

The *Iliad* of Homer

Book 2

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"My father had me learn every word of Homer . . . to see me develop into a good man." —Niceratus of Athens

"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 2

To Battle Men!

The Catalogue of the Best

ZEUS COULDN'T SLEEP. While all the other gods and chariot-fighting men slumbered through the night, sweet sleep didn't take hold of the god. Instead, he anxiously thought about how to honor Achilles and destroy many of the men nearby the Achaean ships.

5-169 Zeus eventually hits upon a plan. He sends a destructive dream to Agamemnon in the likeness of Nestor. The Nestor-dream encourages Agamemnon to call the men together to fight, assuring him of Zeus' compassionate care. Moreover, thanks to Hera's persuasion, the gods are now united on the most significant point, he declares. After nine long years of war, the Achaeans will finally sack Troy. Hearing this, Agamemnon is thrilled. Poor man. He is clueless about the death and destruction that Zeus has in store for him and his army.

When daylight comes, Agamemnon gathers the elders together to tell them about the dream. Afterward, all the lesser men join them in assembly. Surrounded by the chaotic, swarming army, Agamemnon decides to test his men and their willingness to fight. He calls out, *Who wants to*

flee? Who wants to go home? Then he claims that Zeus has shamefully tricked them all—that despite nine years of toilsome combat they will never sack Troy! The men fail the test. Barely waiting to hear him finish, they swivel in the sand and loudly and wildly run off toward their ships where they eagerly prepare to return home.

The problem: an Achaean retreat is not what Fate has ordained. Hera notices the army's flight and orders Athena to do something about it. Obeying the command, the bright-eyed goddess flies down from Olympus and gently speaks to Odysseus, who, says Homer, is like Zeus in counsel.

170-267 So far, Odysseus had not yet touched his black well-benched ship in order to go since he felt distressed in his heart and spirit.

Bright-eyed Athena approached him. Standing near him she said, "God-born son of Laertes, much-able Odysseus—are you too going to jump into your many-benched ship in order to flee to your dear home and the land of your fathers? Are you really going to surrender the glory-boast, Argive Helen, to

Priam and the Trojans? Think about it. Many Achaeans have died here at Troy, far from their own homes. No, you can't just run away. So here's what I command. Make your way through the army of the Achaeans. [180] Speak gently to them, to each man, and restrain them. And don't let them drag their rolling ships down to the sea."

That's what the goddess said. Knowing it was her voice, Odysseus threw off his cloak from around his shoulders and set off running. Behind him his herald Eurybates, who was also from Ithaca, picked up the covering.

Odysseus jogged straight up to Agamemnon and asked him for his scepter—the same imperishable staff he had inherited from his fathers. Agamemnon gave it to him. Then, with the scepter in his right hand, Odysseus went among the ships of the bronze-clad Achaeans. Whenever he met one of the chief leaders, one of those outstanding men, he stood by him and spoke to him gently in order to prevent his departure. [190] "God-possessed man," he said, "it's not fitting for you to be frightened like a coward. Rather, you should remain where you are and order your men to stay as well. Don't you know that Agamemnon was testing us? Soon he'll hammer the sons of the Achaeans. Don't you remember what he said this morning in the first council? But don't let this happen—don't let him and his anger harm the Achaeans! For great is the spirit of a god-nourished ruler. Their honor is from Zeus, and Zeus the counselor loves them."

But when Odysseus came across any common man of the people who was shouting, he struck him with his staff and upbraided him with words, saying, [200] "God-possessed man, sit still and listen to the words of other men who are better and braver than you. You are feeble and without strength—you are unwarlike! Therefore, you don't count either in battle or in counsel. We cannot all be kings here. No, the rule of many is no good. One man must be the ruler; one man must hold the scepter from the son of scheming Cronus and the right to pronounce what is customary so that he may deliberate for all the men."

Like a lord Odysseus managed the army. The

people hurried back to the assembly again from their ships and shelters with a sound that thundered like big waves crashing along [210] the shore when the sea is roaring. Finally, they all took their seats in the assembly and were quiet. But Thersites of measureless speech went on wagging his unbridled tongue. In his mind he knew many disorderly words, all of them inappropriate, with which to strive and quarrel with the chief leaders. He didn't really care about what he said. His only goal was to get the Argives laughing.

The thing about Thersites was that he was truly ugly. In fact, he was the ugliest man that came to Troy. His legs bowed out, and his feet were crippled so that he had to hobble along, and his two shoulders were rounded, causing him to hunch over. But that's not all. His head ran up to a point that grew nothing but stubble. [220] Of all the leading men, Achilles and Odysseus hated him most of all because he always ranted on at them in the attempt to school them.

Now, however, despite the shame the other Achaeans felt at his inappropriate lecturing, Thersites was rebuking godlike Agamemnon. With a shrill voice he shouted at the ruler and schooled him with these words:

"Son of Atreus, what's wrong now? What more do you want? Your shelter is filled with bronze things and plenty of women, for whenever we sack a city, we give you the very first pick. Do you want more gold? Do you want to seize the gold ransom that some [230] horse-taming Trojan man will bring from Ilium in exchange for his son—even though I or another man took him hostage in the first place? Or do you want yet another young woman to mingle with in love? Whatever you want, it's not fitting that the first man—the captain!—lead the sons of the Achaeans into harm.

"O weaklings! Cowards worthy of reproof! Women of the Achaean land—Achaean men no more! Let us sail home in our ships and leave this fellow here at Troy to cherish his honor-prizes all by himself. Then he will discover whether we Achaeans were of any service to him or not. Even though Achilles is a much better man than he is, Agamemnon [240]

has dishonored him, for he has seized and kept his honor-prize. Still, Achilles is not all that angry. Rather, he let the girl go. Otherwise, this would now be your last outrage, son of Atreus!"

That's how Thersites schooled Agamemnon, the shepherd of men. But godlike Odysseus went up to him at once, and full of anger, he rebuked him sternly. "Stop the rapid flow of words from your mouth, Thersites! You shouldn't strive and quarrel with the leading men when you are all alone and have no one to back you. For I declare that among all the men who ventured to Troy with the two sons of Atreus, there is no baser mortal than you. [250] So don't speak about the leading men like this. And don't censure them in the hope that you'll make it home. We don't yet know how things will turn out—whether the sons of the Achaeans will return home well and with success, or not. Regardless, how dare you reproach Agamemnon because the Danaan heroes have awarded him so much! How dare you taunt and harangue him! But I'll tell you this, and I'll make sure it happens: if I catch you again talking like a fool, then I will either give up my head [260] or the fact that I am Telemachus' father, or I will take you, strip you naked of all your clothes, and shamefully whip you out of the assembly until you go blubbering back to the ships."

That's what Odysseus said. And to make sure Thersites heard, he beat him with the scepter upon his back and shoulders until the misshapen man dropped to the ground weeping, and bloody welts rose from his back.

268-336 Thersites sits down to the sound of the other men applauding Odysseus for shutting his mouth. Though distressed at his suffering, they all nevertheless laugh at the weeping man. Odysseus, the sacker of cities, however, isn't finished with them. He turns to the crowd of men and chastises them for wanting to go home. Still, he understands, he says. They've been away for nine years. Any man in his right mind would want to be home with his wife. All the same, it would be shameful to go home with nothing to show for all their labor. He bids them to endure, reminding them of Calchas' prophecy that is bound to come true—

that in the tenth year they would take Troy. The Achaean army cheers in agreement. Then old Nestor stands to speak.

337-381 "Shame on you!" he called out. "You're debating like a bunch of cute little infants—like children who couldn't care less for warlike deeds!

"Where now are all the promises we made and the oaths? [340] Should we toss into the fire all our plans and drink-offerings of unmixed wine and all those handshakes we shook to prove our trustworthiness? Wherever they are, let me tell you that we're wasting our time with all these words. Talking will get us nowhere. Stand, therefore, son of Atreus, and lead the Argives into battle.

"As for those few who secretly plot to go home even before we know whether Zeus has spoken falsely or not, let them rot in Hades! [350] For when we Argives set sail for Troy, the mighty son of Cronus promised that we would bring death and destruction to the Trojans. And to back his promise, he showed us favorable signs by flashing lightning on our right. Therefore, may none of us speed home until each man has first taken and slept with the wife of some Trojan man in order to pay the Trojans back for all the pain and suffering we've had to endure to get Helen back. Still, if any man is in such a hurry to go home again, let him just touch his hand to his black well-benched ship, and very soon he'll find his home in his destined death, long before all the others."

[360] Turning to the ruler Agamemnon, Nestor said, "You should be mindful and listen to what I say. Do not disregard the word I speak to you. Separate the men according to their tribes and clans so that all the brothers and cousins may aid their clan, and the clansmen may help the tribe. If you do this, and if the Achaeans obey you, you'll find out who the cowards and the brave men are from among the leaders and all the ordinary men. Consequently, you will learn whether it is the will of the gods that causes you to fail to take the city or the cowardice of your men and their thoughtlessness and ignorance of warfare."

Answering him, lord Agamemnon said, [370] "Nestor, you have once again outdone the sons of the

Achaean in counsel. Hear me father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo—if only there were ten such counselors among the Achaeans! If there were, then lord Priam’s city would quickly fall into our hands, as we would conquer and sack it. But instead, aegis-bearing Zeus, the son of Cronus, gives me over to suffering and pain, introducing me to useless strife and quarrels. For Achilles and I are fighting about this girl with heated words. And I admit it, I was the first to be angry. Even so, if we can join together in counsel and be united, [380] then the Trojans won’t be able to delay their evil demise for even the smallest amount of time. Now, therefore, go and get your morning meal so that we may join together with the Trojans in the war god Ares’ work!”

382-441 *The men shout their agreement and leave to prepare. Agamemnon and the other chief men—Nestor, Idomeneus, the two Ajaxes, Diomedes, Odysseus, and Menelaus—sacrifice a bull to Zeus for success, that Hector and the many Trojans may bite the dust. They feast and are all satisfied, setting aside the desire for food and drink. Nestor bids Agamemnon to call the army to battle. He does.*

442-454 At once, Agamemnon sent clear-voiced heralds to call the long-haired Achaeans to battle. So they called them, and the army gathered together. Those allied with Agamemnon, the chief leaders raised by Zeus, rushed around separating the men, and bright-eyed Athena, who holds the much-honored and ageless aegis . . . , [450] dashed everywhere, darting furiously among the men of the Achaeans, urging them forward to fight and putting courage into the heart of each man so that he might wage war and battle without ceasing. As a result, war became sweeter to them than returning home in their hollow ships.

455-483 *From their shelters and ships, the men march out onto the plain surrounding the river Scamander. They advance like a swarming flock of birds and gather as flies do around a pail of milk. And with the morning sun shining upon their bronze armor, shields, and spears, they appear like a blazing fire pouring across the grass of the plain. As*

for the leaders, they direct the army as a goatherd does a herd of goats. And among them all, Agamemnon stands out like a bull does among all the cows. Finally, the poet asks the Muses for a glory report, one revealing who all the Achaean leaders are, and who is the best.

484-493 You Muses who live upon the ridges of Olympus, now tell me something great. I ask you because you are goddesses, who witness all things as they happen, whereas we humans hear and know nothing but the rumor and report of things. So I ask you, who were the leaders and rulers of the Danaans? As for the many, the men of the army, I could not name each one of them even if I had ten mouths, [490] and my voice never failed, and my heart were made of bronze. I could only do it if the Muses of Olympus, the daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus, put them into my mind, all those men who came to Ilium. Nevertheless, I will proclaim the names of the leading men of the ships, along with the number of their ships.

494-759 *Beginning with the Boeotians in central Greece and finishing with the Magnesians of Thessaly and covering all of Greece of the allied Achaean army, from south to north, east to west, and all the islands in the sea, Homer recounts the catalogue of ships. It is the greatest glory report of the Iliad. Through him, the Muses declare who came from which land or island, who came with whom, the number of ships, and what their land was like—what flocks it held, what cities and citadels, and what estates there were with fields of grain, vines, and orchards. Homer ends by asking the Muses to reveal the best of the Achaeans.*

760-779 So these were the leaders and rulers of the Danaans. But tell me, Muse, who was the best among them, whether man or horse, among those that followed the sons of Atreus?

Of the horses, those of the son of Pheres were by far the best. They were as fast as birds, the same age and color, and perfectly matched in height. Apollo of the silver bow had bred them in Pereira—both of them mares and dreadful as Ares in battle.

Of men, Telamonian Ajax was the best as long as Achilles persisted in his wrath and anger—for

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Achilles was much better and braver than Ajax, [770] and his horses were better too. As it was, however, Achilles had withdrawn from among the leaders and fighting men. Thanks to his anger aimed at the shepherd of men Agamemnon, he was hiding out among his curved seagoing ships. And his men passed their time upon the seashore throwing discs and spears, and in archery. Their horses, meanwhile, stood nearby grazing upon lotus-clover and wild celery. As for the chariots, they were well-covered in each man's shelter. But the charioteers and other men, even though they longed for their leader, who was dear to Ares, wandered throughout the army without going out to fight.

780-810 *From their assembly held by Priam's great door, the Trojans witness the Achaeans marching out to fight. The latter men sweep the plain below like a wildfire caused by Zeus' thunder and lightning. In the voice of his son Polites, the messenger goddess Iris reveals the vast size of the Achaean army to lord Priam, chastising the king for talking rather than acting. Then she turns and orders Hector to lead the Trojans and their allies out against the invading host. The Trojan allies are from many lands and speak many languages. Obeying her, he does. And so the Trojan army loudly marches out to battle, the footmen together with the chariot fighters.*

811-818 Now there is a high mound before the city . . . called by men Thorn-hill, whereas the gods know it as Myrine's mound, that of the bounding Amazon. It was here that the Trojans and their allies split into the various divisions of men along with their leaders. As for the Trojans themselves, Priam's son, great Hector of the gleaming helmet, led them out. Following him were a great number of men. Among them were the very best of those armed men who longed to fight with a spear.

819-875 *Homer finishes the Trojan glory report by revealing the other Trojan and allied divisions, along with the most significant leaders. Aeneas, for example, the son of Anchises and Aphrodite, leads the Dardanians. To cite a few more of the many named by Homer, there are the archer Pandarus, Adrastus and Amphius (the sons of Merops, who was the best at the art of divination), Asius, Hippothous, Acamas, and Nastes. The latter man is the leader of the Carians "of barbarian speech." He marches into the fight armed like a maiden girl with gold—gold that fails to protect the fool, Homer reveals. And lastly, the men of Lycia march out.*

876-877 There were Sarpedon and the blameless man Glaucus. They were the leaders of the Lycians, up from the land of distant Lycia, by the whirling Xanthus.

So ends Book 2. **See you in Book 3, "The Battle for Helen – Paris, Menelaus & the Chief Achaeans."**



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