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I. CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

HESIOD

Along with the Homeric epics, the works of Hesiod are the earliest pieces of Greek poetry we possess. Hesiod addresses the *Works and Days* to his brother, Perses, who allegedly had cheated the poet out of his share of the family estate by bribing the local kings. Hesiod rails against both and sets himself up as a lone voice of righteousness in a corrupt world. In order to explain why life is so difficult today, Hesiod offers two stories near the start of the *Works and Days*. First he tells of Prometheus's theft of

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

fire, Zeus's punishment of the Titan, the origin of Pandora, and the opening of her jar. Then he tells what he refers to as "another account" of human origins: the myth of the metallic races—gold, silver, bronze, heroes, and the current race of iron. The origins of this story remain a matter of debate, but for later Greek and Roman poets Hesiod was seen as the inventor of the ideal of the Golden Age and successive races or ages of humans.

According to the myth, there have been multiple creations and destructions of humans, but it is not a simple story of decline, as the age of heroes interrupts the downward trajectory. Hesiod's grim prediction for the iron race's future decline into lawlessness and ultimate destruction is not without its ambiguities. Why does Hesiod wish he had

HESIOD

been born later? Does he imagine that the Golden Age will return? Or can his prophecy of destruction be avoided if people live lives of justice and honor the gods?

Works and Days 109–201

[1] χρύσειον μὲν πρώτιστα γένος μερόπων
 ἀνθρώπων
ἀθάνατοι ποίησαν Ὀλύμπια δώματ'
 ἔχοντες.
οἳ μὲν ἐπὶ Κρόνου ἦσαν, ὅτ' οὐρανῷ
 ἐμβασίλευεν.
ὥστε θεοὶ δ' ἔζων ἀκηδέα θυμὸν
 ἔχοντες
νόσφιν ἄτερ τε πόνων καὶ οἰζύος, οὐδέ τι
 δειλὸν
γῆρας ἐπῆν, αἰεὶ δὲ πόδας καὶ χεῖρας
 ὁμοῖοι
τέρποντ' ἐν θαλίῃσι, κακῶν ἔκτοσθεν
 ἀπάντων.
θνητῆσκον δ' ὥσθ' ὕπνω δεδμημένοι:
 ἐσθλὰ δὲ πάντα
τοῖσιν ἔην· καρπὸν δ' ἔφερε ζεῖδωρος
 ἄρουρα

HESIOD

[1] Golden was the first race of humans,
which the immortals who have their
homes on Olympus made.
They were in the time of Kronos when
he ruled in heaven.
They lived like gods, having hearts free
from care,
entirely separate from toil and suffering.
Vile old age did not
come upon them; but with ever-
youthful bodies
they delighted in their festivals, far re-
moved from all evils.
They died as if conquered by sleep, and
all good things
were among them. The grain-giving
earth bore fruit

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

αὐτομάτη πολλόν τε καὶ ἄφθονον· οἱ δ'
ἐθέλημοι
ἥσυχoi ἔργ' ἐνέμοντο σὺν ἐσθλοῖσιν
πολέεσσιν.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δὴ τοῦτο γένος κατὰ γαῖα
κάλυψε,
τοὶ μὲν δαίμονές εἰσι Διὸς μεγάλου διὰ
βουλὰς
ἐσθλοί, ἐπιχθόνιοι, φύλακες θνητῶν
ἀνθρώπων,
οἳ ῥα φυλάσσουσιν τε δίκας καὶ σχέτλια
ἔργα
ἡέρα ἐσάμενοι πάντη φοιτῶντες ἐπ'
αἶαν,
πλουτοδοταὶ· καὶ τοῦτο γέρας βασιλῆιον
ἔσχον.
δεύτερον αὖτε γένος πολὺ χειρότερον
μετόπισθεν

HESIOD

of its own accord, in abundance and
unstinting. Joyfully and
peacefully they possessed their fields
with many goods.

They were rich in flocks and dear to the
blessed gods.

But when the earth hid this race under
the ground,
they became spirits by the plans of great
Zeus.

Good spirits above the earth, they are
guardians of mortal men,
who watch over judgments and wicked
deeds.

Clothed in mist they wander every-
where upon the earth.

They are givers of wealth and have this
kingly reward.

Then a second race, much worse than
the previous one,

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

ἀργύρεον ποίησαν Ὀλύμπια δώματ'
ἔχοντες,
χρυσέῳ οὔτε φυὴν ἐναλίγκιον οὔτε
νόημα.
ἀλλ' ἑκατὸν μὲν παῖς ἔτεα παρὰ μητέρι
κεδνῇ
ἐτρέφετ' ἀτάλλων, μέγα νήπιος, ᾧ ἐνὶ
οἴκῳ·
ἀλλ' ὅτ' ἄρ' ἠβήσαι τε καὶ ἠβης μέτρον
ἵκοιτο,
παυρίδιον ζώεσκον ἐπὶ χρόνον, ἄλγε'
ἔχοντες
ἀφραδίης· ὕβριν γὰρ ἀτάσθαλον οὐκ
ἐδύναντο
ἀλλήλων ἀπέχειν, οὐδ' ἀθανάτους
θεραπεύειν
ἤθελον οὐδ' ἔρδειν μακάρων ἱεροῖς ἐπὶ
βωμοῖς,
ἢ θέμις ἀνθρώποις κατὰ ἤθεα. τοὺς μὲν
ἔπειτα

HESIOD

a silver race, the gods who have their
homes on Olympus made,
similar to the golden race in neither
form nor thoughts.
For one hundred years a child by his
diligent mother
was reared, skipping along, a great fool
in his own house.
But when they reached puberty and at-
tained the time of youthful vigor,
they lived for a very short time, coming
to grief
through their thoughtlessness. They
could not keep from committing
acts of hubris against each other. They
did not wish
to serve the immortals or to sacrifice upon
the holy altars of the blessed ones,
as is right and the custom for humans.
These then

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

Ζεὺς Κρονίδης ἔκρυψε χολούμενος,
οὔνεκα τιμᾶς
οὐκ ἔδιδον μακάρεσσι θεοῖς οἱ Ὀλυμπον
ἔχουσιν.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῦτο γένος κατὰ γαῖα
κάλυψε,
τοὶ μὲν ὑποχθόνιοι μάκαρες θνητοῖ
καλέονται,
δεύτεροι, ἀλλ' ἔμπης τιμὴ καὶ τοῖσιν
ὀπηδεῖ,
Ζεὺς δὲ πατὴρ τρίτον ἄλλο γένος
μερόπων ἀνθρώπων
χάλκειον ποίησ', οὐκ ἀργυρέῳ οὐδὲν
ὁμοῖον,
ἐκ μελιᾶν, δεινόν τε καὶ ὄβριμον· οἷσιν
Ἄρης
ἔργ' ἔμελεν στονόεντα καὶ ὕβριες· οὐδέ τι
σῆτον
ἦσθιον, ἀλλ' ἀδάμαντος ἔχον
κρατερόφρονα θυμόν.

HESIOD

Zeus the son of Kronos hid in his anger,
because they
did not give honors to the blessed gods
who hold Olympus.

But when the earth hid this race as well
under the ground,
they came to be called the blessed sub-
terranean dead,
second in esteem, but still this honor
attends them as well.

Zeus the father made another race of
mortal humans, a third
of bronze, in no way similar to the
silver.

Made out of ash trees, they were terrible
and mighty,
the dread deeds of Ares and acts of
hubris were their only care.

They did not eat bread. They had
dauntless hearts of adamantine,

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

ἄπλαστοι· μεγάλη δὲ βίη καὶ χεῖρες
ἄαπτοι
ἐξ ὧμων ἐπέφυκον ἐπὶ στιβαροῖσι
μέλεσιν.
τῶν δ' ἦν χάλκεα μὲν τεύχεα, χάλκεοι δέ
τε οἴκοι,
χαλκῷ δ' εἰργάζοντο· μέλας δ' οὐκ ἔσκε
σίδηρος.
καὶ τοὶ μὲν χεῖρεσσιν ὑπο σφετέρῃσι
δαμέντες
βῆσαν ἐς εὐρώεντα δόμον κρυεροῦ
Ἄϊδαο,
νώνυμνοι· θάνατος δὲ καὶ ἐκπάγλους περ
έοντας
εἶλε μέλας, λαμπρὸν δ' ἔλιπον φάος
ἡελίοιο.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῦτο γένος κατὰ γαῖα
κάλυπεν,
αὐτὶς ἔτ' ἄλλο τέταρτον ἐπὶ χθονὶ
πουλυβοτείρῃ

HESIOD

and were hulking figures with great
power. Their invincible arms
grew out of their shoulders upon their
stout trunks.

Their tools were bronze, their houses
were bronze,
they worked with bronze, for there was
not yet black iron.

They were conquered by their own
hands
and went to the dank house of cold
Hades,
nameless. Black death took them al-
though they were fearful,
and they left the gleaming light of the
sun.

But when the earth hid this race as well
beneath it,
yet another race, a fourth one upon the
all-nourishing earth

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

Ζεὺς Κρονίδης ποίησε, δικαιοτέρον καὶ
ἄρειον,
ἀνδρῶν ἡρώων θεῖον γένος, οἳ καλέονται
ἡμίθεοι, προτέρη γενεὴ κατ' ἀπείρονα
γαῖαν.
καὶ τοὺς μὲν πόλεμός τε κακὸς καὶ
φύλοπις αἰνὴ,
τοὺς μὲν ὕφ' ἑπταπύλῳ Θήβῃ, Καδμηίδι
γαίῃ,
ὤλεσε μαρναμένους μῆλων ἔνεκ'
Οἰδιπόδαο,
τοὺς δὲ καὶ ἐν νήεσσιν ὑπὲρ μέγα λαῖτμα
θαλάσσης
ἐς Τροίην ἀγαγὼν Ἑλένης ἔνεκ'
ἡυκόμοιο.
ἐνθ' ἦτοι τοὺς μὲν θανάτου τέλος
ἀμφεκάλυψε,
τοῖς δὲ δίχ' ἀνθρώπων βίοτον καὶ ἦθε'
ὀπάσας

HESIOD

Zeus the son of Kronos made. More just
and better,
it was a divine race of heroes, who are
called
demigods, the generation before ours on
the boundless earth.
These evil war with its dreadful clanging
of weapons destroyed.
Some died as they fought by the seven-
gated Thebes,
in Cadmus's land over the flocks of
Oedipus.
Others war led off in ships over the
great expanse of the sea
to Troy to fight over fair-haired Helen.
The end of death embraced some there.
But to others, far away from humans,
the father Zeus son of Kronos,

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

Ζεὺς Κρονίδης κατένασσε πατὴρ ἐς
 πείρατα γαίης.
καὶ τοὶ μὲν ναίουσιν ἀκηδέα θυμὸν
 ἔχοντες
ἐν μακάρων νήσοισι παρ' Ὠκεανὸν
 βαθυδίνην,
ὄλβιοι ἥρωες, τοῖσιν μελιηδέα καρπὸν
τρὶς ἔτεος θάλλοντα φέρει ζεῖδωρος
 ἄρουρα.
μηκέτ' ἔπειτ' ὄφελλον ἐγὼ πέμπτοισι
 μετεῖναι
ἀνδράσιν, ἀλλ' ἢ πρόσθε θανεῖν ἢ ἔπειτα
 γενέσθαι.
νῦν γὰρ δὴ γένος ἐστὶ σιδήρεον· οὐδέ
 ποτ' ἤμαρ
παύσσονται καμάτου καὶ οἰζύος, οὐδέ τι
 νύκτωρ
τειρόμενοι· χαλεπὰς δὲ θεοὶ δώσουσι
 μερίμνας.

HESIOD

gave life and homes, settling them in the
far reaches of the earth.

And with carefree hearts they dwell
in the Islands of the Blessed beside the
deep-eddying Ocean.

They are revered heroes, for whom
honey-sweet fruit
which blossoms three times a year the
grain-giving earth bears.

I wish I was not among the fifth race of
men,
but rather had died earlier or been born
later.¹

For now indeed is a race of iron.² By
day and night
they will never cease being worn down
from labor
and misery; the gods will give them
heavy cares.

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

ἀλλ' ἔμπης καὶ τοῖσι μεμείξεται ἐσθλὰ
κακοῖσιν.
Ζεὺς δ' ὀλέσει καὶ τοῦτο γένος μερόπων
ἀνθρώπων,
εὖτ' ἂν γεινόμενοι πολιοκρόταφοι
τελέθωσιν.
οὐδὲ πατὴρ παίδεσσιν ὁμοῖος οὐδέ τι
παῖδες,
οὐδὲ ξεῖνος ξεινοδόκῳ καὶ ἐταῖρος
ἐταίρῳ,
οὐδὲ κασίγνητος φίλος ἔσσεται, ὥς τὸ
πάρος περ.
αἶψα δὲ γηράσκοντας ἀτιμήσουσι τοκῆας·
μέμψονται δ' ἄρα τοὺς χαλεποῖς
βάζοντες ἔπεσσι,
σχέτλιοι, οὐδὲ θεῶν ὄπιν εἰδότες· οὐδέ
κεν οἷ γε
γηράντεσσι τοκεῦσιν ἀπὸ θρεπτήρια
δοῖεν·

HESIOD

Nevertheless, goods will be mixed with
evils for them.

Zeus will destroy even this race of mortal
humans

when they are born with gray hair
around their temples.

Father will not be like-minded with his
sons, nor sons with father.

Guest will not agree with host, nor
friend with friend.

Brother will not be dear as he previously
was.

Straightaway children will dishonor
their parents,

and blame them with harsh words.

Cruel children, knowing nothing of the
vengeance of the gods,

they will not honor their aged parents
for the nurturing they received.

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

χειροδίκαι· ἕτερος δ' ἑτέρου πόλιν
ἐξαλαπάξει.
οὐδέ τις εὐόρκου χάρις ἔσσεται οὔτε
δικαίου
οὔτ' ἀγαθοῦ, μᾶλλον δὲ κακῶν ῥεκτῆρα
καὶ ὕβριν
ἀνέρες τιμήσουσι· δίκη δ' ἐν χερσὶ· καὶ
αἰδῶς
οὐκ ἔσται, βλάψει δ' ὁ κακὸς τὸν ἀρεῖονα
φῶτα
μύθοισιν σκολιοῖς ἐνέπων, ἐπὶ δ' ὄρκον
ὀμεῖται.
Ζῆλος δ' ἀνθρώποισιν οἰζυροῖσιν ἅπασι
δυσκέλαδος κακόχαρτος ὁμαρτήσῃ,
στυγερῶπης.
καὶ τότε δὴ πρὸς Ὀλυμπον ἀπὸ χθονὸς
εὐρυοδείης
λευκοῖσιν φάρεσσι καλυψαμένῳ χροῶ
καλὸν

HESIOD

Each will assert his own rough justice,
and one will sack the city of another.
There will not be any kindness for the
keeper of oaths, nor for the just
or the good. Rather, the doer of evil
deeds
and the man of hubris they will honor.
Might will make right
and there will be no sense of shame. The
base man will harm the better one
and will swear an oath upon his false
words.
Envy will walk beside all wretched men,
shrieking, horrible Envy, which delights
in evil.
And then, to Olympus from the broad
earth
covering their beautiful skin with white
cloaks,

CREATION, DESTRUCTION, AND A WARNING

ἀθανάτων μετὰ φύλον ἵτον προλιπόντ’
ἀνθρώπους
Αἰδῶς καὶ Νέμεσις· τὰ δὲ λείπεται ἄλγεα
λυγρὰ
θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποισι· κακοῦ δ’ οὐκ
ἔσσεται ἀλκή.

HESIOD

Shame and Retribution will go among
the tribe of gods
and abandon humans. Miserable suffer-
ing will be left
to mortals and there will be no defense
against evil.