

The Works and Days of Hesiod

Lines 106-201 – The Five Races of Mankind – The Golden, Silver, Bronze, Heroic, and Iron Kinds

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Reading 4

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This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Hesiod's Theogony & Works and Days
(where it appears as chapter four of the *Works and Days*).

IF YOU WISH, I will summarize for you another story, well and skillfully. Take it to heart. It is about how the gods and mortal human beings came into being from the same source.

First of all, [110] the immortals who have houses on Olympus made a golden race of speech-endowed human beings. They existed at the time of Kronos, when he was king in the sky. And they lived like the gods, with carefree spirits, far away from toil and suffering. Wretched old age never overtook them, but they were always the same from their feet up to their hands.

They delighted in abundant feasts, apart from every evil. And when they died, it was as though they were overcome by sleep. They had all good things. For without envy, the grain-giving field spontaneously bore many fruit and grain crops. And willingly and peacefully they distributed the results of their work along with many good and noble things. [120] Rich in sheep, they were dear to the blessed gods.

But ever since the earth covered this race, they have become noble beings upon the earth, daemons, the guardians of mortal human beings that ward off

bad things—and this by the will of great Zeus. Clothed with occluding mist, they keep watch over judgments and merciless deeds, going here and there and everywhere along the earth, the givers of wealth. This is the royal honor-prize they received.

Once again, those who have houses on Olympus made a second race, a silver one that was much worse than the earlier one, resembling the golden race neither in bodily stature nor in mind. [130] For a hundred years, a child was brought up by his diligent mother playing like an overgrown infant in his own house. But when they grew up and reached the full measure of their prime, they lived for a very short time, suffering pains in their thoughtlessness. They were unable to abstain from reckless and needless violence against one another. Moreover, they were unwilling to serve the immortals or sacrifice on the holy altars of the blessed ones, following what is right for human beings and local custom.

Consequently, Zeus, the son of Kronos, hid these away in anger because they did not give honor to the blessed gods who hold Olympus. [140] But ever since the earth also covered this race, they are called blessed mortals—the second ones put under the earth. Yet honor attends them also.

And Zeus the father made another race of speech-endowed human beings, a third one of bronze, that was nothing like the silver one. Made from ash trees, they were terrible and mighty and cared alone for the groan-causing works of Ares and for needless violence. They did not eat bread. Instead, they possessed dauntless, unconquerable spirits. Their strength was great, and invincible were the hands that grew on strong arms from their shoulders. [150] Their armor and weapons were made of bronze; their houses were made of bronze; and they worked with bronze—there was not yet any black iron.

But overpowered and conquered by their own hands, one against another, they stepped nameless into the moldy house of icy-cold Hades. Fearfully violent, black death seized them by the hand, and they left behind the bright light of the sun.

But when the earth covered this race as well, Zeus, the son of Kronos, again made another one upon the

much-nourishing earth, a fourth one. They were better, more just, more observant of custom. They were the godly race of men-heroes, called the [160] demigods (half-gods), the race that came before our own upon the limitless earth. Evil war and terrible battle destroyed these men-heroes—some beneath seven-gated Thebes in the land of Kadmos, when they battled for the sake of Oedipus' sheep, and some when they fought because of lovely-haired Helen, after their ships brought them over the great expanse of the sea to Troy. There the end of death covered over some of them.

But father Zeus, the son of Kronos, granted the others life and an accustomed abode far apart from human beings, and he made them dwell at the limits of the earth. [170] And these dwell with carefree spirits on the Islands of the Blessed by deep-eddy Ocean. They are the happy heroes for whom the grain-giving field bears honey-sweet fruit, flourishing three times per year.¹

If only I were no longer obliged to be part of the fifth kind of men but had died before or been born afterward. For presently the race of men is truly one made of iron. Oppressed by wearisome work and suffering, men will not rest day or night. And the gods will give them anxious thoughts that are hard to endure. Yet for these people too, the good will be mixed with the bad—the noble with the ignoble, the fortunate with the unfortunate.

[180] And Zeus will also destroy this race of speech-endowed human beings when at their births their hair is already beginning to gray. Fathers and sons will be at variance, unlike one another. So too will guests and hosts be at variance, and the best of friends, and there will be no affection between brothers as there was before. Growing old quickly, they will dishonor their parents. They will blame them, speaking words that are hard to endure, these merciless men, who don't know the gods' vengeful watch. And they will not repay their parents for their upbringing.

These will be men whose might is right, whose justice is found in the strength of their arms and hands. And one man will sack and utterly destroy another man's city. [190] There will be no gratitude for the oath-keeper, or the just man, or the good one;

rather, they will honor evildoers and those men who engage in needless violence. Again: justice will be in their hands and self-respecting shame and regard for others will vanish. And a bad man will hinder a more excellent one, harming him, telling tangled and twisted stories and swearing an oath by them. And every single wretched human being will be attacked by jealousy, by discordant, hateful rivalry that is

gladdened by the misfortune of others.

At that time proper Shame (Aidōs) and proper Indignation (Nemesis) will abandon human beings. They will cover their beautiful bodies with bright white cloaks and go from the broad-pathed earth to Olympus to be among the tribe of immortals. [200] And miserable pains will be left for mortal human beings, and there will be no defense against evil.

So ends Reading 4, “The Five Races of Humankind – The Golden, Silver, Bronze, Heroic, and Iron Kinds.”

See you in Reading 5, “The Hawk and the Nightingale – The Claims of Power.”

NOTES

¹ Two ancient papyri continue the story, stating that it was Kronos, having been freed by Zeus, who ruled over the heroes in the Islands of the Blessed. And Zeus, the story goes on, made a fifth kind of human being.

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