

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

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VOL. XXXV (No. 1)

JANUARY, 1921

NO. 776

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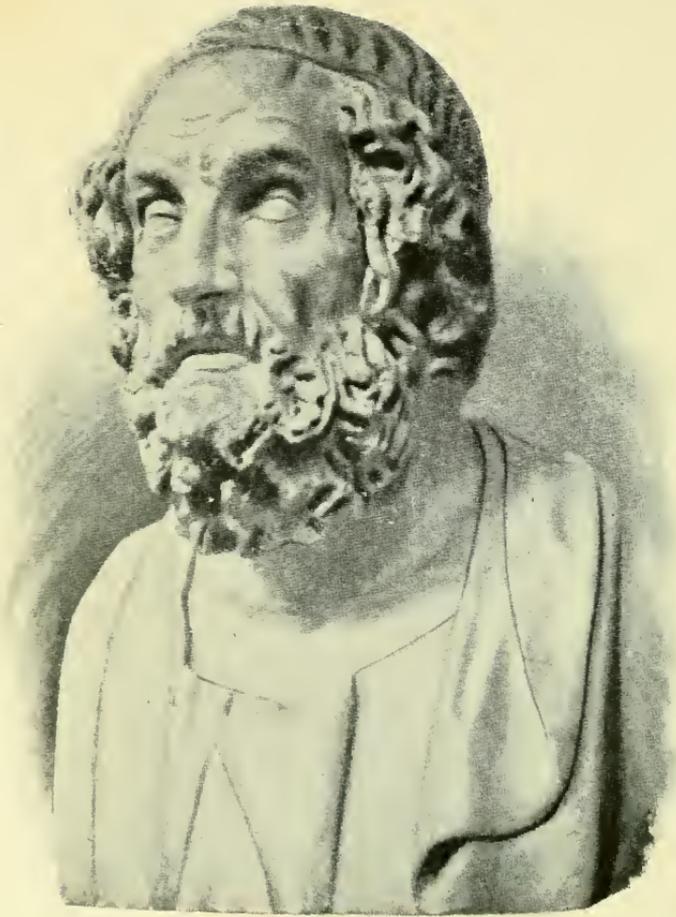
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HOMER.

Ideal bust in the museum at Naples.

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## HOMER AND THE PROPHETS

OR

HOMER AND NOW.

BY CORNELIA STEKETEE HULST.

INTRODUCTION. HOMER: MORAL AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS.

I N the days of Homer, Greece was a frontier land of the West, protected from the conquering East by a narrow but sufficient body of water and by comparative poverty in her earthly possessions. Her happy lot was isolation and opportunity for self-development, while neighboring nations on the mainland bordering the Mediterranean were conquered repeatedly by a succession of Babylonians, Assyrians, Medes and Persians.

But though the people of the Hellenic peninsulas and islands were unconquered, they were not stagnant within their own narrow boundaries and unrelated to the great outlying world of thought and action in their day, for they had ships and sailed them far, to rich Egypt and the northwestern coast of Africa, to the shores of Asia Minor and the Black Sea, to Sicily and the Italian mainland, and to the far, dread coast of Spain. Grecian sailors had even looked upon the Ocean Stream beyond the Pillars of Hercules.

Homer mentions many lands and nations, and from these we may form some conclusion as to the influences from abroad that were acting upon the Hellenic people. They knew Egypt: would they adopt her system of land and priestcraft, counting her people as nothing, but Pharaohs and priests as all? They knew the East: would they adopt her political system and honor kings as gods, to be approached in abject posture and given the right of life or death over the subjects? Would they adopt the obscene goddess Astarte (Ashtaroth, Aphrodite) along with her lover Tammuz (Adonis)?

Would they adopt the harem? If we read our Homer with these questions in mind, we shall find much that has not been found by reading without attention to what were the tendencies outside of Greece in his time.

A neighbor nearer to Greece than Babylon or Egypt, which were the great empires then striving for mastery, was Palestine. Living at the crossing point of the roads that connected the East, the North and the South, the children of Israel, by virtue of their position, received the ideas of all of the ancient world, not only through their constant contact with traders and frequent wars, but through intermarriage. Their national traditions, in their sacred books, make it clear that in them the blood of the East, the South and the North was mingled, for their patriarchs came from Ur of the Chaldees; an Egyptian strain was added during the sojourn in Egypt; and a Northern strain when they took to themselves women of the native tribes, when they conquered the Promised Land—Moabites and Ammonites and Hittites, all Nordic according to modern scholars. We know now that the Homeric Greeks also were Nordic, and in both Israel and Greece physical proof of the Nordic origin is found in the blue eyes and golden hair of individuals, along with proof in ideas and customs held in common. King David and Achilles, the goddess Athene and the god Apollo were of those who showed the Nordic signs.

From bitter experience in early wanderings, from the sojourn in Egypt, and the Babylonian Captivity, Israel attained an early conception of human liberty, and in the fires of her afflictions she came to transcend all other nations in her religious life. She has well been called a Martyr Nation and the Crucible of God.<sup>1</sup> Religiously, she rose to monotheism and gave the world its religion; politically, she was a theocratic democracy at the time when Troy was sacked by the Greeks, with laws which protected the weak against the strong and with prophets who denounced wrong-doing in high places—the very opposite from Babylon, who was drunk with the wine of her power. The laws of Babylon decreed death to the person who gave refuge to a slave, but in Israel that refuge was commanded: "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the slave which has escaped from his master unto thee. He shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best. Thou shalt not oppress him." (Deut. xxiii, 15, 16.) In Homer, what is the practice with regard to suppliants and slaves?

<sup>1</sup> Tucker, *The Martyr Nations*.

Between 1400 B. C. and 1100 B. C. Israel suffered military defeat six times and came to ascribe her sorrows to the evil that she had permitted to exist, especially to her abandoning her service of her God of Righteousness for the service of "false gods of the nations round about," as Moloch, and Tammuz, and Ashtaroth, the Ares, Adonis, and Aphrodite of the Eastern nations. The date of the fall of Troy was within this period, being 1184 B. C. according to Grecian tradition. Did the Greeks also see in personal and national sufferings the hand of a righteous god? Israel had risen to monotheism and her prophets were struggling to keep her faith pure, but her wives and maidens were weeping for Tammuz and Ashtaroth—did the highest moral and religious leaders of the Grecian world also struggle against this debased cult of the East? The people of Israel had not bowed to native kings since their escape from Egyptian bondage, but chose to live under the rule of their Judges, from Moses to the accession of Saul (1451 B. C.—1095 B. C.)—did the Homeric Greeks show any tendencies against monarchy and toward democracy, under the rule of Judges? Are the people whom Homer pictured, the best of them, an-hungered and a-thirst for righteousness and worshipers of gods of righteousness, or are they hedonists, bent on mere pleasure and regardless of the rights and the wrongs involved in attaining their ends?

We know from authentic history the answer to most of these questions as among the historic Greeks. They abolished their kings, and that soon after Homer's time, which was approximately eight hundred years before the Christian era; in Athens they developed a State under the rule of Judges, called Archons, and under Solon established a democracy more wise and more just than any the world has seen since; with courts inclined to favor the people, with land reasonably controlled against monopoly, with burdens of interest lightened, and with money administered through the public treasury so as to pay all profits of issue and exchange for public purposes instead of for the enrichment of a class of privileged "bankers" as is done in all modern States. The Code of Solon, and the Athenian democracy of the Golden Age which developed from it, put modern codes and self-styled democracies to shame by the wisdom and justice which they show, and without further evidence they argue that Homer's system made for righteousness in public as well as in private life—for it was Homer's myths that supplied the ideals of Solon and the Golden Age. This in general, and pragmatically; a study of particulars, characters and incidents in the epics makes for the same conclusion.

"FALSE GODS" IN "JUDGES" AND IN HOMER'S EPIC:  
 (1) APHRODITE; (2) ARES; (3) HEPHÆSTOS.

There are no devils in Homer's epics, but certain of the gods bring destruction to those who serve them, and these are, in general, the same "false gods" whom we find in the Bible, notably Aphrodite. Indeed, the central theme of Homer (which is the destruction of Troy because the Trojans, from Paris to Priam, had turned to Aphrodite against Athene, to whom they had given earlier devotion) finds an exact parallel in Israel, related in Judges ii. 12, 13, 14, 15:

12. And they forsook the Lord God of their fathers....and followed other gods of the people that were round about them, and bowed themselves unto them and provoked the Lord to anger;

13. And they forsook the Lord and served Baal and Ashtaroth;

14. And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies.

15. Whithersoever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn unto them; and they were greatly distressed.

However exalted the goddess Istar (Astarte, Ashtaroth, Aphrodite)<sup>2</sup> may have been in her origin and in early Babylon, where she had been regarded as the Virgin, Mother of All, the ideal woman untainted and immortal, she was certainly not exalted and pure as traders and sailors carried her cult to the West in later ages. In Palestine, where she was worshiped along with her earthly lover, Tammuz (Adonis), she was regarded by Prophets and Judges as debased earthly love—shall we find her regarded by Homer as exalted heavenly love? The fact that in historic times many of her statues in Grecian temples showed purity of outline and nobility of character, as the Venus of Milo did, would seem to prove that the higher cult of Aphrodite Urania was present in Greece, though the lower, that of Aphrodite Pandemos, may have predominated. The name *Aphrodite*, given her in Greece, would argue the same conclusion. Competent scholars hold that *Aphrodite* is derived from the Egyptian word *Apharadat*, meaning "Gift-of-Ra," Ra being the god of the sun, and exalted; but this foreign derivation seems to have been forgotten by the Greeks themselves as time passed, and they gave it a native root, *ἀφρός*, meaning "foam." Consistently with this they developed the fable that this goddess was a child of

<sup>2</sup> Carus, *Venus, an Archeological Study of the Goddess of Womanhood.*

the sea and born of the foam, which would make her an altogether lower sort of person. The accident of homophony may have given them this idea, or the fact that she had acquired a character as "unstable as water." Homer does not show Aphrodite as a virgin mother, but as the wedded wife of Hephæstos, secretly connected with Ares, and exposed to shame by Apollo. Her opposite and opponent is Athene, the virgin, goddess of wisdom, who is given the highest esteem in heaven and among the wise on earth.

In Troy, the "gods of the fathers" had been Athene and Father Zeus, and in accord with them Apollo, their god of just retribution, who warned the people that destruction would come to them through Paris. . . . had Homer heard of the incident in the history of Israel, how "*the Lord had said and sworn unto them*" that they would be punished if they admitted the worship of the false gods of the nations round about, including Ashtaroth, and how he had punished them when they forsook him, delivering them "into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them and selling them into the hands of their enemies so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies"? As a bard Homer had wandered far, and the Ionian Islands where he had his home were not far distant from Palestine. Certainly, his great story and the Athenian dramas later built upon it have the Prophet's theme, and the fate of Troy and her people was a warning to the unwise worshippers of Aphrodite.

On the question of an influence from Palestine upon Greece, we have an opinion of Saint Augustine that some of the great Athenian writers, whom he loved and honored even after he turned Christian, were under the influence of the Hebrew prophets. He mentions Plato and the Athenian dramatists specifically as having been so. . . . was it an accident of omission on his part that he did not mention Homer along with them? Plato and the Athenian dramatists drew their themes largely from Homer, and the influence of the prophets may have come to them through him. Writing in the degenerate days of Rome, Saint Augustine has much to say about the vice of the Trojan myth as it was told in his country and by Virgil, but we shall see that his criticisms do not apply to the version given by Homer. To please his patrons, the Cæsars, who had enrolled the goddess Venus (Ashtaroth) among their ancestors, Vergil glorified Venus and showed her finally triumphant when Troy fell in rescuing Æneas, her son, by the shepherd Anchises, and in founding an imperial city, Rome, this by the assistance of Ares (Mars), who was accounted in Rome an ancestor of Romulus. Homer had shown Aphrodite, along with Ares, her secret lover,

defeated in war and unable to protect her votaries, driven abashed out of heaven amid the laughter of the gods—the goddesses remained away for shame—when her cunning husband, Hephæstos, caught the guilty pair in his golden net, having learned of their relation through Apollo. Homer did not preach a crusade against Aphrodite for this and tear down her temples, as a Hebrew prophet had done, but he used the Greek method of turning laughter against her, that potent laughter of comedy, by which Athenian moralists tried to destroy what they did not love and admire. Homer never turned laughter against what he loved and admired, and the good and the great in his epics were not much given to laughter even of a satiric sort, but were distinguished by the high seriousness and earnestness fitting to epic lives.

Among the other lower gods, or "false gods," are Ares, the god of war, and Hephæstos, the god of craftsmanship, or manufacture, both "gods of the nations round about," for Ares was the god of the wild, hostile Scythians of the steppes and Hephæstos was the god of the Cretans, a commercial people with great skill, but not dear to those who had to pay them tribute, witness the story of Theseus and the Minotaur. Aphrodite, also, was a "goddess from afar," having been brought in through Cyprus from the East.

The unfortunate child of a bitter quarrel between Zeus and Here, Hephæstos was ill-tempered, and he was deformed in body not only by the accident at his birth but also by the occupation of his choosing. He was the smith among the gods, and a subject for their laughter. Unwisely he had desired Aphrodite for his wife, it seems without loving her, for his nature was ignoble and no note of heartfelt sorrow is to be detected in his talk when he discovers that she has betrayed him secretly with Ares. He spies upon her and resorts to cunning and vulgar exposure, so that he becomes ridiculous instead of tragic, as he would not be if his wife's base betrayal hurt his heart. He rants, he clamors about the riches he gave for her to her father, and threatens to demand them back, brooches, spiral armbands, necklaces, and cups set with precious stones. These are his delight, and will be the dearest things on earth to his votaries, though they lack those highest of values which the god Apollo gives to real art by inspiration through the Muses. Even the wonderful shield that Hephæstos made for Achilles was a work of mere craftsmanship, not inspired by the Muse, though it pictured many appealing subjects with utmost skill. A background of nature, and people, high and low, at their work and their play—these a true artist might take for works of high art and as a means

to high life, working with aspiration and insight and reverence, in love of this beautiful earth, sympathy with his brother, man, and gratitude to the Divine Giver of all good things. Such a spirit is not in the work of Hephæstos, and how little he cared is shown by the fact that he put these scenes from life on a shield, where they would be hacked and battered.

Even less in regard among gods and wise and good men than this smith, Hephæstos, was Ares, the god of war, inconstant and secret lover of inconstant Aphrodite, and betrayer of Hephæstos's home. Though Odysseus was the greatest of warriors, he was not in Ares's service, and he would have preferred not to go to the war, but to remain at home with his wife and child. No wise man loves war for its own sake, or even for the chances it gives him for fame, as Ares and his worshipers do. Ares does not fight for a cause because it is just, as Apollo does, nor because it is wise, as Athene does, and, being without moral power, he often turns coward on the battlefield and is always vanquished by those who have moral power though they seem at a first glance far weaker than he. So, a very young mortal hero, Diomedes, because he is strong in devotion to his worthy cause, lays Ares low in combat, this "false god" who is wrong. The Iliad shows in various incidents how contemptible Ares is. When he has been vanquished by Diomedes in combat, he flees to Father Zeus, to get sympathy! and to complain of Athene because she started the war! But, son though he is, he receives cold comfort from Father Zeus, for Zeus looks sternly upon him, and says:

"Nay, thou renegade, sit not by me and whine. Most baleful art thou to me of all the gods that dwell in Olympus. Thou ever lovest strife and wars and battle. . . . My offspring art thou. . . . but wert thou born of any other god, long ere this hadst thou been lower than the sons of Heaven."

Ares is condemned by his mother, Hera, also, and no less rigorously, for she is the Guardian of the Home, which he has violated both by his intrigue with Aphrodite and his support of the Trojans who are protecting Paris and Helen. Of Athene, Ares has no comprehension, and when he faces her in combat he can only call her witless names. "Thou Dogfly!" he shouts to her, "What is the reason thou makest gods fight thus?" Such as he are not amenable to argument, so she answers, "Fool, hast thou not been taught to know mine eminence?" and then proceeds to teach him her eminence by vanquishing him in combat, for he may be convinced, or at least impressed by the fact that his own overweening brute force has been less than equal to her moral force. While Ares lies on the field,

defeated and unable to rise, Aphrodite comes forward to help him, raises him up, and begins to lead him away; but she is stopped by Hera and Athene. "Athene, see!" cries Hera, "Ares is helped from the field! *Dogfly* his rude tongue named thee—upon her fly!" Urged on thus by Ares's own mother to punish them, Athene flies at Aphrodite, beats her a furious blow on the breast, and lays her low ignominiously, along with Ares, while she shouts over them in triumph, "So lie all who succors yield to the false Trojans against the Greeks!" And at this, "whitewristed Hera smiled," though she saw her own son thus publicly beaten and scorned.

It will be observed that in the shout of triumph quoted, Athene expressed no personal rancor or satisfied spite against a rival, but only joy in victory for her cause. The motive usually ascribed to her and to Hera for opposing Aphrodite is vanity wounded because the apple of love was not awarded to one of them as most fair by Paris, but to her. This interpretation is not sustained by the preceding incident, nor by any other in Homer. If Athene were meanly vain and jealous, Zeus would not show such regard to her, but would roundly tell her her shortcomings, as he told Ares his. She is his Wisdom, and when he yields to her, it is always because she has spoken wisely. In this war, he must give support to her, because wisdom ought to prevail over unwisdom in such matters as this of violating a home; also, as guardian of guests and of hosts, he ought to take sides against Paris and those who protect him in Troy. Hera's speech urging Athene to humiliate Ares still farther and to attack Aphrodite, is further evidence that wounded vanity is not the motive of Athene—far from being a myth in which two vain goddesses plunge the world into war to spite a rival, Homer's great myth shows Hera overcoming her former feeling against Athene, who was no child of hers, and suppressing her natural prejudices in favor of her own child, in order to do her duty as guardian of the home. Only the "false gods" will defend Paris and his protectors; against them must be ranged (1) Athene, because they are unwise; (2) Hera, because she guards the home; (3) Zeus, because he punishes those who violate the rites of hospitality, and (4) Apollo, because they had been forewarned from God by prophecy against doing the evil thing but had done it nevertheless.

This interpretation of the myth of the fall of Troy as sternly moral and religious, as is the Bible story, is consistent with what we know of the times in which Homer lived. The Homeric age was not an age of dalliance and sophistication, but was notably serious and earnest as compared with later times. Critics have long realized this

and have called Homer's the *Apollonian period*, in distinction from the *Dionysian* which followed. It was characterized by subjection of the individual to the gods, and by self-restraint, which Apollo commanded, while the cult and period of Dionysos were characterized by a greater emotional fervor along with a general abandonment of self-control, sometimes to the "frenzy." The tendency to excess resulted speedily in degeneration, and finally in the evils so sternly and justly condemned by the early Christians. The Athenian drama of the great period (500 B. C.), with which Saint Augustine was in keen sympathy, as we have said, showed no weakening of the Apollonian self-control, but a happy blending of Apollonian and Dionysian elements. Its themes were taken largely from Homer, and its spirit was high and earnest, with developments in faith beyond what Homer had grasped, but consistent, and, as Saint Augustine judged it, very like the faith of the prophets. The periods to which Homer, Hesiod, Solon, Plato and the Athenian dramatists gave expression held a view of life, morality and religion more nearly akin to that of the prophets than to the pagan mythology of Rome under the Cæsars—we can only wonder that Vergil, the Aphrodisian, should ever have been credited with kinship to the prophets, as he was for centuries. It is true that he wrote of a coming Saviour and of the advent of Peace with him, but the Saviour he looked for was his patron Cæsar, "Augustus," who assumed divinity in imitation of the rulers of the East. So far as Vergil had a religion, he worshiped Venus and Mars, the "false gods" of the prophets, and of Homer. A study of Homer's "gods of the fathers" will show him, here also, not akin to Vergil, but to the prophets.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]