

Hesiod Introduction Part 5

Hesiod's Cosmos

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"Let him hear the advice of Hesiod. ... The advice of Hesiod is good." — Aristotle

"Lampon ... greatly honors the sayings of Hesiod, the one he declares and recommends to his sons."
—Pindar

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This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Hesiod's Theogony & Works and Days.

UNSURPRISINGLY, HESIOD'S COSMOS—that is, his portrayal of the universe, of everything that exists down to human beings and below—is different from our own. On a large scale, we moderns talk about the Big Bang, quasars, stars, and planets. On a much smaller scale, we point to our own world full of animals, plants, and other organisms, all reducible to atoms and their constituent parts. Our own small-scale understanding of the cosmos descends from the vision of the fifth century BC atomists Democritus and Leucippus and the fourth to third century BC philosopher Epicurus. They posited atoms and the void, from which comes everything—the planets and the stars and us.¹ This atoms-and-the-void cosmos is

radically different from the traditional Greek one going back to Hesiod.

For Hesiod, the cosmos has three major areas or portions: the starry sky above, the earth further down, and Tartaros below. Mountains reach into the bright air (aether) of the sky, where the sun runs its daily course. The sky-dwelling gods live on the greatest mountain, Mount Olympus. Upon earth is the sea and the many rivers. Surrounding earth is the great ocean. The river Styx is one-ninth of the great ocean. Roots grow from beneath the earth, reaching all the way down to Tartaros. The roots are the sources and limits of everything. Hesiod also seems to identify them with "chaos" and "chasm," the great stormy

gap between earth and Tartaros. Dark Tartaros, where the Titans are imprisoned, is surrounded by a bronze wall and three layers of night. Somewhere in the general vicinity of the lower roots and Tartaros—Hesiod is not precise—there is a very dark neighborhood of houses. The Titans live there, as well as the hundred-handers, who guard them. Nearby, Night has her house, as do her children Sleep and Death. Hades, “the lord of those rotting beneath the earth,”

also has his mansion there in this dark neighborhood. Finally, there is the great house of the river Styx, whose water rises up to earth somewhere in the west, where night falls, and where Atlas holds up the sky.

To read more about Hesiod's vision of the cosmos and how it all fits together for human beings, see “Hesiod's Cosmos—an Imaginary Excursion” and the accompanying illustration toward the back.

So ends Item 5, “Introduction Part 5 – Hesiod's Cosmos.” **See you in Item 6, “Introduction Part 6 – The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Theogony* & the *Works and Days*.”**

NOTES

¹ For more on Epicurus' view of the cosmos, see *The Best of Epicurus* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2021).

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