

## Odysseus Finds Peace

We read in the *Odyssey* that after Odysseus and his son Telemakhos, aided by their faithful swineherd, Eumaios, and oxherd, Philoitios, had slain the suitors who had pestered Penelope for so many years, Odysseus identified himself to his wife, Penelope. She was hesitant at first but recognized him when he mentioned he had made their bed from an olive tree still rooted to the ground. She embraced him and they slept.

The following day he went to see his father, Laertes, at his farm and revealed himself to him. But he had been followed there by a group of Ithakans, led by Eupheithes, the father of one of the slain suitors, who were out for revenge. The rebellion, however, was soon quelled with the aid of Athenē and Zeus. Under their patronage, Odysseus remained at peace in his homeland.

At first some grumbled he had been away for so long, but he reminded them that he had had no wish to go to war. What had their island, Ithakē, on the western edge of Hellas, to do with Troy? His son Telemakhos had only just been born, and he had wanted to stay at home. He had even pretended to be mad in order to avoid the war. But Palamedes had seen through that, tricked him and obliged him to honour his oath to Menelaos.

But the war lasted only ten years, some reminded him, yet he had been away for twenty. He agreed that the Akhaian leaders had soon made it home safely, except for Menelaos and himself. After being stranded for seven years in Egypt, the gods had at last allowed Menelaos to return to Sparta.

“Telemakhos visited him there,” Odysseus had said, “not long before my return, and found Helen with him. She had persuaded Menelaos she had been taken to Troy against her will and had hated every moment there. But would a daughter of Zeus really have gone to Troy and remained there against her will? She had beguiled Menelaos; Helen, like other daughters of the gods, is not to be trusted. She is like Kirkē and Kalypso. My imprisonment on Kalypso’s island was like a living death; I fear Menelaos’ mind is dead also.”

“As for me,” he had added, “I incurred Poseidon’s wrath. Yet how else was I to rescue my men and myself from Polyphemos? Should I have just watched him eat my men, waiting for my turn to be devoured? Even if I had known he was one of Poseidon’s sons, I could not have done that. And why was Poseidon so bitterly angry? It wasn’t that I killed his son. I only blinded him so that we could escape. The gods can be so very cruel. But Athenē has been kind to me. She protected Penelope and young Telemakhos. She persuaded the gods to rescue me from Kalypso’s long imprisonment and brought me home.”

So things settled on Ithakē. People generally held Odysseus in awe as someone cursed by Poseidon but protected by Athenē and Zeus. They did not want to interfere with the ways of the gods; besides, they respected Queen Penelope and came to love Telemakhos and his bride, Nausikaä, the daughter of Alkinoös, King of the Phaiakians.

When Poseidon had had a final attempt to thwart his homecoming, Odysseus had arrived naked and half-drowned among the Phaiakians. They were a kindly people, and none more so than King Alkinoös and his daughter, Nausikaä. Odysseus had been aware she secretly loved him and he had been fond of her but had respected her far too much to take advantage of her feelings.

After Odysseus had returned to Ithakē, with Alkinoös’ help, and had dealt with the suitors, purified the palace and set things straight again, Telemakhos had visited Alkinoös to thank him for his father’s return. There he had fallen in love with Nausikaä and married her. Telemakhos and Nausikaä had returned to Ithakē and lived in the palace there. Eventually they had two sons, Ptoliporthes and Nausinoös, now both young men themselves, and a daughter, Nausithoë, who had all the stately bearing of her mother.

But however peaceful things were in Ithakē, Odysseus was never really at peace. He could never forget the ten years spent on the plains outside Troy - years of wearisome battle where good men on both sides had been cruelly slain. Nor could he forget the ten years he had spent reaching home, having lost all his men and barely surviving himself. Had it all been for the sake of one woman? No, he had known Helen’s abduction was merely the excuse, not the reason.

For years the rulers of Troy had been exerting their strength, taxing all who sailed through the Hellespont and controlling more and more of the trade in the Aegean and the western lands of Asia. The Akhaians found their markets drying up and resentment had been growing among many of the peoples of Asia; suspicion and fear had been rife everywhere. It had needed only one spark to unleash war, and that spark had been Helen.

The Trojans had been defeated, their city completely razed amid dreadful slaughter. But the war had drained the resources of the the Akhaians and their allies; they had few ships and next to nothing to trade. Their lands had been neglected; poverty was everywhere.

For what, Odysseus had often pondered, had so many good and brave men on both sides been so cruelly slaughtered? No one had won; everywhere there was destitution and restlessness.

Although things were now peaceful on Ithakē, Odysseus was aware that over on the mainland the Dorian peoples had been rising against their overlords. Many of the Akhaians had moved eastward to find new lives on the seaboard of Asia and elsewhere. Peoples were on the move and rebellion was everywhere.

There was a new metal, which people called 'iron', over on the mainland; Telemakhos had brought back an iron sword. It was, thought Odysseus, a hard, cruel metal which matched the hearts of men now.

As Odysseus grew older, he grew weary: the world had changed and a new age was coming. Telemakhos would, he was certain, rule well with Athenē's help. He knew that Penelope was at peace and found great comfort in her grandchildren. It was time now, he thought, to make his last voyage. The prophet, Tiresias, had said his death would come from the sea and that it would be peaceful.

Entrusting his kingdom to Telemakhos and Nausikaä, he made his farewells; he did not say he would not be returning, though Penelope knew this was so. She had sensed how world-weary her husband had become; she hoped he would find peace at last.

So Odysseus sailed westwards from Ithakē, across the Mediterranean. As he sailed through the Pillars of Herakles, which we now call the Strait of Gibraltar, and into the great Ocean beyond, he remembered he had sailed into that Ocean once before; but then he had turned northwards, past the land of the Kimmeroi, which is always covered in fog and mist, and on to the Land of the Dead to seek the aid of Teresias' ghost. Death held no fear for anyone who had visited that land.

This time, however, he determined to hold his course westwards to where the sun sets. For, he thought, some say the Isle of the Blest lies there. In the past year he had had a recurring dream in which he saw a woman clothed in the westering sun with stars appearing in the twilight sky around her head. Sometimes she had seemed to be Penelope, at other times Athenē herself; sometimes, in a way he could not describe, she had seemed to be both at once and yet, perhaps, someone greater still; she sang in a language he did not know, but knew that her song conveyed peace and rest and bliss.

He recalled the many strange lands he had visited and the many marvellous things he had seen, more than most men are accustomed to see; yet most had been evil. The sirens had certainly been evil; although their song had sounded beautiful and alluring, its sweetness had been cloying and full of menace. If his comrades had not tied him fast to the mast and stopped up their own ears, he knew they would surely have all been lured to their deaths.

But song of the Lady of the westering sun was so different; there was no menace, no allurement, no compulsion. Its beauty did not cloy.

Thus leaving the Pillars of Herakles with the sun rising in the east behind him, he sailed westwards into the great Ocean. He was at peace that day. When, at eventide, the sun began to sink beneath the horizon, he heard the song of the Lady of the westering sun and saw her clad in its rays as stars began appearing in the sky above her head. Thus, the prophecy of Tiresias was fulfilled as Odysseus sailed on beyond the bounds of this world.