain, he declares. He begs him to speak the truth rather than comforting words motivated by pity.

Hearing about the suitors, Menelaus is angry. He prays that Odysseus may return to kill them quickly—like a lion—that they may be wed to death rather than the woman they desire. Then he promises the truth to Telemachus, the very words of the old man of the sea.

351-369 “Even though I was eager to return home when I was in Egypt, the gods detained me there since my hecatombs were not complete—and the gods are very strict about their commands.

“Now there is an island in the stormy sea some distance from Egypt. Men call it Pharos. It’s about as far as a hollow ship can sail in a day with the help of

a whistling wind blowing from behind. The island has a harbor that's good for mooring well-balanced ships, from which the vessels can launch again into the sea when they have drawn black water from the deepest wells.

"[360] It was there on that island that the gods kept me for twenty days. Never were there fair winds—nothing blowing seaward. No winds appeared for our ships that would escort them over the broad back of the sea. We would have run out of provisions and my men would have starved if a goddess had not taken pity on me and saved me. She was Eidothea, the daughter of mighty Proteus, the old man of the sea. I deeply moved her spirit.

"She came to me one day when I was alone, apart from my comrades, who were always wandering around the island fishing with curved hooks—for hunger oppressed their bellies."

371-467 *Menelaus explains to her how they are trapped on the island and asks her to reveal which of the gods is upset and how he can leave. In response, Eidothea commands him to take hold of her divine father, the old man of the sea, by stealth when he is resting among his seals. She promises that he will tell the stranded man everything he needs to know.*

In the morning, Menelaus follows her instructions, and by means of trickery he takes hold of the old man. Though Proteus shape-shifts in order to escape, taking on the form of a lion, a serpent, a leopard, a boar, a waterfall, and a tree full of leaves—Menelaus holds him tightly until the old man is ready to talk. Finally, he is able to ask the old man the questions he wants him to answer.

468-480 "'Tell me—for the gods know all things—which one of the immortals keeps me here and bars my way home? [470] And tell me of my return, how I will go over the fish-filled sea.'

"That's what I said. And in response, Proteus said to me at once, 'But you should have made noble sacrifices to Zeus and the other gods before loading onto your ships. Then you would have quickly come to your fatherland, sailing over the wine-faced sea. For it is not your fate to see your friends nor to reach your

well-built house or the land of your fathers until you have gone again to the waters of Egypt, to the river fallen from Zeus, and have offered sacred hecatombs to the immortal gods, who possess the wide sky. [480] At that time the gods will grant you the voyage you eagerly desire.'"

481-555 *Menelaus promises to do as told. Then he asks about the other Achaean leaders. Who made it home? Who died along the way?*

The old man begrudgingly reveals what happened—how Ajax, the son of Oileus, perished thanks to Athena's hatred for him and Poseidon's ire at his "bigtime blindness" and "arrogant speech" against the gods. (Ajax boasted that he had "escaped the great gulf of the sea in spite of the gods.") He next describes how Aegisthus murdered Agamemnon with the help of twenty men in ambush.

Learning this for the first time, Menelaus weeps for his brother and wishes to die and to no longer see the sunshine." The old man of the sea counsels him to stop his useless weeping. "It won't accomplish anything for you," he says. Rather than crying, he advises him to return home to avenge his brother—unless Orestes, of course, has already done so. The advice makes Menelaus feel better. Finally, he asks about a third man—one who yet lives even though he is still detained somewhere upon the wide sea.

556-569 "It is the son of Laertes, whose home is in Ithaca. I saw him on an island, big tears pouring from his eyes, in the halls of the nymph Calypso. She holds him there by force. He has no power to reach his homeland since he has no oar-equipped ships nor comrades [560] to escort him over the broad back of the sea.

"As for you, god-nourished Menelaus, it is not decreed for you to die and meet your destined doom in horse-nourishing Argos. Rather, the immortals will escort you to the Elysian plain and to the limits of the earth, where yellow-haired Rhadamanthus is. Here, life is the easiest for men. There's no falling snow or much of winter or thunderstorms. But a clear West Wind always blows—sent up by Ocean to cool and refresh the men there. You will not die because you hold Helen as your wife and so are the son-in-law of Zeus."

570-584 *With this, Proteus vanishes into the sea. The following morning Menelaus sails with his men to Egypt's great river where they offer well-made hecatombs and pile up a mound for his brother Agamemnon "so that his glory might be inextinguishable."*

585-586 *"Finishing these things, I turned to go, and the immortals gave me a fair wind, swiftly sending me on to my dear homeland."*

587-624 *Menelaus invites Telemachus to stay with him for another eleven or twelve days. He promises him gifts on his departure—horses and a chariot, and a beautiful chalice—if only he will keep Menelaus in mind before the gods. Telemachus tells his host that he must return to Pylos—though he would like to stay, he says. Moreover, he asks him to keep the horses since the terrain of his home island is no good for them. Menelaus promises him instead a well-wrought silver bowl, trimmed with gold, one that was given him by Phaedimus, the king of the Sidonians. They talk and prepare to feast.*

625-629 *Meanwhile, the suitors were enjoying themselves in front of Odysseus' great home. They were throwing javelins and discuses in an area cleared out and levelled—doing as they had before, weighed down with insolence. There sat Antinous and godlike Eurymachus, the leaders of all the suitors. Standing out in excellence of manly skill, they were the best.*

630-695 *When Noemon, the son of Phronius, informs Antinous and Eurymachus that Telemachus has actually sailed to sandy Pylos as he threatened to do, they grow angry at his arrogant disrespect for them and gather all the suitors together. Antinous advises they ambush Telemachus as he sails to Ithaca from Pylos. Everyone approves his proposal before heading inside for the evening's festivities. Overhearing their intentions, the herald Medon also returns to the house. Yet instead of joining the suitors in the great hall, he goes to apprise Penelope of their plans. Seeing Medon enter, Penelope lambasts the suitors' brazen behavior, their wasteful consumption of the livelihood and property of Telemachus, and wonders why they pay evil for all the good Odysseus previously did for them and the peo-*

ple when he was king, doing "no wrong in word or deed" to anyone.

696-705 *And again Medon, a man of understanding, spoke to her. "If only that were the worst misfortune, queen. But the suitors are planning another misfortune far greater and far more troublesome—may the son of Cronus never let it happen! [700] The suitors eagerly desire to slay Telemachus with the sharp bronze sword as he's coming home—for he went away to most holy Pylos and divine Lacedaemon to see what he could hear about his father."*

That's what Medon said. And right then Penelope's knees were loosened beneath her, and her dear heart was unstrung. And speechlessness seized her for a long time, and her eyes filled with tears.

706-721 *Finally, Penelope asks Medon why Telemachus went to Pylos. He repeats what he has already told her, adding that he doesn't know if some god urged him to go or if it was his own spirit. After Medon leaves, Penelope falls to the floor inconsolable and weeping. Her serving-women rush to relieve her. In turn, she sobs to them.*

722-728 *"Hear me, dear ones, for the Olympian has given me grief and distress beyond all those women I grew up with. Before this I lost a good husband, lion-spirited, who surpassed the Danaans in manly excellences of all sorts—all the noble excellences—whose glory is far spread through Hellas and mid-Argos. And now my loveable son has been snatched up and carried away from our halls by a furious storm without any report whatsoever."*

729-749 *Penelope rebukes the serving-women for not telling her about Telemachus' expedition, and then she orders them to have Dolius, her aged servant and groundsman, inform Odysseus' father Laertes so that he might consider a plan. Observing Penelope's concern, the one who reared Odysseus, his nurse Eurycleia, speaks up and admits her complicity in Telemachus' voyage. She explains why she kept silent—that he swore her to silence so that his mother would not miss him too much and ruin her beautiful skin with weeping.*

750-757 “But now go and bathe yourself in fresh water, and put on fresh clothes to cover your body. And afterward, go to your bedroom upstairs with the other women, your handmaids, and pray to Athena, the daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus—for then she may save Telemachus from death. But do not trouble the old man with misfortune, for he’s had enough of his own. Either way, I don’t think the line of Laertes, the son of Arceisius, is entirely hated by the blessed gods. No, at the very least one will survive to hold on to the high-roofed house and its rich and fertile fields that surround it both near and far.”

758-803 *Eurycleia’s remarks “lulled to sleep Penelope’s weeping.” Consequently, she goes to bathe and pray to Athena for her son’s safe return, that the suitors will not harm him. As she does, and as the goddess hears her, the suitors downstairs brag about what they’re going to do. They choose twenty of the best men for the ambush and leave for the shore. While they drag the ship into the water and drift into the sea, Penelope fears for the worst, that her son will perish at the suitors’ hands. Finally, she falls asleep, and Athena sends a dream-image to her in the form of her sister Iphthime. Slipping into the bedroom through the strap-hole, the image stands above her and addresses her.*

804-807 “Are you asleep, Penelope, dear one with a sorrowing heart? May it not be—for the gods who live at ease don’t want you to cry or to be distressed since your son is destined to return. In no way has he transgressed against the gods.”

808-829 *Penelope answers her in her dreams. She tells her sister of all her sorrow—over Odysseus, Telemachus, and the suitors’ plotting. Iphthime tells her to be courageous and not to fear too much for Telemachus. She promises her that Athena is with him—that indeed she has sent her to speak with Penelope.*

830-847 Again, thoughtful Penelope, ever cautious, spoke to her. “If you are truly a god and have come here upon a divine mission, then come and tell me at length about that miserable man, whether he still lives and sees the light of the sun or whether he’s already dead inside the house of Hades.”

In reply, the dimly seen dream-image said to her, “Of him I will not speak at length, whether he is living or dead. It is evil to speak words that are as empty as the wind.”

Saying this, the dream-image slipped through the strap-hole that fastened the door and off into the blowing wind. At this, Icarius’ daughter Penelope woke up suddenly. [840] Her dear heart felt warm at the clear dream that was sent to her in the dead of night.

Meanwhile, the suitors embarked on the ship and sailed along their watery path, anxiously considering in their minds Telemachus’ murder.

Now, there is a fairly small and rocky island in the middle of the sea. It’s called Asteris, the Star, and it sits between Ithaca and rugged Samos. The island has a double harbor where ships can anchor. It was there that the Achaeans waited in ambush.

So ends Book 4. **See you in Book 5, “Odysseus Sails to Scheria (the Phaeacians).”**



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