

The *Iliad* of Homer

Book 8

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Book 8

Zeus' Great Might

The Back and Forth of Battle

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

NOW WHEN YELLOW-VEILED Dawn was spreading out over all the earth, Zeus called the gods to an assembly on the topmost peak of many-ridged Olympus. Then he spoke, and all the other gods listened.

"Hear me, all you gods and goddesses, so that I may say what I wish to say even as my spirit bids me. None of you should try to act contrary to my word, but you should all consent to what I say so that I may quickly bring these works of war to an end. [10] If I see anyone helping either the Trojans or the Danaans apart from me, then I will blast him with lightning, and he will return to Olympus in a manner not befitting him. Or I will hurl him down into dark Tartarus,

far into the deepest pit under the earth, where the gates are iron and the floor bronze—as far beneath Hades as the great sky of heaven is above the earth. I'll do this so that you may learn that among all the gods, I am the strongest."

18-27 Zeus goes on to dare them to test his strength and declares that if they try, they will discover how far above all the gods and men he is.

28-37 So he spoke, and all the gods were silently astonished by his speech—for he had spoken in the assembly with such power and strength.

[30] Finally, the goddess bright-eyed Athena spoke to them, saying, "Our father, the son of Cronus, highest of all rulers, we know well that your might is unyielding and harsh, yet we also feel sorry for the Danaan warriors who are perishing and coming to a bad end. Since you command us, we'll refrain from actual fighting. Still, we will offer advice to the Argives so that they won't all perish thanks to your wrath and hatred."

38-67 Upon hearing Athena's words, Zeus smiles and flies off to Mount Ida, in the Troad, and to Gargarus, its highest peak, where he has an altar. There he "exults in his glory" as he sits and looks down upon the Trojans and the Achaeans.

After eating their morning meal, the Achaeans arm, as do the Trojans. The latter men rush out from the gates of Troy eager to join in battle with the foe—out of the "dire necessity" to defend their children and women. Spears and shields clash! The groaning expressions of the slain and the triumphant voices of those who have slain them sound in abundance. The earth flows with blood. As long as it is morning, men fall to the dust.

68-77 When the sun had reached mid-heaven, father Zeus balanced his golden scales [70] and put two fates of death within them, one for the horse-taming Trojans and the other for the bronze-clad Achaeans. Then he seized it by the middle, and the scale sank down revealing the fated day of doom for the Achaeans.

So it was that the Achaean fates sank down to the all-nourishing earth while those of the Trojans rose to the broad sky above. Then Zeus thundered from Mount Ida and sent the flash of his lightning among the Achaean men. Seeing it, they were astounded, and pale fear seized them all.

78-92 Idomeneus, Agamemnon, and the two Ajaxes flee upon hearing Zeus. Only Nestor remains—not by his own free will, but because Paris killed one of the horses pulling his chariot. Noticing him all alone, Hector rushes to kill him. Diomedes observes his coming, however, and moves to save the old man. As he goes, he cries out to Odysseus for help.

93-96 "God-born son of Laertes, much-able Odysseus, why are you running off with your back turned like a coward? May some man not plant a spear in your back while you flee! Rather, stay here and help me defend old Nestor from this wild man's furious charge."

97-138 *Odysseus doesn't hear him as he speeds off toward the ships. All alone, therefore, Diomedes turns to Nestor and bids him to climb aboard his own chariot so that they may together ride against the Trojans and Hector.*

When they near Hector, Diomedes casts his spear at him but misses. Instead, the spear punches into Hector's driver and drops him to the ground. Now Hector fears for his own life. In fact, there would have been trouble for the Trojans if Zeus hadn't noticed and thundered and lightning right by Diomedes and Nestor. Hearing this, Nestor fearfully pulls back on the reins and urgently speaks to the young warrior.

139-176 "Son of Tydeus, turn your horses in flight! [140] Don't you see that Zeus isn't giving you strength? No, he's giving glory to Hector today. Tomorrow, if he wills it, he'll grant us glory. Whatever the case, no man, however brave he is, may thwart the will and purpose of Zeus, for he is stronger than all men."

Diomedes, good at the battle cry, answered, "All that you have said is true. But I feel a grief that pierces me deeply in my heart. For Hector will talk among the Trojans and say, 'The son of Tydeus fled before me to the ships.' [150] This is the boast he'll make—and on that day may the earth swallow me whole!"

"Son of Tydeus," replied Nestor, "what do you mean? Even if Hector says you are a coward, the Trojans and the Dardanians will not believe him, nor will the wives of the mighty warriors whom you have slaughtered."

Saying this, he turned the horses back through the thick of the battle, and with a cry that tore through the air, the Trojans and Hector rained down their missiles upon them. From behind, [160] great Hector of the gleaming helmet shouted to him and said, "Son of Tydeus, the Danaans have honored you with a

preeminent seat, roasted meat, and full cups. But now they will disdain you as a man of no account because you have acted no better than a woman. Be off you coward and thing for show alone! You will not scale our walls thanks to any flinching on my part—neither will you carry off our wives into your ships. The reason? I will kill you with my own hands!”

So he spoke, and the son of Tydeus debated in his mind whether he should turn his horses around again and fight him. Three times he anxiously thought about this in his mind and spirit, [170] but three times did the counselor Zeus thunder from the heights of Ida, providing a sign to the Trojans that he would give them strength and victory.

Hector then shouted out to them and said, “Trojans, Lycians, and Dardanians, lovers of close fighting, be men my friends, and remember the strength and valor by which you rush into the fight. I know that the son of Cronus has nodded his assent and given me victory and great glory, but for the Danaans, he’s given suffering and woe.”

177-272 Hector goes on to predict that the Achaean’s newly constructed walls won’t withstand a Trojan onslaught, and that they’ll be set on fire. Declaring this, he boasts that he might slay Nestor and Diomedes and cause the invading enemy to flee in their ships. With this, Hector and the Trojans rush into the trench before the wall protecting the ships.

Hearing Hector’s boast, Hera suggests that she, Poseidon, and the other divine Achaean allies go down and help their side. Poseidon balks at this, not wanting to fight with Zeus since his brother is better and stronger than all the other gods.

Regardless, Hera rouses Agamemnon to do something. Making his way around the ships and shelters, the Achaean leader calls them to arms by shaming them. What has happened to all your boasting now? he asks—your boast to individually take on two hundred men, when now they can’t even drive Hector back. Finally, Agamemnon begs Zeus to at least allow them to escape. Pitying them, Zeus nods his assent and sends an omen to confirm his will—one that consists of an eagle clutching a fawn that drops nearby his altar.

Observing the divine sign, the Achaeans rush into the trench—with Diomedes out front, followed by Agamemnon, Menelaus, the two Ajaxes, Idomeneus and Meriones, and Eurypylus. Teucer comes out ninth, firing arrow after arrow from behind Telamonian Ajax’s towering shield. Homer gives him a glory report.

273-279 What Trojan man did blameless Teucer slay first? Orsilochus was first, then Ormenus, Opheltes, Daetor, and Chromius. Next, he killed godlike Lycophontes and Amopaon, Polyaemon’s son, and Melanippus. All these in turn, one after another, Teucer dropped to the ground, the much-nourishing earth. And the lord of men Agamemnon rejoiced when he saw him breaking up the Trojan battle lines with his mighty bow.

280-529 Agamemnon praises Teucer, speaking of the glory that will come to his father Telamon, and promises him a gift of honor when they take Troy. Teucer responds by telling him that he requires no urging on, that he has already dropped eight Trojans. He fires yet another at Hector but misses him, killing instead Gorgythion, another of Priam’s sons. He does this again and again. In response, Hector eagerly leaps down from his chariot, grabs a stone, and just as Teucer is pulling back the string to release another arrow at him, he throws the rugged stone and hits Teucer on the collar bone, causing him to fall to the ground. Hector rushes to kill him, but Teucer’s brother, Telamonian Ajax, protects him from further harm, and the Achaeans carry him off to the ships.

Zeus urges on the Trojans. They beat the Achaeans back into the trench, with Hector in the lead “exulting in his might.” Hera takes notice and speaks with Athena. Shall we not help the Achaeans who are perishing thanks to Hector? she asks. Athena wants to help but says her father is frustrating her desires—this even though she helped Heracles in his many labors at the command of Zeus. Nevertheless, she arms to go help as Hera readies her horses and chariot. They drive through the gates of Olympus.

As they speed away, Zeus sees their flight from his perch atop Mount Ida. He’s angry. He tells Iris to turn them back so that he doesn’t have to thrash them, particu-

larly his daughter, Athena. He will cripple the horses, toss them to the ground, and destroy the chariot! he threatens. Their wounds won't heal for ten years! This for Athena. For Hera, Zeus declares that he's not so upset with her since she is always thwarting his will.

Iris flies to Olympus, stops the two goddesses, and delivers Zeus' message. Hearing this, Hera says they should end their mission and let Zeus do as he pleases.

Zeus travels to Olympus and joins the other gods in assembly. Hera and Athena sit off by themselves sulking. He taunts them. They can't do a thing, he says, against his great strength. "Such is the might of my hands that all the gods in Olympus cannot turn me." If they tried, he would strike them with his thunderbolt.

Athena says nothing in return, but Hera can no longer restrain herself. She agrees to stay out of the battle but says they will nevertheless advise the Achaeans.

Zeus replies by telling her how many Achaeans will die until Hector kills Patroclus, "as is ordained," and so brings Achilles back into the battle. As for Hera's anger, Zeus declares he's not troubled by it, no matter how angry she becomes.

Hera makes no reply.

The sun sets and Hector calls the Trojans to an assembly away from the trench and the dead. He advises them to light fires and feast, and calls upon the heralds to prepare the city in case there is an ambush. Tomorrow they will battle the Achaeans again.

530-542 "But tomorrow morning toward dawn . . . I'll know whether mighty Diomedes, the son of Tydeus, will push me back from the ships to the wall or whether I'll cut him down with the bronze and carry off his armor all blood-covered and gory. We'll all know what he's made of tomorrow, whether he can withstand the approach of my spear. I think he'll be one of the first men of many of his comrades to fall at the rising of the sun. As for me, I wish that I could be immortal and ageless all my days—just like today— [540] and honored as Athena and Apollo are honored, even as this day will certainly bring harm to the Argives."

That's how Hector spoke to the assembly, and the Trojans clapped and applauded his words.

543-561 *The Trojans shout their acclaim, gather wood, and offer hecatombs to the immortal gods. But the blessed gods reject their sacrifice because they hate Troy. Still, the Trojan fires shine in numbers comparable to the stars of the sky.*

562-565 A thousand fires burned and gleamed upon the plain, and in the glow of each fire there sat fifty men. Nearby, their horses champed upon white barley and rye, waiting by the chariots for Dawn to rise upon her many-colored throne.

So ends Book 8. **See you in Book 9, "The Embassy to Achilles."**



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