

LITERATURE

Beginning about 1200 B.C. migrations of peoples and other political events in Egypt and the lands at the eastern end of the Mediterranean strongly influenced the culture of the age. Egyptian documents (and other contemporary allusions in Mesopotamia and Canaan) witness the uprising--or perhaps only a campaign of piracy--of the "Peoples of the Sea," a vague, composite term that probably refers to some of the Philistines, Phoenicians, and perhaps Dorians, the proto-Greek invaders from the mainland of Greece or in the areas to the north in Macedonia. On Crete a sophisticated civilization flourishing in the middle of the second millennium had been either abandoned because of a terrible series of earthquakes or absorbed by earlier invaders from Mycenae. Some scholars assume that it was these same Mycenaeans--Homer's Achaeans--who made piracy and brigandage a way of life for several generations. The war on the plains of Troy, which has never been reliably dated, was perhaps one of several skirmishes characteristic of the period. There is ample evidence, however, that the comparatively peaceful world of the Egyptian Empire period (c. 1400-1100 B.C.) was gradually disintegrating as Egypt was losing its influence abroad.

The Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt probably occurred about 1330 B.C. Within a generation, they were beginning their conquest of Canaan under Joshua, thus taking advantage of the power vacuum left by the Egyptian decline. Though the Hebrews of an earlier time had been the heirs of the older Mesopotamian culture, the nation that had been in Egyptian captivity for centuries now flourished with new vigor. The monarchy under Saul, David, and Solomon dates from about 1000 B.C. and lasted just under a hundred years. During this splended age the documents eventually edited to form the Old Testament were evidently first written down.

While the Old Testament is most important as an expression of Hebrew history and religious thought (see Philosophy-Religion section), it is also significant as a literature. Not only does it contain a range of literary genre--stories, myths, legends, poetry, songs, and elegies--but it has also been a wellspring of literature for nearly 2,000 years. A knowledge of its people, places, events, and ideas is essential for recognizing the allusions and themes that recur in the prose and poetry of innumerable writers of later periods including our own time.

The first five books of the Old Testament, called the Pentateuch, contain historical and mythical materials first set down as early as the ninth century B.C. and revised several times before 400 B.C. They concern the Age of the Patriarchs, the history of Abraham and his descendants,

the sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt (c. 1700-1300 B.C.), their deliverance by the prophet Moses, his laws, based in part on earlier codes from the Near East, the Ten Commandments, and other related writings. Much of the material in these books--known to the Hebrews as the *Torah*, or Law--directly descends from the older traditional literature. There are close correspondences to mythical and quasi-historical materials from Sumerian-Akkadian sources.

The next four books, called the "Former Prophets," Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings, concern the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites under Joshua, the heroic tales of the tribal "Judges" (including Samson, whose literary origins strongly suggest some of the exploits of the Gilgamesh or his Greek counterpart, Hercules), and the ascendancy of the Kings during Israel's great period of monarchy: Saul, David, and Solomon. These were historical figures of the eleventh and tenth centuries B.C. The history of the Hebrews down to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar deported them to Babylon, was probably written down while the scholars were actually captives, for the revised manuscripts date from the late sixth century B.C. The "Latter Prophets," including the books of Isaiah (eighth century), and the "Second Isaiah" (c. 536 B.C.), Jeremiah (c. 650 B.C. to the fall of Jerusalem), Ezekiel, Jeremiah's contemporary, and several lesser prophets of the eighth through the fifth centuries B.C., were probably written down during the lifetimes of their authors, though the attribution of authorship is more traditional than provable. The events in Jonah, for example, are scarcely historical, though the book provides an example of the "miraculous" or legendary literature from a well-established folk tradition.

The remaining books of the Old Testament, known as the "Writings," are a miscellany of history (Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah), short stories (Esther, Ruth, Daniel), dramatic verse (Job), and an anthology of sacred poetry (Lamentations, Psalms, and the somewhat less sacred Song of Solomon). The didactic theme is ever present, mainly in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, though the direct exhortation typical of the books of the prophets is no longer the chief theme. All these writings were composed much later than the earlier books, though they concern events of older periods and were probably based on older manuscripts.

In the thousand years that elapsed between the first writings of the Old Testament and its completed form, the kingdom of the Hebrews was divided and destroyed and its people sent into exile, some never to be heard of again.

The turmoil of the Hebrew experience was but one part of the general turbulence and unrest that characterized this period. In the "Greek world" similar upheavals occurred. By 1400 Minoan (Cretan) civilization had fallen and the Mycenaeans enjoyed a maritime supremacy that lasted until their time of troubles two hundred years later.

Most scholars agree that a vast body of myth and legend must have circulated in oral form during the Dark Age between the fall of Crete and the decline of Mycenae. The age is "dark" because there is no written

literature, and such documents as we have are in a strange, only recently deciphered script of two types: Linear A and B. Linear B seems to be an early form of the Greek language, but there are very few tablets so far discovered, and none of them records any literature. Nevertheless, oral literature was doubtless carried by the Greeks in their migrations, preserving old tales and myths, and perhaps including the narratives Homer later included in his epics.

The so-called "Dorian invasion" of the Mycenaean (Peloponnesian) lands in mainland Greece evidently occurred around 1150 B.C., about 50 years after the reputed siege of Troy. Probably there were repeated invasions, small bands of barbaric marauders attacking the citadels of Mycenae, Argos, and their neighbors, burning and looting at first and then settling as squatters on the ruins. The Dorians succeeded in destroying the Mycenaean Age cities, driving the former kings and nobles elsewhere, and the old heroic culture simply died. But it was not forgotten. Homer, of whom we know very little except by deduction from his epics, was probably a descendant of some of the refugees who fled to the coast of Asia Minor and the offshore islands. Both Smyrna and the island of Chios claim him. He gathered the old stories from whatever oral sources were available to him and around 800 B.C. composed the two "original" epics (hero stories) which have been the models for much of the literature of the Western tradition thereafter.

The "Homeric world" remains the only "historical" milieu of the Mycenaean era, and it is of tremendous importance to later Greek literature. The Greeks idealized Homer's heroes, used Homer's epics as their code of morality; our debt to Homer is so vast that it cannot be regarded merely as a quasi-historical record. It must also be understood in terms of the ideals and aspirations of Homer's own time--the eighth century--and of the later Greeks who inherited and emulated the heroic standards he expressed.

Homer's long narrative poems, though ostensibly written for recitation by a professional bard, could have been written in the Greek script just developing, which was based on the Phoenician alphabetic characters. This circumstance may explain their preservation as individual works of art with a "known" author; but the Homeridae, or sons of Homer--the bards who kept the epics alive in performance--were known for many generations thereafter. Homer's importance can be judged by the fact that of the more than 1200 books found in one Egyptian library, almost half were the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, hand copied on papyrus. The definitive text of the epics was commissioned at Athens by the tyrant Peisistratus (c. 561-527 B.C.).

What is truly remarkable about Homer's epics is that each is a unified work of artistry based upon a single theme or subject. The *Iliad* is the story of Achilles' anger and of its tragic consequences. It is not the story of the Trojan War as such, for the action of the epic takes place during a few weeks of the tenth year of the war between the Trojans and the Achaeans. Telling his story with flashbacks, Homer reveals the background of the "judgment of Paris," whereby Aphrodite awarded Paris the

most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, as a prize for giving her the golden apple. Paris then took Helen from her husband Menelaus to the court of his father Priam at Troy. The Achaeans (who included both mainland and island Greeks), under the leadership of Menelaus' brother Agamemnon, set sail for Troy in a thousand ships to reclaim Helen.

When the *Iliad* begins, almost ten years have passed and neither side has been able to win a decisive victory. The Achaeans have besieged the city for many years and are now beginning to take the upper hand when a quarrel breaks out between Agamemnon and Achilles, the greatest Greek warrior of all, over a prize of battle, the maiden Briseis. In anger, Achilles refuses to fight. The tide of battle begins to turn, and the Trojans are able to breach the walls to the ships, killing several of the finest warriors in numerous individual and group battles. Achilles' great friend, Patroclus, tries to instill fear in the Trojans by attacking them while wearing Achilles' armor, but he is killed by Hector, Priam's son, who leads the Trojans.

With Patroclus' death Achilles is at last aroused. His grief turns to rage and he, now wearing marvelous new armor fashioned by Hephaestus at the behest of his goddess mother Thetis, charges into the battle, killing several Trojan warriors before engaging Hector in combat (an unequal duel, since Achilles receives divine aid). He slays Hector and then drags his body behind his chariot and refuses to give or ransom the body to his father. Following the burial of Patroclus, old Priam goes to Achilles and begs for his son's body. Together they mourn, and Achilles surrenders the body to the sad old king. The epic ends with Hector's burial, ten days later.

Although the story is tragic, Homer depicts more than the sadness, often interspersing comic scenes--mainly of gods and goddesses quarreling. Despite the constant intrusion of the gods with their petty jealousies and intrigues, the story manages to retain its intensity. Even the endless battles, the tiresome lists of men and ships, and the exaggerations (a thousand ships?) cannot mar the heightened movement of the narrative. The twenty-four books of the *Iliad*, while not equal in merit, create a sustained work that illuminates the nobility of the characters, especially of the Trojans, and engages the reader in their passionate struggle.

Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* tells of a hero of the Trojan War. This time the central figure is Odysseus, who is credited with the idea of the Trojan horse to carry warriors inside the walls of Troy and thereby bring about its destruction. The epic recounts the wanderings and homecoming of Odysseus, who, after the Trojan War, is forced by Poseidon to roam the seas for ten years before returning to his wife Penelope and their son Telemachus.

The story actually begins toward the end of this ten-year period and reveals the events of the preceding years in flashbacks. In the opening scenes Penelope is home in Ithaca, desperate and discouraged, besieged by suitors claiming that her husband is dead; Odysseus is under the spell of the nymph Calypso on a far-off isle; and Telemachus is about to embark

upon a journey to discover his father's fate. Before the three are reunited in Ithaca at the story's end, Telemachus encounters the leading figures in the Trojan War (who tell him of his father's heroic deeds); and Odysseus becomes a guest at the court of King Alcinous, where he describes his experiences since the end of the Trojan War. That Odysseus survived any of them (all of his men eventually perished) is a tribute to his guile, strength, patience--and the favor of the goddess Athene. Among those who impeded his journey or threatened his life were the one-eyed Cyclopes; the sea monsters Scylla, who crushed the bones of sailors, and Charybdis, who sucked up the waters that buoyed the ships; the Sirens, whose honey-sweet voices enticed seamen to their destruction; and Circe, whose spell changed men into swine. Odysseus also had to visit the Land of the Dead, where his mother told him of his wife in Ithaca, and he gazed upon the heroes of the Trojan War who had "gone West."

From the court of King Alcinous--and his appealing daughter Nausicaa--Odysseus sails to Ithaca on the magic ships of the Phaeacians. When he arrives home, it is in the guise of a beggar to protect him from the powerful nobles who seek his wife and his kingdom. The drama heightens as one by one the swineherd, his old nurse, his faithful dog, and his son recognize him. The final recognition comes after Penelope declares that she will marry the man strong enough to bend the mighty bow of Odysseus. After all the suitors fail, the old beggar is given his chance. And the bow is bent.

With the help of his son, Odysseus slays the suitors (they number over one hundred) and regains his wife and land. There is also another minor battle (discounted by some critics as a later addition) in which the kinsmen of the dead suitors attack those on the land of Laertes, father of Odysseus, but the fighting is stopped by Athene and Zeus.

The originality of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* lies in Homer's choice of materials, his narrative focus, and his superb skill in creating character. The verse form (dactylic hexameters) is one of the beauties of the Greek dialect itself (Aeolic), and depends in part on the rhythm (or musical quality) and in part on the imagery. Noticeable throughout the poem are many repetitive descriptive phrases (such as "rosy-fingered" and "fair-haired" dawns to denote the passing of time) which reflect its bardic cast.

Some critics see in these epics the story of all humankind, as it recognizes limitations, realizes potentials, faces temptations and trials, but nevertheless endures. Whether or not one interprets them in such universal and symbolic terms, one cannot fail to recognize that "Homer held and nourished the minds and the imaginations of Greeks for generation after generation--of artists, thinkers, and ordinary simple men alike."¹ A citation from Homer settled disputes, and the character of the Greeks

¹H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1951), pp. 44-45.

depended greatly on the heroic models Homer created in his epics.

But Homer, though the earliest known Greek poet, was not alone. Many others--Greek because of their common language--followed shortly, laying the foundations of a vast literature. A farmer in Boeotia named Hesiod wrote at least two well-known works shortly after Homer's time: the *Theogony* and the autobiographical *Works and Days*. The *Theogony* is the work on which early writers depended for their ideas about Greek gods and goddesses. It is essentially a reworking in Greek terms of a cosmology (genealogy of the gods) based partly on such Mesopotamian myths as the *Enuma Elish* and partly on the tales used by Homer. Much oral tradition and some of Hesiod's own preoccupations are also worked into this short didactic poem (about 1,000 lines). The *Works and Days* is a record of commonplace events, chiefly concerned with agriculture and the conduct of life. Interwoven with fables and allegories, it contains poetry of lyrical beauty as well; and Hesiod is probably our earliest lyricist, expressing the personal emotion of a single singer.

The lyric poetry of this period set the patterns for lyrics thereafter. We have only a few examples of what must have been a much larger body of work by these poets, fortuitously saved in later anthologies. We are more or less at the mercy of time and the taste of these anthologists, for they saved only what they liked best, or perhaps it was, indeed, the best. The gems from these early lyricists have been admired, imitated and translated in every age thereafter, even in our own time.²

Archilochos, a satirist of the latter half of the eighth century or a little earlier (and a contemporary of Homer), was a native of the island of Paros and participated in the colonization of Thasos and Thrace. His verse gives us a glimpse of the age through the eyes of an adventurer, a mercenary soldier, one who believed in "honor" but embraced reality even more. A brief comment on his shield contains these sentiments:

*Well, what if some barbaric Thracian glories
in the perfect shield I left under a bush?
I was sorry to leave it--but I saved my skin.
Does it matter? O hell, I'll get a better one.*³

On the Ionian island of Lesbos lived the aristocratic Alkaios (born 620 B.C.) and his friend, the divine Sappho (born c. 612 B.C.), whose admirers included even Plato:

² Meleager of Gadara (early first century B.C.) collected examples of fifty or more poets and added some of his own; these are incorporated in the "Greek Anthology," a sixteen-volume collection based mainly on the Palatine MS (Heidenberg, c. A.D. 980). Most of the modern translations are based on the editions of the MS by Brunck and Jacobs, 1794-1814.

³ Willis Barnstone, tr., *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Bantam Books, 1962), p. 28.

*Some say nine Muses. Count again.
Behold the tenth: Sappho of Lesbos.*⁴

Alkaios was exiled for his opposition to the tyrants who ruled in Ionia, and travelled widely in Egypt and Thrace. He experimented with various forms of poetry and left ten books of hymns, political and erotic pieces and symposia (drinking songs). Sappho, leader of a cult of young women devoted to the worship of Aphrodite, left seven books of poems that survived into Byzantine times and have been much quoted in all periods. Many of the Roman poets, notably Catullus, translated, and thus preserved, her delicate lyrics. Another Ionian, Anacreon, wrote witty, graceful verse, often on the subjects of wine, women, and song. A court poet, he was a sophisticated writer with a distinctive style who looked on life in a civilized, urbane manner.

Besides the personal (monodic) lyric, choral works combining music and dance were composed for performance at festivals. Whereas the personal lyrics were either recited or sung for friends of the poet, the choral works assumed a more public character appropriate for special occasions and were frequently accompanied by group dancing. Among the earliest poets using this form was Alkman of Sparta (late seventh century B.C.), who probably came from Sardis in Asia Minor. During the next century choral works, especially those from the Peloponnesus, were to have a strong influence on the development of the drama. Alkman's lyrics for choruses of young Spartan women, written in the Doric dialect, may have contributed to the persistence of Doric chorus parts in the early drama. The old Ionic dialect was used for dialogue, while allusions were often made by using Homeric (or Aeolic) words. Greek was still a composite tongue, the common bond of Greeks scattered everywhere, yet they understood each other's dialects. The names of these dialectal variations of the language survive in the names of the metrical patterns of verse and modes in music.

In the late seventh century, the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus wrote military songs which were models for a school of later poets interested in martial verse. In the early part of the next century Solon of Athens (c. 640-560 B.C.), a poet-philosopher, became a leader of the city-state and instituted many humane reforms.

After the sixth century Greek literature was widespread throughout the colonial world, or Magna Graecia as the Romans were to call it, and civilization had reemerged on the mainland of Greece as well. By the beginning of the fifth century, many literary forms had been perfected and writers were displaying individual styles and specific points of view.

I.S., 1974
E.J.K., H.G.M., Rev. 1976

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 63.

FOR FURTHER READING

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