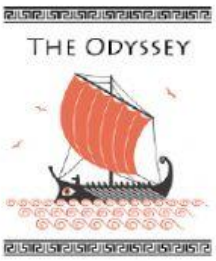


Homer's "The Odyssey"
(A Condensed Translation)

THE ODYSSEY

Chapter 1

Sing, goddess, of Odysseus, man of many schemes, who was forced to wander far after he sacked well-defended Troy, Priam's great city. Many were the men he met in these travels, but many more were the sorrows he felt in his heart as he sailed the salt sea. His goal was to return home safely with his companions. He achieved this goal himself, but he was unable to save his shipmates despite his good counsel, for they sorely angered Helios, lord of the sun, by eating his cattle. Blind to the consequences, they paid for their foolishness with their lives.

Ten years had passed since the bronze-coated Greeks had captured and looted Troy. Those who had survived that ten-year war and their voyage home were now safe and at peace. Only Odysseus, man of many schemes, still remained far from his homeland of Ithaca. For over seven years the goddess Calypso had held him captive on her island, hoping that her beauty and her offer of immortality would make him forget his wife and marry Calypso, but she could not tempt him. Each day Odysseus would sit alone upon the shore of the wine-dark sea and weep with longing for his wife and home.

Seasons had come and gone and come again, finally bringing with them the year the deathless gods had willed that Odysseus, man of many trials, should return home to Ithaca. Yet he was still far from freedom, far from contentment, and far from his family.

All of the gods pitied Odysseus except for Poseidon, the Earthshaker and Lord of the sea, whose hatred did not cease until Odysseus reached the shores of Ithaca. Odysseus had blinded godlike Polyphemus, the mighty Cyclops, who was Poseidon's son. Poseidon could have avenged this injury by killing Odysseus, but instead he chose to force Odysseus to wander from land to land, ever a stranger.

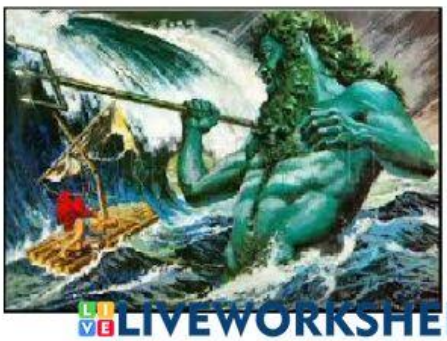
In the eighth year of Odysseus' stay with Calypso, bright-eyed Athena told Zeus, lord of Olympus, My heart aches for wise Odysseus, that unfortunate, unhappy man. Calypso has confined him against his will to her wooded island. Why are you so angry with him that you permit Calypso to restrain him? Did he not offer you generous sacrifices in the land of the horse-taming Trojans?

To these words her father, the Cloud-Gatherer, replied, I would not forget godlike Odysseus, who honors the deathless gods and surpasses all mortal men in wisdom. However, like many other mortals, Odysseus may be quick to blame the gods for misfortunes that he has rashly brought upon himself through his own foolish behavior. By blinding Polyphemus, he incurred the unrelenting anger of my brother Poseidon. But let us plan to start the long-suffering Odysseus on his journey homeward. It is time for the lord of the sea to soften his heart; he will not be able to defy the will of all the gods.

Zeus then called his son Hermes, the Wayfinder, to him and said, Go command the nymph Calypso to permit Odysseus of the stout heart to build a raft and depart. On the twentieth day and after much suffering, he will arrive at the land of the Phaeacians. It is his fate that they will honor him as if he were a god and send him home with more gifts of gold and bronze than he earned for himself at Troy.

When Hermes reached Calypso's island, he was able to converse freely with her, for great-hearted Odysseus sat alone and wept upon the shore of the loud-sounding sea. As a woman tearfully embraces her dying husband, who has given his life for the people of his city, postponing with his courage, his skill, and his strength the day when they will be captured and enslaved, and her tears express the pain in her heart as the proud conquerors prod her in the back with their spears and forcefully take her captive, eager to introduce her to her new life of labor and sorrow, so Odysseus wept tears of grief and despair over his endless captivity.

When Hermes had departed, Calypso approached Odysseus and said, Weep no more, unhappy soul, for I shall let you go! But if you knew the troubles still before you, surely you would choose to remain here with me.



Odysseus replied, I know that my wife, being mortal, cannot compare with you, and yet I long to return to her. Even if some god makes my journey across the wine-dark sea difficult, I shall bear it, for I have a steadfast heart that has already endured much suffering.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

For seventeen days stout-hearted Odysseus sailed across the salt sea upon his raft. He had spied the pale shadows of the mountains of the Phaeacians, the oar-loving people, in the distance when the Earthshaker took note of him. Recognizing his last opportunity to torment Odysseus, Poseidon collected storm clouds to blacken the sky, gathered the strongest winds, and created mighty waves with his trident.

Now I shall surely die! Odysseus exclaimed. How much better it would have been to have died a hero's death at Troy than to die here, alone and without honor. Then I should have had a proper funeral, and men would have sung of my great deeds.

As Odysseus clung to his raft, he was tossed this way and that by the waves. Seeing that he was powerless against the storm, a sea goddess came to Odysseus' rescue. Take my veil, she advised, and swim with it upon your chest. When you reach land, toss it back into the wine-dark sea.

For two days and two nights Odysseus swam upon the waves of the loud-sounding sea. When rosy-fingered Dawn shone forth upon the third day, he found himself close to shore. Still, he would have perished upon the jagged rocks that lined the coast if bright-eyed Athena had not put it into his mind to swim out beyond the surf, where the water was more peaceful, and to search in greater safety for a harbor or a beach.

In time, Odysseus located the mouth of a peaceful river and swam to land. Once he had returned the goddess' veil as she had directed, he found a dry, sheltered place in the woods, and fell asleep upon a bed of leaves.

Meanwhile, Athena appeared to the princess of Phaeacia as her dear friend and led her and a group of companions to the river to wash their clothes. When Odysseus awakened and found them, the princess kindly invited the stranger to the palace to speak with her mother and father.

For the remainder of his time in Phaeacia, Odysseus was treated as a highly honored guest. After a good night's sleep, he was invited to a royal feast, where a fine minstrel sang stories about the war against Troy to the accompaniment of his lyre. When the king noticed that these tales brought tears to the eyes of his guest he suggested athletic contests to brighten Odysseus' spirits and to exhibit Phaeacian skills in boxing, wrestling, and running.

After Odysseus had admired the prowess of the young men of Phaeacia, the king's son asked him, Sir, stranger though you are to us, will you also show whatever skills you possess? A man earns great glory through excellence in athletic contests. Your effort will lift your cares from your heart and be at ease about your departure. Even now, one of our swift black ships is ready to take you home.

Odysseus responded, Kind prince, do not expect me to accept your invitation. My mind is filled with grief and exhaustion, not with athletic contests, and my heart is set only upon returning to my homeland.

Hearing Odysseus' reply, a friend of the prince who was an unusually fine wrestler said, Stranger, you do not accept our invitation because you lack the skills to compete! You certainly do not look like an athlete. More than likely you are simply the captain of a merchant ship, one whose mind thinks only of freight and whose heart is set only on profit!

Young man, godlike Odysseus replied, your words are rude, insulting, and foolish. The deathless gods do not endow each mortal with identical gifts, in either appearance, intelligence, or eloquence. One man may be nothing special to gaze upon but may speak words of such wisdom that he delights those who hear him. Another may be as well formed as a god but may speak like a simpleton. You, for example, are unusually handsome, but you lack judgment!

I am by no means unskilled in athletics, as you suggest, Odysseus continued. Although I am tired in body and spirit, your taunts have so angered me that I am willing to show my skills.

Then, without even bothering to remove his cloak, Odysseus chose a discus that was far larger and heavier than those used in contests and, with a light flick of his wrist, sent it flying down the field. The Phaeacians of the long oars, famous for their swift black ships, gazed upon the discus with awe as it sped far past their most distant marker. The young wrestler stood by, speechless.

Match that, now, young men! exclaimed Odysseus. Or, if any one among you prefers, come try my skill in boxing, wrestling, or even running. I will compete against any among you except my host, for it is not appropriate for a guest to compete against the person who is entertaining him. You will find that I can hold my place in anything.

With the exception of Philoctetes, who used the bow of godlike Heracles at Troy, I am by far the best bowman of any mortal who presently walks upon the earth. And I can send a far-shadowing spear farther afield than any man can shoot an arrow. Only in running may a Phaeacian surpass my best effort, for my journey here by raft has taken a sorry toll upon my legs.

The king, however, suggested other entertainments: dancing exhibitions, songs by their famous minstrel, and fine food, so that their long-suffering guest would remember his stay among the Phaeacians of the long oars with admiration and pleasure.

After the royal family and other nobles had presented Odysseus with a rich array of friendship gifts, including a silver sword from the young man who had taunted Odysseus about his lack of skill, the king said, Let us now hear from our honored stranger, dear as a brother to us, who finds such sorrow in the tales our minstrel sings of the war with Troy.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Tell us your name and the name of your country, the destination of the swift ship that will soon transport you across the wine-dark sea. Tell us of the places you have seen and the people you have met. Speak of those who are wild and without welcome, and also of those who befriend the stranger in their midst and honor the deathless gods. And tell us why tales of the bronze-coated Greeks and the horse-taming Trojans bring tears to your eyes. Did death come upon some dear relative or friend of yours as he shouted the war cry? The gods spin the thread of a mortal's life to create a song for others to hear, even those who are as yet unborn.

LIVEWORKSHEETS