

Tea Dularidze (Tbilisi)

**THE ACHAEAN AMBASSADORIAL MISSION TO ACHILLES
ACCORDING TO THE *ILIAD*, BOOK IX**

An ambassadorial mission is a multifunctional phenomenon in the Homeric epics and plays a highly important role in the development of plot events. The poet mentions heralds, messengers and envoys and assigns them appropriate tasks. These relationships were typical of both gods and humans. At the level of the immortals, it is more or less clear when Zeus (and not only he) is certain to resort to the service of divine messengers; however, the same is not altogether true about the heroes and requires closer consideration. In this regard, Book IX of the *Iliad* is particularly interesting. It pictures the ambassadorial mission assigned and performed by mortals, without the divine interference. The motivation for this representative mission is the following: Achilles, furious at Agamemnon, refuses to fight in the battle. As a result, Achaeans lose. Nestor is the first to make a speech at the meeting of chiefs held in the King's tent. The sage old man reminds the commander of the abduction of Briseis which infuriated Achilles and compelled him to abandon of the battle. However, the circumstances require him back. Apart from Agamemnon's gifts, it is necessary to win Achilles' favor with a friendly word. Nestor recommends the mediators he believes most eligible. What is the principle that underlies the selection of the envoys? Nestor names Phoenix, "dear to Zeus" (δῖφιλος) as the head of the mission, then follow "great" (μέγας) Aias and "divine" (δῖος) Odysseus. They are to be accompanied with Odius and Eurybates who act as heralds. Homer calls all the three heroes "κλητός" which means "chosen", "distinguished", and Odius and Eurybates – "κῆρυξ" (herald).

All the three chosen have their particular missions. They represent a pre-meditated and single unity.¹ The most skilled and versatile of them is Odysseus, and Nestor sends him for his shrewdness; among the selected is Phoenix, a friend of Achilles' father, who can not be turned down; and the third person entrusted with the mission is Aias, the true image of bravery. The son of Peleus highly appreciates his sincerity and straightforwardness. The sage old man takes all this into an account while selecting the representatives. That is why the "diplomatic" Odysseus was accompanied with the other two individuals. However, the following question still remains unanswered: "what was the function of the two heralds – Odysseus and Eurybates – in this mission? Evidently, it was necessary to shape the latter as an official delegation so as to maintain the ambassadorial order, i.e. what in modern diplomacy is called a 'protocol'. According to Tsagarakis, they give royal dignity and sanction to the Achaean petition and witness the event; they come, in other words, to make official the character of a visit to Achilles.² The heralds do not take part in the talks as envoys; they have a different function. Nestor appeals to them to carry out the purification ritual (Il., IX, 171-178).

"Spray the water on their hands, keep sacred silence" (Il., IX, 689);³

Then follows the act of sacrifice and wine-drinking. Nestor urged the chosen to do their best to persuade Achilles. When the Achaeans reached the ships and tents of the Myrmidons, they found Achilles taking joy in a sweet forminx. Patroclus sat nearby. Once the hero caught the sight of the mission, he jumped to his feet and made his way to them. As he approached the envoys, he said:

"I welcome you, friendly brave men. Perhaps, that is the way it should be; of the Achaeans, you are the dearest to me, the enraged" (Il., IX, 197-98).⁴

Achilles received the "dearest brave men" (φίλτατοι ἄνδρες) with deep respect. His kind attitude to Odysseus, Phoenix and Aias, i.e. the individuals chosen by Nestor, is obvious. Thus, the envoys selected according to his criterion proved acceptable to Achilles, which points to the successful decision and the right choice.

Closer attention should be paid to the way shrewd Odysseus builds his speech and tries to persuade Achilles and dissipate his anger. Odysseus' dip-

¹ Lohmann D., "Die Komposition der Reden in der Ilias", Berlin 1970, 213.

² Tsagarakis Od., "Phoenix and The Achaean Embassy", Rheinisches Museum für Philologie, B. 116, # 3/4, New Folge 1973, 197. Odysseus quotes these heralds in his report to Agamemnon and the Achaean council (Il., IX, 689).

³ φέρτε δὲ χερσὶν ὕδωρ, εὐφήμησάι τε κέλεσθε, (Il., IX, 171).

⁴ χαίρετον. ἢ φίλοι ἄνδρες ἰκάνετον. ἢ τι μάλα χρεώ, οἱ μοι σκυζομένω περ' Ἀχαιῶν φίλτατοί ἐστων (Il., IX, 197-98).

lomatic skills are exposed in the address that opens his speech. First, he thanked the host for his cordial welcome and noticed that the table laid for the sake of their friendship was flawless – like the supper in Agamemnon's tent. This statement aimed to make a light and innocent mention of Agamemnon's name in order to bring him unnoticeably into the conversation, and at the same time, avoid Achilles' irritation. The speech is one of the best patterns of Homeric eloquence. This is reflected in its composition as well. Odysseus remains Agamemnon's spokesperson although he is personally interested to persuade the great warrior. His speech is not built on emotions. Tsagarakis believes that in his speech Odysseus shows himself ready to negotiate with Achilles but not to supplicate at his knees.⁵ He resorts to logical arguments to prove the actual threat and calls on Achilles to come to the rescue of the Achaean army. In Griffin's opinion, the speech is ably delivered, but fails to reach the emotional level on which Achilles now lives and broods.⁶ Odysseus recites with surprising accuracy the list of offerings enumerated by the king (IX, 677-88). The presentation of the diplomatic gifts⁷ makes the official status of the envoys more convincing. In the conclusion of the speech, Odysseus gives the hero advice – if he does not wish to reconcile with Agamemnon, let him have mercy on the army which will praise him as the god; he also appeals to Achilles not to lose the chance to fight Hector.

Shrewd Odysseus offers a different kind of "reimbursement" – the name and glory of the hero. In contrast with the material wealth sent by the king, the envoy promises the great warrior the reward he believes more appropriate.⁸ How does infuriated Achilles respond to his speech and the gifts? Achilles' answer is based on Odysseus' arguments but at certain points proves more complicated thematically. The hero mentions every single offer. He states sternly that he is pleased neither with Agamemnon nor with his gifts. He hates the king as "the gates to Hades" (Αἶδαο πύλησιν); therefore, he will not try to quench his anger. In his comments on the Homeric epic, Monro mentions that the outright rejection of the gifts features Achilles' character and exposes his disposition to allow the Greek army to lose.⁹ The scene reveals his uncompromising and adamant nature. According to scholar, in Homeric times, personal feelings mattered far more in the determination of an

⁵ Tsagarakis Od., "The Achaean Embassy and The Wrath of Achilles", *Hermes*, Zeitschrift für Klassische Philologie, 99. Band, Wiesbaden 1971, 258.

⁶ Griffin J., *Homer, Iliad*. Book Nine, Oxford 1995, 21.

⁷ Irene J. F. De Jong, *Narrators and Focalizers, The Presentation of the Story in the Iliad*, Amsterdam 1987, 183.

⁸ Lohmann D., "Die Komposition der Reden in der Reden in der Ilias", Berlin 1970, 235.

⁹ Homer, *Iliad*, Monro D. B., Oxford 1958, 340.

action than laws or moral values.¹⁰ Once deceived by the king, he did not trust him any more, and refused to respond to any attempt of reconciliation. He would not negotiate unless his own demand was met – he wanted Agamemnon to personally appeal to him to rejoin the battlefield. The son of Peleus hoped the necessity (*ἀνάγκη*) would force the king and his envoys to their knees.¹¹ When the hero had made up his mind to quit the battle, the king had not ask him to stay (*Il.*, IX, 169-173); now the situation was different. Agamemnon's offering includes three parts: 1. The immediate gifts; 2. Achilles would marry Agamemnon's daughter when back home; 3. The hero would receive the Trojan wealth after its fall. Achilles rejects the gifts one after another, which exposes that his set of values is different. "It must, even more importantly, display the emotional nature, the depth of hurt and anger, which drives Achilles into a position which neither he nor anybody else in the poem wholly understands."¹² Achilles gradually moved from his enraged state to the meditation on his own fate. Homer presents this route with unmatched skillfulness. Remembering his mother's, Thetis' prophecy,¹³ Achilles longs for a peaceful life¹⁴ and intends to return to Phthia on the following day (IX, 360). He asks old Phoenix to stay with him. He regards Thetis' oracle as another proof for his decision. The hero addresses the rest of the guests:

"Deliver the message – that is the duty of the chosen" (*Il.*, IX, 422).¹⁵

The hero calls on the messengers to inform Agamemnon and all Achaeans about his firm decision, which is their prerogative. To deliver a message was an envoy's duty, and it is very important that this mission is already clearly defined in the Homeric epic.

Another important point is how old Phoenix builds his speech and attempts to persuade Achilles, though the hero has already taken the decision and has asked the messengers to tell it to the king. The hero's words should have been understood as his final say, the peremptory decision that rendered

¹⁰ Homer, *Iliad*, Monro D. B., Oxford 1958, 339.

¹¹ Tsagarakis Od., "The Achaean Embassy and The Wrath of Achilles", *Hermes, Zeitschrift für Klassische Philologie*, 99. Band, Wiesbaden 1971, 259.

¹² Griffin J., *Homer, Iliad Book Nine*, Oxford 1995, 21.

¹³ If Achilles chose to fight in the Trojan War, he was destined to die but win fame; on the other hand, if he stayed in his homeland, he would live an ordinary, mediocre life.

¹⁴ . . . οὐ γὰρ ἔμοι ψυχῆς ἀντάξιον οὐδ' ὄτα φασὶν
Ἴλιον ἐκτῆσθαι.

"As my spirit can not be compared to anything –
either to Ilium when it thrived" (*Il.*, IX, 401-402).

¹⁵ ἀγγελίην ἀπόφασθε - τὸ γὰρ γέρας ἐστὶ γερόντων-
γέρας, αὐτὸς - privilege, prerogative; see Liddell H. G. and Scott R., *Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, 345.

the mission unsuccessful; however, Phoenix, the second envoy, proceeds with the talks. He represents the image opposite to that of Odysseus. The old man's speech is emotionally charged and is based on human and paternal relationships. He talks not as Agamemnon's representative, but as Achilles' father's friend who would sit young Achilles on his knees. He starts his address with a rhetorical question:

"How shall I stay here without you, dear son?" (*Il.* IX, 437-38).¹⁶

He relates how Peleus sheltered him in Phthia and entrusted his son to his care. Phoenix was destined to be childless; so he received Achilles as his own son. He advised the hero not to reject the daughters of Zeus, goddesses of prayers – otherwise, he was certain to incur the Cronid's wrath. According to Fränkel, Achilles has not rebuffed any prayers.¹⁷ In Tsagarakis opinion, Phoenix knows that but in his endeavor to persuade Achilles to give up his wrath he appeals to whatever might bring about the desirable.¹⁸ Though Phoenix' speech is much longer than that of other envoys, its inner structure is easy to trace. It consists of two basic themes: 1. the relationship between Phoenix and Achilles; 2. Meleager's paradigm. After referring to it, he advises Achilles to quench his anger and accept the gifts. The speech of the old man abounds in the words of request and advice that aim at persuading the hero. "Phoenix' role was very delicate because of his relations to Achilles and should be played with diplomacy."¹⁹ Phoenix tries to fulfill his duty with sweet words; the mission of both – Odysseus' and Phoenix' – is result-oriented. The old man should have been well aware of Achilles' character – the latter would gradually proceed from an unconditional decision to a compromise. Lohmann wrote the son of Peleus was wont to plunge from ἀφροσύνη to σωφροσύνη,²⁰ from one extremity into the other. Phoenix' speech marks the transitional stage in the hierarchy of the mission. Achilles' answer to Phoenix is concise – he starts to consider his decision. The hero softens his position and says he would better decide on his return to his homeland on the following day (*Il.*, IX, 618). Though Phoenix fails to dissipate Achilles' fury and persuade him to join the battle, he succeeds to make him change his re-

¹⁶ πῶς ἂν ἔπειτ' ἀπὸ σείο, φίλον τέκος, αὐτὶ λιποῖμην οἶος (*Il.*, IX, 437-438).

¹⁷ Fränkel H., *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums*, München 1962, 69.

¹⁸ Tsagarakis Od., "The Achaean Embassy and The Wrath of Achilles", *Hermes, Zeitschrift für Klassische Philologie*, 99. Band, Wiesbaden 1971, 259.

¹⁹ Tsagarakis Od., "Phoenix and The Achaean Embassy", *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, B. 116, # 3/4, New Folge 1973, 201.

²⁰ Lohmann D., "Die Komposition der Reden in der Reden in der Ilias", Berlin 1970, 279; Gordeziani R., *The Problems of Homeric epics*, the Tbilisi University Press, Tbilisi 1978, 304 (in Russian).

cent decision. It seems Aias, the third messenger, has no chance to address the hero. Bowra believes when the request failed, Aias makes one last attempt to move Achilles by pointing this out; he shows that the envoys are friends under his roof who demand and deserve respect (*Il.*, IX, 640).²¹ His speech reflects the failed diplomatic mission. He mentions the principles of friendship, dignity and bravery, which drive the hero to the other extremity. "A short, bluff speech, it strikes the right manly note. Achilles finds it hard to dissent from the appeal to comradeship. It is just that he can't bring himself to do what he sees to be right."²² Achilles admits that Aias' appeal was sound and fair. However, he can not overcome his anger towards Agamemnon. He tries to justify his actions by his injured dignity. After Aias' speech, Achilles changes his mind to return home and decides to fight divine Hector only when Hector's army approaches the Myrmidons' ships. Already in his address to Odysseus Achilles stated that he would fight only of his own will. After that, each of them takes wordlessly the double-bottom vessel filled with wine. They offer sacrifice to gods. The ritual marks the end to the mission. Although three different ways were found to quench Achilles' anger, they all proved unsuccessful. Remarkably, none of the gods interfered in the talks in favor of the messengers. As a matter of fact, the envoys failed to persuade the hero; however, the mission cannot be assessed as a failure. Achilles' return to the battlefield can be described as three-staged: 1. the mission of the envoys; 2. paradigmatic Patroclus; 3. the fit of the stress – Patroclus' death. Agamemnon's messengers facilitated the first stage. They were to inform the king about the outcome of their mission. This very duty defines finally the functions of the mission. First, Agamemnon asks his official envoy – Odysseus. The latter has discouraging news; Odysseus adds that Aias and both heralds have the same to tell him. Worried Danaans are gripped with silence. Noble Diomedes raises their spirit and calls on to resume the battle in the morning. "Achilleus will fight again when his *thymos* or the god arouse him".²³

The ambassadorial mission described in Book IX of the *Iliad* is directly linked to Achilles' wrath – the basic line that runs throughout the poem. Several aspects can be distinguished in the episode. First of all, our attention is attracted by the attempt to find ways to persuade the hero: three heroes are assigned who are to wage talks according to their respective characters. Three different ways are found to persuade Achilles. The episode implies Homer's unambiguous objective to show the importance of envoys' mission in a decisive moment. He singled out three principle points to persuade the hero: per-

²¹ Bowra C. M., *Tradition and Design in The Iliad*, Oxford 1930, repr. 1963, 19.

²² Griffin J., *Homer, Iliad Book Nine*, Oxford 1995, 22.

²³ Stanley K., *The Shield of Homer, Narrative Structure in The Iliad*, New Jersey, 1993, 117.

suasion through offering compensation; persuasion through an appeal and sage advice; persuasion through resorting to friendship and bravery. In this way the poet built the general image of ambassadorial mission and presented all the three envoys as a single team. Another important point connected with the mission is the impact of eloquence, in which the individuals delegated to Achilles are thoroughly skilled. The links between the opposing parties are restored – this is what determines the dramatic essence of diplomatic talks.