

Ix10 – Homer’s Help to Humanity

Dear: I hope you read Homer’s two books – and I hope you enjoyed them at least a small fraction of how much I did. For example, when I read Homer’s description of the gods plotting and scheming against one another, making mistakes, getting hurt in human battles, and generally making a mess of things, I came to the enjoyable conclusion: these are my kind of gods! That is, if it’s necessary for humans to be burdened by silly ideas about gods, then at least the gods should be sources of some fun, for example, objects of derision!

But I should admit that, during my reading of Homer, I also experienced considerable sadness – because never before had I read his books. Instead, when I was young, “they” dumped the standard Biblical trash on me. Under pressures from the damnable clerics, our society brainwashes our children in the backwash (even, in the sewer water) of human thought (about an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-frightful Hebrew-Persian God), instead of letting kids have some fun with the craziness of the Greek gods. I therefore repeat: I wish that all Bibles in this country (and all “holy books” in all countries!) were replaced with copies of *The ILIAD* and *The ODYSSEY*. Then, surely no one would take seriously any ideas about any god!

And of course there’s more to it than that. If humanity could have avoided the arrogant ignorance of Sumerian, Egyptian, Indian, Persian, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Mormon... clerics, if Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and various other ridiculous religions such as Mormonism had never been concocted, if humanity had been able to progress directly from the humanist ideas of the ancient Greeks to the Renaissance (which started with European rediscovery of Greek ideas), then humanity could have avoided more than 2,000 years worth of backwardness – as well as almost unimaginable brutality, horror, and evil.

But enough of that for now; I’ll be returning to it, again and again. Instead, for this chapter, first I want to review some of the ideas and information in Homer’s books, which of course contain much more than descriptions of the silliness of the gods. Then, I want to try to explain what I mean by the title of this chapter: “Homer’s Help to Humanity.”

IDEAS & INFORMATION IN *THE ILIAD*

Beginning with Book I (or Chapter I) of *The ILIAD*, consider some of the concepts contained in the following paragraph:

“Son of [the Greek king] Atreus [i.e., Agamemnon]”, said he [i.e., Achilles], “I deem that we should now turn roving home if we would escape destruction, for we are being cut down by war and pestilence at once. Let us ask some priest or prophet, or some reader of dreams (for dreams, too, are of Jove [or Zeus]) who can tell us why Phoebus [“the bright one”] Apollo [the Sun god] is so angry, and say whether it is for some vow that we have broken, or hecatomb that we have not offered, and whether he [Apollo] will accept the savor of lambs and goats without blemish, so as to take away the plague from us.”

Some obvious ideas and information contained in the above paragraph include the following.

- The ancient Greeks were no strangers to disease (“pestilence” and “plague”). In this case, I’ve seen suggestions on the internet that this particular “pestilence” was quite likely malaria. If correct, Homer’s ascribing this “pestilence” to being hit by Apollo’s arrows was not too far off the mark, because the “vector” of this parasite is the sting of a certain type of mosquito, still prevalent in Greece.
- To “explain” the cause of this unknown “pestilence” (knowing nothing about diseases carried by mosquitoes and the breeding of more mosquitoes with crop irrigation), these early Greeks turned to “some priest or prophet, or some reader of dreams (for dreams, too, are of Jove)” – apparently not realizing what enormous powers they were thereby giving such “priests”, “prophets” and “readers of dreams”.
- They suspected that the cause of their difficulties might be “some vow that we have broken, or hecatomb that we have not offered [to the gods]”, from which you can see a part of the “honor code” of the ancient Greeks: not to break a “vow”, especially a vow made to one of the gods.
- As another possible cause of this “pestilence”, they wondered if they hadn’t offered some “hecatomb” to the gods, where with *hecaton* being the Greek word for 100 (as in hectare, which is an area of 100 *ares* – and also 100 x 100 meters) and *bous* being the Greek word for ox or cow, a ‘hecatomb’ was the “sacrifice” of 100 cattle for the Gods – but presumably the people ate what the gods didn’t want!
- Thus, just as with the Hebrews as described in the Bible (which, as I’ll show you later, was probably put together by Ezra and co-conspirators, about 800 years after the Trojan War and about 300 years after Homer), these early Greeks concluded (just as had the Sumerians and Egyptians, thousands of years earlier) that their gods could be placated by the odor of cooking meat, in particular, “the savor of lambs and goats

without blemish”. From this it seems reasonable to speculate that this same odor (and the associated eating) was one of the favorite stimulations of the senses that these people knew. And although I admit that the way your grandmother roasts beef would be a fit “offering to the gods”, I can’t help wondering if modern gods wouldn’t prefer strawberry milkshakes!

- More seriously, it seems reasonable to speculate that these ancient people treated food “religiously” because it was scarce. Evidence for this can be found in Book XVII of *The ODYSSEY*, where Ulysses states:

[A] man cannot hide away the cravings of a hungry belly; this is an enemy which gives much trouble to all men; it is because of this that ships are fitted out to sail the seas, and to make war upon other people.

- And finally in this quotation is something, which I mentioned in an earlier chapter, that really intrigues me: the linking of dreams with the “supernatural” world of the gods, “for dreams, too, are of Jove [or Zeus]”. Soon, I’ll return to more ideas from Homer linking dreams to communications from the gods.

The story then gets rather complicated. First, a seer (or “prophet”, i.e., someone allegedly possessing “supernatural insight”) “explains” why the Greeks are having so much difficulty:

Thereon the seer spoke boldly. “The god [Apollo],” he said, “is angry neither about vow nor hecatomb, but for his priest’s sake, whom Agamemnon [the most powerful Greek king of the group] has dishonored, in that he would not free... [the priest’s] daughter nor take a ransom for her; therefore has... [Apollo] sent these evils upon us, and will yet send others. He will not deliver the Danaans [this seems to be a name for the Greeks; other names are Achaeans and Argives] from this pestilence till Agamemnon has restored the girl without fee or ransom to her father, and has sent a holy hecatomb to Chryses [the priest]. Thus we may perhaps appease him [Apollo].”

From this, we gain still more hints about these early people:

- “Seers” had already learned a rule that still applies today: if you want to be a successful con artist, generally a good tactic is to speak boldly, with conviction – as if you believe what you’re saying!
- Unsurprisingly, the seer / prophet / con artist preached that the gods were on the cleric’s side: “The god... is angry... for his priest’s sake”!
- Unsurprisingly, too, men had identified that another great pleasure (comparable to eating freshly cooked meat) was available from women. Yet, apparently there was an honor code: if the woman’s “owner” (in this case, her father) offered to pay sufficient ransom, then she would be returned.

And then, Dear, look at some of the concepts that lie behind Agamemnon's response [in which I've added the notes and the italics]:

With these words he [the seer] sat down, and Agamemnon [the strongest king] rose in anger. His heart was black with rage, and his eyes flashed fire as he scowled on Calchas [the seer] and said, "*Seer of evil*, you never yet prophesied smooth things concerning me, but have ever loved to foretell that which was evil. You have brought me neither comfort nor performance; and now you come... saying that Apollo has plagued us because I would not take a ransom for this girl, the daughter of Chryses. I have set my heart on keeping her in my own house, for I love her better even than my own wife Clytemnestra, whose peer she is alike in form and feature, in understanding and accomplishments. Still I will give her up if I must, for I would have the people live, not die; but you must find me a prize instead, or I alone among the Argives shall be without one. This is not well; for you behold, all of you, that my prize is to go else whither."

In the above, there's evidence (and I'll show you more, later) that priests / seers / interpreters of dreams / promoters of supernatural silliness weren't held in much respect: Agamemnon tore into this fellow: "Seer of evil..." As a result, surely the people who heard this story (during centuries of retelling!) must have developed a similarly skeptical, cynical, and disrespectful attitude towards such con artists. Maybe that's why Greek priests never seemed to gain strength comparable with the clerics of other religions (in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Persia, and those of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions) – although a few hundred years later (as I'll be showing you), Greek priests unfortunately did gain substantial power (when Greek civil power began to wane, which I will suggest is not just coincidental). In any event, maybe one of the reasons that the Ancient Greeks made so much progress is because, in general, they were less burdened by parasitic priests.

And yet, even though this seer "never yet prophesied smooth things concerning me [Agamemnon], but have ever loved to foretell that which was evil", this seer was still allowed to talk to Agamemnon's group. Further, before Agamemnon began his response, he even waited until this seer sat down! That shows quite amazing constraint on the principle "might makes right" (for Agamemnon was the strongest king), and surely the people hearing the story must have here picked up hints of "freedom of speech" and "democracy", ideas which (as I'll show you) later developed in Greece. Notice, however, that *before* the seer first spoke, he sought (and gained) protection for his "freedom" of speech, from Achilles:

“Achilles, loved of heaven, you bid me tell you about the anger of King Apollo [calling the god a king, a concept that Christians later copied], I will therefore do so; but consider first and swear that you will stand by me heartily in word and deed, for I know that I shall offend one who rules the Argives with might, to whom all the Achaeans are in subjection. A plain man cannot stand against the anger of a king, who if he swallow his displeasure now, will yet nurse revenge till he has wreaked it. Consider, therefore, whether or not you will protect me.”

And Achilles answered, “Fear not, but speak as it is borne in upon you from heaven, for by Apollo, Calchas, to whom you pray, and whose oracles you reveal to us, not a Danaan at our ships shall lay his hand upon you, while I yet live to look upon the face of the earth – no, not though [he be] Agamemnon himself, who is by far the foremost of the Achaeans.”

Notice, Dear (as Agamemnon no doubt did!), that Achilles was in essence taunting Agamemnon: although Achilles describes Agamemnon as “foremost of the Achaeans”, yet simultaneously, Achilles claims (over Agamemnon) the right to chose who is allowed to speak “freely”.

After the priest has his say, Achilles re-enters the argument, and the result permeates the entire story.

Achilles answered, “Most noble son of Atreus [i.e., Agamemnon], covetous beyond all mankind [a epithet that seems be laced with sarcasm!], how shall the Achaeans find you another prize [to replace the priest’s daughter]? We have no common store from which to take one. Those we took from the cities have been awarded; we cannot disallow the awards that have been made already. Give this girl, therefore, to the god [i.e., as the god Apollo wants], and if ever Jove [aka Zeus] grants us to sack the city of Troy we will requite you three and fourfold.”

Then Agamemnon said, “Achilles, valiant though you be, you shall not thus outwit me. You shall not overreach and you shall not persuade me. Are you to keep your own prize, while I sit tamely under my loss and give up the girl at your bidding? Let the Achaeans find me a prize in fair exchange to my liking, or I will come and take your own, or that of Ajax or of Ulysses; and he to whomsoever I may come shall rue my coming...

“I [Agamemnon] care neither for you nor for your anger; and thus will I do: since... Apollo is taking [the girl] Chryses from me, I shall send her with my ship and my followers, but I shall come to your tent [Achilles] and take your own prize, [the girl] Briseis, that you may learn how much stronger I am than you are, and that another may fear to set himself up as equal or comparable with me.”

Those were fighting words, but just before the fight began (and it could be argued that Achilles was the one who started the argument), the goddess

Minerva appeared to Achilles (and only to Achilles – and, it could be argued that imagining Minerva was Achilles' way of “chickening out”!):

And Minerva said, “I come from heaven, if you [Achilles] will hear me, to bid you stay your anger. Juno [Jove's (i.e., Zeus's) wife] has sent me, who cares for both of you alike. Cease, then, this brawling, and do not draw your sword; rail at him [Agamemnon] if you will, and your railing will not be vain, for I tell you – and it shall surely be – that you shall hereafter receive gifts three times as splendid by reason of this present insult. Hold, therefore, and obey.”

“Goddess,” answered Achilles, “however angry a man may be, he must do as you command him. This will be best, for the gods ever hear the prayers of him who has obeyed them.”

In later chapters, Dear (especially in the “excursion” Yx), I'll return to the message in this passage, repeated for centuries and not just in this early Greek religion: “the gods ever hear the prayers of him who has obeyed them.” It's a fatally flawed message, but of course, it's promoted by all clerics. For now, I'll just quote how Achilles summarized his predicament for his mother, because it both sets the stage for the entire story and shows more about how these ancient people thought.

Then Achilles went all alone by the side of the hoar sea, weeping [!] and looking out upon the boundless waste of waters. He raised his hands in prayer to his immortal mother [the goddess Thetas]. “Mother,” he cried, “you bore me doomed to live but for a little season; surely Jove, who thunders from Olympus, might have made that [a] little glorious. It is not so. Agamemnon, son of Atreus, has done me dishonor, and has robbed me of my prize by force.”

As he spoke he wept aloud [!], and his mother heard him where she was sitting in the depths of the sea hard by the old man her father. Forthwith she rose as it were a grey mist out of the waves, sat down before him as he stood weeping, caressed him with her hand, and said, “My son, why are you weeping? What is it that grieves you? Keep it not from me, but tell me, that we may know it together.”

Achilles drew a deep sigh and said, “You know it; why tell you what you know well already? We went to Thebe the strong city of Eetion, sacked it, and brought hither the spoil. The sons of the Achaeans shared it duly among themselves, and chose lovely Chryses as the meed of Agamemnon; but Chryses, priest of Apollo, came to the ships of the Achaeans to free his daughter, and brought with him a great ransom: moreover he bore in his hand the sceptre of Apollo, wreathed with a suppliant's wreath, and he besought the Achaeans, but most of all the two sons of Atreus who were their chiefs.”

“On this, the rest of the Achaeans with one voice were for respecting the priest and taking the ransom that he offered; but not so Agamemnon, who spoke fiercely to him and sent him roughly away. So he went back in anger, and Apollo, who loved him dearly, heard his prayer. Then the god [Apollo] sent a deadly dart upon the Argives, and the people died thick on one another, for the arrows [i.e., the pestilence] went every whither among the wide host of the Achaeans. At last a seer in the fullness of his knowledge declared to us the oracles [i.e., the words] of Apollo, and I was myself first to say that we should appease him. Whereon the son of Atreus [i.e., Agamemnon] rose in anger, and threatened that which he has since done. The Achaeans are now taking the girl in a ship to Chrysie, and sending gifts of sacrifice to the god; but the heralds have just taken from my tent the daughter of Briseus, whom the Achaeans had awarded to myself.”

“Help your brave son, therefore, if you are able. Go to Olympus [the home of the gods], and if you have ever done him service in word or deed, implore the aid of Jove. Ofttimes in my father’s house have I heard you glory in that you alone of the immortals saved the son of Saturn [or the son of the Greek god Cronus, viz., Jove (or Zeus)] from ruin, when the others, with Juno, Neptune, and Pallas Minerva would have put him in bonds [where, again, Juno was Jove’s wife!]. It was you, goddess, who delivered him by calling to Olympus the hundred-handed monster whom gods call Briareus, but men [call] Aegaeon, for he is stronger even than his father; when therefore he took his seat all-glorious beside the son of Saturn, the other gods were afraid, and did not bind him. Go, then, to him, remind him of all this, clasp his knees, and bid him give succor to the Trojans. Let the Achaeans be hemmed in at the sterns of their ships, and perish on the sea-shore, that they may reap what joy they may of their king, and that Agamemnon may rue his blindness in offering insult to the foremost of the Achaeans [i.e., me].” [And notice, Dear, that earlier, Achilles said: “Agamemnon himself, who is by far the foremost of the Achaeans.”]

When I think of this story being retold for so many centuries, I become quite amazed:

- That men would consider women as “booty” and yet “worship” their mothers. Men would apparently “prize” their daughters and their wives, but would treat other women as “prizes”. That is, more generally (and as is still the case in most Muslim cultures), when “might makes right”, then women have no rights.
- That the self-proclaimed “foremost of the Achaeans”, i.e., Achilles, would weep, crying to his mother and the gods for help in obtaining retribution because someone “has done me dishonor, and has robbed me of my prize (i.e., a captured woman) by force”.
- That such tribal people (similar to most Muslims today) had what we in the West would now call a “warped sense of honor”: honor was judged by what others thought about you or what you had done (a “shame culture”), not by what you thought about or what you had done (a “guilt culture”). For example, Achilles apparently felt no

guilt about his lying to others that “Agamemnon... is by far the foremost of the Achaeans” (while he felt that, actually, he was “foremost of the Achaeans”); instead, Achilles felt “dishonored” because Agamemnon had taken his “prize”.

- That people accepted as “natural” that the “supernatural” was normal – for example, that Achilles’ mother was a god (just as, a thousand-or-so years later, people accepted that Jesus was the son of a god).
- That what a god was, more than anything else, was “immortal”; that is, that the ultimate accomplishment was to avoid death.
- That the gods, as with men, were always fighting among themselves: even the wife of the chief god plotted against him!
- That, with appropriate prayer, the trials and tribulations of people could be brought to the attention of the gods for resolution.

Yet later, Homer showed the reader (or listener) that, “in reality”, the gods didn’t care about people. As an example, consider this exchange between Jove (or Zeus) and his wife Juno (or Hera), an exchange that occurs later in the story, when the Greeks were about to overwhelm the city of Troy:

Jove was angry and answered, “My dear [Juno], what harm have Priam [the king of Troy] and his sons done you, that you are so hotly bent on sacking the city of Ilius [the Roman name for Troy – and therefore the name of the book: the ILIAD]. Will nothing do for you but you must [burst] within their walls and eat Priam raw, with his sons and all the other Trojans to boot? [Do the gods eat humans – and even eat them raw?!] Have it your own way then; for I would not have this matter become a bone of contention between us. I say further, and lay my saying to your heart, if ever I want to sack a city belonging to friends of yours, you must not try to stop me; you will have to let me do it, for I am giving in to you sorely against my will. [So Jove (Zeus) must get permission from his wife to sack a city!] Of all inhabited cities under the sun and stars of heaven, there was none that I so much respected as Ilius [i.e., Troy] with Priam and his whole people. Equitable feasts were never wanting about my altar, nor the savor of burning fat, which is honor due to ourselves. [So, that’s all it takes to placate the gods? Jove (and similarly Yahweh!) can be placated by the smell of burning fat?!]

“My own three favorite cities,” answered Juno, “are Argos, Sparta, and Mycenae. Sack them whenever you may be displeased with them. I shall not defend them and I shall not care. [She doesn’t dare about her favorite people in her favorite cities!] Even if I did, and tried to stay you, I should take nothing by it, for you are much stronger than I am [and “might makes right”, even among the gods!], but I will not have my own work [defending Troy] wasted. I, too, am a god and of the same race with yourself. I am Saturn’s eldest daughter [and Jove was Saturn’s son], and am honorable not on this ground only, but also because I am your wife, and you are king

over the gods. [And so there's also incest among the gods, with brother marrying sister.] Let it be a case, then, of give-and-take between us, and the rest of the gods will follow our lead..."

What fun and games the gods do have! And there's more fun for the reader, too. For example, Dear, imagine how Homer's listeners must have reacted to the story about how the gods became involved in this human affair – and apparently the gods have nothing better to do than eat, drink, and become involved in human affairs, including many sexual affairs! Thus, see how Jove (Zeus) decided to help Achilles (Book II):

Now the other gods and the armed warriors on the plain slept soundly [so, the gods get tired and need to take naps, too!], but Jove was wakeful, for he was thinking how to do honor to Achilles... [And even Jove / Zeus isn't all knowing (omniscient): he needs to think about things for quite some time!] In the end [after much thought!] he deemed it would be best to send a *lying dream* [italics added] to King Agamemnon; so, he called one to him [so, there are lots of lying dreams lying around!] and said to it, "Lying Dream, go to the ships of the Achaeans, into the tent of Agamemnon, and say to him word to word as I now bid you. Tell him to get the Achaeans instantly under arms, for he shall take Troy. There are no longer divided counsels among the gods; Juno has brought them to her own mind, and woe betides the Trojans."

The dream went when it had heard its message, and soon reached the ships of the Achaeans. It sought Agamemnon son of Atreus and found him in his tent, wrapped in a profound slumber. It hovered over his head in the likeness of Nestor, son of Neleus, whom Agamemnon honored above all his councilors, and said: "You are sleeping, son of Atreus... Hear me at once, for I come as a messenger from Jove, who, though he be not near, yet takes thought for you and pities you. He bids you get the Achaeans instantly under arms, for you shall take Troy. There are no longer divided counsels among the gods; Juno has brought them over to her own mind, and woe betides the Trojans at the hands of Jove. Remember this, and when you wake see that it does not escape you."

Imagine, Dear, what hundreds of years of retelling of this story must have taught the listeners: not only that dreams were from the gods, but that some of the dreams could be "lying dreams", sent by the gods to deliberately trick the dreamer! Talk about shaking one's confidence in the gods! This same message is in *The ODYSSEY*, Book XIX, where Ulysses' wife, Penelope, says:

"Stranger, dreams are very curious and unaccountable things, and they do not by any means invariably come true. There are two gates through which these unsubstantial fancies proceed; the one is of horn, and the other ivory. [Maybe this is a source of the familiar expression (apparently credited to Laurence Sterne, 1713–1768): "the two

horns of the dilemma.”] Those that come through the gate of ivory are fatuous [i.e., foolish or silly or stupid], but those from the gate of horn mean something to those that see them.”

About which, surely the listener of the story wondered: “Yah, but... how can you tell which gate your dream came through – and so then, how do you know which dreams mean something?!” And this (unanswerable) question not being answered by the storyteller, the dilemma unresolved, surely all listeners [at least, all listeners who weren’t, themselves, “fatuous” (i.e., dim-witted)] must have started to think: as messages from the gods, dreams (and therefore the gods, themselves) are terribly unreliable! Further, not only must these stories (which in essence are the “Biblical” stories for the ancient Greeks) surely have shaken the listener’s or reader’s confidence in the messages from their gods sent in dreams, these stories must also have shaken their confidence in “signs” or “portents”, which even today, many people “think” are signals from some god or other.

But before showing you an example (when the Trojans were about to attack the Greek ships) I want to mention something about the fortification and trench that the Greeks had built around their ships. This is from Book VII:

Thus did the Achaeans toil [building a fortification for their ships] and the gods, seated by the side of Jove, the lord of lightning, marveled at their great work; but Neptune, lord of the earthquake, spoke, saying, “Father Jove, what mortal in the whole world will again take the gods into his counsel? See you not how the Achaeans have built a wall about their ships and driven a trench all round it, without offering hecatombs to the gods? The fame of this wall will reach as far as dawn itself, and men will no longer think anything of the one which Phoebus Apollo and myself built...”

Amazing: that a god should be jealous of the works of man (just as Yahweh was jealous of the Babylonians building their tower?! And why? For his concern: “what mortal in the whole world will again take the gods into his counsel [when it’s seen what humans can accomplish by themselves, without offering anything to the gods]?” Indeed: what mortal [should] take the gods into his counsel?!

But, getting back to the topic of the unreliability of messages from the gods, there’s the following exchange in Book XII of *The ILLIAD*:

While they [the Trojans] were busy stripping the armor from these heroes, the youths who were led on by Polydamas and Hector (and these were the greater part and the

most valiant of those that were trying to break through the wall and fire the ships [of the Greeks]) were still standing by the trench, uncertain what they should do; for they had seen a sign from heaven when they had essayed to cross [the trench]: a soaring eagle that flew skirting the left wing of their host, with a monstrous blood-red snake in its talons still alive and struggling to escape. [And as you probably noticed from elsewhere in the story, Dear, if some “sign from heaven” was on their right side, it was generally a good omen, but a sign on their left was otherwise.] The snake was still bent on revenge, wriggling and twisting itself backwards till it struck the bird that held it, on the neck and breast; whereon the bird being in pain, let it fall, dropping it into the middle of the host, and then flew down the wind with a sharp cry.

The Trojans were struck with terror when they saw the snake, portent of aegis-bearing Jove, writhing in the midst of them, and Polydamas went up to Hector [the Trojan hero] and said, “Hector, at our councils of war you are ever given to rebuke me, even when I speak wisely, as though it were not well, forsooth, that one of the people should cross your will, either in the field or at the council board; you would have them support you always; nevertheless I will say what I think will be best; let us not now go on to fight the Danaans [i.e., the Greeks] at their ships, for I know what will happen if this soaring eagle which skirted the left wing of our[s] with a monstrous blood-red snake in its talons (the snake being still alive) was really sent as an omen to the Trojans on their essaying to cross the trench. The eagle let go her hold; she did not succeed in taking it home to her little ones, and so will it be – with ourselves; even though by a mighty effort we break through the gates and wall of the Achaeans, and they give way before us, still we shall not return in good order by the way we came, but shall leave many a man behind us whom the Achaeans will do to death in defense of their ships. Thus would any seer who was expert in these matters, and was trusted by the people, read the portent.”

Hector looked fiercely at him and said, “Polydamas, I like not of your reading [of this ‘portent’]. You can find a better saying than this if you will. If, however, you have spoken in good earnest, then indeed has heaven robbed you of your reason. You would have me pay no heed to the counsels of Jove, nor to the promises [to defeat the Greeks, that] he made me... you bid me be ruled rather by the flight of wildfowl. What care I whether they fly towards dawn or dark, and whether they be on my right hand or on my left? Let us put our trust rather in the counsel of great Jove, king of mortals and immortals. There is one omen, and one only – that a man should fight for his country.”

Well, Dear, I’m again sorry to quote so much, but don’t you agree that this surely would have shaken the confidence of anyone who “believed” in the supernatural? If you can’t trust the messages from the gods, sent in dreams or portents, what can you trust? Who can you rely on? To which of course there’s the answer, which Homer has conveyed (and I think conveyed as the heart of his story): trust and rely on yourself! As Shakespeare wrote, more than 2,000 years later:

* Go to other chapters *via*

This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.

In addition, though, Homer gave us a powerful message, here, from the Trojan hero, Hector: “There is one omen, and one only – that a man should fight for his country.” Shakespeare said similar: “Life every man holds dear; but the dear man holds honor far more precious dear than life.”

Moving on, I’ll now just list a number other quotations that, for me, were illuminating (and to which, in places, I’ve added some italics)

- From Book XII, more on the unreliability of the gods:

Asius the son of Hyrtacus in his dismay cried aloud and smote his two thighs.
“Father Jove,” he cried, “of a truth you, too, are altogether given to lying.”

- As to why the gods would become involved with humans (besides otherwise being bored!), there is the following from Book XVIII:

Then Jove said to Juno his sister-wife, “So, Queen Juno, you have gained your end, and have roused fleet Achilles. One would think that the Achaeans were of your own flesh and blood.”

And Juno answered, “Dread son of Saturn [i.e., Jove or Zeus] why should you say this thing? *May not a man, though he be only mortal and knows less than we do, do what he can for another person?* And shall not I – foremost of all goddesses both by descent and as wife to you who reign in heaven – devise evil for the Trojans if I am angry with them?”

- And as to Agamemnon’s “defense” for making the mistake of taking the girl from Achilles (in Book XIX), blaming [the god] Folly:

Then Agamemnon spoke, rising in his place, and not going into the middle of the assembly. “Danaan heroes,” said he, “servants of Mars, it is well to listen when a man stands up to speak, and it is not seemly to interrupt him... Often have the Achaeans spoken to me of this matter [about Achilles] and upbraided me, but it was not I that did it: Jove, and [the god] Fate, and [the god] Erinys that walks in darkness struck me mad when we were assembled on the day that I took from Achilles the meed [Well, actually, this ‘meed’ was a woman!] that had been awarded to him. What could I do? All things are in the hand of heaven, and [the god] Folly, eldest of Jove’s daughters, shuts men’s eyes to their destruction. She walks delicately, not on the solid earth, but hovers over the heads of men to make them stumble or to ensnare them.”

Imagine when people actually believed such nonsense, i.e., that “all things are in the hand of heaven, and... Folly... shuts men’s eyes to their [own] destruction.” And yet, still today, such fatalism is common in Islamic cultures!

- And there is a similarly cynical “cop out” by Achilles, summarizing his own plight (Book XXIV):

“The immortals [i.e., the gods] know no care, yet the lot they spin for man is full of sorrow; on the floor of Jove’s palace there stand two urns, the one filled with evil gifts, and the other with good ones. He for whom Jove... mixes the gifts he sends, will meet now with good and now with evil fortune; but he to whom Jove sends none but evil gifts will be pointed at by the finger of scorn, the hand of famine will pursue him to the ends of the world, and he will go up and down the face of the earth, respected neither by gods nor men.”

- But did the listeners agree? Couldn’t they see that the faults of both Agamemnon and Achilles were in themselves? If the listeners didn’t see this for themselves, Homer makes it explicit in *The ODYSSEY*, where he has Jove say (Book I):

“*See now, how men lay blame upon us gods for what is after all nothing but their own folly.*”

More than 2,000 years later, Shakespeare conveyed the same message: “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves...”

In summary, Dear, aren’t these amazing stories?! What powerful messages they contain:

- That people can’t rely on help from the gods,
- That the gods are a bunch of bumbling fools,
- That it’s folly to blame the god “Folly” for one’s own mistakes,
- That “there is one omen, and one only – that a man should fight for his county.”

And from our perspective, seeing how many lives were lived and lost based on the hypothesis that a pestilence (possibly malaria) was caused by a displeased god, there’s the clear message: what monstrous mistakes humans have made replacing ignorance of natural phenomena with “explanations”

relying on the supernatural. Surely Homer's – and not the story about Jesus – is “the greatest story ever told.” And, Dear, maybe you now understand why I wish that all “holy books” in the world were replaced by copies of Homer's books.

IDEAS & INFORMATION IN *THE ODYSSEY*

Homer's second story, *The ODYSSEY*, which is the story about the return of Ulysses (or Odysseus) from the Trojan war, is also amazing, containing many timeless messages. Below, I'll just list some of these messages, grouped in four categories.

1. Messages about the foolishness of gods and their priests, prophets, and soothsayers:

- As for disrespecting soothsayers and seers, Homer has Ulysses' son, Telemachus, say:

“My mother [Penelope] does indeed sometimes send for a soothsayer and question him, but I give his prophesying no heed.”

- There is similar disrespect for “prophets” (Book II):

“Go home, old man, and prophesy to your own children... I can read these omens myself much better than you can; birds are always flying about in the sunshine somewhere or other, but they seldom mean anything... You may preach as much as you please, but we shall only hate you the more.”

- Homer even has Ulysses kill one of the priests (Book XXII):

Ulysses looked sternly at him [the priest] and answered, “If you were their sacrificing priest, you must have prayed many a time that it might be long before I got home again.... Therefore you shall die.”

- There is even disrespect for the gods – even the chief god (Book XX):

“Father Jove, of all gods you are the most malicious. We are your own children, yet you show us no mercy in all our misery and afflictions.”

2. Messages about how to live your life without gods:

- Instead of respecting gods and their prophets and priests, Homer suggests (through Telemachus, in Book II):

“Have respect, therefore, to your own consciences and to public opinion...”

- In Book VI, Homer gives a message for how to live with whatever comes your way:

“There is no accounting for luck; Jove gives prosperity to rich and poor just as he chooses – so you must take what he has seen fit to send you, and make the best of it.”

3. Messages about morality

- In Book VIII, Homer suggests some features of his own moral code:

“Ill deeds do not prosper, and the weak confound the strong.”

- In Book XIX he describes more, by having Ulysses’ wife, Penelope, state:

“Men live but for a little season; if they are hard, and deal hardly, people wish them ill so long as they are alive, and speak contemptuously of them when they are dead, but he that is righteous and deals righteously, the people tell of his praise among all lands, and many shall call him blessed.”

- Further, in Book XXII, Homer has Ulysses spare the life of the singer (who possibly was Homer describing himself), with the words:

“Fear not; Telemachus [Ulysses’ son] has saved your life, that you may know in future, and tell other people, how greatly better good deeds prosper than evil ones.”

- In Book XV, there’s the famous rule for living, stated here by Menelaus:

“Moderation is best in all things...”

4. Messages about living in society

- In Book IX, Homer shows some comparisons between civilized and uncivilized life, by having Ulysses state:

“We sailed hence, always in much distress, till we came to the land of the lawless and inhuman Cyclopes. Now the Cyclopes neither plant nor plough, but trust in providence [what could be worse than to “trust in providence”!] and live on such wheat, barley, and grapes as grow wild without any kind of tillage, and their wild grapes yield them wine as the sun and the rain may grow them. They have no laws nor assemblies of the people, but live in caves on the tops of high mountains; each is lord and master in his family, and they take no account of their neighbors.”

HOMER & HUMANISM IN ANCIENT GREECE

And now, Dear, I want to return to the theme that I advertised at the start of the previous chapter (namely, to begin to show you how ideas about “the gods” started to change). Further, maybe I should have advertised even more (e.g., at the outset of this entire “excursion”, to examine “some skeletons and bleached bones of dead ideas”) that it was also to be an excursion to examine writings by the first two famous “humanists”, namely Sin-leqe-unnini (the author of the most complete version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*) and Homer.

I describe Sin-leqe-unnini as a “humanist” because of the ideas he conveyed. For example, recall the following (to which I’ve added the italics):

- “Only gods live forever... my friend [said Gilgamesh to Enkidu], for even our longest days are numbered. Why worry over being like dust in the wind? Leap up for this great threat. Fear not. *Even if I were to fail and fall in combat, all future clans would say I did the job.*”
- “Remember always, mighty king [Gilgamesh, said the bar maid and goddess Sidur], that gods decreed the fates of all many years ago. They alone are let to be eternal, while we frail humans die as you yourself must someday do. What is best for us to do is now to sing and dance; relish warm food and cool drinks; cherish children to whom your love gives life; bathe easily in sweet, refreshing waters; [and] play joyfully with your chosen wife. *It is the will of the gods for you to smile on simple pleasures in the leisure time of your short days.*”
- Then they [Gilgamesh and the boatman] set out again, this time upon the land. After 10 miles they stopped to eat. After 30 miles they set up camp. Next day they came to Uruk, full of shepherds. Then Gilgamesh said this to the boatman: “Rise up now, Urshanabi [the boatman] and examine Uruk’s wall. Study the base, the brick, the old design. Is it permanent as can be? *Does it look like wisdom designed it?*”

That is (as I wrote in an earlier chapter), according to Sin-leqe-unnini the purpose of life (or the secret of happiness) is not only as Sidur said, “to smile on simple pleasures in the leisure time of your short days”, but as Gilgamesh did, to have and to accomplish some goals – such as finding a friend, building some wall (as “permanent as can be”, a wall for which the designer and builder can ask with pride “does it look like wisdom designed it?”), and being able to claim “even if [we] were to fail... all future clans would say [we] did the job.” As Sin-leqe-unnini had the god Ea summarize:

“Choose to live and choose to love; choose to rise above and give back what you yourself were given. Be moderate as you flee for survival in a boat that has no place for riches.”

That’s as good a summary of Humanism as has ever been written.

Similarly, Dear, as I’ve already tried to show you in this chapter, Homer was a humanist. But now, in addition, what I want to try to show you are hints that Homer had a major influence on the development of Humanism in ancient Greece. Maybe Sin-leqe-unnini had a similar influence in Mesopotamia, but I don’t know (and it’s difficult for me to obtain sufficient information). Consequently, I’ll focus on what happened in ancient Greece, where one can clearly see the first major battle in the war between clerics and humanists (or between “supernaturalists” and “naturalists”), a war that continues to this day.

To start, I’ll try to provide you with, if not evidence, at least a few hints of why I suggested (in the previous chapter) that maybe one reason why the ancient Greeks accomplished so much was because of Homer. To start toward my “explanation”, Dear, I’ll first try to stimulate you to imagine “the mind set” (or “worldview”) of people who lived ~1200 BCE, during the time of (the mythical?) Moses and the siege of Troy. Thus, please try to imagine how it must have been when people “didn’t have a clue” (or “barely had a clue”) of how effects were related to causes, i.e., they had next-to-no appreciation of the scientific method.

In contrast, Dear, I know from experience that the scientific method is almost “second nature” to you. To illustrate, suppose that someone in your school (in whom you had some interest) said something to you that was rude. That would be your initial data set. I suspect that you’d then wonder: “Why did he say that?”; i.e., you’d begin to try to understand the data. Next,

you'd begin to speculate: "Maybe I said something wrong; maybe he misunderstood something I said; maybe someone else said something to him about me..." I'm sure that you'd then reject those speculations that aren't logical: "How could it be that he misunderstood something I said; I haven't talked to him since when he was nice to me?" Finally, you'd probably settle (at least temporarily) on a single hypothesis (e.g., "I bet he's just having a bad day") and proceed to test your hypothesis: you'd start "asking around" to try to learn if anyone knew what his problem might be.

Now, Dear, as totally trivial as the above-outlined application of the scientific method may seem to you, please don't think that it was trivial for humans to develop the method into the form that you now consider to be so obvious. You completed multisteps in the scientific method, even while walking down your school's hallway: you collected some data (about his behavior), tried to make sense of the data, restricted speculations about the causes (of his behavior), demanded that your speculations be logical, and then, you considered possible ways to test your hypothesis. And although you could complete this application of the scientific method during only a few minutes, it required the ancient Greeks approximately 500 years to understand this method, roughly from the time of Homer (~700 BCE) until the death of Archimedes (in 212 BCE). Meanwhile, the ancient Hebrews and other ancient people never learned the method – and today's Christian and Muslim fundamentalists still haven't learned it!

I suspect that you find my claim to be rather hard to accept – if not bizarre! – that it required the ancient Greeks approximately 500 years to develop what you can do while walking down the hall. But, Dear, imagine if you had "the mindset" of earlier Greeks (and Hebrews, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and others); that is, the "mindset" of people described by Homer. Then, if Homer is any guide, you would have included many other speculations about the causes of the boy's rude remarks, e.g., "Perhaps Zeus has sent him a Lying Dream that turned him against me, perhaps Zeus and Fate and Erinys (who walks in darkness) struck him mad, or perhaps he has fallen into the hands of Folly, eldest of Zeus's daughters, who walks delicately not on the solid earth but hovers over the heads of men to make them stumble or to ensnare them and shuts men's eyes to their own destruction."

Nowadays, you would consider such speculations about the cause of the boy's rude remarks to be so silly that you'd probably burst out laughing at them. Yet, in the time of the Trojan war, the people would have taken them

so seriously that they would go to war – or refuse to fight – based on such speculations. And even today, Dear, the thoughts of some people (including most religious fundamentalists, including most Muslims) haven't advanced much beyond those of ancient people.

Thus, suppose that (as you walked down the hallway, away from the rude boy) you asked a companion “What's his problem?”, and suppose your companion answered: “God knows”. You might then respond: “You mean that there's an all-knowing, all-powerful, supernatural being present, here in the school hallway, who knows the details of each interpersonal relationship, who knows why that boy was so rude, and who would transmit that knowledge to me if I made suitable supplications such as praying or offering some hecatombs?”

Well, Dear, some of your companions might say, “That's right!” (although they might wonder what a “hecatomb” was!), but as you know, at least some of your “enlightened” companions would answer: “What? ‘God knows’ is just an expression; it just means ‘I dunno’.”

Next, Dear, please think about how Homer's stories might have influenced the ancient Greeks. Surely all groups had myths about their heroes, from those about Coyote in the Columbia River Basin to Odin in Northern Europe, and from those about Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia to Manu in India. Although I haven't reviewed many of them for you yet, you can find similar stories from ancient Egypt, and as I'll be showing you, the Bible has buried within it the “exploits” of the Hebrew's (mythical?) heroes, Abraham, Moses, et al., the Christians have their (mythical?) Jesus, the Muslims have their (partially mythical?) Muhammad, and so on. Therefore, that the ancient Greeks had their stories about Achilles, Ulysses, et al. was neither different nor significant.

But then, Dear, think about some of the differences between Homer's books and “the first books” of other cultures, particularly those of the Egyptians, Indians, and Hebrews. In those cases, their clerics apparently became “caretakers”, “editors”, and eventually “controllers” of the people's myths. The result (it appears) was that the “fun part” of the people's myths became buried in their culture's “holy books”, as defined by a bunch of bureaucrat clerics, whose prime goal (unsurprisingly) was to ensure that the survival of their parasitic priesthoods.

Further, Dear, please imagine at least some features of “what it must have been like” to live about 2500 years ago: not just no TV for a week (well, you shouldn’t have caused so much trouble!) but no TV at all – and no movies, no radio, and in total, only a handful of books. In India, for perhaps 500 years, there was only one book, the *Veda* (which, as I’ll show you later defines a horrible caste system); in Egypt, also only one book, the *Book of the Dead* (which, as I’ll show you later, contains a huge list of idiotic instructions about how to address the gods after you die); and for the Hebrews, only one book, what we normally call the *Old Testament* (horrible details of which I’ll get to in later chapters). In ancient Greece in about 700 BCE, at least there were four books, two each by Hesiod and Homer. And, Dear, not just no TV and only these four books for only a week, but for your entire life – and for generation after generation – for centuries! What this did to the Egyptians, the Hindus, and the Hebrews is sad; in contrast, what Homer seems to have done for the Ancient Greeks was wonderful.

Homer, however, did have competition – from Hesiod. Hesiod’s *Theogony*, similar to any “holy book”, is filled with wild speculations about the nature of “the gods”. Homer, however, did something different. He retold, probably modified for more effect, and then documented the exploits of the people’s heroes. He did this without incorporating the rituals and rules (e.g., the Bible’s Commandments) concocted by conniving clerics. Instead, he “just told stories” about circumstances, human characteristics, and consequences. That is, in contrast to the rules and rituals with which the clerics of all cultures indoctrinated their people, Homer gave the ancient Greeks something entirely different: he gave them something to wonder about, to argue about, and to think about.

Furthermore, Dear, the case is easily argued that, in the history of the world, no one has ever been more successful than Homer in accomplishing the highest achievement of all story tellers: to make people think. That’s why I entertain the possibility that Homer may have been the key to unlocking the talents of the ancient Greeks: what his books may have done is to stimulate the people to think for themselves (rather than obey the priests). And it seemed to work – although not without a fight that raged continuously for the next 500 years – and in fact, the same fight is still raging today.

Indications that a fight had started can be seen from some of the oldest surviving statements from Ancient Greece. Thus, from the Seven Sages (c. 650 – c. 550 BCE), whom I’ve quoted before, there’s not only “Know

thysel’ and “Nothing too much” but also the astounding line:

[Hesiod](#) [i.e., the author of *Theogony*, defining the genealogy of the Greek gods] [might as well have kept his breath to cool his pottage](#) [or his porridge].

Can you imagine it Dear?! A comparable line from the Hebrews would be: “Moses might as well have kept his breath to cool his porridge!” If such a saying could have been attributed to seven ancient Hebrew sages, then humanity might never have been burdened with the Hebrew’s Old Testament, the Christian’s New Testament, the Muslim’s Koran, and the Mormon’s Book of Mormon – and certain grandchildren would have never have been indoctrinated with such a huge pile of god-garbage!

In contrast, Homer’s stories must have stimulated the listener and the reader to think. He told stories about seeking justice, the dangers of anger, the fickleness of the gods, and especially in the case of Ulysses, the power of perseverance. Homer’s books didn’t define any horrible caste system as did the Indian’s *Veda*, Homer’s books didn’t list any silly instructions about how to address the gods after people were dead as did the Egyptian’s *Book of the Dead*, and Homer’s books didn’t convey any “commandments”, define any rituals, tithes, and “sin offerings”, or stupidly inform the people that they were “God’s chosen people” as did the Hebrew’s damnable *Old Testament*. Instead, Homer stimulated the listener and the reader to wonder, to weigh the evidence, to consider causes and alternatives – in a nutshell, to evaluate.

Stated differently, what Homer apparently did was stimulate what is arguably one of the most important characteristics of any adult human (with importance judged, as always, relative to our trio of survival goals), namely, skepticism – a characteristic that the clerics of all religions attempt to crush. To see it, Dear, imagine if, during your entire life, you had repeatedly heard Homer’s: [“See... how men lay blame upon us gods for what is after all nothing but their own folly.”](#) If you had, what would you have concluded? That you (even now!) should reject all teaching about all gods?!

Further, the “stumblebum” gods described by Homer are in stark contrast to the fierce and vengeful mountain God with which maybe Moses and certainly Ezra saddled the Hebrews. I suspect that this difference in “respect” demanded by their different gods (i.e., the differences in power sought and achieved by the religious con artists of the two cultures) is a major reason why, while the Hebrews essentially floundered, the ancient

Greeks flourished. I therefore suggest that Homer helped release the power of the people – no doubt to the great dismay of the priests.

Now, of course, we'll ever know (for certain) the influence that Homer's books had on the ancient Greeks, but I certainly expect that Homer made the people think – and there's evidence that he stimulated doubts in their minds. For example, approximately 200 years after Homer, Xenophanes (c. 570 – c. 475 BCE) wrote (Fragment 11):

Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all things that are a shame and a disgrace among mortals – stealings and adulteries and deceivings of one another.

Now, a similar statement might have been made by a mystic, complaining that Homer “misrepresented” the gods, but then, Homer must have caused the people to doubt the gods, themselves. Thus, Fragment 15 from this same book by Xenophanes is:

If cattle and horses, or lions, had hands, or were able to draw with their feet and produce the works which men do, horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make the gods' bodies the same shape as their own.

Further, consider again the list of examples that I advertised in the previous chapter:

- About 100 years before Ezra and co-conspirators (which I abbreviate to Ezra & CC) put together the Old Testament, preaching about the need to put faith in their immortal god, the Greek mathematician Pythagoras (c. 582 – c. 500 BCE) stated: “Reason is immortal, all else mortal.”
- About 100 years before Ezra & CC wrote that their almighty warrior god Yahweh would protect the Israelites and “smite” her enemies, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (c. 540 – c. 480 BCE) wrote: “It is wise to agree that all things are one... Combinations, wholes and not-wholes, conjunction and separation, harmony and discord – out of all things comes One, and out of One all things.”
- About 50 years before Ezra and & CC preached that their god knew all and judged all, the Greek philosopher Protagoras (c. 485 – c. 410 BCE) wrote: “Man is the measure of all things” and “Respecting the gods, I am unable to know whether they exist or do not exist.” He's also said to have written (Greek clerics burned his books): “gods are figments of people's imagination.”
- Approximately when Ezra & CC were putting together the Old Testament, with its racist claims that the Israelites were “God's chosen people” and that all

“contamination” by foreign blood (i.e., all foreign wives and their children) should be cast aside, Socrates (c. 469 – 399 BCE) said: “[I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world.](#)”

- While Ezra & CC wrote the Old Testament, promoting their opinions about the “glory” of “belief” and “faith”, the first great Greek scientist and “father of modern medicine”, Hippocrates (c. 460 – 400 BCE) wrote: “[There are in fact two things, science and opinion: the former begets knowledge, the latter, ignorance.](#)”

And let me add to this last statement (by Hippocrates) the powerful summary by his contemporary, Socrates (a statement to which I’ll repeatedly return in later chapters): “[There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance.](#)”

But the battle that ensued in ancient Greece, between these budding humanists and the con-artist clerics, isn’t revealed in the above quotations. To see it, you need to dig into details, some of which I’ll show you in the “excursion” Yx (dealing with “Your Indoctrination in the Mountainous God Lie”). Nonetheless, for now, I’ll at least provide the following list:

- In ~450 BCE, Anaxagoras (who taught that “the Sun was a red-hot stone”) was imprisoned and sentenced to death for breaking a new law (no doubt formulated and promoted by the clerics) that people could be “[impeached](#)” who “[did not practice religion and taught theories about ‘the things on high’.](#)”¹
- After Protagoras (c. 485 – c. 410 BCE) wrote the totally reasonable statement “Respecting the gods, I am unable to know whether they exist or do not exist”, and possibly wrote that “gods are figments of people’s imagination”, he was charged by the clerics with “[impiety](#)”, his books were burned, he was exiled from Greece, and he was lost at sea.
- Socrates (c. 469 – 399 BCE), who had no use for the clerics’ gods and who concluded “There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance”, was charged with “[not believing in the gods in which the state believes](#)”, was found guilty, sentenced to death, and executed.

I will show you more about Socrates in a later chapter; for now, I’ll partially summarize by saying: he was executed not just for what he thought, but for how he stimulated others to think for themselves.

¹ Dear, you can find this information on the internet; for example, see the web page at <http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/Mathematicians/Anaxagoras.html>

For the next thousand-or-so years (i.e., continuing during the Roman Empire), the brilliance of the ancient Greeks almost succeeded in lighting the way for humanity out of the darkness of religious superstition, but eventually, the priests (this time, Christian priests) won again, dragging the western world into the Dark Ages. Then, approximately 500 years ago, the Greek ideas were rekindled, leading at least some people out of the darkness and into the light of science – though even today the poor Islamic people continue to be trapped by their clerics in an Islamic Dark Age. And always it has been the same: ignorant clerics seeking to maintain the *status quo* in which they can maintain their parasitic existence, preying on the producers of the world.

And so, what was it? What did Homer do? What he did was: he told stories to the Greeks; he wrote a “holy book” for the Greeks, a holy book that said, in effect, “It’s not the gods but heroic people (Achilles, Hector, Ulysses, Penelope...), no matter their sex or national identity, who deserve to be honored, in our memory, with our respect.” Approximately 300 years after Homer, “the world’s first journalist”, Thucydides (c. 460 – 400 BCE) summarized it well:

Fix your eyes on the greatness of Athens as you have it before you day by day, fall in love with her, and when you feel her greatness, remember that this greatness was won by men with courage, with knowledge of their duty, and with a sense of honor in action... So they gave their bodies to the commonwealth and received, each for his own memory, praise that will never die, and with it the grandest of all sepulchers, not that in which their mortal bones are laid, but a home in the minds of men, where their glory remains fresh to stir to speech or action as the occasion comes by. For the whole earth is the sepulcher of famous men; and their story is not graven only on stone over their native earth, but lives on far away, without visible symbol, woven into the stuff of other men’s lives. For you, now it remains to rival what they have done and, knowing the secret of happiness to be freedom and the secret of freedom a brave heart, not idly to stand aside from the enemy’s onset.

Approximately 2,000 years later, in his book *The Natural History of Religion*, the philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) saw even more: he saw that the behavior of people depends on the type of gods they concoct. He wrote [to which I’ve added some notes in brackets]:

Where the deity is represented as infinitely superior to mankind [as is the case in Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Mormonism...] this belief... is apt, when joined with superstitious terror, to sink the human mind into the lowest submission and abasement, and to represent the monkish virtues of mortification, penance, humility, and passive suffering, as the only qualities which are acceptable to

him. But where the gods are conceived to be only a little superior to mankind [as was the case for the Greek gods and the gods of your Northern European ancestors – before Christianity was crammed down their throats (under threats of having their throats cut, or stretched by a rope, or burned to ashes with the rest of them), and [for such gods] to have been, many of them, advanced from that inferior rank, we are more at our ease in our addresses to them, and may even, without profaneness, aspire sometimes to a rivalry and emulation of them. Hence activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and all the virtues which aggrandize a people...

This gave rise to the observation of Machiavel that the doctrines of the Christian religion... which recommend only passive courage and suffering, had subdued the spirit of mankind, and had fitted them for slavery and subjection. [Or, alternatively, as Christianity started, it placated those who, already, were essentially slaves with the placebo that life would be better after they were dead!]...

Brasidas seized a mouse, and being bit by it, let it go. “There is nothing so contemptible”, said he, “but what may be safe, if it has but courage to defend itself.” Bellarmine patiently and humbly allowed the fleas and other odious vermin to prey upon him. “We shall have heaven”, said he, “to reward us for our sufferings: But these poor creatures have nothing but the enjoyment of the present life.” Such difference is there between the maxims of a Greek hero and a [Christian] saint.

Finally for this chapter, let me show you someone else’s summary of Homer’s impact on Western society, someone far more knowledgeable than I, namely Richard Hooker.²

No other texts in the Western imagination occupy as central a position in the self-definition of Western culture as the two epic poems of **Homer**, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.³ They both concern the great defining moment of Greek culture, the **Trojan War**. Whether or not this war really occurred, or occurred as the Greeks narrate it, is a relatively unanswerable question. We know that such a war did take place around a city that quite likely was Troy, that Troy was destroyed utterly, but beyond that it’s all speculation. This war, however, fired the imaginations of the Greeks and became the defining cultural moment in their history.

² Dear: I copied the quotation from <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/MINOA/MINOA.HTM>. It’s a single page from an astounding resource available on the web: two, on-line, general-education courses (World Civilizations I and II) led by Professor Richard Hooker and available from Washington State University. The “start page” for the courses is at <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/CONTENTS.HTM>. If I had more years left to live than I expect I do, I’d enroll in this course!

³ Dear: please read that sentence again! Certainly it’s a sweeping generalization; certainly all “the religious kooks” in the West would strongly disagree; but not only do I NOT disagree with Hooker, I ardently wish that what he wrote would be correct! And maybe he IS correct, because Homer’s ideas are central to “Western culture” – as opposed to the religious propaganda imposed on Europeans (courtesy the Romans), imported from the Middle East.

Technically, the war wasn't fought by "Greeks" in the classical sense, it was fought by the Mycenaens; the Greek culture that we call "classical" is actually derived from a different group of Greeks, the Dorians and Ionians. However, the Greeks saw the Trojan War as the first moment in history when the Greeks came together as one people with a common purpose. This unification, whether it was myth or not, gave the later Greeks a sense of national or cultural identity, despite the fact that their governments were small, disunified city-states. Since the Greeks regarded the Trojan War as the defining moment in the establishment of "Greek character," they were obsessed about the events of that great war and told them repeatedly with great variety; as the Greek idea of cultural identity changed, so did their stories about the Trojan War

If the Greeks regarded the Trojan War as the defining moment of their culture, they did so because of the poetry of Homer. It would not be unfair to regard the Homeric poems as the single most important texts in Greek culture. While the Greeks all gained their collective identity from the Trojan War, that collective identity was concentrated in the values, ethics, and narrative of Homer's epic poems. Just as the Greeks were obsessed about the Trojan War, they were equally obsessed about the Homeric poems, returning to them over and over again, particularly in times of cultural crisis. The Greeks didn't believe that the Homeric poems were sacred in any way, or even flawless history. For most of Greek history, Homer comes under fire for his unflattering portrayal of Greek gods. The Greeks understood that the poems were poetry, and in the Hellenistic period came to the understanding that the poems had been deeply corrupted over the ages. So unlike most ancient cultures which rooted collective identity in religious texts of some sort, the Greeks turned to literature.

As the Trojan War was the product of Mycenaean culture, the Homeric poems were the product of the Greek Dark Ages. [With the "Dark Ages" possibly caused by the marauding (and mysterious) "sea people", who were finally defeated by the Egyptians.] Whatever happened at Troy, the events were probably so captivating, that the Greeks continued to narrate the stories long after they had abandoned their cities and abandoned writing. The history of the war was preserved from mouth to mouth, from person to person; it may be that the stories of the Trojan War were the dominant cultural artifact of the Greek Dark Ages. These stories probably began as short tales of isolated events and heroes; eventually a profession of story telling was established – classical scholars call this new professional a "bard." This new professional began combining the stories into larger narratives; as the narratives grew, the technique of story telling changed as well. Whereas early bards probably memorized their stories with great exactitude, the later bards, telling much longer stories, probably improvised much of their lines following sophisticated rules. Maybe. We have evidence from the classical age in Greece of people memorizing the complete poetry of Homer *word for word* (over 25,000 lines of poetry); it may be possible that the Homeric poems were memorized with more exactitude than scholars believe. No matter what the case, by the end of the Greek Dark Ages, these bards or story-tellers were probably the cultural center of Greek society; their status improved greatly as Greeks began to slowly urbanize.

On an average night in the late Greek Dark Ages, a community, probably the wealthiest people, would settle in for an evening's entertainment. The professional storyteller would sing the stories of the Trojan War and its Greek heroes; these songs would be the Greek equivalent of a mini-series, for the stories were so long that they would take days to complete. The Greeks believed that the greatest of these storytellers was a blind man named **Homer**, and that he sung ten epic poems about the Trojan War, of which only two survived (although the Greeks seem to have known them [all?, e.g., about "the Trojan horse"]). As a group these poems told the entire history of the Trojan War; each poem, however, only covered a small part of that history. Many classicists believe that the two surviving Homeric epics (probably the only Homeric epics) were in fact composed by several individuals; in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, most classicists accept the overall Greek idea of a single author. Whatever the compositional history of the poems, they were set down into writing within a few decades of their composition; the growing urbanization of Greek society led to the rediscovery of writing (learned from the Phoenicians this time), and the Homeric poems were committed to writing very quickly. Time and transmission added much extraneous material to the poems, but in their basic character and outline they seem to be the original compositions.

The *Iliad* is the story of a brief event in the ninth year of the war (which the Greeks claim lasted ten years); the great hero **Achilles** is offended when the leader of the Greeks, Agamemnon, takes a slave girl Achilles has been awarded. Achilles withdraws from the battle and prays to his mother, Thetas, a goddess, to turn the tide of battle against the Greeks. The gods grant Achilles his prayer, and he does not return to battle until his best friend is killed by the great Trojan hero, Hector. Achilles throws himself into the battle, fights Hector, and kills him; in a final gesture of contempt, he drags Hector's lifeless body around the walls of Troy. If there is a "theme" to the epic (and one should resist simplifying large and complex literature), it is "Achilles choice." Achilles has been offered a choice: either he can be a great and famous hero in war and die young (Achilles does die in Troy when a poison arrow strikes him in the ankle), or he can live a long, happy life without any lasting fame whatsoever. Although Achilles initially chooses not to die young, the death of his friend forces him to make the choice that will make him famous for all time, but tragically dead at a young age.

The *Odyssey* is the story of the homecoming of another of the great Greek heroes at Troy, **Odysseus**. Unlike Achilles, Odysseus is not famous for his great strength or bravery, but for his ability to deceive and trick (it is Odysseus's idea to take Troy by offering the citizens a large wooden horse filled, unbeknownst to the Trojans, with Greek soldiers). He is the *anthropos polytropos*, the "man of many ways," or the "man of many tricks." His homecoming has been delayed for ten years because of the anger of the gods; finally, in the tenth year, he is allowed to go home. He hasn't been misspending his time, though; for most of the ten years he has been living on an island with the goddess Kalypso, who is madly in love with him. Odysseus, like Achilles, is offered a choice: he may either live on the island with Kalypso and be

immortal like the gods, or he may return to his wife and his country and be mortal like the rest of us.

He chooses to return, and much of the rest of the work is a long exposition on what it means to be “mortal.” If the *Odyssey* has a discernible theme, it is the nature of mortal life, why any human being would, if offered the chance to be a god, still choose to be mortal. This choice becomes particularly problematic when Odysseus, in Book XI, meets the ghost of Achilles in the Underworld; Odysseus remarks to Achilles how all the shades of the dead must worship and serve Achilles, but Achilles replies that he would rather be the meanest and most obscure slave of the poorest landholder than be the most famous of the dead. If being dead is so awful, what is it about being human that makes up for the infinite suffering that attends our deaths? As part of this question concerning the nature of human life, much of the book deals with the nature of human civilization and human savagery. The question also deepens in the latter half of the poem; while the first half of the epic deals with the question of the value of a mortal life, the last half of the epic introduces the question of the value of an *anonymous* human life. What value can be attached to a life that will be forgotten at its conclusion?

The Greeks in general regard Homer’s two epics as the highest cultural achievement of their people, the defining moment in Greek culture which set the basic Greek character in stone. Throughout antiquity, both in Greece and Rome, everything tended to be compared to these two works; events in history made sense when put in the light of the events narrated in these two works. As a result, then, these two epics are the focal point of Greek values and the Greek worldview despite all its evolution and permutations through the centuries following their composition.

There are two very important words repeatedly used throughout the Homeric epics: honor (*timé*) and virtue or greatness (*areté*). The latter term is perhaps the most reiterated cultural and moral value in Ancient Greece and means something like achieving, morally and otherwise, your greatest potential as a human being. The reward for great honor and virtue is fame (*kleos*), which is what guarantees meaning and value to one’s life. Dying without fame (*akleos*) is generally considered a disaster, and the warriors of the Homeric epics commit the most outrageous deeds to avoid dying in obscurity or infamy (witness Odysseus’s absurd insistence on telling Polyphemos his name, even though this will bring disaster on him and his men in the Polyphemos episode). The passage from *Odyssey* XI discussed above presents Achilles’ final judgment on *kleos* and its value when he tells Odysseus that he would rather be alive and the most obscure human on earth than dead and famous.

I trust you agree, Dear, that the above is an astoundingly good summary of Homer’s books. Furthermore, it introduces another theme into which I want to dig deeper, namely, changing ideas about death – which, strangely enough, is the topic that I’ll turn to in the next chapter and which, amazingly enough, will be here, waiting for you, after you get some exercise!