

The *Odyssey* of Homer

Book 8

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Book 8

Feasting with the Phaeacians

Reading 8

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This reading comes from the Cave's

The Best of Homer's Odyssey.

WHEN THE EARLY-BORN rosy-fingered Dawn appeared, strong and mighty Alcinous stirred from his bed as did god-born Odysseus, the sacker of cities. And now strong and mighty Alcinous led the way to the Phaeacian assembly place, which had been built for them nearby their ships. When the two arrived, they sat down on polished stones that were fitted together side by side. Meanwhile, Pallas Athena went throughout the city in the likeness of Alcinous' wise herald, planning a return home for great-hearted Odysseus.

10-61 *Athena calls the Phaeacian men to meet at the assembly place to see a man who is like the immortals. She*

makes Odysseus bigger so that he might receive a better welcome, the wonder and respect of the Phaeacians.

Once they come together, Alcinous commands the younger men to prepare a black ship for Odysseus' conveyance home and fifty-two of the best young men to row. Turning to the sceptered kings, he calls on them to join him at his house for a feast. The young men will join them once the ship is ready. Lastly, he summons the bard Demodocus to delight them with song.

62-64 And the herald came near to those feasting, leading the trusty bard. Among men, the Muse loved him and gave him both good and bad fortune.

65-71 *The good is the gift of song; the bad is blindness. Nevertheless, the bard Demodocus is honored with a fine chair, cups of wine, and a lyre. And everyone eats and drinks.*

72-103 When they had set aside the desire for drink and food, the Muse urged the bard to sing about the glorious deeds of men, a song whose fame was then as wide as the sky. He sang about Odysseus' quarrel with Achilles, the son of Peleus, how they once quarreled with violent speech at the gods' abundant feast. . . . [80] . . . This is the song the famous bard sang.

Meanwhile, Odysseus took hold of his great purple cloak in his strong hands and drew it around his head, concealing his beautiful face. He did this because he felt shame before the Phaeacians as tears poured from his eyes. But when the godlike bard paused in the song, Odysseus wiped away his tears and drew down the cloak from his head. And taking up his two-handled cup, he poured out libations to the gods. [90] But just as he finished, the bard would begin again, urged on to sing by the best men of the Phaeacians since they enjoyed the epic story. And again, Odysseus would cover his head and weep. In this way he hid the pouring tears from all the rest.

Alcinous was the only one that noticed what was going on, for he sat near to Odysseus and heard his deep-drawn sighs. And to the Phaeacians, who delight in oars, he said at once, "Listen to me, Phaeacian chief men and rulers! We've just satisfied our desire for the generous feast and for the lyre, which always accompanies an abundant feast. [100] Now let's go and attempt all kinds of contests, so that when the stranger returns home he may tell his friends how greatly we surpass all other men in boxing, wrestling, jumping, and racing on our feet."

104-157 *The Phaeacian men agree and follow Alcinous to the assembly place. There, all the younger men join in the games. Many step forward, including Euryalus, the equal of Ares. He was the best of the Phaeacians after Laodamas. The three sons of Alcinous also rise to compete, including Laodamas, Halius, and Clytoneus.*

The first competition is the foot race. Clytoneus wins by far. Next, Euryalus triumphs in wrestling, Elatreus

with the discus, and Laodamas with his fists in boxing. Then, after sizing the stranger up and judging him to be no weak man—rather, big and strong—Laodamas challenges him to make a trial of himself in one of the contests. For, he says, "there is no greater glory than that which a man has from the accomplishments of his own hands and feet." He urges him on, suggesting that activity will disperse the cares of his spirit. Odysseus responds by declaring that the only thing on his mind is sorrow and his return home. Hearing this, Euryalus decides to tease him.

158-193 "No, indeed, stranger you do not look like one who is very experienced [160] with contests—the many kinds that exist among men. Rather, you look like a man occupied with many-benched ships, the leader of sailing men, who are traders, ever mindful of your cargo, keeping watch over your freights and grasping for gain. No, you don't seem like an athlete."

But with an angry glance from beneath his brows, Odysseus of many counsels said to Euryalus, "Stranger, your words are rude. You seem like a reckless man. It's true that the gods do not give to every man every grace—whether stature, wisdom, or eloquence. For one man is inferior in his looks, [170] but god crowns his words with beauty. Men therefore look on him with delight as he speaks without faltering, respectfully, and with gentle words. That man stands out wherever men are gathered, and as he walks through the city, everyone looks upon him as if he were some god. Then there's the other man—he looks like the immortals, but his speech has no crown of grace. That's what you're like. In appearance you're a standout—the gods couldn't have made another better than you. But your mind is empty! Just now you stirred the spirit within me with your disorderly words without manners. I am not unskilled in games, as you declare. [180] No, I imagine I was among the best, while I could rely on my youth and my arms and hands. Now I am overwhelmed with misery and distress, for I have endured much, cutting through the wars of men and the distressful waves of the sea. Even so, even suffering as much bad fortune as I have suffered, I will attempt the games since your words stung my spirit, stirring me up."

He spoke, and with his cloak still on, he jumped up and took hold of a discus larger than the rest. It was thick, quite a bit heavier than those which the Phaeacians were using for themselves. Whirling around he hurled the discus from his strong hand. [190] The stone flew humming through the air—and down on the ground the Phaeacian long oarsmen, those men famous for their ships, crouched under the rush of the stone. It soared over all the other markers of distance, flying swiftly from his hand.

194-305 *Appearing as a man, Athena marks the discus' landing spot and declares its distance to be far beyond all the other stones. Her judgment makes Odysseus glad. He then challenges all the young men to any contest—to boxing, wrestling, or running. He's very angry, he says. Still, he will not challenge his guest-friend Laodamas. A man would have to be senseless to challenge his own host! He would have to be a worthless nobody! He goes on to boast his own superiority in most games but for archery. He further claims that he can throw a spear farther than a man can shoot an arrow. He only fears being outdone in a foot-race thanks to all the suffering he's endured while at sea.*

Now everyone is silent. Alcinous alone speaks up. He first recognizes Euryalus' offense and Odysseus' anger. Then he admits that the Phaeacians are not the best at fighting with their fists or wrestling. They're better at foot racing and the best men on the sea. Moreover, they enjoy feasting, playing the lyre, taking hot baths, and putting on fresh clothes. Even more, they like to dance and will demonstrate for Odysseus how skilled they are at the ball dance. That way, when the stranger returns home, he says, he can report how great they are at sailing, foot racing, singing, and dancing.

After preparing the ground, the youngest boys begin to dance, and Odysseus is truly amazed to see them move to the accompaniment of the lyre and Demodocus' singing. The bard strums the lyre and sings about the love affair between Ares and Aphrodite. He reveals how they slept together secretly, dishonoring Hephaestus' own marriage bed, since Aphrodite was his wife. Discovering the affair thanks to Helios, the divine Sun who sees all, Hephaestus set a trap for them. Then he went off to Lemnos to visit the Sintians. When Ares saw the smith god leaving for the sacred island,

he sped over to Hephaestus' house. But when he was sleeping with Aphrodite in love, the trap was sprung, and they were caught naked, bound to the bed. Helios told Hephaestus. In turn Hephaestus spread the news to all the other gods and urged them to come witness what had happened.

306-332 *"Father Zeus and all you other blessed gods who live forever, come here so that you might see a laughable deed—though not one that should be endured! This Aphrodite, this daughter of Zeus, forever dishonors me because of my disabled feet and legs, while she loves destructive Ares [310] since he is handsome and has quick feet. I was born disabled—and no other gods are to blame for it than my two parents! It would have been better not to have been born at all!*

"But come and you will see where these two have climbed into my bed and are sleeping together in love. As for me, I'm angry at the sight and filled with grief! And yet there's reason to hope that they'll not cling to each other for very long, no matter what they're doing in love. No, very soon they'll not want to sleep together. Still, my trap and the chains will hold them until her father pays me back the many wedding gifts I gave to get that dog-eyed, shameless girl—[320] he has to because, even though his daughter is beautiful, she lacks all self-control of her passions."

That's what Hephaestus said, and the gods gathered together at his bronze-supported house. Earth-carrying Poseidon came, as did the bringer of luck Hermes, and lord Apollo who works from afar. As for the female goddesses, each one remained at home out of a sense of shame. But the gods, the givers of good things, stood in the doorway. And an unstoppable laughter rose up from among the blessed gods as they beheld the artful skill of inventive Hephaestus. And glancing at the other one would say, "Bad deeds do not thrive. The slow overtakes the swift—[330] just as now Hephaestus, slow as he is, has seized Ares, even though he is the swiftest of the gods who hold Olympus. Lame, he has seized him by craft. Ares must pay the fine for adultery."

333-386 *Still, Apollo turns to Hermes and asks him if he would be willing to be trapped like Ares if only he could*

sleep with Aphrodite. Hermes' declares he would. They all laugh at this—all but for Poseidon, who promises to pay the penalty if Hephaestus sets Ares free. Hesitating, Hephaestus agrees. After their release, Ares flies off to Thrace, and Aphrodite goes to her altar in Cyprus where the Graces bathe and anoint her.

Odysseus delights in the song and story as do all the Phaeacians. By now the younger boys have finished dancing, so the sons of Alcinous Halios and Laodamas expertly perform the ball dance. As they step this way and that to the drumming of other young men, they throw a "beautiful purple ball" high into the air and back and forth to each other. Odysseus turns to Alcinous and expresses his utter amazement, agreeing that, yes, the Phaeacians are the best dancers. In response, Alcinous speaks to his men.

387-389 "Listen to me, you chief men and rulers of the Phaeacians. This stranger seems wise—to really know what he thinks and what he's talking about. But come. Let's give him a guest-gift, the kind that's fitting for a host to give."

390-399 Alcinous directs the others to bring clothing and gold for Odysseus, and, to rectify what had earlier occurred, he orders Euryalus to make up for his rude words.

400-416 And Euryalus answered the king and said, "Mighty Alcinous, most renowned among all people, I will indeed make amends to the stranger, as you command. I will give him this sword made of bronze. Its hilt is silver, and the scabbard that holds it is made of fresh-cut ivory. He will find it to be a possession of great worth."

Saying this, Euryalus put the silver-studded sword into Odysseus' hands. And speaking with winged words he said, "Be glad, father stranger! If any word I uttered was harsh, then may some stormy wind snatch it up and bear it away. [410] May the gods grant that you may see your wife and reach your homeland—since you've been suffering pain far from your loved ones for a long time."

Then Odysseus of many counsels answered him and said, "You too, my friend, rejoice! May the gods give you happiness and fortune for making amends

with your words, and may you never miss the sword you give me."

He spoke, and around his shoulders he slung the silver-studded sword.

417-486 As the sun sets and the Phaeacians return to the palace, the heralds bring the gifts, and Alcinous and Arete generously add a chest full of gifts to the collection. Alcinous gives him a gold cup. Arete advises Odysseus to guard well over the gifts.

After he seals the chest, Odysseus goes off to bathe in a tub of water that has been warmed over the fire. The handmaidens anoint him with olive oil and dress him. Then, when he's returning to the great hall, Nausicaa sees him and calls on him to remember her when he returns home. He owes her his life, she says. He promises to do so. If he makes it home, he will pray to her as though a god since she kept him alive.

Odysseus enters the hall and reclines next to Alcinous. The servants are "distributing the portions and mixing the wine." A herald walks the bard Demodocus, honored by the people, into the hall. Odysseus adds to his honor by directing the herald to give him a piece of fatty wild boar. They eat and everyone sets aside the desire for drink and food. Then Odysseus turns to Demodocus and praises him.

487-516 "Demodocus, I praise you beyond all mortal men, whether your teacher was the Muse, who is the child of Zeus, or Apollo. With perfect truth you sing the fate of the Achaeans—[490] all they did and all they suffered, the whole of the miserable Achaean struggle. And you do so as if you yourself were there or you heard the story from a man who was. Move on now and sing the building of the wooden horse, made by Epeius with Athena's help, which godlike Odysseus once led into the upper city—a thing meant to deceive, packed with warriors. They used it to sack Ilium. And if you now tell the story as it was fated by the gods, then I will declare to all men how favorably a god has been toward you by inspiring you with song."

That's what Odysseus said. And stirred by the god, the bard showed his skill in song, [500] beginning the story where some Argives, after setting their

shelters on fire, were embarking on the well-benched ships and setting sail, while the others, led by glorious Odysseus, were hidden in the horse in the middle of the Trojan assembly place—since the Trojans themselves had dragged the horse to their citadel.

So there it stood. And seated around it, the people argued for a long time, uncertain what to do. There were three plans that pleased them. They could split the hollow wooden horse down the middle with an axe made of ruthless bronze. Or they could drag it to the city heights and hurl it down upon the rocks. Or last, they could spare the monstrosity and use it to propitiate the gods. [510] So that's what they did, the last, as that's how it was destined to end according to the decree of Fate. They would all be utterly destroyed when the great wooden horse was stationed inside the city. And within its hollow chamber were all the best of the Argives waiting to deliver murder and death to the Trojans.

Demodocus sang about how the sons of the Achaeans left the hollow place of their ambush, poured out from the horse, and sacked the city. And, he sang, each man plundered the city.

517-571 *The bard lastly sings about Odysseus' great and victorious fight with Deiphobus. When Odysseus hears this, he breaks down drenching his cheeks with tears. He weeps like a woman who has just witnessed the slaying of her own husband before the city walls. And though he tries to hide his sorrow from the Phaeacians, Alcinous notices it. He consequently orders Demodocus to stop playing and singing since, he reveals, the stranger does not delight in it but is full of misery and sorrow. The whole purpose of the feast, he explains, is to demonstrate affection for the stranger since strangers and suppliants are equal to brothers.*

Turning to Odysseus, then, he calls on him to fully and

without guile reveal his name—since no one, he explains, is born nameless, whether a base and cowardly man or a noble and brave man. He further bids him to tell of his mother, father, and the rest of his kinfolk, and where he's from—his land, people, and city. They need to know what land he comes from in order to better convey him home.

The last point leads Alcinous to describe the magical Phaeacian ships that have neither steersmen nor rudders to guide them. Rather, the ships know the cities of men and follow the thoughts of those onboard through mist and cloud without fear of destruction. That said, Alcinous relates how his father Nausithous once told him a story about how Poseidon would one day wipe out a Phaeacian convoy and pile a mound around the city. Well, he finishes, the god may or may not accomplish this end as is pleasing to him.

572-586 “But come—tell me exactly: where have you wandered? To what lands of men have you come? Tell me about the cities you saw, the dwellings of men, and the people there. Were they hard to deal with, wild men living in the fields without justice and lacking the observance of custom? Tell me also about the ones who were hospitable and love strangers, the ones who are god-fearing in the thoughts of their minds. And tell me why you weep and lament when you hear the fated doom of the Argives and Danaans, or when you hear about Ilium—for the gods caused all this to happen, spinning out destruction [580] for men so that there would be a song for those men who do not yet exist. Did some kinsman by marriage fall before the walls of Ilium, some good man such as your daughter's husband or your wife's father? These are the ones we care for after our birth families, the ones who share our blood. Or was it possibly some comrade in arms who pleased you, a noble man? Such a wise friend is worth just as much as a brother.”

So ends Book 8. **See you in Book 9, “Disaster on the Way Home.”**



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