

# The Iliad

by Homer

## About this work

*The Iliad* is an **epic poem** in Ancient Greek written down around the 8th century B.C., but likely assembled from older oral sources. Attributed to Homer, the work recounts events set some 400 to 500 years before, in the Bronze Age. The story told in the *Iliad* is set in the tenth year of the **war between the Greeks and the Trojans**. A Trojan prince, Paris, was visiting the great Greek city-state of Sparta and left with the beautiful Helen, wife of the Spartan king Menelaus. Angered by this, Menelaus asked his brother Agamemnon (king of Mycenae, another Greek city) to assemble forces from many Greek city-states to lead **an assault on Troy**, which was located across the Aegean Sea. Legend has it that the Greeks launched a thousand ships and sailed to Troy, but even after ten years of fighting were still **stuck on the beaches outside Troy's walls and gates**. This is the point where the *Iliad* begins . . .

There are 24 books in the *Iliad*, written in rhyme in the original Greek. What follows is an excerpt from Book I rendered in prose in an English translation.

Note that in the epic the Greek forces are called by different names: the **Achaens**, the **Danaans**, and the **Argives** among them.

This part of the tale concerns the beginning of a quarrel between the leader of all the Greeks, King **Agamemnon** (sometimes referred to as the **son of Atreus**) and the greatest fighter in his army, **Achilles** (sometimes called the **son of Peleus**; his mother was the minor goddess Thetis, which means Achilles is **not an immortal** but still endowed with **divine qualities of speed and strength**).

excerpts from Book I

### Lines 1–21: Invocation and Introduction

Goddess, sing me the anger, of Achilles, Peleus' son, that fatal anger that brought countless sorrows on the Greeks, and sent many valiant souls of warriors down to Hades, leaving their bodies as spoil for dogs and carrion birds: for thus was the will of Zeus brought to fulfilment. Sing of it from the moment when Agamemnon, Atreus' son, that king of men, parted in wrath from noble Achilles.

Which of the gods set these two to quarrel? Apollo, the son of Leto and Zeus, angered by the king, brought an evil plague on the army, so that the men were dying, for the son of Atreus had dishonored Chryses the priest. He it was who came to the swift Achaean ships, to free his daughter, bringing a wealth of ransom, carrying a golden staff adorned with the ribbons of far-striking Apollo, and called out to the Achaeans, above all to the two leaders of armies, those sons of Atreus: "Atreides, and all you bronze-greaved Achaeans, may the gods who live on Olympus grant you to sack Priam's city, and sail back home in safety; but take this ransom, and free my darling child; show reverence for Zeus's son, far-striking Apollo."

### **Lines 22–52: Chryses invokes Apollo**

Then the rest of the Achaeans shouted in agreement, that the priest should be respected, and the fine ransom taken; but this troubled the heart of Agamemnon, son of Atreus, and he dismissed the priest harshly, and dealt with him sternly: "Old man, don't let me catch you loitering by the hollow ships today, and don't be back later, lest your staff and the god's ribbons fail to protect you. Her, I shall not free; old age will claim her first, far from her own country, in Argos, my home, where she can tend the loom, and share my bed. Away now; don't provoke me if you'd leave safely."

So he spoke, and the old man, seized by fear, obeyed. Silently, he walked the shore of the echoing sea; and when he was quite alone, the old man prayed deeply to Lord Apollo, the son of bright-haired Leto: "Hear me, Silver Bow, protector of Chryse and holy Cilla, high lord of Tenedos: if ever I built a shrine that pleased you, if ever I burned the fat thighs of a bull or goat for you, grant my wish: Smintheus, with your arrows make the Greeks pay for my tears."

So he prayed, and Phoebus Apollo heard him. Down he came, in fury, from the heights of Olympus, with his bow and inlaid quiver at his back. The arrows rattled at his shoulder as the god descended like the night, in anger. He set down by the ships, and fired a shaft, with a fearful twang of his silver bow. First he attacked the mules, and the swift hounds, then loosed his vicious darts at the men; so the dense pyres for the dead burned endlessly.

### **Lines 53–100: Achilles and Calchas speak**

For nine days the god's arrows fell on the army, and on the tenth Achilles, his heart stirred by the goddess, white-armed Hera, called them to the Place of Assembly, she pitying the Danaans, whose deaths she witnessed. And when they had assembled, and the gathering was complete, swift-footed Achilles rose and spoke: "Son of Atreus, if war and plague alike are fated to defeat us Greeks, I think we shall be driven to head for home: if, that is, we can indeed escape death. But why not consult some priest, some prophet, some interpreter of

dreams, since dreams too come from Zeus, one who can tell why Phoebus Apollo shows such anger to us, because of some broken vow perhaps, or some missed sacrifice; in hopes the god might accept succulent lambs or unmarked goats, and choose to avert our ruin."

He sat down again when he had spoken, and Calchas, son of Thestor, rose to his feet, he, peerless among augurs, who knew all things past, all things to come, and all things present, who, through the gift of prophecy granted him by Phoebus Apollo, had guided the Greek fleet to Ilium. He, with virtuous intent, spoke to the gathering, saying: "Achilles, god-beloved, you ask that I explain far-striking Apollo's anger. Well, I will, but take thought, and swear to me you'll be ready to defend me with strength and word; for I believe I'll anger the man who rules the Argives in his might, whom all the Achaeans obey. For a king in his anger crushes a lesser man. Even if he swallows anger for a while, he will nurse resentment till he chooses to repay. Consider then, if you can keep me safe."

Swift-footed Achilles spoke in reply: "Courage, and say out what truth you know, for by god-beloved Apollo to whom you pray, whose utterances you grant to the Danaans, none shall lay hand on you beside the hollow ships, no Danaan while I live and see the earth, not even if it's Agamemnon you mean, who counts himself the best of the Achaeans."

Then the peerless seer took heart, and spoke to them, saying: "Not for a broken vow, or a missed sacrifice, does he blame us, but because of that priest whom Agamemnon offended, refusing the ransom, refusing to free his daughter. That is why the god, the far-striker, makes us suffer, and will do so, and will not rid the Danaans of loathsome plague, until we return the bright-eyed girl to her father, without his recompense or ransom, and send a sacred offering to Chryse; then we might persuade him to relent."

### **Lines 101–147: The argument begins**

When he had finished speaking, Calchas sat down, and Agamemnon, the warrior, royal son of Atreus, leapt up in anger; his mind was filled with blind rage, and his eyes blazed like fire. First he rounded on Calchas, with a threatening look: "Baneful prophet, your utterance has never yet favored me; you only ever love to augur evil, never a word of good is spoken or fulfilled! And now you prophesy to the Danaan assembly, claiming the far-striker troubles them because I refused fine ransom for a girl, Chryses' daughter, and would rather take her home. Well I prefer her to my wife, Clytaemnestra, since she's no less than her in form or stature, mind or skill. Yet, even so, I'd look to give her up, if that seems best; I'd rather you were safe, and free of plague. So ready a prize at once, for me, I'll not be the only one with empty hands: that would be wrong: you see for yourselves, my prize now goes elsewhere."

Then swift-footed Lord Achilles spoke in answer: "Great son of Atreus, covetous as ever, how can the brave Achaeans grant a prize? What wealth is there in common, now we have shared our plunder from the cities which cannot be reclaimed? Give up the girl, as the god demands, and we Achaeans will compensate you, three or four times over, if Zeus ever lets us sack high-walled Troy."

Then Lord Agamemnon answered him: "Brave you may be, godlike Achilles, but don't try to trick me with your cleverness. You'll not outwit me or cajole me. Do you think, since you demand I return her, that I'll sit here without a prize while you keep yours? Let the great-hearted Achaeans find a prize, one that's to my taste, so the exchange is equal. If not, then I myself will take yours, or seize and keep that of Ajax or Odysseus. Whoever it is, he'll be angered. But we can ponder all of that later; for now, let us launch a black ship on the shining sea, crew her, and embark creatures for sacrifice and this fair-faced daughter of Chryses too. One of our counsellors can go as captain, Ajax, Idomeneus, noble Odysseus or you, son of Peleus, you the most redoubtable of men, and make sacrifice and appease far-striking Apollo."

### **Lines 148–187: Agamemnon and Achilles quarrel**

Then, with an angry look, swift-footed Achilles replied: "Why, you shameless schemer, why should any Achaean leap to obey your orders to march or wage war? No quarrel with Trojan spearmen brought me here to fight: they have done me no wrong. No horse or cow of mine have they stolen, nor have my crops been ravaged in deep-soiled Phthia, nurturer of men, since the shadowy mountains and the echoing sea lie between us. No, for your pleasure, you shameless cur, we followed to try and win recompense, for you and Menelaus, from the Trojans. And you neither see nor care; and even threaten to rob me of my prize, given by the sons of Achaea, reward for which I labored. When the Achaeans sack some rich Trojan city, it's not I who win the prize. My hands bear the brunt of the fiercest fight, but when the wealth is shared, yours is the greater, while I return, weary with battle, to the ships, with some small fraction for my own. So now I'm for Phthia, since it's better to lead my beaked ships home than stay here dishonored piling up wealth and goods for you."

Agamemnon, king of men, answered him then: "Be off, if your heart demands it; I'll not beg your presence on my account. Others, who'll honor me, are with me: Zeus, above all, the lord of counsel. Of all the god-beloved princes here you are most odious to me, since war, contention, strife are dear to you. If you are the greatest warrior, well, it was some god I think who granted it. Go home, with your ships and men, and lord it over the Myrmidons: I care naught for you, or your anger. And here's my threat: since Phoebus Apollo robs me

of Chryses' daughter, a ship and crew of mine will return her, but I'll pay your quarters a visit myself, and take that prize of yours, fair-faced Briseis, so that you know how my power exceeds yours, and so that others will think twice before claiming they're my peers, and comparing themselves to me, face to face."

### **Lines 188–222: Athena counsels Achilles**

While Agamemnon spoke, the son of Peleus was gnawed by pain, and the heart in his shaggy breast was torn; whether to draw the sharp blade at his side, scatter the crowd, and kill the son of Atreus, or curb his wrath and restrain his spirit. As he pondered this in his mind, his great sword half-unsheathed, Athena descended from the sky, sent by Hera, the white-armed goddess, who loved and cared for both the lords alike. Athena, standing behind the son of Peleus, tugged at his golden hair, so that only he could see her, no one else. Achilles, turning in surprise, knew Pallas Athena at once, so terrible were her flashing eyes. He spoke out, with winged words, saying: "Why are you here, daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus? Is it to witness Agamemnon's arrogance? I tell you and believe that this son of Atreus' will pay soon with his life for his insolent acts."

The goddess, bright-eyed Athena, replied: "I came from the heavens to quell your anger, if you'll but listen: I was sent by the goddess, white-armed Hera, who in her heart loves and cares for you both alike. Come, end this quarrel, and sheathe your sword. Taunt him with words of prophecy; for I say, and it shall come to pass, that three times as many glorious gifts shall be yours one day for this insult. Restrain yourself, now, and obey."

Then swift-footed Achilles, in answer, said: "Goddess, a man must attend to your word, no matter how great his heart's anger: that is right. Whoever obeys the gods will gain their hearing."

So saying he checked his great hand on the silver hilt, and thrust the long sword back into its sheath, obeying the word of Athena; she meanwhile had left for Olympus, for the palace of aegis-bearing Zeus, and rejoined the other gods.

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*Edited and formatted by Ned Gallagher, Choate Rosemary Hall Departments of English and History, April 2020.*