

Lecture Series on Homer's *Iliad*: Lecture 4

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Book 9

The Trojans are ready to push the Achaeans to return to their ships, and the Achaean troops are broken-hearted and sitting in their camp. Agamemnon stands before them, and he weeps while saying that the war is a failure. He suggests a disgraceful return to Greece. Diomedes objects, declaring that he will remain and fight even if he does so alone. He tries to improve the morale of the soldiers by pointing out that Troy's fate is to fall. Nestor says that they should persevere too, and he suggests that there be a reconciliation with Achilles. Agamemnon perceives that this is a wise idea, and he opts to offer Achilles many gifts on the condition that he go back to the Achaean lines. The king selects men that are among Achaeans' best, including the Great Ajax, Odysseus, and Phoenix, to present the proposal to Achilles.

The embassy comes upon Achilles, who is playing the lyre, in his tent. He is in the company of Patroclus, his dear friend. Agamemnon's offer is presented by Odysseus. It is immediately rejected by Achilles. He declares his intention to go back to Phthia, his homeland. He wants to live a long and prosaic life rather than a short and glorious one as he will have if he remains where he is. Achilles says that he is willing to take Phoenix. Phoenix assisted in rearing him in Phthia. Phoenix wants to stay, however, and he emotionally begins a long plea with Achilles to stay. He alludes to an ancient story, that of Meleager, a warrior who refused to fight when in a rage. The story shows the importance of responding to pleas coming from desperate friends. However, Achilles chooses to remain firm. He still feels insulted by Agamemnon. The embassy is forced to return unsuccessful. Despair overtakes the army again.

Book 10

That night, the Greek commanders sleep soundly with the exceptions of Menelaus and Agamemnon. Eventually, they wake and get the others up. On the Trojan side of the fortifications, they meet together on open ground, to plan what they will do next. Nestor believes that they should send a spy for infiltration of the Trojan ranks. Diomedes promptly volunteers to fill this role. He requests support, and Odysseus offers his help. Diomedes and Odysseus arm themselves and leave for the Trojan camp. A heron that Athena has sent calls out. It is on their right-hand side. They pray to Athena, asking for protection.

The Trojans come up with their own acts of reconnaissance in the meantime. Hector wants to find out if the Achaeans have an escape planned. He chooses Dolon, a man who is very quick but unattractive, to be his scout. He promises to give him Achilles' chariot and horses as a reward after the fall of the Achaeans. Dolon sets out on his way, and he quickly comes across Odysseus and Diomedes. He is interrogated by the two men. In an effort to save his life, he tells them about the Trojans' positions, as well as those of their allies. He tells them that the newly arrived Thracians are currently in a vulnerable position. Dolon is then killed by Diomedes. His armor is stripped from him. Odysseus and Diomedes then make their way to the Thracian camp. It is there that they kill a king, Rhesus, and twelve soldiers. They also take the king's chariot and horses. Athena gives them a warning about an angry god that could wake the other soldiers. Odysseus and Diomedes ride the chariot they have stolen back to the Achaean camp. Nestor and other Greeks have been worried that their comrades could be dead, and they give him a warm greeting.

Book 11

The following morning, the Achaean lines descend into panic when Zeus causes blood to rain down on them. There is a massacre amongst them. However, they have started to make some progress by the time afternoon arrives. Agamemnon is impressively armed, and he is able to cut down many men. He forces the Trojans to move back to the gates of the city. Iris is sent by Zeus to inform Hector that he is compelled to wait until Agamemnon is wounded before he starts his attack. Coon soon wounds Agamemnon. Coon is Antenor's son. He kills Agamemnon after he kills Coon's brother. Although injured, Agamemnon continues to fight and he cuts down Coon. He is in a great deal of pain, however, and he eventually leaves the field.

Hector sees his cue. He charges the Achaean line, successfully driving it back. In a panic, the Achaeans are ready to retreat, but the words of Diomedes and Odysseus give them courage. Diomedes then throws a spear that makes contact with Hector's helmet. Hector is stunned by this, and he retreats. Paris responds to the actions of the Achaeans by using an arrow to wound Diomedes. This means that a great warrior is sidelined for the remainder of the poem. Odysseus is now encircled by the Trojans, and he must fight alone. He is able to beat them off, but before he is successful in doing so, a man called Socus wounds him through the ribs. Odysseus is carried by the Great Ajax back to camp prior to the Trojans being able to harm him any more.

Hector continues with his assault on a different component of the Achaean line. The Greeks are able to hold him off at first, but they begin to panic when Machaon, the healer, is wounded by Paris. Ajax is forced by Hector and his men to retreat. Nestor takes Machaon to his tent. In the meantime, Achilles witnesses Machaon pass quickly by in a chariot. He sends Patroclus, his companion, to ask about Machaon's status. Nestor informs Patroclus about the wounds that the Trojans have caused the Achaean commanders to incur. He appeals to Patroclus, asking him to push Achilles to go back to the battle, or at minimum enter the battle disguised in the armor of Achilles. This is a ruse that would at minimum provide the Achaeans with the benefit of Achilles' frightening aura. Patroclus assents to the idea of appealing to the Achilles. He treats the wound of a man called Euryplyus, who is injured as result of fighting at the side of Ajax.