

Hesiod Introduction Part 4

How Should We Read or Understand Hesiod?

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

BE AWARE OF the sources. Scholars have long noted the ancient Near Eastern influences on Hesiod's poems—Babylonian, Assyrian, Hittite, Hurrian, Canaanite-Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Egyptian. In Hesiod, we see the reflection of or parallels with ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, theogonies, and wisdom literature. The point is not only fascinating to consider but essential. As Stephen Scully observes, "It is useful to remind ourselves, when thinking of the classical tradition, that ancient Greek culture did not suddenly emerge full-grown like Athena out of the head of Zeus."¹ What we do not know, however, is whether Hesiod or the Hesiodic tradition was directly in contact with the literature of the ancient Near East or if the

contact came more indirectly from an earlier time.

Aside from the ancient Near East, we should also mention Hesiod's relation to the Homeric tradition. Voicing a now common conclusion, though some would perhaps express it differently, Werner Jaeger notes that "words, phrases, fragments of lines, even whole lines are borrowed from Homer. It is from Homer that Hesiod takes his idealizing epic epithets."²

Be mindful of the underlying structure. Though it is not necessary to understand precisely what it is, it is useful at least to grasp that there actually *is* an underlying structure to both of Hesiod's poems. The point is significant because on a first reading through his works—and even after multiple expeditions—the

poems may seem like unstructured messes, with passages coming into existence for very little apparent reason. Rest assured, however, that despite the skepticism of some, many scholars have observed an “architecture” beneath the lines of his poems. In other words, rather than randomness, there is a plan. In this way, Hesiod’s work reflects his understanding of reality. There’s cosmos beneath the apparent chaos, order beneath the apparent disorder.

Recognize the collective unity. Not only was there a plan for both the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* as separate poems but many scholars argue for the unity of Hesiod’s work as a whole. Referring to both poems, Lilah Grace Canevaro states that “Hesiod composed [them] to be read together.”³ Werner Jaeger puts it this way: “Despite their difference in subject-matter, [his poems] are not separated in the poet’s mind. Hesiod’s theology invades the ethics of the *Works and Days* and his ethical beliefs color the theology of the *Theogony*. Both works reflect one man’s consistent world-picture.”⁴ Stephanie Nelson similarly asserts that “Hesiod’s vision of farming is of a piece with his vision of the cosmos.”⁵

Read the Theogony literally. Moving on to the actual reading of the poems, let’s begin with the *Theogony*. One way to read the poem is to take it literally, which is to say that the poem presents what Hesiod believed was the actual origins of the cosmos in terms of the births and relations of the gods. The remarks of the early Greek historian Herodotus seem to reflect such a reading—or at least the fact that others read and understood Hesiod this way.

But when and from where each of the gods came to be, or whether they all had always been, and how they appeared in form, [the Greeks] did not know until yesterday or the day before, so to speak. . . . Hesiod and Homer . . . are the ones who taught the Greeks the descent of the gods, and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms.”⁶

Read the Theogony allegorically. An allegorical reading of the *Theogony*, where the reader understands the

gods and their births, relations, battles, violence, and the like in terms of hidden meanings, symbols, or abstractions, stands in contrast to a literal reading, though the two are not mutually exclusive. Many in the ancient world perused the *Theogony* in this manner. Thanks to the early Christian theologian Origen, we know that the second century AD philosopher Celsus understood Hesiod in this way. In his *Against Celsus*, Origen notes with frustration that Celsus refused readers a similar allegorical reading of the Old Testament.⁷ As for modern scholars, opinions vary. Albin Lesky, for example, cautions us not to see the gods merely in terms of abstractions or personifications. Robert Lamberton, by contrast, sees allegory and symbol in the poems—at least in some sense.

Read the Works and Days for wisdom. We’ve already encountered Martin L. West’s alternative title, “the Wisdom of Hesiod,” for the *Works and Days*. The title is apt because wisdom is what the poem is all about. For Werner Jaeger, the poem was a “huge admonitory speech” related in kind to the “speeches of the Homeric epic.”⁸ Not only that but reading it in terms of its wise sayings, and contemplating and memorizing its content for action, is how readers in the ancient world approached the poem. Andrew L. Ford reports, for example, that ancient “quotations [of Hesiod] suggest that for readers of Plato’s time Hesiod’s *Works and Days* was usually encountered in pre-selected, often pre-interpreted excerpts.”⁹ The point holds not only for Plato’s time in the fourth century BC but all the way to the fourth century AD and beyond. Recall Basil the Great’s statement that “everyone is singing” Hesiod’s wise lines about the hard road to virtue. In this passage and many others, ancient Greeks and Romans were hungry for the wisdom Hesiod offered.

Look for etiology. A common feature of all early literature or mythology, etiology explains certain aspects of life and reality in terms of myths, legends, and other stories. Hesiod’s work is no exception. To give one instance, he tells the story of Prometheus in order to explain why humans get all the good parts of the sacrificial animal—the meat and the like—while the gods get stuck with the bones and smoke.

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After telling the story, Hesiod concludes, “It is because of this that the tribes of men dwelling upon the earth burn white bones on fragrantly smoking altars to the immortals.”¹⁰

Take Hesiod as early philosophy. We’ve already noted the possibility that Hesiod was actually doing

philosophy in the guise of mythology. Although a handful of ancient and modern writers suggest that he may be read in this way, we would do well to approach such a reading with due caution. Still, it is a worthwhile endeavor.

So ends Item 4, “Introduction Part 4 – How Should We Read or Understand Hesiod?” **See you in Item 5, “Introduction Part 5 – Hesiod’s Cosmos.”**

NOTES

¹ Stephen Scully, “Whose Greece?” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 4, no. 2 (1997): 247-55.

² Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans. Gilbert Highet, 57.

³ Lilah Grace Canevaro, *Hesiod’s Works & Days: How to Teach Self-Sufficiency*, 104.

⁴ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans. Gilbert Highet, 66.

⁵ Stephanie Nelson, *God and Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil*, v-vi.

⁶ Herodotus, *Histories* 2.53.

⁷ Eastern Orthodox Christians, including Greek Orthodox, and other Christians still read the Old Testament in this way. For instance, *The Orthodox Study Bible* (2008) notes that, aside from its literal meaning, the collapse of Jericho’s walls in the book of Joshua is really the “bring[ing] down” of the walls of “sin and death” (262). And the conquering of the “kings of the land represent[s] . . . [the conquest of] the sinful passions.” Thus, “by the grace of Christ, those who put to death these kings will inherit the land of God’s kingdom in the world to come” (270).

⁸ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans. Gilbert Highet, 66.

⁹ Andrew L. Ford, “Plato’s two Hesiods,” in *Plato and Hesiod*, 152.

¹⁰ Hesiod, *Theogony* 556-557.

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