

HESIOD

(8th or 7th c. BC, composed in Greek)

The Homeric epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, are probably slightly earlier than Hesiod's two surviving poems, the Works and Days and the Theogony. Yet in many ways Hesiod is the more important author for the study of Greek mythology. While Homer treats certain aspects of the saga of the Trojan War, he makes no attempt at treating myth more generally. He often includes short digressions and tantalizes us with hints of a broader tradition, but much of this remains obscure. Hesiod, by contrast, sought in his Theogony to give a connected account of the creation of the universe. For the study of myth he is important precisely because his is the oldest surviving attempt to treat systematically the mythical tradition from the first gods down to the great heroes.

Also unlike the legendary Homer, Hesiod is for us an historical figure and a real personality. His Works and Days contains a great deal of autobiographical information, including his birthplace (Ascrea in Boiotia), where his father had come from (Cyme in Asia Minor), and the name of his brother (Perseus), with whom he had a dispute that was the inspiration for composing the Works and Days. His exact date cannot be determined with precision, but there is general agreement that he lived in the 8th century or perhaps the early 7th century BC.

His life, therefore, was approximately contemporaneous with the beginning of alphabetic writing in the Greek world. Although we do not know whether Hesiod himself employed this new invention in composing his poems, we can be certain that it was soon used to record and pass them on. Since the Homeric epics and Hesiod's works both came into form at this important time, they stood for the later Greeks at the very beginnings of their literary traditions. Because of this early and authoritative position in Greek literature, later authors looked to these two poets time and time again, quoting them as authorities, commenting on their views (both positively and negatively), and looking to them for inspiration.

THEOGONY

Although the Theogony is our earliest surviving account of the origins of the gods from the Greek world, it must always be remembered that there were other contemporary accounts, and every indication suggests that they sometimes differed radically from Hesiod's version. Thus, the Theogony is merely the most important Greek poem on the subject, but it is not possible to say that it straightforwardly represents "what the Greeks believed" or even "what the Greeks of Hesiod's time believed." Despite the poem's status as a classic with special authority that derived from its early date and the greatness of its poet, the Greeks did not approach it with the same degree of reverence that modern revelation religions such as

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam approach their sacred books. The Greeks always kept in mind that Hesiod as poet had the choice to follow one tradition or another, or even to depart from all previous traditions, just as his audience had the choice to favor his account or not as the circumstances demanded.

In Hesiod's case we also have to concern ourselves with the question of influence from the civilizations of the Near East, which had older, elaborate creation myths of their own. To what degree these influences had been incorporated into Greek mythical thought before Hesiod is difficult to determine, but there is no doubt that many of the features that stand out in the Theogony derive from or are parallel to myths from the Near East. Because the poem is the sole surviving example of such Greek literature of this date, however, it is impossible to make categorical assertions.

Hesiod's Theogony (literally, "Birth of the Gods") is also a cosmogony ("birth of the cosmos"), because for Hesiod the physical universe was itself made up of gods. His poem, then, is a description of how the universe came to exist in the form his audience recognized; that process of evolution takes place through the birth of gods. First, there is simply Chaos, the space in which the creation takes place. Then Gaia (Earth) is formed, along with Tartaros, which is conceived of as a sort of underworld. Gaia will, in turn, produce Ouranos (Sky), then the mountains and the sea. Thus, one can trace the development of the physical features of the universe as successive gods come into being. For the Greeks, however, the universe is not only filled with places, but also with ideas and unseen forces, and Hesiod's account is concerned with these too. So Eros, the power of desire, comes into being along with Gaia and Tartaros, and Hesiod's audience learns of the creation of everything from night and day to justice and pain, each a divine figure.

The central figure in the Theogony is Zeus, and the whole poem can be read as an elaboration of the greatness of this god. Not only do the early gods ultimately give way to his rule, but he is also either the progenitor of the gods that come after him or the one who dispenses to them their privileges and functions. Although most of the physical creation in the universe occurs before Zeus' birth, he stamps the final impression onto the world as the Greeks knew it, and he fends off challenges to his authority (in the form of the monster Typhoios) to emphasize the permanence of his rule and to show that this eternal just rule and this particular ordering of the cosmos is the proper culmination of cosmogonic evolution.

The transition from the old order to the rule of Zeus is told in the stories where the kingship passes from Ouranos to Cronos and finally to Zeus. The basic structure of this succession myth is certainly derived from older theogonies of the Near East; the clearest parallels are found in the texts from the Hittites, a people of Anatolia (today central Turkey) whose civilization had thrived during the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BC. There we read about Anush (Sky) having his genitals bitten off by his son Kumarbi. Kumarbi, in turn, produces Teshub, a storm god, who eventually overthrows his father. This coincides so closely with the story of Cronos' castration of Ouranos and Zeus' subsequent rise to power that there is no doubt the Greek story is derivative. Still, we cannot know whether the early Greeks borrowed the story directly from the Hittites or whether the two traditions had a common ancestor in the myths of some other people. Nonetheless, as important as this insight is for the study of the history of myth, Hesiod's account is completely understandable in purely Greek terms.

Despite the central importance of the succession myth, Hesiod's poem is not solely concerned with the transmission of heavenly power from generation to generation. Because

the poet is interested in showing the overall evolution of the cosmos from the beginning of time to something recognizable to his audience, much has to be accounted for. To that end, long lists of the offspring of various divinities are given, most notably the list of the progeny of Night, Pontos, and other gods in lines 211–455. Hesiod also begins a list of mortal heroes born from goddesses at line 970, and the last two lines of the poem show that it was followed by the Catalog of Women, Hesiod's now mostly lost poem on the mortal women who produced children by gods. Since many aristocratic families and even entire cities traced their lineages back to these heroes, this extensive list acts as a bridge between the Theogony and the world of Hesiod's audience.

The poem begins with an invocation to the Muses (1–115). The first primordial gods (116–136) follow, along with the tale of the castration of Ouranos (137–187) and its outcome, including the birth of Aphrodite (188–210). After the lengthy genealogical digression (211–455), which includes an excursus on the nature of the goddess Hecate (413–455) that is difficult to account for (various theories have been proposed, but they need not concern us here), the birth of the older Olympians from Cronos and Rhea comes next (456–508). The story of Prometheus and the trick he played on Zeus at Mecone (509–572) is, at heart, an explanation for the ritual of sacrifice, but it also explains mankind's technical skills (the gift of fire), as well as the origin of women told in the story of Pandora (573–620). But Hesiod has gotten ahead of himself, for in the grand sweep of the poem Zeus is not yet king of the cosmos. The poet then returns (621–725) to that theme with the Titanomachy (“Battle with the Titans”), in which Zeus finally defeats Cronos. The defeated are thrown into Tartaros, which is described at some length (726–825). Zeus' power is challenged by the monster Typhoios (826–885). After his victory, Zeus begins a series of divine marriages, which, along with the matings of other gods, shows the continuing evolution of the universe (886–969). The poem ends with the list of goddesses who slept with mortal men (970–1028) and the transition to the Catalog of Women (1029–1030).

Invocation to the Muses

Begin our singing with the Heliconian Muses,
 Who possess Mount Helicon, high and holy,
 And near its violet-stained spring on petal-soft feet
 Dance circling the altar of almighty Cronion,¹

- 5 And having bathed their silken skin in Permessos
 Or in Horse Spring or the sacred creek Olmeios,
 They begin their choral dance on Helicon's summit
 So lovely it pangs, and with power in their steps
 Ascend veiled and misted in palpable air
- 10 Treading the night, and in a voice beyond beauty
 They chant:

¹ “Son of Cronos,” i.e., Zeus.

Zeus Aegisholder and his lady Hera
 Of Argos, in gold sandals striding,
 And the Aegisholder's girl, owl-eyed Athena,
 15 And Phoibos Apollo and arrowy Artemis,
 Poseidon earth-holder, earthquaking god,
 Modest Themis and Aphrodite, eyelashes curling,
 And Hebe gold-crowned and lovely Dione,
 Leto and Iapetos and Cronos, his mind bent,
 20 Eos and Helios and glowing Selene,
 Gaia, Oceanos, and the black one, Night,²

And the whole eerie brood of the eternal Immortals.

And they once taught Hesiod the art of singing verse,
 While he pastured his lambs on holy Helicon's slopes.
 25 And this was the very first thing they told me,
 The Olympian Muses daughters of Zeus Aegisholder:

"Hillbillies and bellies, poor excuses for shepherds:
 We know how to tell many believable lies,
 But also, when we want to, how to speak the plain truth."
 30 So spoke the daughters of great Zeus, mincing their words.
 And they gave me a staff, a branch of good sappy laurel,³
 Plucking it off, spectacular. And they breathed into me
 A voice divine, so I might celebrate past and future.
 And they told me to hymn the generation of the eternal gods,

35 But always to sing of themselves, the Muses, first and last.

But why all this about oak tree or stone?⁴

Start from the Muses: when they sing for Zeus Father
 They thrill the great mind deep in Olympos,
 Telling what is, what will be, and what has been,
 40 Blending their voices, and weariless the sound
 Flows sweet from their lips and spreads like lilies,
 And Zeus' thundering halls shine with laughter,

² Nyx.

³ The laurel is associated with Apollo and so with poets.

⁴ This apparently proverbial line seems to be a way of saying "Enough about that."

And Olympos' snowy peaks and the halls of the gods
 Echo the strains as their immortal chanting

45 Honors first the primordial generation of gods
 Whom in the beginning Earth⁵ and Sky⁶ bore,
 And the divine benefactors born from them;
 And, second, Zeus, the Father of gods and men,
 Mightiest of the gods and strongest by far;
 50 And then the race of humans and of powerful Giants.
 And Zeus' mind in Olympos is thrilled by the song
 Of the Olympian Muses, the Storm King's daughters.

They were born on Pieria after our Father Cronion
 Mingled with Memory,⁷ who rules Eleutherai's hills.

55 She bore them to be a forgetting of troubles,
 A pause in sorrow. For nine nights wise Zeus
 Mingled with her in love, ascending her sacred bed
 In isolation from the other Immortals,
 But when the time drew near, and the seasons turned,
 60 And the moons had waned, and the many days were done,
 She bore nine daughters, all of one mind, with song
 In their breasts, with hearts that never failed,
 Near the topmost peak of snowcapped Olympos.

There are their polished dancing grounds, their fine halls,
 65 And the Graces⁸ and Desire⁹ have their houses close by,
 And all is in bloom. And they move in the dance, intoning
 The careful ways of the gods, celebrating the customs
 Of all the Immortals in a voice enchanting and sweet.
 Then they process to Olympos, a glory of pure

70 Sound and dance, and the black earth shrieks with delight
 As they sing, and the drum of their footfalls rises like love
 As they go to their father. He is king in the sky,
 He holds the thunder and flashing lightning.
 He defeated his father Cronos by force, and he ordained
 75 Laws for the gods and assigned them their rights.

⁵ Gaia.

⁶ Ouranos.

⁷ Mnemosyne.

⁸ Charites.

⁹ Himeros.

Thus, sing the Muses who have their homes on Olympos,

The nine daughters born of great Zeus,

Cleio, Euterpe, Thaleia, Melpomene,
Terpsichore, Erato, Polyhymnia, Ourania,

80 And Calliope, the most important of all,

For she keeps the company of reverend kings.

When the daughters of great Zeus will honor a lord
Whose lineage is divine, and look upon his birth,
They distill a sweet dew upon his tongue,

85 And from his mouth words flow like honey. The people

All look to him as he arbitrates settlements
With judgments straight. He speaks out in sure tones
And soon puts an end even to bitter disputes.

A sound-minded ruler, when someone is wronged,

90 Sets things to rights in the public assembly,
Conciliating both sides with ease.

He comes to the meeting place propitiated as a god,
Treated with respect, preeminent in the crowd.

Such is the Muses' sacred gift to men.

95 For though it is singers and lyre players
That come from the Muses and far-shooting Apollo
And kings come from Zeus, happy is the man
Whom the Muses love. Sweet flows the voice from his mouth.

For if anyone is grieved, if his heart is sore

100 With fresh sorrow, if he is troubled, and a singer
Who serves the Muses chants the deeds of past men
Or the blessed gods who have their homes on Olympos,
He soon forgets his heartache, and of all his cares
He remembers none: the goddesses' gifts turn them aside.

105 Farewell Zeus' daughters, and bestow song that beguiles.
Make known the eerie brood of the eternal Immortals
Who were born of Earth and starry Sky,
And of dusky Night, and whom the salt Sea¹⁰ bore.
Tell how first the gods and earth came into being
110 And the rivers and the sea, endless and surging,

¹⁰ Pontos.

And the stars shining and the wide sky above;
 How they divided wealth and allotted honors,
 And first possessed deep-ridged Olympos.

115 Tell me these things, Olympian Muses,
 From the beginning, and tell which of them came first.

The First Gods

In the beginning there was only Chaos, the Abyss,
 But then Gaia, the Earth, came into being,
 Her broad bosom the ever-firm foundation of all,
 And Tartaros, dim in the underground depths,
 120 And Eros, loveliest of all the Immortals, who
 Makes their bodies (and men's bodies) go limp,
 Mastering their minds and subduing their wills.

From the Abyss were born Erebos and dark Night.
 And Night, pregnant after sweet intercourse
 125 With Erebos, gave birth to Aether and Day.

Earth's first child was Ouranos, starry Heaven,
 Just her size, a perfect fit on all sides,
 And a firm foundation for the blessed gods.
 And she bore the Mountains in long ranges, haunted
 130 By the Nymphs who live in the deep mountain dells.
 Then she gave birth to the barren, raging Sea
 Without any sexual love. But later she slept with
 Ouranos and bore Ocean with its deep currents,
 And also: Coios, Crius, Hyperion, Iapetos,
 135 Theia, Rhea, Themis, Mnemosyne,
 Gold-crowned Phoibe, and lovely Tethys.

The Castration of Ouranos

After them she bore a most terrible child,
 Cronos, her youngest, an arch-deceiver,
 And this boy hated his lecherous father.

140 She bore the Cyclopes too, with hearts of stone,
 Brontes, Steropes, and ponderous Argos,
 Who gave Zeus thunder and made the thunderbolt.
 In every other respect they were just like gods,