

THE RETURN OF THE KINGS: COMPARING THE HOMECOMING OF ODYSSEUS AND THE TWO COMINGS OF CHRIST

Alex Markos on the Tension between Love
and Wrath

After twenty years of suffering and wandering, Odysseus finally returns to his home country of Ithaca. He knows that in his absence, wicked men have taken up residence in his palace, and it is now his responsibility to set things right. Before rushing in and exacting justice on his enemies, Odysseus first undergoes a transformation from a king to a beggar, a transformation that may catch the eye of an observant Christian reader. The blows and ridicule he receives in this state condemn the faithless suitors when the disguise is removed, and they stand before their lord. This double nature of

Odysseus's return to Ithaca — first disguised as a lowly beggar and then as an avenging king — sheds insight into the two comings of Christ, His Incarnation and His awaited Second Coming and Judgment.

Odysseus's acceptance of the humiliation of being turned into a beggar mirrors Christ's Incarnation, God taking on human flesh. Athena counsels Odysseus not to confront the suitors directly at first, but to go around unrecognized, in the form of a beggar. With a stroke of her wand "she shriveled the supple skin on his lithe limbs / stripped the russet curls from his head . . . dimmed the fire in his eyes, so shining once. She turned his shirt and cloak into squalid rags, / ripped and filthy."¹ Even though he is in his own land, the rightful king goes in rags before his own people and into his own palace. This humbling transformation is similar to the kenosis or self-emptying of Jesus Christ, who "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."² Just as

¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996), XIV.492-4, 496-8.

² Phil 2:7, ESV. Kenosis is the Greek word used in this verse translated as "emptied himself." It refers to an aspect of the doctrine of the Incarnation that Christ willingly gave up His divine, kingly privileges as God and took on a human nature, capable of experiencing physical pain and suffering.

the king of Ithaca entered his own kingdom as a filthy beggar, so the King of kings entered His own creation in the lowly form of one of His creatures, the divine spirit taking on flesh and blood. Unbeknownst to this ancient poet, Homer's moving transformation of Odysseus, as his lovely skin is wrinkled, his full head of hair shorn of its glory, the spark of youthfulness dimmed from his eyes, and his royal body clothed in filthy rags, provides a powerful image of Christ's kenosis. Pastors and teachers in the twenty-first century can hold up this image to help others understand the humiliating and shocking quality of the doctrine of the Incarnation.

In addition to the humiliating transformation, the beggarly Odysseus suffered the attacks and scorn of lesser men without retaliation, just as Christ bore the whips and scorns of the men who took part in the Crucifixion. When the disguised Odysseus arrives at his palace and begs at the feet of his own enemies for food, one of the suitors "seized the stool and hurled it — square in the back / it struck Odysseus, just under the right shoulder / but he stood up against it . . . just shook his head, / silent, his mind churning."³ Even though Odysseus has the

³ Homer, *Odyssey*, XVII.510-14.

strength to retaliate against the blow, he controls his rage and endures it. Similarly, Jesus had to endure the scorn of the religious leaders, who eventually plotted His death by crucifixion. As the prophet Isaiah foretold of Christ, “he was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth.”⁴ St. Paul explains that Christ “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”⁵ Just as the humbled Odysseus endured both the transformation and the scorn, the humbled Son of God endured the act of becoming human and the humiliation of crucifixion. Both characters demonstrate the virtue of humility by suffering silently at the hands of their enemies.

In addition to the content, the structure of Homer’s *Odyssey*, drawing out the narrative while Odysseus is in disguise, creates a tension and a longing for justice that complements the narrative of the Incarnation. While the action in books I through XII is fast-paced, the action in books XIII-XXII, narrating the time Odysseus arrives on Ithaca and kills the suitors, is agonizingly slow. This slower pace produces a dramatic tension in the narrative. Since the beginning of the poem, we know that

⁴ Isaiah 53:7.

⁵ Phil. 2:8.

Odysseus's wife and son are desperately awaiting Odysseus's return, hoping that he would come and drive away the debauched suitors.⁶ Then, from the lips of the dead prophet Tiresias, we hear that Odysseus will, in fact, exact his revenge on the suitors once he arrives home.⁷ Odysseus is able to take his revenge in a matter of days, yet Homer stretches out the events of those days over ten books.

Likewise, the entire Old Testament cries out for an avenging, conquering Messiah, but the New Testament is almost entirely dedicated to the Incarnation and the development of the church. Jesus Christ, the prophesied Messiah, enters history during the reign of Caesar Augustus, as recorded in the Gospels.⁸ However, it is only at the very end of history, prophesied in the book of Revelation, that God's justice is finally enacted. As the readers of the *Odyssey* have to wait patiently for ten books between Odysseus's arrival and his judgment, Christians have been waiting two thousand years (and God only knows how many more) between

⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, I.132-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, XI.129-37.

⁸ Lk 2:1.

Christ's Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension and his promised Second Coming and Judgment.

Odysseus's killing of the suitors anticipates the Second Coming of Christ, when He will judge those according to their deeds. In Book XXII, Homer gives an electrifying account of Odysseus's vengeance on the suitors whom he mercilessly slaughters one by one. When one of the suitors, Eurymachus, tries to bargain with Odysseus, he responds saying, "not if you paid . . . all that could pour in from the world's end--/ no, not even then would I stay my hands from slaughter / till all you suitors had paid for all your crimes!"⁹ Nothing will stop Odysseus's wrath and vengeance against the abominable suitors. Since the entire weight of the poem comes from the tension between the suffering king Odysseus and the indulgent, violent suitors who are usurping his power and resources, their doom feels just and inexorable. In a similar way, the entire weight of Scripture points to the time when Christ will come back to His people, establish His eternal Kingdom, and sentence all His enemies to eternal punishment in Hell. In the book of Revelation, Christ returns, riding on a white horse, "and in righteousness he

⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, XXII.65-8.

judges and makes war.”¹⁰ After a quick, decisive battle, “[the beast and the false prophet] were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse.”¹¹ At the climax of both Homer’s epic and the history of the world, the rightful king takes up his arms, exacts justice on his enemies and re-establishes his reign of unquestioned authority. Just as Odysseus’s wrath against the suitors is justified by their sin, God’s wrath against unrepentant sinners is also just. Homer confirms the concept in Scripture that sin must not go unpunished, and that wrath and judgment await all those who sin against their Lord.

Though these two judgment scenes are similar, one difference between Odysseus and Christ is their motives for accepting their humiliation, the first out of cleverness, the other out of love. Odysseus’s beggar disguise was just a clever ruse to help get him into the palace undetected, so that he could muster a surprise attack against the suitors. Both Odysseus and Athena are known for their tricks. Just before telling him of her plan to turn him into a beggar,

¹⁰ Rev 19:11.

¹¹ Ibid., 19:20-1.

Athena says to Odysseus, “among mortal men, /you’re by far the best at tactics, spinning yarns, / and I am famous among the gods for wisdom, / cunning wiles too.”¹² Odysseus agreed to the plan out of its cleverness and deceitfulness. On the other hand, Christ agreed to the Incarnation out of love for His creatures. As Paul tells us, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”¹³ The Incarnation was not a trick, but an expression of God’s perfect love for all mankind. The humiliation and the suffering were not merely the means by which God was able to save us, but the manifestation of the depth of His love.

Reflecting on this transformed version of the narrative, in which Odysseus undergoes his humiliating transformation out of love for his family, can help our culture to better reconcile God’s love and wrath. One of the great difficulties that modern people, including Christians, have regarding the faith is that they see a contradiction in God’s character within Scripture. They may point out, as Marcion did in the second century, that the Old Testament God, Jehovah, is full of wrath, but the New Testament God, Jesus Christ, is full of love. The

¹² Homer, *Odyssey*, XIII.336-9.

¹³ Rom 5:8.

modified Odysseus, the avenging king who is motivated by love for his family, can show how love and wrath can be meaningfully combined into one person. The same God who loved us enough to die for our sins is the same God who will return to bring death and judgment on His enemies. He will establish justice and secure His reign over all things just as Odysseus killed the suitors to reclaim his rightful place as king over Ithaca. Love and wrath are not contradictory but complementary characteristics of the same God.

The narrative structure of the *Odyssey* can further help put Christ's first and second comings in context of the large, meta-narrative of Scripture. Homer's technique of *in medias res* can be a helpful way to approach Scripture by beginning with an explanation of the human condition. Just as the *Odyssey* begins on Ithaca where the corrupt suitors hold sway and the good people long for the coming of their true but distant King, our world is in a state of sin and evil, awaiting its true King. Understanding the sinful state of our world is important for acknowledging the tension and expectation that preceded Christ's Incarnation and the tension that still remains in the period before the Second Coming. Odysseus's return to Ithaca is the turning point in the story, and it happens in the

middle of the text. Similarly, Christ's Incarnation is (literally) the turning point in history and currently marks the half-way point between us and Abraham.¹⁴ We are a part of the same great story. We can look back on the things God has already done to address sin in the world (Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection) and look forward to the fulfillment and consummation of His promise to return in glory and dwell with His people in the New Heaven and the New Earth.¹⁵

While we struggle to understand Christ's love for us, the tension between His love and wrath remains. For the Christian, it lies in the question and desperate plea, "Where is God when enemies surround me on every side? Where is God in my sufferings?" Our Odysseus has come in his disguise and is, even now, preparing to crush his enemies, but the enemies still linger. We are living, then, in the moment between when Odysseus throws off his beggarly disguise and the first shot of his bow directed at the suitors. The Kingdom is here, but it is not yet. The complete narrative of the *Odyssey* can remind us of the hope of the promised Second

¹⁴ God's covenant with Abraham occurred c. 2000 B.C., and we are currently living 2000 years after Christ's Incarnation.

¹⁵ Rev 21:1.

Coming of Christ and the prophesied destruction of the wicked. Until that day, we must continue to wait, as Christ's loyal subjects, preparing for His triumphant homecoming.

Bibliography

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