

Myths and Legends: Odysseus and his odyssey, the short version

By Caroline H. Harding and Samuel B. Harding, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.10.17

Word Count **1,399**

Level **1030L**



Escaping from the island of the Cyclopes — one-eyed, ill-tempered giants — the hero Odysseus calls back to the shore, taunting the Cyclops Polyphemus, who heaves a boulder at the ship. Painting by Arnold Böcklin in 1896. SECOND: A drawing of a cyclops, courtesy of CSA Images/B&W Engrave Ink Collection and Getty Images.

Greek mythology began thousands of years ago because there was a need to explain natural events, disasters, and events in history. Myths were created about gods and goddesses who had supernatural powers, human feelings and looked human. These ideas were passed down in beliefs and stories.

The following stories are about Odysseus, the son of the king of the Greek island of Ithaca and a hero, who was described to be as wise as Zeus, king of the gods.

For 10 years, the Greek army battled the Trojans in the walled city of Troy, but could not get over, under or through the walls that protected it. Finally, Odysseus came up with the idea of a large hollow, wooden horse, that would be filled with Greek soldiers. The people of Troy woke one morning and found that no army surrounded the city, so they thought the enemy had returned to their ships and were finally sailing back to Greece. A great horse had been left behind, so the Trojans brought it through the gates and into the walled city. That night the people of Troy celebrated the victory with food, drink and song, and finally lay down to sleep.

Odysseus and his men climbed out of the horse and opened the gates for the Greek soldiers that had only pretended to be on their ships returning to Greece. The Greek army attacked and the great city of Troy fell.

Beginning A Decade Of Adventures

After the Trojan War was ended by the burning of Troy, the Greeks filled their ships with gold and other valuables and set sail for home. But Odysseus had more adventures and did not return to his home until 10 more years had passed.

Odysseus proved himself to be wise and brave in his long and dangerous journey home. But at this time, it would be too much to tell of all the adventures that he had. However, sometime in the future, you might want to read them in a book written by a great Greek poet named Homer. Here, we can tell only a few of the wonderful things that happened to him.

Odysseus Outsmarts The Giant Cyclops

After sailing for a long time, and seeing many strange lands, Odysseus and his men came to the land of the Cyclops. These were wild and lawless giants as each had only one great eye in the middle of his forehead. They did not plow the fields but lived off their herds of sheep and cattle. With some of his men, Odysseus explored the country and soon found a great high cave, with much cheese and milk in it. They waited for the owner and he soon appeared, driving his herds into the cave with him.



When Odysseus and his men saw how large and fierce the Cyclops was, they wanted to run away, but the giant rolled a huge rock against the mouth of the cave so they could not get out. The Cyclops immediately seized two of the men and ate them. The next morning he ate two more, and then drove his flocks out to pasture. But before he left he rolled the rock back to the mouth of the cave, so that Odysseus and his men were still kept as prisoners.

While he was gone, Odysseus planned a way of escape. He found a long stake in the cave that he sharpened into a point and hardened in a fire pit. When the giant returned he ate two more men. Odysseus gave him some wine, which they had brought when they came to the cave. When the Cyclops got drunk from the wine and fell asleep, Odysseus and his men plunged the sharp stick into his one eye and blinded him.

That night they hid in the cave from the blinded giant. The next morning, Cyclops rolled the rock from the mouth of the cave and started herding the sheep to let them out to their pastures. The blinded Cyclops felt the back of each sheep that went out but did not realize that Odysseus and each of his men were clinging to the underside of the sheep. With that, they all escaped safely. But Poseidon, the god of the sea, was the father of the Cyclops. He heard the men had blinded his son and planned to punish them.

A Sheepskin Bag Of Wind

After leaving the land of the Cyclops, Odysseus and his men came to the island of Aeolus, the god of the winds. They rested, ate well and enjoyed themselves for a month. Aeolus gave Odysseus a strong sheepskin bag when they set out again on their journey. This held all the winds of heaven, but not the west wind. It was left out so it would blow the ship gently home. They sailed for nine days until they were so near to their home that Odysseus saw people on the shore. While he slept, his men secretly opened the bag of the winds to see what great present King Aeolus had given Odysseus. All the winds of heaven stormed out of the bag and blew them back to the island of King Aeolus. This time the king refused to help them.

Next, they sailed to the island of Circe, the witch and enchantress, who was the daughter of Helios, the god of the sun. At first, she was angry and changed some of his men into pigs. But Odysseus bravely forced her to change them back into men. Then Odysseus and his companions lived pleasantly with her for a whole year and when they were ready to set sail again, Circe told Odysseus what he must do to get safely back home. She told him to go down to the world of the dead and ask about his journey home. There Odysseus found out that Poseidon would send storms to stop him because of the blinding the Cyclops. But also he was told that they would journey to the island of the sun and was warned not to harm the oxen that lived there.

Devouring Oxen Angers Helios

Odysseus returned to the upper world, and once more he and his men set out on their way. In their journey, they did come to an island of the sun god, Helios, where lived the oxen of the sun. Odysseus did not wish to land here, but his men wanted to sleep on the shore that night. Odysseus finally agreed, but made his men promise not to harm the oxen of the sun. That night a great storm was sent by the angry Poseidon and for a whole month, they could not leave the island. Finally, after Odysseus' men could not get enough to eat, they killed and ate some of the oxen of the sun and sailed off. This angered Helios who asked Zeus, king of the gods to kill Odysseus and his men.

Zeus hurled a great thunderbolt, which destroyed their ship causing everyone to drown. Only Odysseus was able to escape. For 10 days he swam and floated on the mast of his ship, until he came to the island of the goddess, Calypso. She fell in love with Odysseus and kept him with her for seven years. But he wanted to return to his wife and home, so Calypso finally let

him go. She gave him a great raft and he set sail for home. For 17 days, Odysseus sailed on in safety. However, Poseidon had not forgotten his anger and sent a great storm, which wrecked the raft. Odysseus was able to swim to a nearby shore.

A Final Ship Sets Sail

This time, Odysseus found the daughter of the king near a river that flowed into the sea. When he told her his story, she took him to her father. At last Odysseus was taken to his own home in one of the ships, which belonged to this king.

Odysseus reached home, but his troubles were not yet over for he found that evil men had taken over his home and property. With the help of his son and a faithful servant, Odysseus defeated them and took back his house and lands. At last, he lived quietly and peacefully once more in the island kingdom.

From "Greek Gods, Heroes, and Men" by Caroline H. Harding and Samuel B. Harding, published in 1897.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following characters was MOST supportive of Odysseus during his journey?
- (A) Poseidon
 - (B) Circe
 - (C) Helios
 - (D) Calypso
- 2 How does the article BEST develop the idea that Odysseus was a wise and brave man?
- (A) by highlighting the ways he used his mind and his courage to get out of difficult situations
 - (B) by calling attention to the many people who respected him for his intelligence and daring
 - (C) by describing his origins as a famous war leader who won many battles during the Trojan War
 - (D) by discussing his legacy as an intelligent and heroic leader after he finally returned home

- 3 Read the sentence from the section "Odysseus Outsmarts The Giant Cyclops."

They did not plow the fields but lived off their herds of sheep and cattle.

What is the meaning of the phrase "plow the fields" as used in the sentence above?

- (A) live in one place
- (B) farm their land
- (C) hunt for food
- (D) eat fruits and vegetables

- 4 Read the sentence from the section "Devouring Oxen Angers Helios."

Zeus hurled a great thunderbolt, which destroyed their ship causing everyone to drown.

The authors use the word "hurled" to mean:

- (A) vomited
- (B) summoned
- (C) heaved
- (D) demanded