

Lecture Series on Homer's *Iliad*: Lecture 8

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Book 20

While Achaeans and the Trojan forces prepare themselves for battle, Zeus requires his fellow gods to come to Mount Olympus. He is aware that if Achilles comes onto the battlefield unchecked, he will be able to destroy the Trojans and perhaps even make the city fall before it is fated to do so. In accordance, he takes back his earlier instructions against divine interference in the fighting. The gods come down to earth, but they quickly opt only to watch the fighting rather than get involved in it. They sit on hills looking down on the battlefield. They are curious to see how each team of mortals will do without their help. Before taking a passive role, though, Aeneas is urged to challenge Achilles by Apollo. The heroes come together on the battlefield and they insult one another. Achilles is getting ready to stab Aeneas. However, Poseidon suddenly feels sympathy for the Trojan, and he takes Aeneas away. Hector approaches after that, but Apollo says that he must not have a duel in front of the soldiers. He must wait until Achilles approaches him. Hector obeys at first, but when he witnesses Achilles so easily killing the Trojans, including a brother of Hector, he challenges Achilles. Hector does poorly in the fight, and Apollo comes to his rescue for the second time.

Book 21

Achilles is able to rout the Trojan forces, splitting their ranks. He pushes half of them into a river known as Xanthus to the gods. The mortals call it Scamander. Achilles is merciless in his slaughter of a son of Priam, Lycaon, on the riverbank. Asteropaeus, the Trojan, is granted new strength by the god of the river, and he challenges Achilles valiantly. However, Achilles cuts him down, too. Achilles is vengeful, and he does not intend to spare any Trojans as they have cut down Patroclus. The river's channels become clogged as a result of all the corpses that he consigns to the river. Achilles agrees to cease putting bodies in the water when the river god protests. He never promises to cease killing them, though. The Trojans have the river's sympathy, and that body of water asks for Apollo's help. However, when the river's plea is heard by Achilles, he attacks it. The river is never able to get the upper hand, and it pulls Achilles to a floodplain downstream.

He almost kills Achilles, but is prevented from doing so by the intervention of the gods. Hera has sent Hephaestus, and he sets fire to the plain, causing the river to boil until it gives up. There is now a great deal of confusion among the gods as they observe and quarrel about human warfare. Aphrodite and Ares are defeated by Athena. Apollo is challenged by Poseidon, but he refuses to engage in fighting over mortals. Artemis, his sister, attempts to push him into fighting by taunting him. Hera hears her doing this, and she pounces on her. In the meantime, Priam observes the human violence and death on the battlefield. He opens Troy's fates for his troops, who are fleeing. Achilles chases them and almost takes Troy, but Agenor, the Trojan prince, challenges him to a fight. Achilles' combat with Agenor and with Apollo (who disguises himself as Agenor after Agenor is taken to safety) gives the Trojans enough time to get back to Troy.

Book 22

Hector is now the sole Trojan outside of Troy. Priam is looking over the battlefield from the Trojan ramparts, and he urges Hector to come inside. Hector, however, now feels that it would be shameful to go into retreat, as he gave the foolish order the night before for the Trojans to camp outside the city's gates. Achilles finally comes back from his pursuit of Apollo (who is disguised as Agenor). Hector then confronts him. Initially, the great Trojan thinks about attempting to negotiate with Achilles. However, he quickly realizes that his cause is hopeless and he flees. He runs the circumference of the city three times, with Achilles chasing him the whole time. Zeus thinks about saving Hector, but Athena makes him see that it is his time to die. Zeus puts Achilles' and Hector's fates on a golden scale. Hector's fate sinks downward. As Hector makes his fourth circle around the walls of the city, Athena makes her appearance before him. She is disguised as Deiphobus, his ally. She convinces him that they can take Achilles if they work together. Hector stands still and turns around to see his opponent. He and Achilles throw their spears at one another, but neither is successful in hitting his opponent.

Hector asks Deiphobus to give him a lance, but he sees that his friend has disappeared. He quickly realizes that the gods have deceived him. Desperate to achieve glory, he charges towards Achilles. However, he is still in Achilles' old armor, that was taken from the dead body of Patroclus. Achilles is acutely aware of the weak points of the armor. He shows his skill in making a perfect thrust of his spear, and it goes through Hector's throat. Hector is near death, and he asks Achilles to bring his body to the Trojans to be buried. However, Achilles decides to allow the scavenger birds and dogs maul the Trojan. Hector's corpse is surrounded by the other Achaeans and stabbed. Achilles drags the body through the dirt by attaching it to his chariot. In the meantime, King Priam and Queen Hecuba above the city's walls see the destruction of their son's body and are overcome with grief. Andromache hears their cries from her chamber and she runs to see what is wrong.

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