

The *Iliad* of Homer

Book 9

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Book 9

The Embassy to Achilles

Odysseus, Phoenix & Telamonian Ajax

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

SO THAT'S HOW the Trojans handled their own night watch. As for the Achaeans, all the best men were stricken with a sorrow past endurance when an unutterable panic, the comrade of ice-cold fear, took hold of them.

4-95 Agamemnon, stricken by a great worming pain and distress, calls each man to an assembly. Weeping, he explains how Zeus has tricked him, how they will not sack Troy, and so, he finishes, they might as well sail home. They can do nothing about it because Zeus is all powerful and can destroy cities or not as he desires.

Everyone is silent. Finally, Diomedes speaks up, re-

bukes Agamemnon for his lack of boldness, and tells him that even if he and his ships depart, he will not. He will stay with his comrade Sthenelus until Ilium falls!

Hearing his speech, the Achaeans shout their acclaim. Nestor then advises them to prepare their evening meal and take counsel after the feast. While all the men prepare their own meals, the leaders meet in Agamemnon's shelter. Once they're finished eating and satisfied, Nestor stands to speak.

96-121 "Glorious son of Atreus, ruler of men, Agamemnon, with you I will begin my speech and end it, for you are the ruler of many people, and Zeus has

given you the scepter and the ability to deliberate for others and to determine what is right. [100] Therefore, it is fitting for you above all others to speak and to listen and to carry out the counsel of another who intends to speak wisely. So, I will speak in a way that appears best to me because no other man will come up with anything better. I will say what I think now and what I long ago had in mind when you angered Achilles by taking the girl Briseis from his shelter in a way contrary to what I believed best. I attempted to dissuade you, but you surrendered to your own heroic, supersized heart, [110] instead of giving way to the best of men. You took vengeance on a man honored by the immortals—for you seized and carried off his honor-prize. Now, however, let us consider how we may appease him, both with presents and gentle and soothing words.”

So Agamemnon, the lord of men, answered him, “Old man, you have not falsely recounted my reckless blindness. I behaved foolishly and will do nothing to deny it. Now I see that Achilles, whom Zeus loves in his heart, is equal to many men—I see this because Zeus now pays honor to him while destroying the Achaean army. But since I behaved foolishly and blindly by obeying my wretched heart, [120] I am now willing to make amends by giving back the girl and offering a vast amount of compensation. But let me first name all the glorious gifts.”

122-161 *In a glory report-like revelation that demonstrates his own wealth, Agamemnon goes on to name and number everything that he will give Achilles: tripods, gold, cauldrons, horses, women—and Briseis, about whom he will swear he never slept with her. Furthermore, Achilles will obtain prized plunder when they sack Troy—women, gold, and bronze. And when they return home, he'll be Agamemnon's son by marriage, honored like Orestes. He will receive one of his three daughters—either Chrysothemis, Laodice, or Iphianassa—without the bride price. Moreover, he'll get seven cities with farmland, vineyards, and flocks. Achilles only has to yield, he says. He shouldn't be unyielding, like Hades, who is hated by mortals. Rather, declares Agamemnon, he must give up his anger and submit since Agamemnon is the greater ruler and his elder.*

162-172 The horseman Nestor of Gerenia answered him, saying, “Most glorious son of Atreus, the lord of men Agamemnon. The gifts you offer are no small ones. But come, let us quickly send chosen messengers to Achilles' shelter. I'll name the men and they'll go. Let Phoenix, dear to Zeus, lead the way, and let Ajax and godlike Odysseus follow. [170] And for heralds, let Odysseus and Eurybates follow them. Now bring water for our hands and call on the men to avoid all irreverent speech so that we might pray to Zeus, the son of Cronus, for his pity and mercy.”

173-306 *The Achaeans pray they might be successful in persuading Achilles, pour out a libation, and leave. When the three men come to the ships of the Myrmidons and Achilles' shelter, they find him playing the lyre and singing about “the glories of men,” with Patroclus sitting nearby.*

After Achilles offers them food and wine, and Patroclus makes sacrifice, Odysseus speaks to Achilles. He explains the plight of the Achaeans—Hector's battle rage among the Achaean army, how the Trojans are pressing against their ships, the thousand campfires, and Hector's prayer to burn the ships when Dawn appears. Odysseus' greatest fear is that he will succeed. He explains how Achilles' father, Pelus, had charged his son with the task of restraining his own great heart by means of friendliness and kindness, and refraining from strife, the contriver of evil, so the Argives would honor him all the more. So, says Odysseus, you must give up your anger. If you do, Agamemnon will give you many gifts. Odysseus lists them just as Agamemnon did. He promises much now and much later after they sack Troy and return home. You will be honored as though a god, he assures him. Odysseus further tells Achilles that if he must hate Agamemnon, then he should at least have pity on all the other Achaeans. If you do, he promises, they will pledge themselves to you as if you were a god and raise you up in great glory. Odysseus finishes by suggesting that Achilles might be the man to slay Hector.

307-345 In answer to him, swift-footed Achilles said, “God-born son of Laertes, much-able Odysseus, I must speak bluntly, [310] exactly as I am minded to and as it will happen, so that you will not remain here and go on and on about this, that, and the other. For

the man who says one thing while he hides another in his heart is hated by me like I hate the gates of Hades. Therefore, I for my part will speak in a way that appears best to me.

“Agamemnon will not persuade me, nor will the other Danaans, since he will never give the kind of gratitude or homage equal to always warring and battling against the other men without pause. The plunder portion is the same for the man who hangs back or the one who fights the most. Agamemnon honors both the coward and the brave man. [320] And the lazy man and the man who works, they must both die. Plus, there’s no advantage for me—since I suffer pains in my spirit—to always throw myself into the fighting. As a bird takes a morsel of food to her nestlings when she has found one, giving the whole bit to them while she herself fares badly, even so many a long night have I remained awake, and many a bloody battle have I waged by day against those who were fighting for their women. With my ships I have taken twelve cities, and with my men by land I have stormed eleven nearby Troy. [330] From these I seized much treasure and many noble things, and I would carry them off and give them to Agamemnon, the son of Atreus. As for him, he would stay back by his swift ships. But when he divided everything, I would receive very little, while he carried off a lot. Otherwise, he gave some of the gifts to the noblest men and the chief leaders—and they still have theirs. But from me alone among the Achaeans, he has seized and holds the delightful partner of my bed. So, let him sleep with her and be pleased by her.

“But why must the Argives fight the Trojans? And why has the son of Atreus gathered and led the men here? Was it not for the sake of lovely-haired Helen? [340] Are the sons of Atreus the only ones of men endowed with speech who love their wives, their bed partners? No! The noble and sensible man loves and cares for his own wife in the same way that I loved Briseis from my spirit, even though she was won by my spear. Now, since he has seized my honor-prize from my hands and has deceived and cheated me, let him not test me—for I know him well. He will not persuade me.”

346-400 *Achilles goes on to explain that when he used to fight, Hector rarely left the safety of Troy’s wall. Only once did the Trojan hero fight Achilles—and he barely made it away with his life. Achilles informs Odysseus that he plans to sail away in the morning, taking everything he has won by lot with him—except for Briseis, of course, his honor-prize. No matter what he does, though, the Achaeans should be angry with shameless Agamemnon. Achilles declares he will never take any gifts from the son of Atreus—not even if the gifts outnumber all the wealth in the fabulously wealthy cities of Orchomenus in Boeotia or Thebes in Egypt. Not even if they are as many as there are grains of sand. Moreover, he explains, his own father Peleus will give him a fair wife. Then, there is the value of his own life.*

401-415 “My life is worth more to me than all the wealth of Ilium, the riches it had before the Achaeans attacked it, when there was yet peace. It is worth more than all the treasure that lies on the stone floor of Apollo’s temple beneath the cliffs of Pytho. Cattle and fat sheep may be carried off as booty, and tripods and yellow-headed horses may be acquired, but when a man’s life has once left him, it cannot be brought back again or won by force.

[410] “My goddess mother, the silver-footed Thetis, tells me that there are two possible fates carrying me toward the fulfillment of death. If I stay here and fight nearby the city of the Trojans, then I give up my return home, but my glory will never die. But if I return home to the land I love, then I give up my noble glory, yet my life will be very long.”

416-437 *Achilles advises the rest of the Achaeans to likewise sail home since Zeus is clearly protecting Troy. Or they should consider another way to defend the ships and the army since he will not help them. He lastly requests that Phoenix stay behind with him in his shelter, so he may sail back home with him in the morning. Distressed, and fearful for the ships, Phoenix tearfully speaks.*

438-443 “The old horseman Peleus sent me with you on the day he sent you out from Phthia to Agamemnon. [440] You were then a silly child and knew nothing yet of distressing war nor of assemblies in which

men stand out from others. For this reason, he sent me with you to instruct you in all these matters, to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.”

444-599 Phoenix tells the story of how he came to Phthia from Hellas thanks to the fact that he had angered his own father by sleeping with his father's concubine at the bidding of his mother. Rather than slaying his father, who had cursed him, he fled Hellas and made his way to Phthia and to king Peleus, who received and loved him as a son, granting him land, people, and riches. Peleus charged Phoenix with rearing Achilles, and so he did. He gave him his meat in small bites and his wine, and he endured the young lad's spit up all over his tunic. His hope was that Achilles would care for him in old age.

So, he says, Achilles must give up his wrath—for even the gods, who are far greater in might and honor, change their minds when men pray and offer libations. Beware, he warns him, of blindness. Agamemnon has offered many fine gifts in recompense for his error. And now he has sent the best of the Achaeans to rectify matters. And men of old, when terribly angry, would give up their wrath if necessary and appropriate. He recounts the tale of Meleager and how he would not exchange his own anger for gifts—or give it up at all—until his fearful and weeping wife, Cleopatra, explained what happens to a city when it is sacked and taken: all the men are put to the sword, she said, the city is burned, and the children and women are taken into captivity. Fearing this (his city was being attacked), Meleager armed and fought off the enemy. Nevertheless, since he had previously scorned the gifts, he didn't receive them, even though he finally gave up his anger.

600-619 “As for you, Achilles, I hope you will think differently and that some god doesn't similarly direct you, dear man. It will be much harder to ward off fire from the ships once it is already kindled. But go and receive the gifts, for the Achaeans will honor you equally with the gods, whereas if you fight without taking the gifts, you may do well in battle, but you will not have a similar honor.”

And in answer, swift-footed Achilles spoke to him, “Phoenix, old father, nurtured by Zeus, I do not need this man Agamemnon's honor. For I think that

I have been honored by the decree of Zeus, which will remain with me at my ships as long as I have breath [610] in my chest and spring in my knees.

“And another thing I will tell you—and let it sink into your mind. Don't try to confound me by grieving and going on, doing a favor to the hero, the son of Atreus. You must not love that man, or you will incur my hatred—I who love you. It is a fine thing if you help me trouble those that trouble me. In doing so you may rule equally with me and share half my honor.

“So let the other messengers take my answer to Agamemnon. As for you, stay here in my shelter and sleep comfortably in your bed. Then in the morning we can consider whether we should remain here or go home.”

620-642 Achilles silently nods to Patroclus, who agrees to prepare a bed for Phoenix. Next, Telamonian Ajax speaks briefly. His advice is to return quickly to Agamemnon. He can tell Achilles will not change his mind. No, even though other great men relent and take compensation when a man seriously offends him, Achilles will not. He finishes by rebuking Achilles for his hardened heart, and he asks him once more to soften his heart and take the gifts.

643-648 In answer to him, swift-footed Achilles said, “Ajax, god-born son of Telamon, ruler of men, you have spoken everything according to my own desire, but anger causes my heart to swell when I remember how that man, the son of Atreus, has outraged me in front of the Argives as if I were some wanderer—some dishonored homeless man.”

649-709 Achilles finishes by telling them to deliver the message—that he will not enter battle until Hector has killed many Argives, burned their ships, and come close to the Myrmidon camp.

They have one last cup of wine before the men return without Phoenix. When they reach Agamemnon's shelter, Odysseus reports Achilles' answer. In response, everyone is silent and full of sorrow. After some time, Diomedes speaks up and counsels them to let Achilles do as he pleases—whether he stays or goes. As for them, they should retire for

BOOK 9 ▪ THE EMBASSY TO ACHILLES

the evening and sleep after eating and drinking. In the morning they should fight.

710-713 That's what he said, and the other chief lead-

ers readily approved, pleased with the words of horse-taming Diomedes. They poured out libations, and each man walked to his own shelter where he lay down and received the gift of sleep.

So ends Book 9. **See you in Book 10, "Agamemnon's Worry."**

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