

# The *Theogony* of Hesiod

## Lines 1-103 – Hymn to the Helikonian Muses

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## Hymn to the Helikonian Muses

### Lines 1-103

LET US BEGIN to sing with the Helikonian Muses, the ones who live upon the great and sacred mountain—Mount Helikon.

It is there they dance together in a line on soft feet around the deep-blue spring and raised altar of Zeus, the mighty son of Kronos.<sup>1</sup> They do this after they have bathed their delicate bodies in Permessos, or in Hippokrene, the Horse's Spring, or sacred Olmeios. Then upon the heights of Helikon they perform their lovely moves that call upon desire, giving their feet to the dance. From there they urge one another [10] into the night, and each night, hidden away by a thick mist, they walk together broadcasting their very beautiful voices in song.

They hymn aegis-bearing Zeus and queenly Argive Hera, the one who steps forward in golden sandals. They sing about the daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus, bright-eyed Athena, and about Phoebus Apollo and Artemis, the arrow-shooter. They laud Poseidon, who holds and shakes the Earth, and praise highly regarded Themis. And they adore many others—quick-glancing Aphrodite, golden-crowned Hebe, and

beautiful Dione and Leto. Then there's Iapetos and Kronos, the one whose counsels are crooked, and Dawn (Eōs) and great Sun (Helios) and bright Moon (Selēnē), [20] and Earth (Gaia) and great Ocean (Okeanos) and dark Night (Nyx). They sing about the holy race of immortals who always are, living on forever.

One day the Muses taught Hesiod beautiful song while he was tending his sheep under sacred Helikon. Here is what the goddesses first said to me—the Muses of Olympus, the daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus: "You shepherds dwelling in the field! Worthless things of shame! Bellies alone! We Muses know how to say many false things that appear true. Then again, when we are willing, we know how to sing what is real and true."

That's how they spoke, the daughters of mighty Zeus, the Muses, whose speech flows with ease. [30] And they snapped a branch from a flourishing laurel, a sight to behold, and gave it to me as a staff. Then they blew into me a divine voice to celebrate and glorify what will be and what was before.

Moreover, they called on me to hymn the race of blessed ones who always are. Still, I should always begin with their own song first—and finish with the same.

So why am I singing about this—the laurel and the rest?<sup>2</sup>

Let us begin with the Muses, the ones who delight father Zeus' great mind with their singing upon Olympus. Harmoniously, they proclaim what is, what will be, and what was before. The sweet song easily flows [40] from their mouths, and the house of the father, loud-thundering Zeus, laughs as the graceful song develops and fills the halls of the immortal gods and reaches the peak of snowy Olympus.

Letting the immortal voice flow, the Muses first celebrate and glorify with their song the highly regarded race of gods. They start at the very beginning—with those gods that Earth and wide Sky brought into the world, and the gods that came into being from these, the givers of good things. The goddesses next sing of Zeus, the father of gods and men. They begin and end their song by lauding him as the greatest, strongest, and all-out best of the gods. [50] And again, by singing about the race of human beings and the mighty Giants, the Olympian Muses delight Zeus' great mind upon Olympus.

These are the daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus. After joining with the son of Kronos, Memory (Mnemosyne), the goddess who guards over the hills of Eleuther, gave birth in Pieria to the Muses, who replace bad things with forgetfulness and cares with rest. All-wise Zeus joined with her for nine nights, going up into her holy bed far away from the other immortals. And when a year went by, and the seasons turned as moon after moon waned and many days came to an end, [60] Memory gave birth to nine daughters of harmonious mind and carefree spirit, whose feeling is for song. They were born a little way from the topmost peak of snowy Olympus, where they perform their brilliant dances and where they have their beautiful homes nearby the dwellings of the Graces (Charites) and Longing (Himeros). There they live in abundance, and the Muses celebrate with song and dance. As their

charming voices pass through their mouths, they celebrate and glorify the laws and cherished customs of the immortals. Their desirable song flows, resounding.

They went to Olympus exulting in their beautiful voice and in the immortal song and dance. The dark earth resounded with their [70] singing, and a lovely beat rose up from beneath their feet as they went to their father. He is now king in the sky, holding thunder and the burning lightning bolt—after he conquered his father Kronos with strength and might. Well did he appoint each god's place and declare their honors.

75-80 *Hesiod names the nine Muses—Kleio, Euterpe, Thaleia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polymnia, Ourania, and Kalliope, most excellent, the one who attends chief men, the kings.*<sup>3</sup>

81-103 And whomever among the chief men, the kings, those nourished by Zeus, the daughters of great Zeus honor and take notice of when he is born, they pour sweet dew upon his tongue, and gentle words flow from his mouth. All the people look toward him in the assembly place when he determines what is right by means of straight judgments. And addressing the matter unshakably, he quickly and skillfully brings an end to even a great quarrel. This is why we call kings wise: when the people are being harmed in the assembly—deceived and misled—they rectify matters [90] easily, persuading them with gentle words. And as he makes his way up to the assembly's judgment place, the different sides call out to him as though he were a god to win his favor with reverence and gentle words. Among the assembled crowd, the king is conspicuous. Such is the holy gift the Muses give to human beings. For it is from the Muses and far-shooting Apollo that men are poet-singers and lyre players upon the earth. But kings are from Zeus.

Happy is the man whom the Muses love! Sweet speech flows from that man's mouth. Even when some man is bearing sorrow, even when it is some brand-new care in his spirit that dries out his heart

with weeping, even so, when the poet-singer, [100]  
the servant of the Muses, sings about the glorious  
deeds of men from long ago and about the blessed

gods who hold Olympus, that man suddenly forgets  
his concerns and does not remember his troubles.  
Quickly do the goddesses' song-gifts divert his mind!

So ends Reading 1, "Hymn to the Helikonian Muses."

See you in Reading 2, "Birth of the Earliest Gods."

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Classics Cave has generally given a straightforward transliteration of the Greek rather than Latinizing names. For Latin variations (for instance, Cronus in place of Kronos for Κρόνος), see "The Cast of Gods and Men" for the *Theogony* of Hesiod in the Ancient Authors Cave. Also, when the name of a god or goddess corresponds to a physical object or place (for example, the earth or the sky), we have generally given the literal translation of the name since that is what the Greeks would have, to some extent, had in mind. When they heard or saw *Gaia*, for instance, they thought "Earth." That said, this is not to suggest the connotation for them was *merely* natural. See "The Cast of Gods and Men" for alternative names.

<sup>2</sup> Though this is the intended meaning of the line (something, perhaps, dangerous to offer in a translation), the reader should be aware that the line literally reads, "But why all this about an oak or a stone?" It is a saying that means something like, "Why should I make a bunch of useless, unrelated points?" It is Hesiod's way of reporting the good thing that happened to him, the calling to be a poet, and its implied glory, while defending himself against the jealousy of the gods, or here, the Muses.

<sup>3</sup> In order their names mean Glorifying, Delighting Well, Blooming, Singing, Delighting in Dance, Lovely, Many Hymning, Heavenly, and Beautiful Voiced.

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