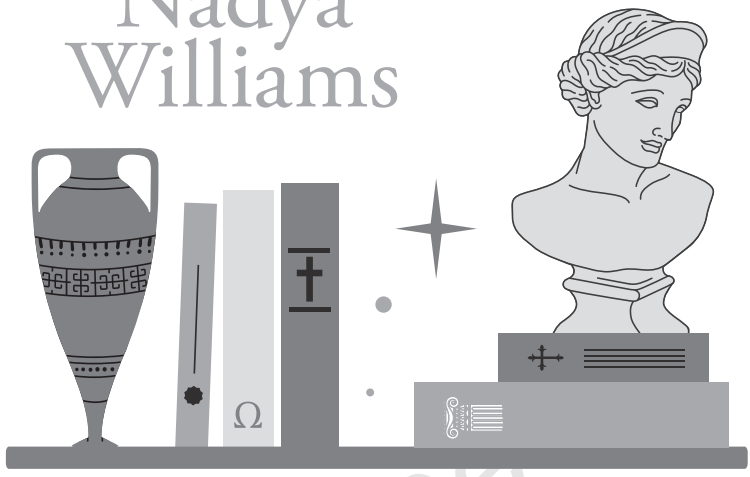
Nadya Williams

Christians Reading Classics

An Introduction to
GRECO-ROMAN CLASSICS
from Homer to Boethius

Christians Reading Classics

Nadya Williams



Christians Reading Classics

A Guide to
GRECO-ROMAN LITERATURE
from Homer to Boethius

ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC

ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC

Christians Reading Classics

Published by Zondervan, 3950 Sparks Drive SE, Suite 101, Grand Rapids, MI 49546, USA. Zondervan is a registered trademark of The Zondervan Corporation, L.L.C., a wholly owned subsidiary of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Requests for information should be addressed to customercare@harpercollins.com.

Zondervan titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com.

ISBN 978-0-310-17107-2 (softcover)
ISBN 978-0-310-17108-9 (ebook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-0-310-17107-2

HarperCollins Publishers, Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland (https://www.harpercollins.com)

Art direction: Name goes here
Cover design: Name goes here
Cover photography: Name goes here
Cover image: Name goes here
Cover illustration: Name goes here
Interior illustrations: Name goes here
Interior design: Name goes here
Illustrated by Name goes here
Written by Name goes here

Printed in the United States of America

$PrintCode

To Dan. Omnia vincit amor.

Contents

Part IV: Heroes and Role Models

Part V: Virtues and Vices in the Age of Anxiety

TIMELINE of AUTHORS and WORKS

Ca. 2100 BC
The *Epic of Gilgamesh*

Ca. 750 BC
Iliad (attributed to Homer)

Ca. 725 BC
Odyssey (attributed to Homer)

Ca. 700 BC
Hesiod, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*

Ca. 518–446 BC
Pindar

Ca. 530s–470s BC
Phrynichus

Ca. 545/4–456/5 BC
Aeschylus

Ca. 397–322 BC
Aeschines

Ca. 390–325/4 BC
Lycurgus

384–322 BC
Aristotle

384–322 BC
Demosthenes

Mid-4th c. BC
Aeneas Tacticus, *How to Survive Under Siege*

239–169 BC
Quintus Ennius

234–149 BC
Cato the Elder

2100 800 700 600 500 400 300 20

2100 800 700 600 500 400 300 20

Ca. 650 BC
Semonides of Amorgos

Ca. 630–570 BC
Sappho

Ca. 480–420s BC
Herodotus

Ca. 496/5–406 BC
Sophocles

Ca. 480s–407/6 BC
Euripides

Ca. 450s–386 BC
Aristophanes

Ca. 469–399 BC
Hippocrates

Ca. 460–400 BC
Thucydides

Ca. 459/8–380 BC
Lysias

Ca. 429–347 BC
Plato

Ca. 420s BC
Old Oligarch, *The Constitution of the Athenians*

Ca. 430s–360s BCE
Xenophon

1. Some of these dates are disputed. Most of the dates used in this timeline are from the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

Ca. 110–24 BC
Cornelius Nepos

106–43 BC
Marcus Tullius Cicero

102–43 BC
Quintus Tullius Cicero

100–44 BC
Gaius Julius Caesar

Ca. 86–35 BC
Gaius Sallustius Crispus (Sallust)

Ca. 84–54 BC
Gaius Valerius Catullus

Early 1st c. AD
Apicius

Mid-1st c. AD
Pamphila

AD 27–66
Gaius Petronius Arbiter

Mid-late 2nd c. AD
Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*)

AD 121–180
Marcus Aurelius

AD 124–170s
Apuleius

AD 160–240
Tertullian

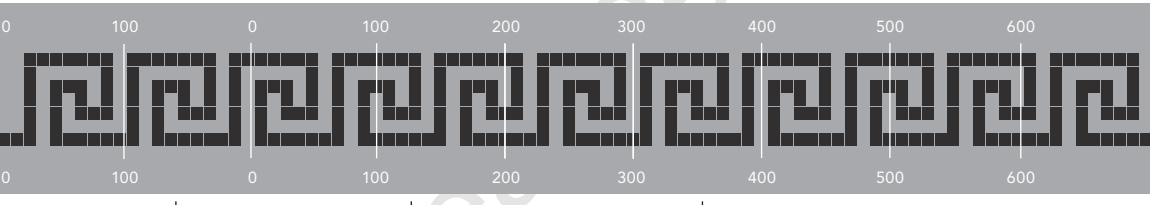
Ca. AD 182–203
Perpetua

Ca. AD 204–270
Plotinus

Ca. AD 210–258
Cyprian

Ca. AD 480–524
Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius

Ca. AD 484–585
Cassiodorus



65–8 BC
Horace

59 BC–AD 17
Livy

Ca. 55–19 BC
Tibullus

Ca. 54–16 BC
Propertius

43 BC–AD 17/18
Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid)

Late 1st c. BC
Sulpicia

AD 56–118
Publius Cornelius Tacitus

Ca. AD 69–120s
Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus

Ca. AD 46–120s
Plutarch

Ca. AD 125–180s
Lucian

Mid-4th c. AD
Faltonia Betitia Proba

AD 348–413
Prudentius

AD 354–430
Augustine

Introduction

Why Should Christians Read the Greco-Roman Classics?

> St. Augustine defines virtue as *ordo amoris*, the ordinate condition of the affections in which every object is accorded that kind of degree of love which is appropriate to it. Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought.[1]

Can Christians Read Greco-Roman Pagans for Spiritual Formation?

This book's goal is simple: to encourage Christians to read the Greco-Roman classics as Christians and to equip them to do so productively by providing a thematic and chronological introduction to key authors in all periods of Greco-Roman literature, from Homer to Boethius.

We begin with a question that may appear scandalous at first glance: Can Christians today read the great classics of Greco-Roman pagan literature for spiritual formation and growth in the virtues? This book seeks to show that yes, we can. Indeed, we will see examples of Christian readers in the Late Roman Empire, like Augustine and Boethius, who did just this.

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (HarperOne, 2001), 16.

But this goal does require reading differently than you are, perhaps, used to doing.

In other words, this is a book about reading the Greco-Roman classics *as Christians*—the why, the how, and, to a lesser extent, the when. Thankfully, this exercise, equal parts intellectual and spiritual, is timely; the past few years have seen the appearance of several excellent defenses of liberal arts education for Christians.[2] Other books have focused more specifically on the value of literature in nourishing our minds and souls—developing the practice of reading not just the Bible but all that we read for spiritual formation.[3] These encouragements, in a world of excess information available at our fingertips, are more necessary than ever.[4]

Just as our bodies are what we eat, so our minds are what we consume.[5] But books on reading for spiritual formation have focused largely on medieval and modern literature, involving antiquity only peripherally. Even though we are continually exhorted to "read old books," those who urge this generally mean something much more recent than Greco-Roman antiquity. Thus, many books and authors that have inspired Christians for nearly two millennia are now less read than ever, falling victim to our increasingly less educated culture and (alas) church. This too, I contend, is part of the scandal of the evangelical mind.[6]

With the exception, perhaps, of a few epics and maybe some dialogues

2. See Jeffrey Bilbro, Jessica Hooten Wilson, and David Henreckson, eds., *The Liberating Arts: Why We Need Liberal Arts Education* (Plough, 2023); Jeffry C. Davis and Philip G. Ryken, eds., *Liberal Arts and the Christian Life* (Crossway, 2012); and Alex Sosler, *Learning to Love: Christian Higher Education as Pilgrimage* (Falls City Press, 2023).
3. See Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton University Press, 2020); Jennifer L. Holberg, *Nourishing Narratives: The Power of Story to Shape Our Faith* (IVP Academic, 2023); Alan Jacobs, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and *Breaking Bread with the Dead: A Reader's Guide to a More Tranquil Mind* (Penguin Books, 2020); Christina Bieber Lake, *Beyond the Story: American Literary Fiction and the Limits of Materialism* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2019); Roosevelt Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2021); Karen Swallow Prior, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life Through Great Books* (Brazos Press, 2018); and Jessica Hooten Wilson, *The Scandal of Holiness: Renewing Your Imagination in the Company of Literary Saints* (Brazos Press, 2022) and *Reading for the Love of God: How to Read as a Spiritual Practice* (Brazos Press, 2023).
4. Jeffrey Bilbro, *Reading the Times: A Literary and Theological Inquiry into the News* (IVP Academic, 2021).
5. This is a central premise for Lanta Davis in her book *Becoming by Beholding: The Power of the Imagination in Spiritual Formation* (Baker Academic, 2024).
6. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, 2022).

of Plato, most Christians today feel that the literature of the ancient world is irrelevant for them as Christians. This philosophy is also reflected in the absence of classics programs from the vast majority of CCCU (Council for Christian Colleges & Universities) schools. Even Great Books or classical education reading lists habitually leave out large swaths of Greco-Roman literature. Admittedly, it is difficult to blame these programs that are trying to cover a broad range of texts. And yet something is lost in this approach. What are we consequently missing? One avid lifelong reader's story can help us begin to understand.

The little boy opened his eyes, shaking off remnants of sleep and the vivid dreams that invaded night after night. Seared in his memory were the images of mythical beasts and mythological quests, along with the stories of gods and monsters. Leaping at him from the pages of the books into which he has been escaping for years since he could reliably read on his own, these tales filled his mind while awake and haunted his dreams while asleep. He loved them so. But they also terrified him, filling him with dread and, perhaps, longing for something he could not describe. He knew at a certain level that these stories were not true—yet they seemed so real in his mind and they inspired his imagination like nothing else could.

Motivated by his love of mythology and the fantastical world, this boy would grow up to become a distinguished scholar of medieval literature. Then, following his dramatic conversion to Christianity at age thirty-two, he became one of the most famous Christian thinkers of the twentieth century: C. S. Lewis.

Decades later, writing of his childhood obsession with ancient Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology and literature, which shaped his mind and soul, Lewis would simultaneously share the story of his remarkable and all-consuming coming to Christ. In his conversion memoir *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis reflects on the contrast between the truth of the gospel, which brought a striking degree of previously unknown joy and peace into his life, and the lies of the mythological tales, which only instilled in him alarm and distress. Later, Lewis recognized that these stories contained hints of the questions that would bring him to Christ while acknowledging that he did not have a full framework for understanding these tales as a child.[7] In

7. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (HarperOne, 2017).

the end, however, this contrast between the pagan stories and the truth of the gospel made the joy of knowing God truly come alive, make sense, and fill him with delight. In other words, reading the pagans strengthened C. S. Lewis's Christian faith.

Too often, the genre of apologetics literature emphasizes very modern logical arguments for the veracity of the Bible and the claims of Christianity.[8] Lewis certainly proposed logical arguments in his most famous work of apologetics, *Mere Christianity*.[9] And yet *Surprised by Joy* is also a work of apologetics, even if of a different sort—apologetics through the reading of the ancient world and its myths. This makes Lewis's remarkable conversion story as ancient as it is modern. Let me explain.

Almost two thousand years ago, as Christianity was first beginning to spread in the ancient Mediterranean world, the gospel came to believers who had also grown up hearing and reading the pagan myths. They saw these stories everywhere in their world, which was saturated with pagan gods in literature, public and private art, coins, and more. I imagine that these new converts, like Lewis, exulted joyfully in encountering Jesus and learning of God's love for all of sinful humanity when they contrasted this hope against the stark cruelty of the pagan worldview that comes through so clearly in these myths. And yet they too could see hints of truth and spiritual longings for salvation in pagan books and myths.

So why should Christians read the Greco-Roman pagan classics? As C. S. Lewis's example shows, the "why" in this question is inseparable from the "how": Christians should read the Greco-Roman classics while remembering their own identity in Christ and seeing the pre-Christian antiquity in dialogue with this identity. In other words, this means reading these texts as the earliest Christians did—to the extent that we can, at least.

When we look at the world around us as believers, this changes everything, including how we read fiction and nonfiction from over two thousand years ago. Instead of mocking the sorrow of unlikeable characters, we are moved with compassion for them; instead of decrying injustices as mere

8. See, for example, Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World* (Thomas Nelson, 2017), and Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Zondervan, 2016).
9. This book makes multiple references to the concept of genre. The best modern overview of the genres and how they work for Christian readers is Andrew Judd, *Modern Genre Theory* (Zondervan Academic, 2024).

affairs of this world, we see them in a cosmic light as part of the fallenness of creation; and instead of idolizing the great powers of the past, we see God's plans for them along with all nations past, present, and future. These insights contribute to what is known as "common grace"—the recognition that some shared aspects of God's goodness and mercy are gifts common to all of humanity, including unbelievers. With all this in mind, we can see more clearly three related reasons for reading the pagan classics for our spiritual formation as Christians: reading to be surprised by joy, reading to understand the world of the Bible and the earliest Christians, and reading for character formation. What do I mean by this?

First, reading the classics as Christians can strengthen our faith and teach us to cherish the story of the Bible with joy—just as it did for C. S. Lewis. In this process, we will learn to appreciate the beauty of the Greco-Roman classics more as we see a longing for spiritual truths that many ancient writers displayed; for example, they frequently asked difficult questions about the nature of the human soul. In other words, reading the classics while thinking about the Bible will enrich our understanding of both.

Second, reading the texts that the earliest Christians read is one of the best ways for us to grow in our understanding of the early converts and believers—our brothers and sisters in Christ. Reading is always a historical, theological, and cultural exercise. It also calls us to appreciate great art. We simply forget this truth all too often when reading familiar things. And yet reading in light of eternity is also a historical exercise—which is why historical writers are an integral part of this book's coverage.

Finally, after millennia of readers using these texts for character formation, both in antiquity and beyond, surely we can safely admit that we also need to do this kind of reading. Of course, we do need to recognize that these virtues, as presented in the pagan texts, do not reflect the complete picture that is only fully visible to those equipped with gospel eyes. Still, we will see that reading for character formation is a goal that the Greco-Roman authors already had in mind. This was, indeed, one of the chief aims of literature in the ancient world, no less than offering entertainment.

The cliché that we are what we eat extends readily to our reading practices. Our minds and hearts and souls are shaped by what we consume—by reading, listening, and watching. And, so, I invite you to taste and see the

beauty in ancient Greco-Roman literature. I especially invite you to consider how this beauty is perfected when we read it with gospel eyes.

An Invitation to Explore

If you are reading this book, chances are that you already find one or more of these arguments for why Christians should read the Greco-Roman classics compelling. Yet you still may feel reluctant to go ahead and check out all the Plutarch or Aristophanes volumes off the shelves at your next visit to the local public library. I can understand this reluctance. Few want to admit this openly in polite company, but Greek and Roman texts often exemplify to many modern readers the definition that Mark Twain gave for the Great Books: Many people feel better once they have read Homer than to be in the process of slogging through Homer.[10] Ancient epics or tragedies or historical narratives just might not feel like reading for joy. If this is you, please feel no shame in admitting this. I hope that reading this book will change your mind.

Unfortunately, many readers who approach these ancient texts for the first time might never have encountered similar literature before. Reading something so far removed from us by time and cultural barriers requires a guide, which I hope this book will prove to be. For instance, humor of the sort that permeates ancient comedy is difficult to understand without knowing some historical and cultural background. Just think how difficult it is to understand a political or cultural joke from twenty years ago, much less two thousand years ago! And then, of course, there are all these strange gods and their stories (for some less familiar names and terms, the glossary at the back of this book can be your good friend). What does all this mean anyway, and how do we approach this kind of reading as Christians? With this umbrella question in mind, each chapter in this book offers you a brief orientation for one particular author, whose work is representative of a larger tradition. Ultimately, I do not claim to provide all the answers, nor do we

10. Mark Twain, "Disappearance of Literature," address at the dinner of the Nineteenth Century Club at Sherry's, New York, November 20, 1900, https://www.originalsources.com/Document.aspx?DocID=TIZG36QPLEMQUYI&H=1. I have adapted the definition to fit this book's context; Twain's original words were "[A classic is] something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read."

cover all possible ancient writers. Rather, I invite you to explore, think, and enjoy—with an eye to reading more on your own as you find authors you would like to explore in greater detail.

Perhaps you are a high school or college student of the Great Books or are enrolled in a classical education program in a traditional schooling or homeschooling environment. You may be a lifelong learner and have previously read many or all of the books considered in this volume, but perhaps have not considered how you might read them specifically as a Christian. Maybe you are an educator—whether at a public or private school or as a homeschooler—who would like to teach the classics to your students. Maybe you have tried reading Greco-Roman literature before but have found yourself lost and confused or just bored. Or perhaps you would like to experience what C. S. Lewis did—you would like to be surprised by joy all over again through reading the classics. Whatever your particular reason is, I hope to provide you with training wheels so you can read Greco-Roman literature more comfortably on your own going forward.

This book proceeds mostly chronologically for two main reasons. First, this allows us to get oriented in time. After all, the literature we examine, if we approach it chronologically, really does reflect ancient history, because all people are the product of their time and place even though the human experience in many ways is timeless. Texts, like the people who first produced them and read them, do not exist in a vacuum. While all of us can profit from these texts, we will benefit even more if we understand the original context better. And, second, ancient readers were aware of which texts came earlier or later. Accordingly, understanding how to read the classics as their ancient readers did requires an awareness of this chronology. This will also help us to see more clearly the influence of ideas over time: Who influenced whom? Some answers will emerge naturally.

At the same time, I also group the selected authors into thematic categories that will help us see consistent themes in these texts over time. Part I, "Longing for Eternity," focuses on the theme of eternity in the earliest Greek literature. While the Greeks were unaware of the Christian values, we will see the longing for eternity present in their imagination, reminding us that this is an in-built human impulse that should point us to God. And so we will look at this theme in the epics of Homer and the shorter poems of Hesiod; in the Odes of Pindar, commissioned to celebrate the victories of the

greatest athletes of his day; and in the quest for writing eternal—or, at least, timeless—history that historians like Herodotus and Thucydides undertook.

In Part II, "The Formation of Virtuous Citizens," we turn to the question of citizenship and the struggle between the individual and the state. Whose desires take precedence? All citizens wish to protect their own interests and those of their families, and yet the success of the state requires individuals to sometimes sacrifice their own desires for its benefit. Ultimately, as we will see, this type of struggle, so foundational to political discourse, reflects an even greater cosmic conflict: our desire to be the masters of our own universe rather than relinquish this power to God.

Building on this concept of the struggle between the individual and the state, we turn in Part III to "Words of Power and Power of Words." Our own world is brimming with words, some of them powerful. And yet our society offers less formal rhetorical training than possibly any previous society in world history. In this section, we consider the ancient world's emphasis on empowering one's words to the maximum degree possible in the work of legal and political speechwriters, writers of manuals and handbooks, and, finally, love poets.

In Part IV, "Heroes and Role Models," we turn to the subject of character formation that is present in ancient literature from Homer onward. Ancient writers and their audiences took this aspect of literature and storytelling for granted: Stories were meant to convey moral lessons and shape the character of their audiences. Who are the best role models? What makes someone a good or bad role model? In this section, we consider how Roman historians, epic poets, and biographers approached these questions and explore how this motivation to form readers shaped their own thinking about the importance of their work. In this process, we will see that certain virtues have a timeless aspect to them, even though the endemic cruelty of the ancient pagan world did not respect all persons.

In Part V, "Virtues and Vices in the Age of Anxiety," we consider what happens when the lessons and values of all previous literature are challenged by the troubles of the age of Late Antiquity. When things fall apart all around us, to what—or to whom—do we hold fast? In this last section of the book, as we consider voices from the turbulent final centuries of the classical world, we examine both pagan responses to the crises through which they were living and several Christian responses to these crises.

The latter—especially Augustine, Prudentius, and Boethius—display a remarkable familiarity with pagan literature of previous ages, reinforcing to us the overall lesson of this book: When we read as Christians, we can discern God in all that is beautiful in this world, including the literature of pagan thinkers who yearned for God but never knew him.

Join me on this time-traveling adventure. We begin—where else?—in the Greek Bronze Age, the world of the Homeric epics, a time of power-hungry demigods and the greatest war in the Greek imagination.

A Brief Note on Translations

Perhaps one of the most common questions I get from readers has to do with what translation to use for a Classical work. This is remarkably difficult to answer. For many texts I discuss in this book, many translations exist and have their merits. In particular, there are probably more translations of the Homeric epics than any other Greek text—and several more are in progress, even as of this writing. So, while I will recommend some translations for the texts I discuss in this book, these are just suggestions and are meant to be a starting point—not the ultimate or exclusive endorsement of any one translation over all others. In reality, there are so many good translations, and choosing one is a subjective decision. It's kind of like with the Bible: Everyone has a favorite version.

So, how might you select a translation of an ancient book? Select one that you find the most readable. Ideally, look at sample pages from a translation on Amazon or another online platform so you can get a sense of the style. Since your goal is to read literature for joy, find a translation that gives you joy.

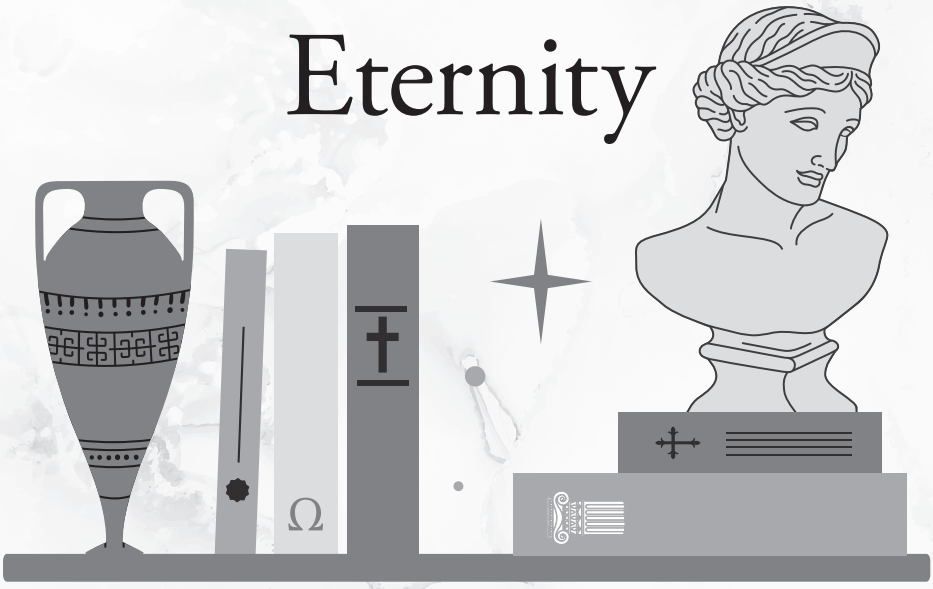
In the long term, it is even better to learn Greek and Latin. But that's not essential to be able to appreciate the texts discussed in this book, just as not everyone has time and energy to go forth and learn Hebrew and Greek to enjoy the Bible in the original languages.

In fact, while I have a PhD in classics (Greek and Latin), you see that in this book I am quoting from other scholars' translations rather than providing you with my own. Why? Because my tendency is to translate literally—but that is not literary. In other words, gifted translators, especially those who translate poetry, are able to translate not simply word-for-word (which I can do) but also offer you the feel of the ancient text in another language (which I cannot do well).

So, when it comes to translations, please rest assured that we live in the age of an embarrassment of riches! Last but not least, I should mention the incredible resource of the Loeb Classical Library. Loeb books are distinctively colored—green volumes for Greek texts and red for Latin. They contain on facing pages the original Greek or Latin text and the English translation. This makes them an ideal resource for someone who knows some Greek or Latin and wants to be able to easily read the work while occasionally referencing the original language.

PART I

Longing for Eternity



CHAPTER

Homer and Glory Before the Foundation of the World

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,
hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,
great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
feasts for the dogs and birds,
and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.[1]

Dreaming of Eternity

Early in my time living in Georgia, now almost a decade and a half removed, I walked out of the house and into the garage to get something. I stopped cold when I saw a rattlesnake inches from my bare feet. Immediately I grabbed a shovel leaning against the wall close by and killed the snake. To this day, I am still not entirely sure how I did this, as my arms operated entirely of their own accord in those few seconds without consulting my panicked brain.

One of the strongest human impulses is our sense of self-preservation. In times of danger, a built-in fight-or-flight instinct kicks in, not because of anything we have been taught but because of how we just *are*. We are wired to love our life and wish to preserve it. More than that, though,

1. Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (Penguin Classics, 1998), 1.1–5.

the earliest known texts of human civilizations around the world show that this same impulse of self-preservation has also led people to dream of immortality—the dream of never dying but living forever, eternally. This dream undergirds the entire genre of ancient heroic epic poetry.

After the death of his best friend, King Gilgamesh, the hero of the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, is confronted with the reality that he too will die. Determined to defeat even death, he goes on a quest beyond the bounds of the known world, earnestly hoping to learn the secret of immortality. Alas, he fails. Two-thirds god and one-third mortal (yeah, Mesopotamian math makes no sense—sorry!), he still dies a man's death. Foiled in their quests for immortality, heroes like Gilgamesh learn instead to settle for the next best prize. They reason that living forever is not the only kind of immortality that exists. The glory that the greatest heroes win through commemoration in epic compositions offers another way to become immortal. The ancient Greeks knew this well.

Sometime in the Late Bronze Age, following the mysterious and catastrophic destruction of the city of Troy in Asia Minor ca. 1100 BC, but well before there was a Greek alphabet for writing down literature (or, really, anything else), itinerant bards in Greek-speaking lands began weaving beautiful stories together for the delight of their audiences. How do we know, you might (and should) ask? Because their tales survived to get written down later—possibly in Athens in the sixth century BC. Close analysis of the language, style, and historical details in these epics—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—shows that they were composed orally over the course of centuries and they do not represent the fruit of one man's labors. Yet the people of antiquity readily attributed these works to Homer, a blind bard who perhaps never existed. Recited at festivals and gatherings, large and small, these epics were the bestsellers of literature before there was such a thing as either bestsellers or literature. Their popularity reminds us of the desire we all have for entertainment, especially entertainment through good—or, one could even say, epic—stories.

We forget sometimes that life without television or the internet or even a smartphone can indeed involve plenty of such entertainment, which is delivered live rather than onscreen. Composed in formulaic epic language, the epics consisted of lines and phrases and entire sections that—before they were written down and "fixed" in a particular version—could be strung

together like beads on a custom-made necklace. Composed earlier, the *Iliad* deals with the Trojan War itself, focusing on a sequence of events in the tenth and final year of the greatest war in Greek mythology. The *Odyssey*, composed slightly later, focuses on the decade-long struggle of Odysseus, one of the heroes of that war, to get home after the war's end.

Bards were known as *demiourgoi*—public workers in the best sense of the term. They were professionals who practiced a craft essential for human flourishing, akin to other *demiourgoi* such as physicians. And, like physicians, bards traveled around, bringing entertainment for a few evenings wherever they went—although we see from the evidence of the Homeric epics themselves that wealthy nobles also employed their own bards. No two performances could ever be alike before the epics were written down. But the overall feelings and desires they reflected were the same. These were action-packed stories about heroes, war, love, family, and sacrifice. Most of all, the epics were about an instinctive desire that people in all time periods of history have felt: the desire for undying glory that would give the greatest warriors an immortality of sorts. The Homeric epics made this glory possible by celebrating the deeds of heroes—just as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* did for its own protagonist.

Craving the immortality that is made possible by glory, the original listeners did not know a key truth that we possess: that God "chose us in [Jesus] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."[2] We desire to be eternal creatures because we ourselves have been created by the only one who is eternal. Although we are children of dust with frail bodies, we also possess immortal souls that long for eternity. Eternity with God is each true believer's reward. Yet manmade and man-perpetuated glory is an empty kind of immortality. It reflects a true and good desire, but it fails to see that desire's ultimate fulfillment for the soul.

Reading the Homeric epics as Christians, we can see a God-shaped void—a yearning for something greater than what the Greek bards and their audiences could ever see here on earth—even in those heroes of the

2. Ephesians 1:4–6.

pagan world and in the gods, who (in the Greeks' imagination) populated the landscape all around them.

The *Iliad*: The Wrath and Glory of Achilles

By the time the *Iliad* opens, the Trojan War, the bitter siege of Troy by the combined army of the Greeks, is in its tenth year. It may seem deeply frustrating and confusing for the modern reader to be dropped into this tale mid-action. What is this war, anyway? Why does everyone assume it needs no introduction? Our confusion is a reminder that most of us did not grow up hearing these myths regularly, as the ancient audiences did. Furthermore, reading the epics in silence is a far cry from the dramatic performances the original audiences enjoyed. Nevertheless, we do see hints and flashbacks to earlier events, including the cause of the war, scattered throughout the epic.

The war started because of a beauty contest gone wrong. At the wedding of the mortal king Peleus and the immortal sea nymph Thetis, an uninvited and angry guest drops off a gift that keeps on giving. This guest is Eris, the goddess of discord, and the reasons for not inviting her to a wedding are, perhaps, self-explanatory: Would *you* invite discord to your wedding? Alas, she "crashes" the wedding by throwing a golden apple inscribed "to the most beautiful" in front of three powerful goddesses: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. Each of the three wants the apple, and so the contest is on. We see here at play the anthropomorphic—humanlike—nature and desires of the gods. Like people, the gods are capricious, vengeful, and cruel. But they are also immortal, which means they can do anything they wish to mortals, who are justifiably afraid of them. Always.

The three goddesses appoint Paris, a prince of Troy, to serve as the neutral party in judging the beauty contest. Yet even after going to the trouble of finding a seemingly neutral judge, each goddess in turn offers him spectacular bribes. At the end, Paris accepts the bribe that Aphrodite offers: to give him the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife. Paris declares Aphrodite the winner of the contest and gives her the golden apple; then Aphrodite fulfills her end of the bargain. There is a problem with this last part, however—a sort of fine print to the original bargain that neither Paris nor Aphrodite seemed (or cared) to consider. The most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, is already married—to Menelaus, king of Sparta.

No matter. Aphrodite helps Paris kidnap Helen from her husband and bring her to Troy. A number of mythological retellings of this myth in later Greek literature suggest that Helen was quite happy to go, while others are less sure. But the consequence of the kidnapping, in any case, is certain. The Greeks, under the leadership of Menelaus's more powerful brother, King Agamemnon of Mycenae, gather an army and launch a massive fleet, whose size later earns Helen the nickname "the face that launched a thousand ships."

Although Agamemnon is the commander-in-chief of the Greek army, the son of Peleus and Thetis—the couple at whose wedding things first went so awfully awry—becomes known in the Trojan War as "the Best of the Achaeans," the greatest of all Greek heroes. ("Achaeans" is one of the terms used to describe the Greeks in the epic.) His name is Achilles, and the opening line of the *Iliad* reveals a curious truth: This poem is about his wrath.

> Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
> murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,
> hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,
> great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
> feasts for the dogs and birds,
> and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
> Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
> Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.
>
> What god drove them to fight with such a fury?
> Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto.[3]

War, this opening states matter-of-factly, means death and destruction. Readers both in antiquity and today often focus so closely on the idea of heroes and heroism to the point of abstraction that they overlook this basic fact. But the *Iliad* is remarkably frank about the calamity of war, even while celebrating the heroes' exploits. There is an irreconcilable conflict of interests, at least among the Greek heroes: The aim of going to war technically is to win the war (and win Helen back). And yet each individual Greek

3. Homer, *Iliad*, 1.1–10.

hero sees the war in very self-centered terms: Every hero's main goal is to be recognized as "the Best of the Achaeans," squeezing the maximum glory he could possibly gain to thereby achieve immortality in future song. The conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles, to which the opening of the epic refers ("when the two first broke and clashed"), is an example of this phenomenon at work.

In the first book of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon insults Chryses, the priest of Apollo in a region near Troy. During one of their raids, the Greeks had captured his daughter, Chryseis, who became a special prize for Agamemnon. Chryses asks for her return. When Agamemnon refuses, the priest calls upon Apollo's help and the entire army learns to its chagrin why it is not a good idea to upset the god of (among other things) the plague!

A murderous plague from Apollo is no joking matter—especially when the plague is killing soldiers during a war and threatening to defeat the attacking army off the battlefield. Agamemnon ultimately has no choice but to give back Chryseis to her father. If things ended here, there would be no *Iliad*. But, of course, Agamemnon does not stop at this point. Upset with Achilles, who was the one who had encouraged him to return his prize to end the plague, Agamemnon takes away Achilles's prize, the captive girl Briseis. Achilles, in turn, announces his own great resignation, 1100 BC style: He will sit out of the war, benching himself in his camp until he gets a good and proper apology. As you might imagine, Agamemnon refuses to play this game. This is the quarrel to which the opening verses of the *Iliad* are referring. Achilles's wrath—the rage that is the very first word of the epic in Greek—is his rage in response to this insult from Agamemnon.

This opening episode is key for our understanding of the Greek heroic code. It shows how honor-driven and externally bestowed this heroic code is. Essentially, honor is something that others think someone has—or not. Chryseis and Briseis are pawns who demonstrate this nature of honor in the Homeric world. These women are no ordinary captives. Rather, each of them is designated a *geras*, a special prize of valor. They are portable trophies whose presence in a hero's tent shows his own special status. To be a great hero meant, after all, receiving public recognition by others—including through special honor prizes. This means that the removal of a *geras* visibly degraded one's honor and prestige as a warrior. Think of it as the stripping away of a medal from a winner after the competition—this person suffers even greater

dishonor than if he had never won the prize to begin with. It is no wonder, therefore, that Agamemnon did not want to give back his own prize and that he took away Achilles's prize when he returned Chryseis to her father.

The externally governed nature of this heroic code—that one is only a great hero if this person is recognized by others and has accumulated great prizes of honor, including prizes that are real people!—is a warning to us as we consider how aspects of such a code appeal to our own desires even today. Each of us wants to be declared good—as God once spoke when he created Adam. In fact, we would like to be declared "the Best," and we would like this coronation to come unconditionally from absolutely everyone around. But our worth and any declaration of goodness, excellence, and ultimately righteousness is to be found in God alone, not in other people's view of us. The suffering of the heroes in the *Iliad* and in other ancient epics, where heroes do all they can to be declared "the Best," is an important warning of what happens if we place our value in others' opinion of us. It reminds us of the empty promises of this kind of glory—it cannot satisfy.

The story of Achilles highlights the emptiness of the Greek heroic code. For most of the epic after his initial quarrel with Agamemnon, Achilles keeps his promise and stays out of the fight, only returning at last after his best friend Patroclus is killed. The poem, chock-full of very graphic and bloody violence and so many duels of heroes ending with the death of one or both of them, finally ends with a Greco-Trojan truce so the opposing forces can bury their dead. We are left with a poignant image of the futility of war. "Is this really all?" we cannot help but wonder as we read or hear of the numberless funeral pyres of the dead on both sides. Yes, if you seek glory through war—yes, this is all that there is.

While Achilles does not die in the *Iliad*, he knows at the end that his own death is drawing nigh. In the Homeric epics, he is satisfied with the choice he has made—given the choice between living a long life in obscurity and dying young in glory, he chooses the latter fate. Some later Greek writers, however, were not so sure that anyone could be truly happy with such a choice. Writing in the mid-second century AD, the satirist Lucian includes Achilles among the many notables in his *Dialogues of the Dead*. And there Achilles remarks mournfully that it would be better to be a lowly man still alive than to be the king of the dead. Perhaps Ecclesiastes offers the most sobering answer to Achilles and the values of the Greek heroic code:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!"
says the Teacher.
"Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless."

What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?
Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.[4]

Ultimately, eternity only gains meaning if spent with the one who is eternal. True, Achilles's glory has lasted. Three thousand years later, you also know who he is because of the *Iliad*. And yet this is all meaningless apart from God. What has Achilles gained from his labors, his decade-long and despairing toil under the blazing sun and the ruthless winters of Troy? Nothing but an early death. And earthly glory.

Penelope and Odysseus's Happy Ending

While the Homeric epics largely revolve around the heroes, women connected to these men in various ways are also part of the story. Many of them are clearly victims of the war—like Chryseis and Briseis, the kidnapped and enslaved women from the towns around Troy. But one woman in particular is presented as an example of virtue: Penelope, Odysseus's wife, who stayed home for twenty years waiting faithfully for his return.

Penelope, though, is no passive housewife. In her, we meet someone who is strategically minded and able to plot several moves ahead—she really is the ideal wife for Odysseus, who is best known for his craftiness. Most of all, her labors at home in

4. Ecclesiastes 1:2–4.

Odysseus's absence enable him to get a happy ending after his initially rough homecoming. As you read the *Odyssey*, pay attention to Penelope and the model of feminine virtue that she presents in a world primarily focused on men.

On January 1, 2018, the internet persona Bronze Age Pervert self-published a book on the value of Homeric values for the modern man. Aptly named *Bronze Age Mindset*, it took off like wildfire, building its author an X following of over 170,000 as of this writing.[5] The author's description of his book on Goodreads includes the following explanation of his argument and aims:

> The contents are pure dynamite. He explains that you live in ant farm. That you are observed by the lords of lies, ritually probed. Ancient man had something you have lost: confidence in his instincts and strength, knowledge in his blood. BAP shows how the Bronze Age mindset can set you free from this Iron Prison and help you embark on the path of power. He talks about life, biology, hormones. He gives many examples from history, both ancient and modern. He shows the secrets of the detrimental robots, how they hide and fabricate. He helps you escape gynocracy and ascend to fresh mountain air.[6]

While the Bronze Age Pervert is the best-known example of someone misreading Homer to get at what he considers the primordial masculine virtues, he is not alone. Of course, as noted earlier, the *Iliad* is a remarkably violent poem, which should caution us against wholesale emulation of its heroes. Additionally, readers looking for the most masculine of virtues from ancient Greek and Roman epics invariably tend to overlook one: the manly virtue of tenderness. Overlooking this virtue in the heroes amounts

5. See Rosie Gray, "How Bronze Age Pervert Built an Online Following and Injected Anti-Democracy, Pro-Men Ideas into the GOP," *Politico*, July 16, 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/07/16/bronze-age-pervert-masculinity-00105427, and Graeme Wood, "How Bronze Age Pervert Charmed the Far Right," *The Atlantic*, August 3, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/bronze-age-pervert-costin-alamariu/674762/.
6. Goodreads, "Bronze Age Mindset," January 1, 2018, https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/40388177.

to cherry-picking material from the epics—proof-texting, if you will—focusing only on battle sequences while ignoring the considerable swathes of text that show heroes in more peaceful settings, where their nature as heroes and exemplars is still clearly recognized.

Strikingly, the virtues on display off the battlefield have nothing to do with displays of brute strength—just as we do not walk around flexing our muscles for no reason at all outside the gym. Or, at least, most people don't. The overwhelmingly narrow definition of masculine virtues in Homer by some modern readers that merely relates them to strength is, indeed, modern and not ancient. It is more frat boy heroic cosplay than Achilles. It is more Bronze Age Pervert and less actual Homer. Let us consider here in brief just two examples of heroic tenderness which remind us that bravery and brute strength do not alone a Homeric hero make.

Throughout the *Iliad*, Odysseus singles himself out by his preeminent craftiness. Indeed, his masterful subterfuge ultimately wins the war against Troy. Odysseus is the inventor of the Trojan Horse scheme—long before this became a computer virus, this was the trick that involved building a hollow wooden horse, filling it up with armed warriors, and sending it to Troy as a peace offering. The Trojans fell for the trick and brought the horse inside the city. That same night Troy fell to the Greek warriors hiding inside the horse, who opened the city gates to the rest of the army waiting outside.

But Odysseus's craftiness is not the only virtue that puts him above all other heroes. Rather, in a world where all other heroes bravely introduce themselves as sons of their fathers, reciting genealogies proudly going back to the gods, Odysseus repeatedly introduces himself as the father of Telemachus. Telemachus was just a baby when Odysseus left for Troy. He was no famous hero and had not accomplished anything. And yet Telemachus was the most important, identity-defining feature in Odysseus's vision of himself, an anchor he held fast to in hope for a future after the war. Telemachus was the one of whom his father, as all proud fathers we know, bragged in every conversation. There is admittedly much to dislike about Odysseus in the Homeric epics; he is a liar, an ever-scheming opportunist, and a serial adulterer to boot. Indeed, in later Greek tragedy he is uniformly portrayed as a villain, and Dante will take up this depiction in the *Inferno*. But Odysseus's rejection of the typical Homeric genealogies to

rejoice, instead, in being a father to a dear son gives us a surprising glimpse of tenderness, otherwise unseen in this hero.

Here is one more example. In Book 6 of the *Iliad*, during a lull in the fight, the greatest Trojan hero, Hector, goes home to see his wife and son. Remember that they have all been living in a city under siege for nearly ten years. Yet even in this difficult situation people get married, families are formed, and children are born. The baby son of Hector and Andromache is not yet a year old. When Hector walks into the room with his war helmet on, its decorative crest swaying gloriously but ominously, the frightened baby bursts into tears. In that moment, Hector removes the helmet to show his baby his real face and to comfort him.

This episode didn't mean much to me when I first read it as a high schooler. But now that I read it with the eyes of a parent, this brings to my mind memories of my youngest daughter, who was the quintessential "rabbit" for the first three years of her life, terrified of every loud or sudden noise, large animals, and anything that looked new and unfamiliar. A war helmet with a towering crest would have certainly set her crying, too. So what did her father do whenever she cried in fear, as she did multiple times each day—over the distant bark of a dog, the sound of a hand dryer in a public restroom, or the noise of a leaf blower from the neighbor across the street? He picked her up and held her tenderly, showing her that he would always offer safety for her in her times of fear.

The tenderness of mothers in all societies is taken for granted. Mothers have, after all, carried their children for nine months and have nourished them with their own bodies first within and then outside the womb. By contrast, the tenderness of fathers, the loving emotion of the heroes who otherwise mercilessly kill on the battlefield, is a remarkable picture of something transcendent and beautiful. It is a reminder that war is not the natural state of affairs but the result of the fallenness of creation. What God made good, we have twisted, all for nothing—as many of Homer's heroes seemed to realize even though they felt trapped in the glory-seeking machine.

In our society also, some become overly obsessed with a hypermasculine idea of heroes—which the Bronze Age Pervert takes to a new extreme. But it is particularly problematic when we also project this same muscle-inflated ideal to God. In the process, we overlook God's remarkable tenderness to us, his beloved adopted children. In the early Christian catacombs,

where believers gathered in secret, a popular art motif emerged: the Good Shepherd. In these simple wall paintings, done by believers taking refuge and with limited means, Jesus also looks humble and lowly, dressed in poor shepherd's clothing as he tenderly carries a lamb on his shoulders. The same eternal God who created the universe and formed the stars, was—and still is—showing love and tender care for the needy—us.

Eternity

The concept of eternity in the minds of ancient epic heroes is deeply self-centered: It is all about the hero receiving the glory that, he believes, is his due. In this way, each hero, while mortal, conceives of himself as achieving at least a small portion of godlike immortality. But we also see much sadness in the heroes' lives as they abandon all possibility of earthly happiness for their heroic quests. Achilles's obsession with immortality through glory ultimately turns out to be an obsession with his own death. In the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus visits the underworld—the realm of the dead—while still living, he encounters Achilles. And the only question Achilles has for him is: What was my funeral like?

The Greek heroic code, with its tunnel-visioned focus on the hero's greatness, turned out to be utterly empty. Achilles's question to Odysseus only drives this point home more fully: This kind of glory is no eternity. Achilles, not knowing the immortal God and his promises, settled for a dim shadow of something he could feel but never knew or experienced. Because we are endowed with eternal souls, a recognition of our identity as eternal beings gives us a different view of our life in the here and now. Our brief time in this mortal coil is a gift to cherish and treasure. It is not a time to spend hunting for immortality or questing for the eternity of our own creation. This is something that even Gilgamesh realized at the end, but the pagan heroes never fully knew the *telos* of mortal time. Ultimately, we must redeem our time for the glory of our Creator.

This has implications for the epics we construct in our minds and in our imaginations—epics with ourselves as the heroes. There is a reason, after all, that modern superhero cartoons appeal so powerfully even to young children. We all want to be our own superheroes—cape optional. This impulse can be good and true and beautiful—but only if we direct it

to serve the world rather than our own selfish desires and only if we give God the glory. Ultimately, the language of the Homeric epics, as theologian Dennis R. MacDonald argues, equipped the writers of the Gospels to do just this—to tell the greatest epic ever told, the story of Jesus.[7]

Recommendations for Further Reading

Epic of Gilgamesh. Translated by N. K. Sandars. Penguin Books, 2006.

Homer, *Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles. Penguin Books, 1998.

Homer, *Iliad*. Translated by Emily Wilson. Norton, 2024.

Homer, *Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles. Penguin Books, 1999.

Homer, *Odyssey*. Translated by Daniel Mendelsohn. University of Chicago Press, 2025.

Lombardo, Stanley. *The Essential Homer*. Hackett, 2000.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Have you ever had an encounter with danger that left you thinking about your mortality? How did you react?
2. Which character(s) in the Homeric epics do you relate to the most? Why do you think this is the case?
3. How does the knowledge of Jesus and his promises change or complete your understanding of the stories of the Homeric epics?

7. See Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (Yale University Press, 2000); *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); and *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

CHAPTER

Hesiod and the Quest for the Meaning of Life

I begin my song with the Helikonian Muses whose domain
is Helikon, the great god-haunted mountain;
their soft feet move in a dance that rings
the violet-dark spring and the altar of mighty Zeus.[1]

Oh Homer, Where Art Thou?

About three centuries after Odysseus finally made it home from Troy and the last of the heroes of the Trojan War slept in uneasy peace with their ancestors, a more ordinary man, whom we simply know as Hesiod, began weaving his own epic yet significantly less heroic poems.

The son of a hard-working small farmer, Hesiod also lived a farmer's life in a little village within the shadow of Mount Helicon, known in his days as the haunt of the Muses, the goddesses of poetry, music, and the arts. The agricultural life was intense and its responsibilities heavy. Furthermore, strife with his backstabbing brother over the inheritance from their father plagued Hesiod for years. As a result, although he lived close to the sea, he had only once in his entire life left his village and boarded a ship. He tells of that experience with pride:

1. Hesiod, *Theogony*, in *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*, trans. Apostolos N. Athanassakis, 2nd ed. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), vv. 1–4.

I never sailed the open seas on a boat,
except when I went to Euboea from Aulis, where once
the Achaeans weathered a grim storm and then with a great
host
from holy Greece sailed over to Troy, land of fair women.
There I crossed over to Chalkis for the prizes
in honor of wise Amphidamas, the many prizes proclaimed in
advance
by his magnanimous sons. And I claim that there
I was the victor in a song contest and won an eared tripod,
which I dedicated to the Helikonian Muses,
where they first taught me mastery of flowing song.[2]

Hesiod's account of the memorable sole sea voyage of his life offers us several key hints about the poet himself and what he hoped to offer his similarly hardscrabble audiences.

First and foremost, Hesiod's world and imagination were saturated with Homer. In referencing his travels to Euboea, he mentions Aulis, from which the Greek army once set out to the war in Troy. Second and related, no less than the Homeric heroes, Hesiod too felt a desire to be the best in his craft. He certainly saw his victory in this poetic contest as the greatest achievement of his life. The reality of sailing to this contest—a war among the poets—from the same harbor as the Greeks once sailed from to war against Troy, was not lost on Hesiod. He was a warrior of a different sort, also embarking on a dangerous adventure. He persevered and won—and did not need a full decade to get home, for the favor of the goddesses was with him every step of the way.

All this ultimately brings us to the third point. Hesiod's dedication of his prize to the Muses, the goddesses of poetry, acknowledges the same reality that permeates the Homeric epics. This world of the early Greeks was saturated with the pagan gods, whose favor meant success and whose disfavor meant destruction. Indeed, as Hesiod tells us at the beginning of his *Theogony*, the Muses first came to him as he was pastoring his sheep

2. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, in *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*, trans. Apostolos N. Athanassakis, 2nd ed. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), vv. 650–59.

and called him to the task of composing poetry. Just as God in the Old Testament calls prophets, so the Muses in ancient pagan societies also call poets, who are prophets of a different sort. The Muses breathed the gift of song into a mere shepherd and asked him—quite rudely to boot—to bring the glory to them and to the rest of the gods with his words. Since Hesiod won the poetic contest with this poem, the task brought glory to him as well.

Hesiod took his calling seriously. His poetic vocation became for him parallel to the calling of mythological heroes to go forth and found a new city or the calling of Homeric epic heroes to perform extraordinary feats on the battlefield. After all, these tasks were also the work of gods acting through men, and divine inspiration was the key to their success:

> Blessed is the man
> whom the Muses love; sweet song flows from his mouth.
> A man may have some fresh grief over which to mourn,
> and sorrow may have left him no more tears, but if a singer,
> a servant of the Muses, sings the glories of ancient men
> and hymns the blessed gods who dwell on Olympos,
> the heavy-hearted man soon shakes off his dark mood, and
> oblivion
> sooths his grief, for this gift of the gods diverts his mind.[3]

Hesiod's two most significant poems to survive are *Theogony*, which tells of the birth and origins of the Greek gods, and *Works and Days*, a meditation on the struggles of the agricultural life. Hesiod composed both poems in the dactylic hexameter epic meter—the exact same poetic meter and style as Homer. And yet these are not epics of the same variety, even if they also use epic language. These are, rather, didactic poems—works that aimed to teach their audience about the topic at hand. Still, the seemingly mundane lessons Hesiod offers are thoroughly Homeric. They teach about the timeless human yearning for glory and eternity in a world filled with death, destruction, and despair. One might note parallels to the Psalms—also composed so often by those in tears and sorrow. The parallel, though,

3. Hesiod, *Theogony*, vv. 96–103.

stops there, as the pagan gods, unlike God, cannot take away sorrow. All the praise of them in hymns and other poetry only grants "oblivion"—forgetfulness, akin to what one might get from drunkenness or sleep.

It matters not whether there was ever a poet named Homer. No trace of any real man's personality comes through in Homeric epics—the focus is all on gods and heroes. But there was a real man called Hesiod, and he includes enough personal elements in his poetry to remind us of his embodiment. He may have been inspired by the Muses, but he was still thoroughly mortal—and he was open about what a bummer that reality could be like. And yet, in the poverty and discouragement of everyday life, Hesiod's inclusion of himself and his life story in his poetry reminded his audiences of something else that was revolutionary: They too, everyday farmers and shepherds, could be humbler heroes of their own stories. Sure, they are a lower sort of heroes than Homer's, but they are still worthy of poetry.

In other words, as Hesiod shows, feats worthy of poetry did not end with the Trojan War. Even a life of farming and generally mundane hardship—no *Iliad* this!—could be the stuff of an epic—a shorter and humbler one, but an epic nevertheless.

Another Genesis: Ancient Greek Visions of Creation

In the beginning, as Hesiod says, divinely inspired by the Muses to know this information to which no other mortal has direct access, there was Chaos. Next came Gaia, the primordial goddess of the Earth, who proceeds to give birth to Ouranos, the sky. Together, Ouranos and Gaia give birth to a new generation of gods, including the hundred-armed monsters and the twelve Titans.

However, there is strife from the beginning, as the children of Ouranos and Gaia hate their father. The feeling is mutual; Ouranos hates his offspring too, and keeps hiding the various monsters within Gaia, who is groaning in pain from their weight. At last, the most enterprising of this next generation, Kronos, the Titan of time, takes the lead in the violent overthrow of Ouranos—first castrating him with a sickle. Kronos does not get to rest easy, however, as the cycle repeats itself with the next generation. Anticipating his own overthrow by one of his children, Kronos devours each

baby god or goddess that is born to him and his wife Rhea. At last, however, Rhea tricks him: When the youngest god, Zeus, is born, she gives Kronos a swaddled large stone to swallow instead of the child.

This is not the first nor the last time in Greek mythology that the gods trick each other. After all, the pagan gods are not omniscient like God. Their knowledge is always limited. And so, in another trick due to a potion, Kronos regurgitates his offspring (and the swaddled tricky rock). None of the disgorged gods are the worse for wear, but they are understandably not happy with Pa. Thus, the next round of divine revolution is imminent. In that next round of fighting among the gods, Zeus and his siblings do manage to defeat the older generation of gods and inaugurate their own reign over Mount Olympus. Yet more chopping is in order first, as Kronos's children dismember the body of the Titan of time—the only way to sort of kill an immortal god who is, technically, unkillable. And yet the pieces still remain out there, somewhere, forever. Just like with time and, of course, eternity, they can never be destroyed.

Sprinkled amidst these dramatic battles of generations of gods against each other are the genealogical accounts—who begat whom. We are familiar, of course, with the Bible's "begats," but our bewilderment—and, let's be honest, occasional boredom—at these accounts makes it difficult for us to appreciate their significance. In the ancient world, however, these genealogies were a way to measure eternity and encapsulate it. The gods' genealogies mattered for this purpose, but so did those of mortals. A sliver of eternity, even for men, could be measured in these lineages. Mortals may be dead now, but they lived. Furthermore, their lives have led to the continuation of other lives. Gods and mortals in the Greek worldview are not so different in this obsession with lineage. We are reminded of this every time two heroes encounter each other in a duel on the Homeric battlefield: They introduce themselves by dutifully reciting their respective genealogies to each other before they fight.

The spectacular nature of *Theogony*'s genealogical accounts and stories of the gods shows two important truths that are significant for understanding the early Greek imagination. First, eternal life belongs to the gods alone. And, second—and even more important—this life does not bring them joy. Petty in their treatment of each other and of the human race, suspicious of everyone, and ever power-hungry, the gods live a miserable eternity that

seems more curse than blessing. For some, we learn, the eternal curse is just that. Just think of Atlas, whom Hesiod mentions in passing, holding the heavy weight of the world on his shoulders forever. What kind of eternal life is this?

And then there is Prometheus.

Arguably none of the gods in Greek mythology had a softer spot for humankind in his heart than Prometheus. A Titan—a member of the same older generation of gods as Kronos—he was always an object of Zeus's suspicion. As Hesiod tells us, after one transgression too many, he took on Zeus's full wrath for his assistance to humans. His punishment? He was chained to a rock in (the Greeks believed) the Caucasus Mountains. There, all day, every day, an eagle—the sacred bird of Zeus—picked at his liver, eating it one tiny pecked-out bite by bite. At night, Prometheus received a break, just long enough for his liver to grow back, and in the morning the savage punishment would resume anew.

The tale of Prometheus presages Jesus at more than a surface level: Here is the one god in all of Greek mythology who truly chose to suffer on behalf of frail humans. This is the closest, indeed, that we ever get in pagan mythology to something remotely akin to substitutionary atonement. All other gods repeatedly treat human beings as their playthings to be toyed with and disposed of as needed, with no pity or mercy. Tales of rape of mortal women by the gods keep surfacing in *Theogony* so casually that if we do not stop long enough to process these brief asides and lists, we might miss these stories for the horrific violence against personhood that they represent. But Prometheus, we see, is different. Helping people through such actions as stealing fire for them from Zeus costs him something—the joy of having an immortal life. As a god, Prometheus cannot be killed. But he can most certainly suffer, and Zeus makes sure that he does.

Such stories of the suffering of the gods present a rather unpleasant vision of eternity. It clashes with that Homeric dream—that desire to live forever that the heroes chased in vain. But then, such is the limit of human vision and human imagination. Left to our own devices, as Hesiod's stories about the gods remind us, we could never imagine a God who would choose to be chained, like Prometheus, and suffer in a horrible way, all to save humankind. Such self-sacrifice, after all, requires an anthropology unlike any seen in Greek mythology—a view that human beings are precious. But

the point is, we never see such a philosophy or such a view of humanity in *Theogony* or, really, anywhere in Greek mythology.

We repeatedly see the judgment over anyone's preciousness or lack thereof as wholly subjective: A god may or may not like a particular human. Likewise, people may or may not like other people. There is no absolute moral stance over the value of anyone's life. The result, as Hesiod matter-of-factly shows in his didactic epic poem *Works and Days*, is the simple reality of human life as suffering from birth to death. Indeed, we find in this process that there is only one difference between gods and men. Gods may suffer all day long, as Prometheus did, but they never die. People, however, suffer all day long, all their lives, and then they die. If they're lucky, however, they will have descendants, who will continue that story in their own suffering lives.

Works and Days: From Here to Eternity?

Hesiod ends the divinely focused *Theogony* with a few final genealogical observations concerning the births of some of the heroes of the Trojan War, including Achilles and Aeneas. In contrast, *Works and Days* sticks mostly to the human rather than divine experience. The story it tells can be seen as the product of another chronological age: a time later than the heroes of Troy. Just as *Theogony* told of the generations of the gods, so *Works and Days* presents the mortals' side of existence. It is a life, Hesiod emphasizes, that is filled with curses: family strife and enmity, the misery of marriage, and a sense of the pointlessness of existence. Year after year, the works and the days will repeat. Actually, they do not repeat precisely. With each repetition, things only get worse.

One of *Works and Days*'s most striking episodes is the sequence of the generations of man:

> There was, at first, a golden age:
> At first the immortals who dwell on Olympos
> Created a golden race of mortal men.
> That was when Kronos was king of the sky,
> And they lived like gods, carefree in their hearts,
> Shielded from pain and misery. Helpless old age

Did not exist, and with limbs of unsagging vigor
They enjoyed the delights of feasts, out of evil's reach.
A sleeplike death subdued them, and every good thing was theirs;
The barley-giving earth asked for no toil to bring forth
A rich and plentiful harvest. They knew no constraint
And lived in peace and abundance as lords of their lands,
Rich in flocks and dear to the blessed gods.[4]

This first age, we learn, was truly blessed. Indeed, the humans of the golden age seem to have been better off than the gods themselves, as we recall the strife and misery that had been a feature of the gods' lives from their creation. Incidentally, we learn that these humans overlapped with the age of Kronos as "king of the sky."

Once that age all died out, however—and Hesiod doesn't tell the reasons why—the gods made a second, worse race: the silver age of humanity. Because this second race disrespected the gods, Zeus (now in charge of Olympus) destroyed it. He himself made the third race—of bronze. Bent on violence and destruction, this race of humanity destroyed itself, and Zeus then made the race of heroes. These heroes, Hesiod tells us, fought the great mythological wars, especially against Troy, but were consequently wiped off the face of the earth. This brings us at last to Hesiod's own age. Unfortunately, as he notes, it is the worst age of all—the age of iron, wracked by persistent and systemic injustice and misery. He sadly asserts that it would have been better not to have been born than to live in this age of unjust and unlawful oathbreakers.

Hesiod knows this well from personal experience, as he gradually reveals over the course of the poem. His brother Perses had cheated him out of his inheritance from their father. Tied up in courts for years and years, Hesiod futilely kept trying to get the inheritance back. This miscarriage of justice has pursued Hesiod all the days of his life, making him bitter and angry. He vacillates between the certainty that Zeus will always punish such oathbreakers as his brother and will restore justice and the belief that no consequences are forthcoming for the unjust until Zeus one day destroys this present evil generation, just as he had done with the ones that

4. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, vv. 110–21.

preceded it. But then, as the pattern of existence has showed, if the gods create another generation, it will be even worse.

Still, one has no choice but to live out his or her lot. Perhaps one can at least be glad that it's not eternal. And so, in the meanwhile, even in this horrible and unjust age one must go through the works on the designated days and seasons. Spring demands planting, while summer and fall bring a harvest—if all goes well. At least, sometimes it does. It is hard work, to be sure, but such is life in this age of iron. In addition to these seasons of works of the land, one must not forget the seasons of life. At some point, a young man must find a wife and start a family. It is a misery of another sort, Hesiod admits: The hard work of marriage is just like the labor that is involved in the life of farming. It is yet another curse of this iron age, but one must bear it. So, it continues—each new morning, new season, and new year. You suffer injustice, you mourn that suffering, and you work and work and work—until you die, probably mourning at that last moment how unfair both life and death are.

Reading Hesiod, one is struck by the theme of despair that runs through his poetry, connecting both *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Life is hard for both gods and humans, although it is certainly harder for the latter, on average—unless you are Atlas or Prometheus. The pagan gods, we see though Hesiod's own eyes, could not even provide a happy existence for themselves, much less for the mortals they created. It is an endless cycle. No one in the Greek imagination is going to come out of it well.

In the midst of this misery and despair, it is striking to reflect about the idea that every new morning brings a renewal of blessings rather than curses. Such is the promise God gives us repeatedly, responding to the kind of pagan despair that Hesiod exemplifies. Lamentations 3:22–24 is an especially poignant example of this. It is a passage many know because of the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," whose refrain comes to my mind so readily in time of trouble, great and small:

> Great is Thy faithfulness!
> Great is Thy faithfulness!
> Morning by morning new mercies I see:
> All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
> Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Because of God's faithfulness to sinful humanity, each morning reveals new mercies of God's love to us. "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living," David proclaims in a psalm in the midst of his own hardship.[5]

We are no Atlas or Prometheus. But we are no Hesiod, either. Despair and hardship have been people's companions since the earliest days. Our own days right now are filled with suffering—if not our own, then that of other people we know, near or far. But we know that such suffering does not hold the final word; God does. The days and years repeat, and so do the seasonal works and family obligations, but the cycle of our year is not Hesiod's. Why? Because we know how the story ends. Christ's sacrifice for humanity, unlike that of Prometheus, has ransomed our lives. This gives our lives meaning for times of both joy and suffering. Furthermore, we are freed from despair over the evils and injustices of this world and from fear over the death that will surely be our mortal bodies' lot.

The Cup of Nestor

Sometime in the eighth century BC in the Greek trading colony of Pithekoussai, located on a small island off the coast of Italy, someone attended a nice dinner party. He defaced one of his host's drinking cups by scratching a silly ditty on it: "I am the cup of Nestor, well-suited for drinking. Whoever drinks from it, straightaway the desire of beautifully crowned Aphrodite will overtake him."[1]

This is maybe not the deepest message, but it is an obvious reference to the *Iliad*, where there is an elderly hero, Nestor, who does happen to have a legendary golden drinking cup.

Most significantly, this is one of the earliest (and some have said the earliest) known texts written in the Greek alphabet,

1. The translation is mine.

5. Psalm 27:13.

then in its infancy, only recently adopted from the Phoenician alphabet. It is striking to consider that one of the earliest texts written in this brand-new alphabet was not a work of literature or anything lofty, but a graffito referring to a work of literature—a silly poem about a Homeric hero.

Around 1000 BC on the island of Euboea, where Hesiod traveled for the poetic contest that he won with his *Theogony*, a middle-aged man was buried. We do not know who he was, and yet his burial tells a powerful story about his life and dreams. He was cremated, and his ashes were placed in a much older bronze bowl. Weapons were placed next to him. Buried nearby, but not cremated, were his companions on his journey out of this life: four horses, ceremonially slaughtered, and a young woman, decked out with gold jewelry.[6] Ever since this burial was discovered, scholars have been asking questions about it. Who is this man? Why was he buried in such an unusual manner? Who is the woman buried with him? Was she connected to him in life? Did she die a natural death, or was she killed as part of his funeral proceedings in order to accompany him in death? What's the deal with the horses, anyway?

We cannot answer all of these questions, but we can formulate a partial answer. Our answer key, it turns out, lies in Homer. This burial, which seems so strange, replicates closely the descriptions of heroic burials in the Homeric poems. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, when Odysseus gets to catch up briefly with the shade of the dead Achilles in *Odyssey* 11, the only plea Achilles has is: Tell me about my funeral. And the description with which Odysseus dutifully regales him looks very similar to the burial of Patroclus in *Iliad* 23. It also resembles the burial of the unknown hero of Euboea. Perhaps this man, having heard the heroic epics in life and eager for the glory of heroes to be his own lot, decided that even if he did not live a Homeric hero's life, at least he could be buried as one. And yet, driving home the point of the insignificance of man's vain dreams of glory, we do not even know this man's name.

6. For an overview of this heroon (hero shrine) at Lefkandi, see "Archaeologies of the Greek Past—Lefkandi," Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology & the Ancient World, accessed March 6, 2025, https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/greekpast/4729.html.

The Euboean man's obsession with his own burial echoes that of Achilles, but the desires of both men raise an important question: Does our life's meaning lie in our death and burial? As Christians, we know that our story does not end there. For after death and burial comes the resurrection. The Bible promises repeatedly that just as the Son of God promised—and spectacularly achieved, to the amazement of the earliest witnesses—we too will rise with him some day. Our quest for eternity, therefore, looks infinitely more hopeful and joyful than that of Homeric heroes or their wanna-be imitators, like the self-staged nameless hero of Euboea.

Yet the strife for glory did not stop with Hesiod or his iron age contemporaries. In antiquity, as today, the realm of athletics provided yet another opportunity for those craving immortal glory to achieve it—not on the battlefield of Troy, and not on the farmlands in the shadows of Mount Helicon, but in the greatest athletic contests of the age. Good business acumen led one poet, Pindar, to capitalize on the Homeric urges of the athletic competitors of his age. For a handsome fee, Pindar composed commensurately handsome odes celebrating the heroism of the victors. We turn next to his visions of glory and immortality through athletic victories and the writing of poetry about them.

Recommendations for Further Reading

Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*. Translated by Apostolos N. Athanassakis. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004 (second edition) and 2022 (third edition).

Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*. Translated by M. L. West. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What does Hesiod think about glory and eternity, and how does his vision differ from the Homeric epics?

2. What do we learn from the Lefkandi burial on Euboea? What do you think the man was thinking when he designed such a burial for himself?
3. What is the meaning of your life? How do you know that this meaning is true? If you were to find a time machine and go visit Hesiod for a day, what would you like to tell him in response to his reflections about life?

CHAPTER

Pindar and Seeking Eternal Glory Through Athletics

> Kylon plotted a dictatorship and I wonder why they dedicated a bronze to him. My reasoning is he was physically very beautiful and quite well known for winning a two-lap race in the Olympic games.[1]

The Quest for Immortality at the Stadium

Chances are, if you talk to many a little boy (or if you ever were a little boy yourself) and ask him what he would like to be when he grows up, the answers will include famous athletes in one or more of his favorite sports. To be honest, I am not a sports afficionado myself so I will not mention any athletes here, but you can go ahead and take a minute right now to rattle off the names of your own personal heroes and perhaps even their best stats in their respective sports. It's okay—it is therapeutic. Most of all, it is true: Perhaps the closest that our society comes to having its own Homeric heroes is in the realm of athletics.

Heroes in our world today are made and unmade in front of thousands of fans watching any given game in person at a stadium or on television or livestream from home. The most dedicated of fans know stats about players going back nearly a century and get excited about those moments

1. Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, vol. 1: *Central Greece*, trans. Peter Levi (Penguin Classics, 1979), 79.

when it seems that someone is about to break an old record and set a new one. Furthermore, famous athletes themselves reap the financial and reputational benefits from their successes on the field. They become advertisers of products, especially athletic gear. They write books—and are the subject of books—they make cameo appearances in movies, and more. Their glory, for a time, is secure.

But here's the surprising thing. The quest for immortality at the stadium is nothing new. In the early fifth century BC, a talented poet made a name—and likely quite a nice nest egg—for himself by writing poems that celebrated the greatest athletic victors of his day. His name was Pindar, and he became the go-to poet of the age for patrons of athletics all over Greece, who paid him handsomely. Millennia later, we only know about specific athletes and their victories because Pindar wrote about them. The Homeric principle is at work here in the realm of poetics. What Homer was to the heroes of the Trojan War, Pindar became the same type of glory-maker for the athletes of his age.

Everyone has heard, of course, of the Olympics. Yet the Olympics, celebrated at Olympia in honor of Zeus every four years since 776 BC, were just one of four great panhellenic athletic festivals—contests that included participants from all over the Greek-speaking world and, therefore, guaranteed unparalleled prestige and fame for their victors. In addition to the Olympics, there were the Pythian Games, held at Delphi in honor of Apollo every four years after 586 BC; the Isthmian Games, celebrated in honor of the sea god Poseidon at Corinth every two years after 582 BC; and the Nemean Games in honor of Zeus, held every two years beginning in 573 BC. Nemea, incidentally, was also the location of the mythical hero Heracles's first labor—the capture of the Nemean lion. It was consequently a fitting place for yet more heroic glory and fame to be made.

The panhellenic nature of the festivals made them prestigious. Here was a chance to compete against the best of the best, not only in one's own city but with athletes from all over the Greek-speaking world. Many of these places were certainly not known to most participants, and their residents spoke Greek with a different accent. Thus, competitors were not just representing themselves but their cities. Their honor or dishonor would not be their own alone but would reflect back on their city—this was yet another

parallel between them and the Homeric heroes, who also were aware of the connection between their own glory and that of their homeland.

Also, just like some athletes today may give credit for their victory to God, the athletes of Pindar's age could not avoid the pagan religious setting of the competitions in which they engaged. All four of the great panhellenic games were held at religious sites and in honor of specific patron divinities. Two of the four celebrated Zeus, the king of the gods. One of the remaining two festivals honored Poseidon, Zeus's brother and god of the sea, and the other was dedicated to Apollo, Zeus's son and one of the twelve Olympian gods.

Athletic contests at these festivals included footraces of different distances, horse and chariot races, wrestling and boxing, and more. Technically, only men were eligible to participate, although the chariot races made it possible for wealthy women to compete by entering their horses and jockeys.[2] The requirements of the contests also ensured that the participants were among the wealthiest and most noble-born people in the Greek world. After all, participants had to pay for their own training. Participants also had to travel to the events in advance to be examined by special panels and accepted into the competition—expensive undertakings in their own right. Horse and chariot races, in particular, were the purview of the wealthiest nobility and royalty. After all, maintaining a team of four horses in peak shape was understandably costly and difficult—not to mention the danger factor involved in racing four-horse chariots at breakneck speed around a narrow track.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the families and patrons of victors wanted to commemorate their achievements in various ways, including through specially commissioned poetry. Pindar's odes in celebrating these athletes are strikingly relatable in some of their content. They often describe the youth and beauty of the victorious athletes, and they note just how difficult it was to achieve victory in a competitive field. Less modern, at first glance, is Pindar's use of mythological stories and parallels to glorify the accomplishments of the athletes. Still, the takeaways are timeless: The immortality of the greatest athletes' achievements reminds us of the same

2. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant provide a lengthy list of the resulting women winners in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, 4th ed. (Bloomsbury, 2016), 194–202.

truth that we saw in the Homeric epics and in Hesiod's writings. The gods never die, but mortals—even the most glorious of athletes—do. We are finite and limited, even when we are at the pinnacle of our achievements. So, what does this mean for how we think about the glory we seek and, sometimes, achieve in every realm of life, including athletics? To answer this question, we first need to consider the longings that have always driven athletes to seek victory at the stadium.

Athletics and the Quest for Immortality

In 476 BC, King Hieron of Syracuse, a powerful Greek city-state in Sicily, won the horse race at the Olympic Games and hired Pindar to commemorate the occasion. A single horse race required a jockey on a horse, and we can readily assume that the king himself did not risk his life and limb around the tough corners. Indeed, when we think of the horse races or the chariot races, it is apt to consider their modern successor: the car races. There, cars also slip, collide, crash, and flame up. Sometimes the riders emerge the worse for wear.

But in this race, all went smoothly—perfectly!—for Hieron's horse. And as the one who paid for the training of the horse and its rider, Hieron received the crown and the accolades for this victory. In many ways, such a victory was a celebration of the king's orderly rule and ability to control the elements, human and equine. Indeed, Pindar opens the celebratory hymn for this victory, Olympian 1, by listing the best things of all: Water is the best of elements, gold is the best of metals, and the Olympics are the best of all competitions. By winning the Olympics, Hieron demonstrated his control over all these elements. He is, in other words, a great king, one whose achievements are on par even with the gods', especially in this moment of glory.

Pindar, however, is not one to present facile celebrations. Instead, after the opening compliments and grandiose statements about Hieron, the ode shifts into the mythical segment, so typical for Pindar's celebration odes. Usually, he selected myths that had some connection either to the victor's city of origin or, as in this case, had a subtle moral lesson to offer. Indeed, the myth Pindar tells in this ode initially seems rather unflattering and unfitting for the occasion. It is the tale of Tantalus, a king once beloved by the gods but who lost favor when he tried to test them in the most horrible way imaginable. He cooked his own son, Pelops, in a stew and served the dish at a feast to the

gods, just to see if anyone would notice. Spoiler alert: they did, although not before a distracted Demeter nibbled on a piece. In response, Zeus promptly resurrected Pelops and punished Tantalus by eternally surrounding him with delicious fruit and plentiful water that he was unable to enjoy.

Dysfunctional families in Greek mythology are aplenty, and the family of Tantalus is particularly so. Why did Tantalus, a king who had the gods' favor, decide to test their knowledge in such a horrific manner by killing and cooking his own son? And why would Pindar include this myth in his celebration ode for the athletic victory of a great king? Perhaps Tantalus's success was the most fitting way to describe the temptation that the greatest victories of our lives hold over us—they can become a massive boulder hanging over our heads, threatening to crush us.

Success, whether in athletics or in any other area of life, is a dangerously intoxicating drug. It is, on the other hand, something we all crave. What athlete, ancient or modern, doesn't dream of winning at the Olympics? And yet success can be seductive in all the wrong ways, since it tempts us to test the gods (as Pindar saw it) or to test God, as we might admit if we are honest. In our human strivings after power and glory and accomplishments—the things we conflate with immortality and eternity—we can easily make ourselves into our own gods. When victorious in any area of life, we should give glory to the gods, as Pindar said, lest they grow jealous of our success.

Pindar was on to something significant that we know: All our strivings, for victory and success and glory, cease in Christ. In Christ alone, we can rest. Our victories and successes belong to God, but in the greatest moments of victories it is easy to claim these achievements as our own. Of course, Pindar was no fool. He knew which way his bread was buttered, and he was not going to forthrightly tell one of the most powerful kings in the entire Greek-speaking world that he needed to resist the seductive allure of power. But he could hint at this truth in poetry and through the telling of a well-known myth. You too, O great king, are mortal—a creature of dust and fog.

Youth Athletics

Of course, not all athletes, whether in antiquity or today, are full-grown adults. Youth sports have become in modern America a full-fledged industry in their own right; for example, Friday night high school football draws

a larger crowd than any other event in my small Midwestern town of Ashland, Ohio. Annual Halloween trick-or-treating in Ashland is held on the Thursday before Halloween, rather than on the night proper, all to ensure (as the locals tell me) that no trick-or-treating events would ever interfere with Friday night football. We take this event that seriously!

The star athletes of these high school sports command a commensurately high degree of glory. Indeed, the path to a coveted NFL career generally lies through a very clearly marked trajectory: from high school football to college football at a Division I school (on a full scholarship, needless to say) to the draft into the NFL. Very few ever make it into professional football, but this doesn't stop thousands upon thousands of school-aged players each year from trying.

We do not know a lot about children's sports in antiquity, but Pindar's odes celebrating athletic victories offer a tantalizing glimpse.[3] A number of surviving odes celebrate the victories of young athletes, who are probably somewhere between the ages of twelve and eighteen. One of these, Pythian 10, commemorates the victory in a footrace at the Pythian Games of a boy about whom we otherwise know nothing—one Hippokleas of Pelinna. There is a certain irony here: The victor's name means "glory of horses," and his hometown is located in Thessaly, a region in northern Greece that was most famous for its horses. But this boy's victory was not in an equestrian sport—he won by running a middle distance, two laps around the track, on his own two feet.

It is fitting in celebrating a young athlete to consider how his victory reflects on both his city and, especially, his family. Pindar is happy to let us know that Hippokleas's father was also a prize-winning runner—at the Olympics, no less. As the poet notes, the father's seeing his son victorious in this very same type of race is about as high a blessing from the gods that one can reap in this life. Ultimately, this victory ode celebrates its youthful victor by reflecting on what we all desire and glorify in youth sports: health and popularity, which we associate with the good life beyond youth. A successful athlete in youth sports, we assume, will also be a popular and successful grown-up.

3. That said, several of the women athletes mentioned in Lefkowitz and Fant's *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, 194–202, appear to be girls.

Pindar proclaims that assumption as he includes a blessing: May this victory bring to Hippokleas the respect of the older men in his community and the admiration of the young girls his age. He is, after all, just a youth and not yet married. This victory is likely to increase both his prestige as an adult and his chances of a great marriage with a girl of his choosing. We may pretend that we no longer think this way today, but think of how many movies set in high school pair the star football player and the best-looking cheerleader. There is, additionally, an implied echo here to another runner from Hippokleas's home region. Thessaly, after all, was the homeland of the Homeric hero Achilles. In addition to being "the best of the Achaeans," Achilles is also labeled "swift-footed" by Homer because he wasn't just the best Greek warrior—he was also the fastest. And, so, could this fastest of Greek boys, Hippokleas from Thessaly, hope to become one day also a great warrior?

Pindar excels at these tantalizing hints: the dreams of greatness yet to come in these celebrations of present greatness. Indeed, that is how we act as humans. Even as we achieve what we had previously thought would be the pinnacle of our lives, even at that moment, even while receiving that victor's wreath, we dream up a new pinnacle: something better that we hadn't thought of before but desire now.

Finally, Pindar has some fun in likening his own work as a poet to athletic events, referring to his poem as the four-horse chariot of the Muses. This is a poignant image. Poetry, at its best, is orderly and organized, following the rules of its genre and art yet trying to do something within these bounds that has never been done before.[4] This doesn't happen easily, just as it is never easy to drive a four-horse chariot around a track faster and better than anyone else—governing the will of four different creatures in the chaotic environment of a race. So why do it? For the glory—why else?

The Homeric epics referred to the glory that the tellers of epics could win, not by doing epic deeds of their own but simply through immortalizing them. Eternity can be won this way by proxy. And so, Pindar also—a mortal poet with no special skills other than the important gift of poetry—is running his own race, guiding the Muses around the track to victory.

4. For a discussion of how genres work within poetry, see Andrew Judd, *Modern Genre Theory* (Zondervan Academic, 2024), 117–39.

Perhaps he was right. As we read his poetry now, 2,500 years later, and only know of most athletes he celebrates through his words alone, we realize that poets really do get the last—and the most lasting—word. And yet reading this poetry, beautiful as it is, also reminds us of the emptiness of such victories. Hippokleas has been dead and gathered to his ancestors for a long time. What was the point of his achievements? We can only hope that they brought him some joy during his fleeting life.

Athletics and the Quest for Honor and Redemption

Pindar's position in celebrating victors of different panhellenic athletic games placed him in a unique position in the Greek world: He celebrated victories of individuals from all over the Greek-speaking world, including from city-states who had at various occasions, including in his own lifetime, been each other's bitterest enemies. So what did he do on these occasions? An immaculate professional, he celebrated the victor and honored the quest for honor and redemption that present-day countries also seek through athletics. Athletes, after all, represent not only themselves.

One particularly striking example of Pindar's diplomatic good sense in mediating such potential drama comes through in Isthmian 7. In this poem he celebrates the victory of one Strepsiadas in the pankration at the 454 BC Isthmian Games. The pankration was known as a particularly vicious sport: It combined no-holds-barred wrestling with boxing. Not surprisingly, it was a special favorite of the Spartans, the most martial state of the age. Victory in this sport was especially prestigious. But in this ode, something else overshadowed the victory's impressive achievement: his city of origin. Strepsiadas was from Thebes.

In the early fifth century BC, the growing Persian Empire invaded Greece twice. In the first invasion, the Athenians dramatically defeated the Persian army at the Battle of Marathon (490 BC). This victory forced King Darius to retreat back home to lick his wounds. But a decade later, following the death of Darius, his son Xerxes was back for another invasion with an even larger army, one that (the historian Herodotus tells us) drank whole rivers dry while on the march. In the course of this second invasion, most of the Greek city-states combined forces against their common enemy,

understanding that they could win only if they were united. And win they did—crushing the Persians decisively both on sea at the Battle of Salamis (480 BC) and on land at the Battle of Plataea (479 BC).

But here is the kicker: While most of the Greek city-states indeed worked together to fight the Persians, a few chose instead to "medize," as the Greeks called it—to join the Medes (another term for Persians). The most prominent city-state to medize? Thebes. Strepsiadas himself likely wasn't yet born at that point, a quarter century before his great athletic victory, but this was the generation of his parents. Consequently, knowing his city of origin, everyone watching Strepsiadas's victory would have remembered this recent and painful history.

Pindar is a skilled diplomat, so he goes back to much earlier, mythical history in opening the ode with some nice words about Thebes, the hometown of Dionysus, the god of wine. To be fair, he keeps this story clean, not revealing in detail the uglier aspects of that myth—those were plenty. Next, he turns his attention to the young victor Strepsiadas himself. Sure, he is not in the youth sports category but is quite young—presumably somewhere in his early-to-mid-twenties. And so Pindar expresses admiration for Strepsiadas's youth and beauty, which are on par with the strength he has just proven through his victory in the pankration. His looks, in other words, are not deceptive but demonstrate a matching strength of body and character.

Such a depiction of the victor as someone now proven beautiful in every way is Homeric and deeply culturally ingrained in the Greek world. Just think of the Homeric heroes: All of them were beautiful—as well as strong, skilled on the battlefield, and often adept with words. Beauty and virtue were meant to march hand in hand. By contrast, Homer briefly mentions the "ugliest man who came to Troy" in the *Iliad*. This man, Thersites, is not only ugly but speaks out of turn and dares to criticize the supreme commander-in-chief of the army, Agamemnon.[5] He is the antihero par excellence, deserving nothing but ridicule from Odysseus, who savagely beats him into submission. The Greek army laughs in response to this display of cruelty.

A quarter century before Strepsiadas's magnificent victory, the Thebans

5. Homer, *Iliad*, 2.250–317.

had proved the rottenness of their character to the rest of the Greeks when they sided with the Persians. But now here is a representative of a new generation, one unmarred by a betrayal of the rest of the Greek-speaking world. Wouldn't this be a good moment to let bygones be bygones and celebrate athletic greatness that, in this young man, is fittingly combined with beauty and all the accompanying excellence of character? This is the message that Pindar subtly presents here, as he highlights the city of the victor no less than the victor himself. We thus see a very modern instance of a likeable athletic victor representing his rather disliked homeland well to others abroad.

However, Pindar and his audiences were perhaps somewhat aware of a longing left unfulfilled. This is why there was a huge demand for Pindar's services. The memory of even the greatest victories is fleeting, just like the beauty, youth, and strength of even the greatest of victors. All flowers fade at the end—it is only natural. But we know that God's word stands forever, and this is a comfort that successful athletes today need no less than anyone else.

Pentathlon and *Kalokagathia*

In antiquity, just as today, well-rounded athletes were particularly respected. No Olympic event embodied this idea more clearly than the pentathlon. In this combination of five events, athletes competed over the course of a single intense day in standing long jump, javelin throw, discus throw, foot race, and wrestling. The victors were considered to have demonstrated *kalokagathia*—literally, beauty and goodness, the attributes of the most noble persons.

For the Greeks, internal character and external achievements were connected. Only someone truly good and beautiful, therefore, could win an athletic contest of strength and endurance. Such a victory couldn't be a mere accident of strength—it had to be the result of extraordinary virtue and self-control. However, such an approach yet again adds up to

valuing and judging people based on their achievements, determining their worth externally. If only victors are good and beautiful, an uncomfortable Homeric question comes to mind: What does this mean for those who lost?

Each celebration ode that Pindar wrote celebrated someone at the greatest moment of his mortal life—the moment of prestigious victory. But as Pindar well knew, and as we also well know, our bodies were created with limits. This drives our desire to commemorate that great moment, to prove that it really did happen—for in a few decades, it might seem inconceivable that this seventy-year-old man had once been the Olympic champion. No athlete can remain at the peak of his or her game for a lifetime. At some point sooner or later, our bodies grow weak and frail, reminding us, even as we resist this truth, of our finitude.

This reality does not mean that we should not celebrate athletic achievements, but it does mean that we should not make them into idols. These particular idols are especially extremely transitory. Pindar's odes reflect this truth in their very existence—if we do not write down something beautiful and spectacular about the victor and his achievements, both will be forgotten all too quickly. Even the victory itself will lose significance, perhaps. Looking at a dusty trophy decades later, one might struggle to remember what it was all about and why it mattered. Like our very finite bodies, so are our victories.

But another reality of sports is no less important to remember. For every athletic competition that has a victor, there are many more losers. If we define the victors solely by their victories, then we ought to define everyone else by their losses—an uncomfortable conclusion! In other words, most of us are losers in whatever sport we compete, for only one winner can be crowned. The Greeks understood this stark reality even better than we do, since we dole out ubiquitous participation medals and trophies for youth sports and even for adults—cue the completion medals for marathons, for instance.

However, this much-mocked current trend of participation trophies likely gets something important right, albeit without fully realizing it: In

Christ we have not just a victory, but *the* victory. This truth is so simple yet so complicated. It should ultimately give us comfort for all athletic endeavors and other competitions by reminding us that whether we win or lose, neither our victories nor our losses define us. That is a comforting thought.

Recommendations for Further Reading

Pindar, *The Complete Odes*. Translated by Anthony Verity. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Which of the stories of Pindaric victories discussed in this chapter resonated the most with you? Why do you think it did?
2. How should Christians think about athletics or other competitions (if you are not an athlete)? What are some parameters that come to mind for you?
3. If you were Pindar today and were to write a victory ode, whose victory would you celebrate, and how would you approach your poem? If you are feeling inspired, go a step further: write your own victory ode!

CHAPTER

Herodotus, Thucydides, and Writing Eternity in Prose

I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.[1]

Eternity in Prose

Right around the time of Pindar, another Greek writer was more quietly—and likely for much worse pay—working on his own pet project of writing eternity. But this man, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, decided to attempt something that had not been done at this scope before in Greek literature, even while choosing to do something that was very typical. Yes, he wrote an epic tale of an epic war. And yet the epic war he wanted to explore in detail was historical, not mythological: the Persian Wars. Herodotus's decision was doubtless personal: He was born right at the end of this conflict and his hometown, the city of Halicarnassus in Asia Minor, played a major part in the war. But unlike Homer or Hesiod or even Pindar, he chose to write in prose. In hindsight, we see the significance of his quiet rebellion much more clearly than he had ever imagined. This is why we call Herodotus "The Father of History"—a title that establishes him as the free-spirited experimenter who started something new: the writing of history.

1. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (Random House, 1982), 1:22.

When we read translations of ancient literature, including poetry, sometimes we forget that a decision to write about a recent war—the war of his parents, which Herodotus surely grew up hearing about from family, neighbors, and friends—and in prose, to boot, was so revolutionary—but it was. Herodotus's visionary decision attests not only to the Greeks' willingness to experiment with other genres but also confirms the rise of a new creature in Classical Greece: readers. While poetry is easy to memorize and was composed and meant to be presented orally, prose was meant to be read. Such reading would be done not only in public but also by private individuals who had the means to purchase scrolls to read at home.

And so, with his massive work of nine books—nine separate scrolls—that formed his history of the Persian Wars, Herodotus became the model for all future historians. His goal, as he tells us from the get-go, was to preserve the great deeds of men—both Greeks and non-Greeks—from extinction. This aim has been the mission of historians ever since. While historians are also people and often take sides in their own interpretations of events, they are also aware of their duty to preserve an often messy and complicated past.

Herodotus's experiment became a massive success, although some read it more for the esoteric stories of weird things Greeks and non-Greeks have done than for the grand history narrative. He was, it seems, a businesslike personality up front yet a jocular entertainer in the back. But the historian whom we tend to place beside Herodotus, the Athenian Thucydides, who wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), was most assuredly all business and no fun. Ever. To be fair, this was perhaps not Thucydides's fault: The life he lived was decidedly complicated.

While Herodotus was just a guy who had wealth and connections sufficient for the ample travel that he undertook while researching his book for decades, Thucydides was an Athenian aristocrat and politician whose career culminated in becoming a general: a prestigious yet stressful office. Furthermore, Thucydides was significantly closer to the war that he documented than Herodotus was to the Persian Wars: He served in the Peloponnesian War until he was exiled for botching an important military operation in 424 BC. He subsequently spent the rest of the war traveling away from Athens à la modern war correspondents.

Each of these two historians documented the most important war of his lifetime for not only the Greek world but the entire Mediterranean world.

Each was convinced that it was necessary to set the history of this conflict in writing to preserve its memory for future generations. In this regard, we find Herodotus and Thucydides also operating with the Homeric mindset: Great deeds, whether good or bad or neutral, must be preserved both to render the glory due to the past and to benefit the future. In other words, both Herodotus and Thucydides saw the writing of history as a timeless, weighty duty—the work of preserving the past for eternity. History was, as Thucydides hopefully and ambitiously described, "a possession for all time." It was the work of glory—past, present, and future.

It was the work of eternity.

The Historian at Work

Hesiod may have encountered some rude Muses on the hillside where he herded sheep, but Herodotus and Thucydides had no such sources for their historical quests. Without divine inspiration, they instead had to pursue research to gather information about the events they were describing. They understood their task well. Both men conducted significant original research: oral interviews with witnesses and participants, consultation of any documents they could find, and so much travel to visit sites of relevance that one modern scholar wrote an article titled "Herodotus the Tourist."[2]

Facts, however, do not stand alone. The historian needs to decide which facts fit best into the story and what order and purpose they should follow. Indeed, the historian must set forth a purpose first of all. Herodotus's methodological prologue to his *Histories* made this initial declaration of purpose an essential and henceforth expected feature of the genre of historical writing that subsequent Greek and Roman historians followed.[3] Historians still generally follow this approach today—which is why your history teachers and professors ask you to have a thesis statement in your history papers.[4] So, how did Herodotus see his work?

---

2. James Redfield, "Herodotus the Tourist," *Classical Philology* 80, no. 2 (1985): 97–118.
3. See John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2025).
4. For an overview of historical methodology and goals of study from a Christian perspective, see John Fea, *Why Study History? Reflecting on the Importance of the Past*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2024) and Sarah Irving-Stonebraker, *Priests of History: Stewarding the Past in an Ahistoric Age* (Zondervan Reflective, 2024).

> Here are presented the results of the enquiry carried out by Herodotus of Halicarnassus. The purpose is to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks; among the matters covered is, in particular, the cause of the hostilities between Greeks and non-Greeks.[5]

Human beings are liable to die, and therefore human events are forgotten, erased by time. The only antidote that protects the glory of events from eternal extinguishment is, Herodotus concludes, to write them down. Fair enough!

Herodotus's emphasis on the importance of the achievements of both Greeks and non-Greeks may surprise us at first glance. When we recount the events of wars from our fathers' or grandfathers' generations, we likely prefer to condemn the enemy openly than to commemorate the enemy's achievements. I think, for instance, of my two Russian grandfathers who fought in World War II; both remarkably survived the Battle of Stalingrad. Their generation most assuredly would not have thought of anything their German enemies did as remarkable or worth remembering. But this mission also appears readily Homeric for Herodotus—recall that the *Iliad* also depicts moments of glory on and off the battlefield for both the Greek and Trojan heroes.

We do not need to guess that Herodotus was thinking of Homer while writing his introduction. He makes this clear for us himself as he proceeds to tell his theory about the origins of the Persian Wars. It all started, he says, with a series of kidnappings of women—first, the Phoenicians abducted a Greek princess, taking her to Egypt. Next, Greeks visiting Tyre in Phoenicia kidnapped the king's daughter from there.

A generation later, Herodotus tells us, the Trojan prince Paris decided to kidnap Helen. He assumed from previous historical precedent that this wouldn't cause any trouble—but, alas, he was wrong. This kidnapping sparked the Trojan War. In this way through his prologue, Herodotus manages to connect his new experiment—writing history in prose—to the more respected epic of Homer. Furthermore, we see his reflection on historical

5. Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

causality: Events like the Trojan War do not exist in isolation. Rather, events have a bearing on other events.

But, wait, you might be asking right now: What does this catalog of abductions of random princesses have to do with the Persian Wars? And doesn't the Trojan War, with its tales of gods and demigods, belong to the realm of mythology rather than history? Herodotus saw an obvious response to the first question: Troy was located in Asia Minor, part of the Persian Empire of his day. The Trojans were, in Herodotus's mind, the ancestors of the Persians. So the Persians took the Trojan War personally and sought a way to avenge the disaster and dishonor they had suffered. This makes sense—or, at least, it did to Herodotus.

As for the second matter, the distinction between myth and history did not exist as clearly for Herodotus as it does for us today. For him and his readers, the Trojan War was certainly a faraway event, but it was unquestionably historical—and its effect on the Persian Wars was, therefore, perfectly logical. Herodotus was not the only person who sought to mix mythology and history. We will see later, when we get to the Roman poet Vergil, that the Romans also had an interest in connecting their history to the Trojan War (and to Trojans specifically).

Thucydides started his own project within a couple of decades from the time when Herodotus had completed his. He seems to have looked down on his predecessor; in a brief jab, he apparently contrasted Herodotus's project unfavorably with his own:

> The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.[6]

Look, Thucydides wants you to know that he is a *serious* historian—not like that Herodotus guy, unnamed but clearly referenced here. He is

6. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1:22.

not one who courts his readers through gratuitous entertainment. And so Thucydides insists that he doesn't care for the "applause of the moment." If his work manages to educate readers to understand how historical events unfold, he will be content. It is perfectly fair for us to note that Thucydides doth protest too much. Surely, he did care about winning glory for his work; after all, every writer who has ever existed has wanted to be read and appreciated. Furthermore, such a concern for glory was in Thucydides's very DNA as a Greek man! And yet we also see in his words a somber variation on that worn-out modern adage that "those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it": If you know history, you will at least understand what is going on when it repeats itself, as it invariably does. Then at least you'll be equipped to say "I told you so" to everyone around you.

While Thucydides takes great effort in his prologue to separate his work from that of Herodotus, ultimately both men have a common goal in mind. As historians, they want to document epic wars in their own times and give their own updates on Homer, as Hesiod and Pindar had each personally done. Hesiod wanted to show that everyday events could also be the stuff of epics, while Pindar glorified athletic victories, setting them on par with the heroic achievements of Achilles and his ilk. But Thucydides and Herodotus go a step further, proclaiming that each age and each warlike generation can have their own epic war that is worthy of historical writing. These epics, furthermore, have a way of educating their readers—forming their very character. Let us consider now two further ways in which they do so.

History as Literature

Thucydides may have taken jabs at Herodotus's excessive use of entertainment in his history to attract the attention of his readers. But nothing Herodotus did (at least as far as he tells us) is likely to garner as much of a shock from the modern reader as Thucydides's explanation of how he approaches speeches in his history:

> With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say

> what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.[7]

Over the years, I've heard students describe this admission as "shocking," "shameless," "mic drop," and "bombshell." I myself have joked to students that they can't abide by this method of citing information in their college papers. Can you imagine a historian today ever borrowing a page from Thucydides's playbook to admit outright: "I included quoted speeches in my book wherever I thought that such a quoted speech was necessary. I did hear some of these speeches. But for some of them I wasn't actually present in person, and I'm not entirely sure that a speech was even delivered on that occasion. But I just wrote what I thought should have been said on that occasion. Oh, and I won't tell you which speeches I heard and which ones I made up."

Obviously, we would consider such a methodological approach from historians and journalists today to be utterly scandalous and outrageous. But before we get overly angry at Thucydides's free hand in wholesale making up some speeches in his history, let us recall that some of his literary predecessors (e.g., Hesiod) were getting their information direct from the Muses. And so, more than anything else, when we read Thucydides's description of how he composed speeches in his history, we should be reminded of the close connection that ancient historical writing bore to more fictional genres of literature, especially the epic. In this regard, historical speeches are similar to historical battle narratives; both try to paint a picture fitting to the occasion, leaning on art to present what looks like reality.

For example, one genre of speeches in Herodotus, Thucydides, and subsequent Greco-Roman historical writers is the pre-battle exhortations that generals give to their troops. Modern historians have wondered if such speeches actually happened.[8] How can we even know? These historians have discussed the logistics of addressing large crowds before the availability of

7. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1:22.
8. See Mogens Herman Hansen, "The Battle Exhortation in Ancient Historiography. Fact or Fiction?" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 42.2 (1993): 161–80, and "The Little Grey Horse—Henry V's Speech at Agincourt and the Battle Exhortation in Ancient Historiography" *Histos* 2 (1998): 46–63.

voice amplifiers. Could a general really speak to several thousand men at once and be heard by all of them? But, to consider a more recent parallel, the eighteenth-century evangelist George Whitefield could address thousands of listeners in urban settings with a clear, sonorous voice—which an initially skeptical Ben Franklin confirms in his autobiography.[9] Just as opera singers have traditionally projected their voices to be heard throughout an entire large hall, so could some talented public speakers. In other words, these pre-battle speeches could certainly have happened more or less as ancient historians describe.

But perhaps such speculations are not the point. Rather, these speeches are another feature of the new prose epics that Herodotus and Thucydides were writing. Speeches heighten the drama: They present participants in the historical narrative as real characters rather than flat one-dimensional figures. In the process, they make historical accounts more interesting. Additionally, both Herodotus and Thucydides use battle narratives not only to describe real events as accurately as they can but to create Homeric epics in prose. Here is one example.

During the thick of the Battle of Marathon (490 BC), one Epizelus, an Athenian soldier, had a vision: "It seemed to him that he was confronted by a huge man in heavy armour, whose beard overshadowed his whole shield; but this phantom passed him by and killed the man next to him. That is Epizelus' story, according to my informants."[10] Following this encounter, Epizelus immediately went blind—despite having no visible wound nor even the merest scratch on his body—and remained blind for the rest of his life.

Modern historians have mentioned Epizelus as a classic example of PTSD on the battlefield, and that is certainly true. But we also see remarkably Homeric features in this episode. Here again, in a chaotic battle narrative a single warrior is singled out by name, and we see the presence of the supernatural—an encounter with an entity similar to Homeric descriptions of the gods fighting on the battlefield right alongside the mortals. Seeing a god

9. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, in *Benjamin Franklin: Autobiography, Poor Richard, and Later Writings*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (Library of America, 1997), 669. Franklin further remarks, "[Whitefield's preaching] reconcil'd me . . . to the antient Histories of Generals haranguing whole Armies, of which I had sometimes doubted."
10. Herodotus, *The Histories*, 6:117.

generally carried consequences, and so Epizelus's blindness makes sense in this regard. But more than anything else, Epizelus's close call with death in battle reminds us that war leaves scars, visible or invisible, upon all its participants. Is the glory that the greatest warriors obtain in battle worth such sacrifices? We already saw in Homer's epics that some warriors felt conflicted over this very question. And so, Thucydides realized, sometimes war as literature becomes more closely connected not to the genre of epic but tragedy. Perhaps a more famous example of this genre shift involves a small island that wanted to remain neutral during the Peloponnesian War.

In 416 BC, the Athenians set their eyes on the tiny island of Melos, which had up until that point remained neutral during the Peloponnesian War—refusing to back either Athens or Sparta in the conflict, unlike what practically all other Greek city-states had done. At this point, Thucydides himself has been an exile from Athens for almost a decade. Where he got his information about these proceedings is unclear, but we find a short tragedy in his narrative: an episode we refer to today as "the Melian Dialogue."[11] Thucydides allows us to eavesdrop on a conversation between the Athenians and the Melians, casting it as a tragic dialogue—a conversation he himself certainly did not witness and which may never have happened. But the spirit of the event is clear. Through the Athenians' brutal ultimatum to the Melians—join Athens or die—Thucydides shows the corruption of human character that war perpetrates. The Athenians, noble proponents of democracy at the beginning of the war, are now savagely insisting to the Melians that natural order has created the weak to submit to the strong, because there is no other alternative.

The Melians, whether overly noble or foolish or both, refuse. Athens then besieges the island, captures it, and slaughters all male inhabitants, selling the women and children into slavery—the unfortunate classic outcome of ancient wars for the defeated. The overconfident Athenians, convinced of their strength, next embark upon the Sicilian Expedition, seeking to conquer the entire island of Sicily as a side project even while the domestic war with Sparta is still ongoing. Predictably, the Athenians suffer a horrific disaster that wipes out their entire fleet and eliminates most of their generals.

11. For a translation of the Melian Dialogue, see academics.wellesley.edu/ClassicalStudies/CLCV102/Thucydides--MelianDialogue.html. This excerpt is from the Richard Crawley translation, also used in *The Landmark Thucydides*, ed. Robert Strassler (Free Press, 1998).

Thucydides could have narrated the events at Melos in a matter-of-fact style, chronicling what happened as the nationless observer that he now was. But by recounting the events at Melos as a tragic dialogue, Thucydides did something much more powerful: He called all readers, present and future, to confront the moral questions that war always brings up. In the process, he reminds us that history, like all of life, is never neutral. Living in light of eternity requires us to confront right and wrong all around us. Additionally, the consequences of moral failure will also at some point reverberate on the offenders, as the Athenians found out too late in their Sicilian catastrophe.

Herodotus and the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BC)

Perhaps the most famous episode from Herodotus's *Histories* is the iconic Battle of Thermopylae. It is a Homeric contest par excellence: Three hundred Spartan warriors (and some other Greeks, who are overshadowed by the glorious Spartans) take on the entirety of the Persian army—these hordes that drank rivers dry. And while the Spartans die to a man (except for the two guys who missed the battle because of pink eye, really), they win immortal glory. Indeed, one could argue, their glory continues to live on in such modern media portrayals as the film *300*.

Stories like this one from the Persian Wars gave the Greeks real Homeric heroes: real people they could look up to. These stories also created, for the first time, a sense of panhellenic identity—all of the Greeks could now work together because their autonomous small city-states had to unify against a common enemy. In other words, the Homeric epics had given a common culture, but it took the Persian Wars and battles like Thermopylae to create a sense of a common cause.

Eternity and the Quest for the Good Life

Perhaps we can't achieve eternity in the here and now, after all. All of the authors we have considered so far gently whisper this truth to us under their breath, even while humoring us with their tales of failed quests of individuals and states for eternal glory through earthly acts. Gilgamesh was right, after all. The most prominent thing that defines us as people is, most assuredly, our mortality. Nevertheless, something else that defines us is our desire to dream big. Even in the days between the early knowledge of the one true God and the arrival of the gospel with Christ's birth, we find pagan thinkers and writers dreaming of the good life and wondering what it is all about. If the good life is not eternity, what else is there? This is a question that Herodotus also confronts through a remarkable side story early in his history about the encounter of King Croesus of Lydia with the Athenian lawmaker and sage Solon.

Solon, who supposedly ruled Athens as a lawmaker in 594 BC, is a figure more legend and smoke than flesh and blood. But, then, the entire conversation Herodotus documents between him and Croesus is likely to be more legend than reality, anyway: How could Herodotus have been privy to the private discussions of a king and a sage? At any rate, the story Herodotus tells is significant in illustrating the Greeks' quest for the good life.

During his travels, Herodotus tells us, Solon pays a visit to King Croesus of Lydia, then at the height of his power and wealth—it is no coincidence that "wealthy as Croesus" became a byword. Croesus takes Solon on a tour of his treasuries, and afterward casually asks if Solon has ever seen anyone more blessed than himself.[12] Solon responds by telling a story about an Athenian family man, Tellus, who lived a happy family life and then died in battle during a small war. He fought well and was buried on the battlefield as a hero with honors.

Taken aback, Croesus asks Solon to name a runner-up for "the most blessed man ever" award. He is sure that even if he has lost the first prize, he at least has the second place in the bag. Solon, spoilsport that he is, happily obliges by telling the tale of two brothers, Cleobis and Biton. When their mother, a priestess of Hera in Argos, was running late for a festival, the

12. For this conversation, see Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1:30–32.

two brothers yoked themselves to her chariot in place of oxen and brought her to the ceremonies on time. She then prayed to Hera to give her sons the best reward of honor they could receive. Accordingly, following the festival, the brothers went into Hera's temple, fell asleep, and never woke up. An outraged Croesus then asks Solon if he considers Croesus's obvious wealth, power, and success to be worthless. Solon next presents a key truth that is still important to us today: The story is not yet over. How can he name anyone who is still in the middle of life as the most blessed of all? He must see, first and foremost, how Croesus's story will turn out. Subsequent events, which involve the dramatic fall of Croesus's kingdom, will vindicate Solon's judgment.

Herodotus's tale has more significant theological implications for us than he could ever have fully realized. We are all, in our heart of hearts, like Croesus. Created with eternity stamped deep within us through the *imago Dei*, we yet want to boast in the visible, in the obvious, and in the here and now—at least when things are going well for us. But we are too small to see any sort of big picture, as the fate of so many earthly kings from Croesus to the Bible and beyond reminds us time and time again.[13] God alone knows eternity, feels it, and is master over it. The longing for eternity, knit into every human being, is but a longing for God. Nevertheless, since we live in the earthly mortal realm, we have to come to terms with our nature as citizens and participants in the politics of our state. We turn to this theme in the next part of this book.

Recommendations for Further Reading

Herodotus, *The Landmark Herodotus*. Edited by Robert B. Strassler. Translated by Andrea L. Purvis. Anchor Books, 2009.

Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*. Edited by Robert B. Strassler. Translated by Richard Crawley. The Free Press, 1998.

13. Lucy S. R. Austen makes this point in her essay on writing biography as a Christian: "What Hath Faith to Do with Biography?" *Current*, October 19, 2023, https://currentpub.com/2023/10/19/what-has-faith-to-do-with-biography/.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Which of the two historians in this chapter do you find more relatable—Herodotus or Thucydides? Why?
2. Have you ever thought about writing a history of an event? Which event is it, and how would you approach telling its story?
3. How does the idea of the *imago Dei*, the awareness that every human being who has ever existed is made in God's image, change our view of history?