

The odd theology of Homer's "Odyssey"

BY CHRIS HIGHLAND

As memory serves me (or do I serve memory?), I read portions of Homer's writings in college Greek classes.

I remember reading passages in Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus and others, sometimes comparing the Classical Greek language to the "koine" or "common" Greek of New Testament writers. We must have read a bit of Homer too, since he was among the earliest Greek writers (7th or 8th Century before the common era, or about 2700 years ago). I went on to study Christian scriptures in Greek while in seminary, leaving the ancient Greeks behind. So it was a pleasure to find a copy of Homer's "Odyssey" on our shelf, a copy Carol bought many years ago, pages yellowed and price stamped on the cover: 95 cents—for a 300 page paperback!

In the opening words of

the Preface, the translator declares: "This is the best story ever written, and it has been a favorite for three thousand years." The cover proclaims it: "The world's greatest adventure story." I was somewhat surprised at how much religion plays a part in the story, but it was good to keep in mind Greek culture was saturated in spiritual beliefs. Ancient Philosophy was also animated to some extent by those beliefs, that there was divine activity in the cosmos. Given this historical context, it's still rather stunning to read the tale of Odysseus with its rather odd setting of the theological stage.

Odd, yes, but no more odd than popular theologies in our time. Without attempting to summarize the entire story, some basics: The hero of the story is Odysseus, a wealthy landowner in Ithaca, an island just off the north-

west coast of modern Greece. He is returning home from the battle of Troy but his voyage is delayed because the gods are either punishing or playing with him. Athena, daughter of Zeus, known for her "bright eyes," becomes protector of Odysseus, since Poseidon ("Earthshaker") is angry with the warrior who blinded his son, the one-eyed Cyclops. Athena appears to Telemachus, son of Odysseus, in the form of a man, Mentor, assuming the role of "mentor" for the young man. Athena has a central role in the journey as wise guardian and guide. Even Zeus ("Cloudgatherer") has admiration for Odysseus. "He is almost one of us ... wise beyond mortal men." So the narrative takes the hero through many trials on sea and shore until all his companions are dead. Due to Athena's defense, Zeus allows Odysseus to return to Ithaca where he and Telemachus avenge the

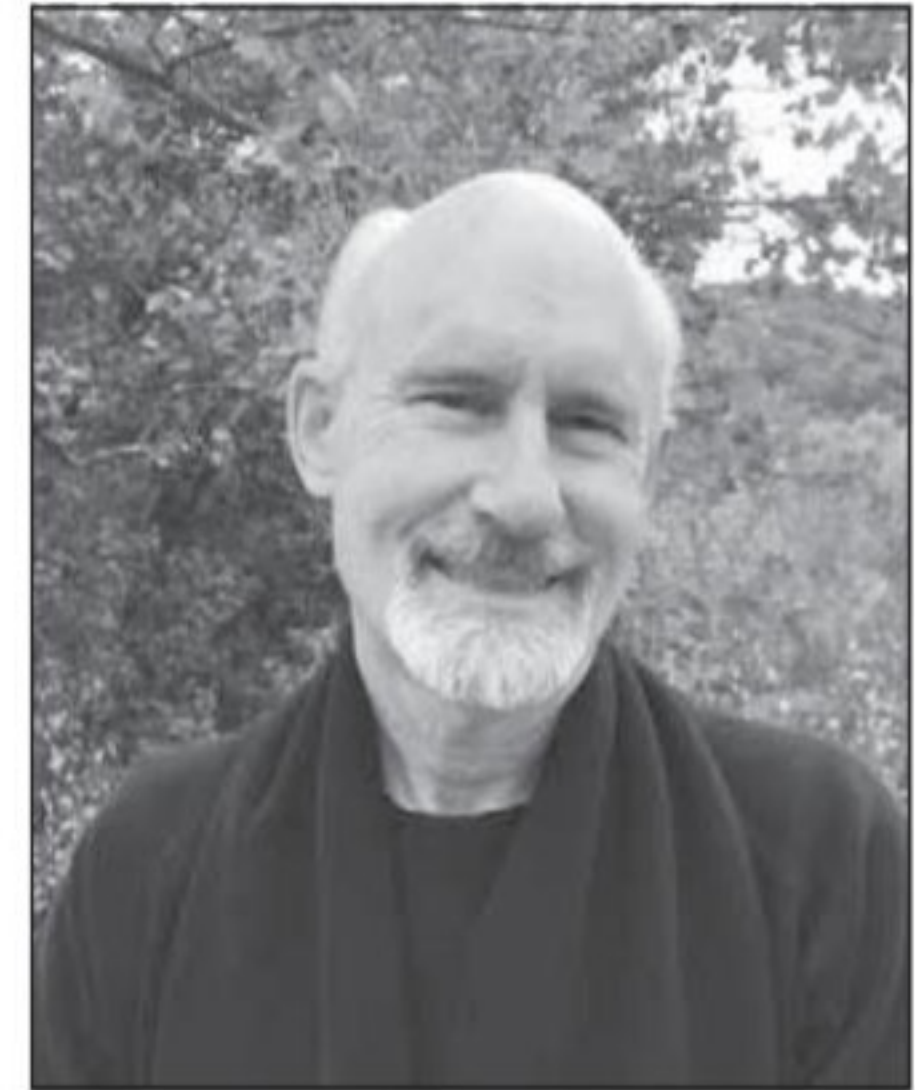
disrespect of his household and his wife, Penelope, by killing all the suitors pressuring her to marry them. In the end, Odysseus wants to kill the families of these men, but Athena stops him. Peace rules Ithaca again.

All through the story, Odysseus prays and offers sacrifices to the gods. As in biblical literature, the divine being takes pleasure in blood sacrifice. We are told the gods, especially Athena, are actively involved in life, though they can be swayed by special pleas or devotion.

I was particularly struck by a scene where Odysseus has returned to his homeland yet remains disguised as a beggar. He stays in a humble hut with one of his herdsmen. Though he doesn't recognize Odysseus, the man is friendly toward the beggar. His reason is quite interesting, especially compared to some biblical teachings: "Zeus has brought you to my door ... I brought you in because I fear the god of strangers and I'm sorry for you." The ranch hand "prayed

to All Gods" as he shared his food and humble home. Grateful, Odysseus says: "I pray Zeus may bless you as I do for the honor you have done to a ragged stranger." A reader who knows Matthew 25 will immediately recognize this lesson on the treatment of strangers, written many centuries before the gospels (begging the question: Was Jesus familiar with the Odyssey?). Welcoming the poor stranger is a thread woven through the narrative. As the Book of Hebrews says: "Welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed [divine messengers] as guests, without even knowing it." In this case, the stranger could be a very special guest, even Athena.

When Odysseus finally enters his house, still in disguise, one of the suitors slaps him. Another spoke up: "You shouldn't have hit him. Sometimes gods make themselves like strangers ... and visit cities to watch." At the conclusion, Athena appears again as Mentor and follows



the advice of Zeus to: "let them all be friends as before, and let peace and plenty abide with them."

It may be instructive for us to compare this "gospel of the Greeks" (secular scripture?) with the later Jewish-Greek stories we know as the "New Testament."

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