

Discussion questions on *The Odyssey*
(Norton edition translated by Emily Wilson, ISBN-13: 978-0393356250)

2020-21 Book Of The Year in Messiah University's Honors Program

General questions on *The Odyssey*

1. At the beginning of *The Odyssey*, we are told that Odysseus suffered much on his long, arduous journey homeward. How much of his suffering was the result of his own choices and how much of it was beyond his control? How are the two to be distinguished?
2. What is the relationship between the actions of humans and the dictates of the gods throughout this poem?
3. Do you think Odysseus was a good leader? Why or why not?
4. What roles do women play in *The Odyssey*? Which women hold the most power? Why do you think this is?
5. *Hubris*, a Greek word for excessive pride, is one of the downfalls of many characters in works of ancient mythology. Does this apply to *The Odyssey*?
6. Do you know of any other books or movies about home and the challenges of reaching home that come to mind when reading *The Odyssey*?
7. How does reading *The Odyssey* affect your thinking about telling the truth? Are there ever situations in which it is justified to hold back some true things?
8. In several places, Odysseus tells long, elaborate, and untrue stories about his life to introduce himself to others. Why does he do this?
9. Many people value being sincere or guileless or transparent. How does reading *The Odyssey* affect your thinking about these things? The poem is filled with accounts of their opposites--disguises, transformations, and attempts to hide true appearances. Why is this?
10. Homer scholar John Rexine has written that Odysseus "represents humankind in its supreme form, a combination of physical strength, intellectual ability, and the will to survive all obstacles, all odds." How do you respond to this characterization? Is Odysseus an exemplar for you? Why or why not?
11. The 6 themes of our Honors Program are: Exploring fundamental questions; Facing disputed questions; Cultivating a Christian worldview; Growing and applying talents; Engaging in conversation; and Enjoying community. When reading *The Odyssey*, did any of these come to mind or seem relevant?
12. One of the most important cultural values in *The Odyssey* is *xenia*, a Greek word for hospitality, generosity, or courtesy shown to those who are far from home. Where do you see this? Why do you think hospitality was held in such high regard in Homer's time? In what ways is this value still applicable today?
13. How does reading *The Odyssey* affect your thinking about piety? Is Odysseus a pious man? Why or why not? Is there anything about piety that you can learn from *The Odyssey*?
14. *The Iliad* especially focusses on *kleos*, a Greek word for glory or renown. *The Odyssey* focusses more on *nostos*, a Greek word relating to the challenges of reaching home when far from it. How do you think about these two things? What is the value of *kleos* (glory) compared with that of *nostos* (home)?
15. How does reading *The Odyssey* affect your thinking about fidelity and faithfulness? Should these to be understood as universal moral and ethical goods? Why or why not?

Questions on Books 1-4 of *The Odyssey*

1. In the first line of Homer's epic poem, Odysseus is described as "*polytropos*." Some scholars have translated this word as "much-travelled," "wandering," "many-turned," "much-turning," "versatile," or "ingenious." Our translator, Emily Wilson, chooses to describe Odysseus as "complicated." What difference does it make how one translates "*polytropos*" in depicting Odysseus? (Book 1)
2. What might be Homer's purpose in having Zeus recall the story of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, and Orestes in such detail? (Book 1)
3. What prophecy does Zeus make concerning Odysseus? How does this affect our reactions in the narrative that follows? (Book 1)
4. What does *xenia* (hospitality) look like? Who extends it? Who abuses it? (Books 1-4)
5. Characterize Telemachus. How does he change in the first few books? (Books 1-4)
6. Characterize Penelope as a wife and mother. (Books 1-4)
7. Characterize the two suitors, Antinous and Eurymachus. (Books 1-4)
8. What role does Athena play? (Books 1-4)?
9. Why does Athena appear before Telemachus disguised rather than as herself in Book 1?
10. How would you characterize the tone of Telemachus' speech in Book 2? How did you react to its conclusion?
11. What is the response of Antinous and the suitors to Telemachus' speech in Book 2?
12. What is the nature and purpose of the prayers and sacrifices Nestor ordains in Book 3?
13. What does Telemachus learn from Nestor in Book 3? How does this meeting affect him?
14. What does Telemachus learn from Menelaus in Book 4? Is it similar to what he learned from Nestor in Book 3?
15. When in Book 4 the group hears stories about past times in Troy and the missing Odysseus, there is deep sadness and weeping. Helen drugs the wine so no one will feel any pain. Is she justified in doing this? When is it appropriate or helpful to feel deep pain and when is it not?

Questions on Books 5-8 of *The Odyssey*

1. How is Calypso characterized in Book 5? Do you sympathize at all with her?
2. Does Calypso demonstrate *xenia* (hospitality)? (Book 5)
3. What traits of the epic hero does Odysseus exhibit in Book 5?
4. Besides epic hero traits, how is Odysseus characterized as a man and as a husband in Book 5?
5. Calypso offers Odysseus immortality, to be free from time and death forever. Why does Odysseus reject this offer? (Book 5)
6. What is the role of gods in Odysseus' fate? (Book 5)
7. How do the concepts of *kleos* (glory) and *nostos* (home) apply in Book 5?
8. What is Nausica's plan for going through town in Book 6 and why does she need such a plan?
9. In Phaeacia, why doesn't Odysseus immediately identify himself to Alcinous and Arete? (Books 6-7)
10. In his visit to Phaeacia, Odysseus notes physical blessings, including fruit, grain, harvest, food, health, and strength. Why is this included? How should we respond? (Book 7)
11. In his carefully-crafted speech to King Alcinous in Book 7 (page 215), Odysseus makes clear that he is not a god and is entirely human. How does he characterize the experience of being human. How do you respond?
12. How important is *xenia* (hospitality) to the Phaeacians? How is it demonstrated in Book 8?
13. What is the significance of the three songs sung by the bard in Book 8?

Questions on Books 9-12 of *The Odyssey*

1. At the city of the Cicones, what tragedies befall Odysseus? Who or what is to blame? (Book 9)
2. Among the Lotus Eaters, what delays the group's journey? Who or what is to blame? (Book 9)
3. What is the role of *xenia* (hospitality) as it applies to the Polyphemus episode? (Book 9)
4. Where do you see *metis* (clever thinking) in Book 9?
5. In telling the Polyphemus episode, note that none of the first-hand witnesses are present. Given this, does the way he tells this story surprise you? Why does he choose to tell it in this way? (Book 9)
6. How would you rate Odysseus as a leader in the episodes with the Cicones, with the Lotus Eaters, and with Polyphemus? (Book 9)
7. During his travels, Odysseus can be viewed as a raider motivated greed and gain or as an anthropologist motivated by a genuine curiosity about other peoples. How does he appear to you in Books 9-12?
8. How would you characterize the *xenia* (hospitality) of the residents of Aeolus? (Book 10)
9. How is Odysseus' journey hindered at Aeolus, at Laestrygonia, and in the land of Circe? Who or what shares the blame for this? (Book 10)
10. Once his men are in danger, how is Odysseus able to save them? What skills or methods does he employ? (Book 10)
11. Why must Odysseus go to the house of Hades before he can continue his journey? (Book 10)
12. In the description of Odysseus' visit to the house of Hades, which elements did you find familiar or common and which did you find odd or surprising? (Book 11)
13. What values seem to be expressed among the residents of the house of Hades? What do the dead seem to care about most? How do their words affect Odysseus? (Book 11)
14. In *The Iliad*, Achilles was given the choice between a long life with no *kleos* (glory) or a short life with *kleos*. He chose the latter. Now that he's in the house of Hades, what does Achilles say about *nostos* (home) and *kleos* (glory)? How might this relate to the rest of the epic poem? (Book 11)
15. How does the experience of visiting the house of Hades affect Odysseus? (Book 11)
16. In Book 12, what do the Sirens promise Odysseus and his men? How do they tempt them?

Questions on Books 13-16 of *The Odyssey*

1. What does the exchange between Odysseus and Athena at Ithaca reveal about the personality of each? Why do you think Athena changes Odysseus' appearance? (Book 13)
2. In Books 14 and 15, Odysseus and Eumaeus exchange life stories with the disguised Odysseus lying (as he so often does) and Eumaeus telling his true history. How does the theme of deceit and lying figure in these tales? Why does Odysseus wait so long to reveal his real identity to Eumaeus? Does his deceit and manipulation seem justified?
3. Why does Telemachus have Theoclymenus accompany on his trip to Athens? (Book 15)
4. In Book 16, what things keep Telemachus from recognizing his father, Odysseus? How do you respond to this reunion of father and son?
5. What is the plan that Odysseus and Telemachus come up with to get revenge on the suitors? Which details seem to be important? (Book 16)
6. What role does Athena play in Books 13-16?
7. Where is *xenia* (hospitality) expressed in Books 13-16?
8. In Books 13-16, some strangers are viewed as savages and some are viewed as civilized people who should be offered *xenia* (hospitality). What determines these different situations? Is it a reasonable distinction or not?

Questions on Books 17-20 of *The Odyssey*

1. How did you respond to the scene between Odysseus-the-beggar and Argos in Book 17?
2. In Book 17, Athena urges Odysseus to beg from all of the suitors to test them even though she doesn't plan to spare any of them. Why would she do this? What does it suggest about Odysseus that he throws himself into this role?
3. In Book 17, Antinous scornfully attacks Odysseus-the-beggar who does not respond with violence, but does insult Antinous. How do you understand and explain their exchange here?
4. What are the differences between the two beggars in Book 18?
5. In Book 18, Odysseus-the-beggar tells the suitor Amphinomus that when Odysseus returns home "there will be blood" (page 413). What is his purpose here? What is Athena's purpose in this scene?
6. In Book 18, we see Odysseus testing the suitors, egged on by Athena. Why would she rouse the suitors to torment Odysseus given that she doesn't plan to spare any of them even if they prove to be kind?
7. Why does Penelope continue to respond to the courting efforts of the suitors even after she knows that they have plotted to murder Telemachus?
8. Why doesn't Odysseus explicitly reveal himself to Penelope before proceeding with his plans?
9. Some readers believe that Penelope recognizes her husband Odysseus by the end of Book 19, before the time he purposefully chooses to reveal himself. What do you think about this theory? What in the text leads you to be either convinced or unconvinced by it?
10. What is the significance of Odysseus' scar? (Book 19)
11. What motivates Athena throughout the last part of the poem?

Questions on Books 21-24 of *The Odyssey*

1. How has Telemachus changed from the beginning of the poem?
2. When Odysseus finally reveals himself to the suitors in in Book 22 (page 477), what are the charges he levies against them? What is your response these charges?
3. The showdown scene with the suitors involves much mayhem and violence--including mass murder, hanging, mutilation, and torture. Is this violence justified in any way?
4. Why does Telemachus hang the serving women who had slept with the suitors instead of killing them with swords as his father had prescribed? (Book 22)
5. Does the violence in Books 21-22 affect your enjoyment of reading *The Odyssey*?
6. Analyze Penelope's responses to Euryycleia's news. What is she thinking and feeling? (Book 23)
7. In the reunion scene between Penelope and Odysseus, do you think Penelope's wariness is warranted or not? Why does she propose the "bed test?" (Book 23)
8. What is significant about the bridal bed in Book 23? What things does it symbolize? What do you think it looked like? (Try drawing it.)
9. Why do you think Homer included the scene of the suitors in the house of Hades? What, if anything, does it add to the story? (Book 24)
10. What does *The Odyssey* (in Book 24 and throughout) suggest that we owe the dead?
11. Why does Odysseus test his aged father, Laertes, instead of immediately revealing himself? (Book 24)
12. What do we learn about the laws and mores of Ithaca from the council of elders which discusses the slaughter of the suitors? What points of view are expressed? What does Athena's intervention at the end add to this? (Book 24)