

Lecture Series on Homer's *Iliad*: Lecture 1

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Book 1

Invocation of the muse takes place, with the poet asking for help in conveying the story of Achilles' rage. It is made clear that Achilles is the greatest hero of the Greeks to fight in the Trojan War. The story begins nine years following the beginning of the war, as a Trojan-allied town is sacked by Achaeans. The Achaeans capture a pair of beautiful maidens. Their names are Chryseis and Briseis. Chryseis is chosen by Agamemnon, the Achaean army's commander-in-chief, as his prize. Briseis is claimed by Achilles, a valuable warrior. Chryses, a priest of the god of Apollo, is Chryseis's father. He begs Agamemnon to return his daughter to him. He offers a huge ransom in return. Agamemnon refuses to accede to this plan, and Chryses directs his prayers for help to Apollo. The Greek camp suffers the death of numerous soldiers when Apollo sends a plague upon it. After they have suffered for ten days, Achilles orders an assembly of the Achaean army. He requests that a soothsayer tell him what caused the plague. This soothsayer is a powerful seer called Calchas. While Calchas is afraid of Agamemnon's retribution, he reveals that the plague was intended as a strategic act of vengeance by Chryses and Apollo. Agamemnon becomes very angry, and he declares that he will give back Chryseis only on the condition of Briseis being given to him by Achilles as compensation.

Achilles, who is very proud, is infuriated and humiliated by Agamemnon's demand. An argument ensues. Achilles threatens Agamemnon, saying that he will withdraw from battle, bringing the Myrmidons, his people, back to their home of Phthia. Agamemnon says that he can visit Achilles' tent and take Briseis. Achilles is ready to draw his sword on the Achaean commander, but his anger is checked by the appearance of Athena, a goddess. She has been sent by the queen of the gods, Hera. The guidance provided by Athena, when combined with a speech by Nestor, a wise advisor, prevents the duel. Agamemnon sends Chryseis back to her father on a ship. He also sends heralds to arrange for Briseis to be escorted out of Achilles' tent. Achilles appeals to his mother, Thetis, the sea-nymph, to request that the king of the gods, punish the Achaeans. He tells her the story of his conflict with Agamemnon. She says that she will discuss the matter with Zeus, and that the king of the gods owes her a favor.

Thetis says that she will do this when Zeus comes back from thirteen days of feasting with the Aethiopians. The ship carrying Chryseis is being navigated by Odysseus, the Achaean commander. After the ship lands, he brings the maiden back to her father and makes a sacrifice to Apollo. Chryses feels joyful at the sight of his daughter, and he prays that the Achaean camp is relieved of the plague. His prayer is acknowledged by Apollo. Odysseus goes back to his comrades.

The beginning of more severe suffering is all that comes after the end of the plague. Achilles has not participated in battle since he quarreled with Agamemnon. After twelve days pass, Thetis appeals to Zeus, as she promised to do. Zeus shows reluctance to assist the Trojans. This is because Hera, his wife, supports the Greeks. However, he does finally agree. Hera is extremely angry when she finds out that Zeus is assisting the Trojans. However, Hephaestus, her son, persuades her to refrain from causing conflict among the gods for the sake of the mortals.

Book 2

In their quest to help the Trojans, as they promised to do, Zeus causes Agamemnon to have a dream in which a figure appearing to be Nestor pushes him to think that he is able to take Troy if he chooses to carry out a full-scale assault on the walls of the city. The following day, Agamemnon brings his troops together to attack, but, in order to test their courage, he lies to them and says that he has opted to give up the war and go back to Greece. He is dismayed when they are eager to rush to their ships.

When Hera observes that the Achaeans are fleeing, she tells Athena, who inspires the most eloquent Achaean, Odysseus, to call the men back. He shouts out encouraging words and insults to goad their pride and boost their confidence.

He reminds them of the soothsayer Calchas's prophecy that was given when the Achaeans first began bringing together their soldiers in Greece. A water snake that had slithered to the shore had eaten a nest with nine sparrows. Calchas thought the sign meant that a period of nine years would pass prior to the Achaeans finally being able to take Troy. They are reminded by Odysseus that they at that time vowed that they would refrain from abandoning their struggle until the fall of the city.

Nestor now pushes Agamemnon to arrange his forces by clan and city so that they are able to fight by the idea of their friends and kin. The poet uses this chance to begin on a catalog of the army. Once he has invoked the muses to help strengthen his memory, he goes through the cities that have given troops to the Greek's cause, the number of troops that each gave, and the person who leads every contingent. At each list's ending, the poet points out the bravest individuals of the Achaean forces. Achilles and Ajax are two of them.

When a messenger is sent to the Trojan court by Zeus, informing them of the incredible formation of the Greeks, the Trojans bring together their own troops that are under the command of Hector, Priam's son. The poet then goes on to catalogue the Trojan forces.

Book 3

After marching from the city gates, the Trojan army proceeds to meet the Achaeans. Paris is the Trojan prince whose action of stealing Menelaus' wife, the beautiful Helen, precipitated the war. He challenges the Achaean forces to single combat with any one of the warriors within it. When Menelaus comes forward, however, Paris becomes cowardly and hides in the Trojan ranks. Hector, who is the leader of the Trojan forces as well as Paris's brother, shows his disapproval of Paris's behavior. Paris is distressed by this insult from his brother, and he decides to duel with Menelaus. He declares that this fight will help to establish peace between the Achaeans and Trojans, as it will show which man will keep Helen as his wife. Hector gives the terms of the duel to Menelaus, and the latter accepts. A possible ending to the war is looked forward to by both armies.

Menelaus and Paris prepare for the fight. Iris, a goddess, disguises herself as Laodice, Hector's sister, and visits Helen, who is in Priam's palace. Iris encourages Helen to venture to the city gates in order to see the battle that would be fought for her hand. Helen goes, and she discovers Priam and other city elders gathered there. Priam sees the strong young Achaeans that are in view, and he asks Helen about them. Helen says that they are Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Ajax. Priam is amazed at their splendor and strength. However, he eventually departs from the scene, as he does not want to see Paris fight to the death.

After arming themselves, Paris and Menelaus begin the duel. Neither man proves able to use his spear to make the other fall. Menelaus's sword is broken over Paris's helmet. Menelaus seizes Paris by his helmet and starts pulling him over the ground. However, Aphrodite, who is an ally of the Trojans, snaps the helmet's straps. The helmet breaks off in Menelaus's hands. Menelaus is frustrated, and he gets his spear and prepares to attack Paris with it, but Aphrodite transports Paris to his room within Priam's palace. She brings Helen there, as well. Helen scolds Paris for being a coward, but then lies down with him in bed. On the battlefield, Paris is sought by both the Greeks and Trojans. Insisting that Menelaus has been triumphant in the duel, Agamemnon demands that Helen be returned.