

Hesiod Introduction Part 1

Why Should We Care about Hesiod?

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

POP SONGS ARE ephemeral. Like a bubble, they quickly rise up within what seems like an instant. Yesterday they were not. Today, everyone is singing them. At least you hear them everywhere—from radios and streaming services, in shopping centers and restaurants, and, most importantly, inside your own head. Yet then, with the same kind of imperceptible rapidity, they vanish. The bubble pops, and—well, it's hard to know exactly where the song goes as our attention fixes on another bubble that seizes us just as surely as did the first. As Homer sang, "People always applaud the latest songs most warmly."¹

But what if everyone was singing a different kind of song? What if it was a song that had been around

for a thousand years or more?—one that had remained popular through that whole time, through each year of the thousand and each day of the year? In his treatise *On How to Benefit from Reading Greek Literature*, the highly influential fourth century AD Christian theologian Basil the Great informs us that there was once such a song. It was by Hesiod. And remarkably it was one that everyone was still singing in Basil's day, a thousand years after it was composed.²

Perhaps this is no surprise. I say this given a prediction that was made during Hesiod's own lifetime, over a thousand years before Basil lived and wrote. According to legend, the famous oracle of Delphi

foretold that Hesiod's glory, and so the glory of his songs, would shine "as far as the dawn" — which is to say everywhere and for all time.³ So it was, perhaps, that the glory of Hesiod's songs reached Basil's time. And ours, even. But alas, everyone's lips have now stopped moving, and our voices have fallen silent. What was popular for well over a thousand years is now hardly even known. Sadly, we don't sing the ancient poet's songs. The glory of Hesiod has faded even though the sun continues to dawn each morning with a regularity that only someone with the skeptical fortitude of the Scottish philosopher David Hume would doubt.

How did this happen? How did Hesiod mean so much to so many people for well over a thousand years when he means very little to us today? Whatever the reason is — and surely there are many having to do with the vagaries of history, economics, and pedagogy, or with the simple fickleness of fashion — it is The Classic Cave's goal to change that. If only a little. And if only beginning with *you*. We want to get people singing Hesiod's songs again. We want their glory to shine once more with the brilliance of the sun.

But first, we must answer a simple question. Why should we care about Hesiod?

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT HESIOD?

Before we directly answer the "why care" question, we should boldly admit something about Hesiod. In antiquity he was nearly always judged the runner-up. Throughout the course of history, Hesiod has been overshadowed by Homer, early Greece's other giant poet. The second century AD writer Plutarch, for instance, relates that "even though Hesiod proclaimed himself the disciple of the Muses, he is nevertheless second to Homer in reputation."⁴ The scholar Werner Jaeger similarly confirms the Greeks called Hesiod their "second greatest poet after Homer."⁵

Oh sure, there have been claims that have placed Hesiod and Homer side by side as though they hailed with equal greatness from the same family of poets surnamed, "The Best." One such claim forms part of the first line of the ancient *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*. It runs, "Homer and Hesiod are the most divine poets." The *Contest* goes on to assert that "every human being glory-boasts that Homer and Hesiod are their own fellow citizens."⁶ Nevertheless, it is clear the balance of praise has fallen on Homer's side. Glancing at classical Greek and Roman and later European literature and scholarship, Homer is more often than not presented as the great, towering tree of the family, whereas Hesiod is more like a shrub.

Ah, but what a shrub! — even *if* second best. Not only that but ancient literature records one time, at least, when Hesiod took first prize in a competition

with Homer.

In a legend that may be traced back to the early fourth century BC sophist Alcidas, and ultimately to Hesiod's own *Works and Days* in which he mentions the competition, Hesiod competed with Homer at the funeral games of Amphidamas, a king whose land was situated in the large Greek island of Euboea. We are told that Ganyctor, Amphidamas' son, organized the games, which included contests of strength and speed as well as intellectual might and wisdom. Enter Homer and Hesiod — not only artful but wise poets.

Arriving in Chalcis, one of the chief cities in Euboea, Homer and Hesiod eagerly watched the athletic competitions. When it was their turn to compete, they stood before the audience and judges and put on, we are told, an "extraordinary" show. As might be expected, everything seemed to go Homer's way. When Hesiod poetically posed a series of questions about life, Homer rejoined with perfectly wise responses. What's the best thing for mortal men? asked Hesiod. Homer answered. And when he did, he threw the javelin, as it were, out of the park. The finest thing? Another massive throw. We're told the crowd oohed and aahed, delighted with Homer's replies. Frustrated, Hesiod moved on to riddles. Then ambivalent sayings. Through every turn of the contest, the people were pleased with Homer's wisdom. And when it

came time to acclaim a victor, they demanded the judges crown him.

But first, the chief judge Panedes, the present king of Chalcis and the brother of Alcidas, stepped forward to add one more element to the competition. He asked the poets to recite the finest passage from their own poems. They did. Hesiod belted out a song about the right time to farm and how (hint: you should farm naked), and Homer sang of battle. The result? The ancient storyteller reports, "The Greeks applauded Homer with admiration since his verses towered above the merely ordinary. They demanded that he should therefore be judged the winner." Still, Panedes didn't crown Homer. Rather, we're told "the king gave the crown to Hesiod, declaring that it was right that the one who urged men on to farming and peace should win rather than the one who emphasized war and slaughter."

So it was that Hesiod won the competition. And when he was awarded a trophy in the form of a bronze tripod for his victory, he dedicated it to the Muses with a line emphasizing his conquest of "divine Homer at Chalcis in a contest of song." The upshot? For the moment, at least, the shrub towered over the great tree.

Still, the question remains: why should *we* care about Hesiod? If Panedes appreciated Hesiod for his poems encouraging human beings in the arts of peace and production rather than war and destruction, why have countless others valued him from then until now? And why should we?

The first point to understand is that most Greeks and later Romans *did* in fact highly value Hesiod. Professor Johannes H. Haubold states that "Hesiod . . . was extremely popular and highly authoritative in archaic and classical Greece."⁷ Professor Glenn W. Most extends this status to later times. Hesiod "enjoyed an astonishing degree of popularity and influence throughout antiquity and into the Middle Ages."⁸ Our first motivation for caring about Hesiod, then, is the straightforward idea that we would do well to pay attention to and care for such an esteemed person and his widely-lauded work and the living wisdom found therein that millions admired, relied on, and deeply

cared about for well over a thousand years.

We know that Hesiod was popular for a number of reasons. One, there is the great number of ancient Greek and Roman writers who quote or mention him in their own discussions and writings. To give some idea, there were the poets Pindar, Bacchylides, and Ovid; the orators Aeschines, Isocrates, and Quintilian; the historians Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Josephus; the biographers Diogenes Laertius and Plutarch—the latter author who, we are told, wrote a commentary on Hesiod; the philosophers Heraclitus, Xenophanes, Protagoras, Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, and Epictetus; the statesman, orator, and philosopher Cicero; the satirist Lucian of Samosata; the travel writer Pausanias; the geographer Strabo; the naturalist Pliny the Elder; and the writer of miscellanies Aulus Gellius.

Two, thanks largely to luck and the arid conditions of the trash dump at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, the "City of the Sharp-nosed Fish," among other locations, many ancient copies of Hesiod from the Hellenistic through the Roman and Byzantine periods have survived to our day. Compared with other authors, Hesiod is at the top of the list of extant fragments. Out of 150 Greek writers, William H. Willis places him fourth on a list of frequently appearing authors, just one copy behind the tragic playwright Euripides, and a handful more behind the orator Demosthenes.⁹ (You may be able to guess who comes in first!) What this means is that Hesiod's work was valued enough to be copied and studied in large enough numbers that some of the copies happened to end up preserved in the city dump. In reference to Hesiod, the papyrologist Raffaella Cribiore reports that "well over 100 papyri are preserved," concluding that "the large number of papyri that preserve his work are an excellent index of [his] popularity."¹⁰

Three, we have reports from the ancient world that statues were set up to celebrate Hesiod. To mention two described by Pausanias, there was a bronze statue of Hesiod in the market-place of Thespieae. Nearby on Mount Helikon was another portrait with Hesiod sitting down "holding a harp upon his knees."¹¹

That Hesiod was popular in antiquity seems certain. But *why* was he popular? What sort of positive things do the ancients have to say about him? The following brief citations give some idea. Pausanias reports that Hesiod's tombstone inscription proclaimed his "glory is greatest in Greece." The epinician poet Bacchylides recognizes Hesiod as the "attendant of the sweet Muses." The orator Aeschines labels him "a good poet." Cicero judges him "learned." Pindar claims that he possessed "the measure of wisdom for human beings." Diogenes Laertius notes that the playwright Cratinus called Hesiod a "sophist," "another name for . . . wise men." The sophist Protagoras seems to have shared Cratinus' view, suggesting that Hesiod merely "used poetry as a screen" to fend off the jealousy of others. Then there were Socrates and Plato. Although they criticized Hesiod for what he said about the gods, they also valued and enjoyed him. In the *Apology*, Plato reports that Socrates delighted in the thought of meeting Hesiod, among others, in the afterlife. As for Plato himself, Glenn W. Most suggests that "as he aged, Plato had come to appreciate Hesiod more." This makes sense given what Plato has various characters say about Hesiod in his later dialogues. In the *Laws*, for example, the Athenian declares that "we old men would very likely take most delight in listening to a rhapsode giving a fine recitation of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* or of a piece of Hesiod, and declare that he is easily the winner." In the *Timaeus*, the Athenian politician Critias cites Hesiod as one of two highly "reputed" poets.¹²

The next question we must address is how the Greeks made use of and were affected by Hesiod. The answer will reveal the second reason why we should care about him. Next to Homer, Hesiod was the most significant influence on Greek culture. As Stephanie Nelson observes, "Greek civilization was founded, as the Greeks themselves believed, by two poets, Hesiod and Homer."¹³ We detect evidence of the impact in a variety of ways.

First, we may note that Hesiod was cited as an authority on a variety of matters by many Greeks and by others who wrote in Greek. For instance, the

geographer Strabo refers to him as a source of information about rivers. Pausanias discusses him as the origin of the idea that Pandora was the first woman. Pliny the Elder marshals Hesiod's authority to discuss when men and women are most "lustful," that is, when they long most for "sexual love." (The answer: men in winter and women in summer.) Finally, the Greek-writing Jewish historian Josephus cites Hesiod as a "writer of antiquities," who supported the fact that men such as Noah used to live very long lives.¹⁴

Next we may discuss Hesiod's perceived influence on agriculture. Plutarch, for example, reports the claim of the early Spartan king Cleomenes that just as "Homer had given the necessary directions for fighting, Hesiod had done so for farming." The comic playwright Aristophanes suggests that his greatest use to humans had been his wise counsel on farming, namely on "the working of the land, harvest seasons, and plowing." The *Economics* attributed to Aristotle counsels one to "follow Hesiod" regarding the management of a homestead. Nearly a thousand years after he first sang his songs, Pliny the Elder credits Hesiod for being the "first [who] gave precepts for the guidance of the farmer." Later poets such as Virgil imitated him in giving farming advice. Finally, the scholar Lilah Grace Canevaro reports that Hesiod's *Works and Days* "continued to be used in an agricultural context even in the [Byzantine] Middle Ages."¹⁵

As for Hesiod's perceived influence on Greek religion, the early Greek historian Herodotus provides the key witness. He explains that the Greeks "did not know until yesterday or the day before, so to speak" much about the gods. They didn't know "when and from where each of the gods came to be, or whether they all had always been, and how they appeared in form." So it was, he testifies, that "Hesiod and Homer . . . 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."¹⁶

The truth is we do not know exactly what role Hesiod played and to what extent he helped shape Greek religion. Nevertheless, modern scholars tend

to agree that Hesiod played a significant part in its formation. Pietro Pucci states that “Hesiod appears as the religious teacher of the Greeks” and thus “his poetic mission is felt as a religious mission.” For Walter Burkert, Hesiod was, next to Homer, “the authority to whom the Greeks appealed” to “create order amid . . . a confusion of [previous] traditions.” In this sense he argues that “the spiritual unity of the Greeks was founded and upheld by poetry.” Burkert goes on to observe that “in the *Theogony*, Hesiod created a basic textbook of Greek religion,” one that Carolina Lopez-Ruiz identifies as “canonical.” To the point, Glenn W. Most indicates that Plato accepted “the *Theogony* as a divine encyclopedia or lexicon.”¹⁷

That Hesiod influenced Greek philosophy is a more controversial point. Albin Lesky cautions that “the statement frequently made that Hesiod represents the beginning of Greek philosophy can only be accepted with great reservations.”¹⁸ Still, many have argued that Hesiod stands at the beginning of much of Greek speculation. Jenny Strauss Clay writes that Hesiod “synthesizes earlier traditions and at the same time prepares the way for the Pre-Socratics, especially Parmenides, Empedocles, and Heraclitus.” More, she argues that “the questions that preoccupied them were already adumbrated by Hesiod,” concluding that one could in fact argue that “Hesiod was the first to set the terms for the debate.”¹⁹ Werner Jaeger goes so far as to say that Hesiod was actually doing philosophy when he was spinning his mythology. He was a “constructive theologian” giving “an intelligible explanation of the development of the world,” he judges, the one who “first ventured to arrange all mythology into a comprehensive philosophical system.”²⁰

If we look to the ancient Greeks themselves, some of them likewise seem to have accepted the idea that Hesiod was doing philosophy. Diogenes Laertius, for example, recognizes that the philosophers Parmenides, Xenophanes, and Empedocles expressed their philosophical doctrines in the form of poetry “just as did Hesiod.”²¹ The implication is that Hesiod was expressing his own philosophy in his poetry. There is also the witness of Aristotle and Plutarch pertaining

to Hesiod’s philosophical views regarding Desire or Love (Eros). Plutarch states it this way: “Hesiod, in my opinion, seems more naturally to make Desire the oldest of all the gods, from whom all the other gods derive their beginning.”²² For Aristotle, Hesiod was the first to suggest that desire in various forms is a “first principle” in the cosmos, that which, contrary to “spontaneity and chance,” orders and arranges all things. Desire is “the first cause that moves things and brings them together.”²³

Finally, we may observe the Greek encounter with the poet in the course of what may be called their ethical formation. Hesiod’s wise sayings were used to shape Greek character and behavior. In his discourse on education, the Roman orator Quintilian praises Hesiod for “his maxims of moral wisdom.” For Aeschines, the point of learning “the sentiments of the poets” such as Hesiod was to call them to mind and “make use of them.” We know from others that these sentiments were ideas, admonitions, and wise sayings—about success and virtue; about justice and just rulers; about how to approach a variety of practical problems in life. Isocrates acknowledges the fact that most people recognized Hesiod as one of a handful of poets who “have proved the best counselors for human conduct.” Pindar observes that “Lampon . . . very much honors Hesiod’s wise word and quotes it with approval to his sons.” Basil the Great presents us with a specific example of how people understood Hesiod and made use of his wisdom. Citing the “two paths” passage from the *Works and Days*, the “verses that everyone is singing,” Basil states that “it seems to me that Hesiod had no other purpose in making these points [about each path] than to turn us toward virtue and summon all men to be good.” Lilah Grace Canevaro reports that this one passage alone “is quoted some twenty-six times in extant literature dating from 70 BC to AD 300.”²⁴ If we include earlier Greek literature, the number of citations multiplies, including writers such as Plato and Xenophon.

Given the Greek and Roman appetite for Hesiod, we may well wonder whether it is possible for us to similarly admire and learn from Hesiod today. The Cave’s answer is unreservedly yes! As mentioned a moment ago, even though Hesiod has largely been

forgotten and rarely appears on reading lists today, we hope to change that precisely because we believe the poet has so much to offer.

This is the third reason why we should care about Hesiod. He is still able to provide rich insights into the nature of reality and the best way to approach life. Correspondingly, he still offers up bits of wisdom, wise sayings—what the Greeks called *paroimia*—regarding how to flourish and be happy.

Before turning to Hesiod himself, let's look at one last point, one final reason why we should care about Hesiod and his poetry. If nothing else, we should value him because his poems are some of the earliest works of Greek literature we possess. Consequently, they most clearly reveal the earliest thoughts and feelings of this dynamic people that profoundly influenced the Romans, later Europeans, Americans, and, long-term, the culture of most peoples.

These early Hesiodic Greek feelings and thoughts are somewhat like those we have—however well-formed or not—when we first wake up in the morning, the feelings and thoughts that guide us the rest of the day. To forget them would be like forgetting

why we're doing what we're doing *right now* on *this* day. Have you ever had that experience? Well, the same can happen to all of us. How did we end up here? Why do we feel as we do? Why are we thinking *this* among all possible thoughts? And why are we behaving in *this* manner and doing things *this* way? Reading Hesiod will help us remember our first feelings, thoughts, and doings.

Similarly, reading Hesiod is like looking at a photo album or video, or listening to a recording of a man or woman when he or she was a young child. As any parent knows, personality shows up very early on in an individual's life. By the end of the first or second year, a parent can have some idea of what a child will be like as he or she grows up and becomes an adult. This manifestation or revelation particularly shows up in a child's first words. Well, if you want to know what we humans were like when we said our first words, then read Hesiod. Although much of his work will feel foreign, you will nevertheless recognize much of yourself in his poetry. We at the Cave know we do.

So ends Item 1, "Introduction Part 1 – Why Should We Care about Hesiod?" **See you in Item 2, "Introduction Part 2 – Basic Facts about Hesiod."**

NOTES

¹ Homer, *Odyssey* 1.351-352.

² See Basil the Great, *How to Benefit from Reading Greek Literature* 5.3, in *The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2020).

³ Tzetzes, Scholium on Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Cited in Glen W. Most, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 161.

⁴ Plutarch, *Letter of condolence to Apollonius* 7.

⁵ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans. Gilbert Highet (New York, Oxford University Press, 1945), 57.

⁶ "Divine" (*theios*) could also be read as "marvelous" or "excellent." For a translation of the whole *Contest*, see H.G. Evelyn-White, *Hesiod: The Homeric Hymns and Homeric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 567-587.

⁷ J.H. Haubold, "Shepherd, farmer, poet, sophist: Hesiod on his own reception," in *Plato & Hesiod*, eds. G.R. Boys-Stones & J.H. Haubold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 30.

⁸ Glen Most, "Plato's Hesiod: An acquired taste?" in *Plato & Hesiod*, 52.

⁹ See William H. Willis, "A Census of the Literary Papyri from Egypt," p. 212, from <http://grbs.library.duke.edu/article/view/10921>.

¹⁰ Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 197.

¹¹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 9.27.5 and 9.30.3.

¹² In order, the material cited in this paragraph comes from: *ibid.*, 9.38.4.; Bacchylides, *Ode* 5.192; Aeschines, *On the Embassy* 2.144; Cicero, *Cato the Elder: On Old Age* 54; Pindar, inscription, cited in Tzetzes, Scholium on Hesiod's *Works and Days* (see Glen

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W. Most, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, 161); Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.prologue.12; Plato, *Protagoras* 316d; Plato, *Apology* 41a (speaking during his trial, Socrates says, “What would any of you give to meet with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer?”); Glen Most, “Plato’s Hesiod: An acquired taste?” in *Plato & Hesiod*, 65; Plato, *Laws* 2.658d; Plato, *Timaeus* 21d.

¹³ Stephanie Nelson, *God and Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31.

¹⁴ In order, the material cited in this paragraph comes from: see, for example, Strabo, *Geography* 1.2.22, 8.3.11, and 9.3.16; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.24.7; Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* 10.83; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.104.

¹⁵ In order, the material cited in this paragraph comes from: Plutarch, *Sayings of Spartans*, “Of Cleomenes the Son of Anaxandridas,” 45; Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1033-1034; *Economics* 1.1343a, attributed to Aristotle; Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* 14.1; Lilah Grace Canevaro, *Hesiod’s Works & Days: How to Teach Self-Sufficiency*, 15.

¹⁶ Herodotus, *Histories* 2.53.

¹⁷ In order, the material cited in this paragraph comes from: Pietro Pucci, *Hesiod and the Language of Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 134; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 120; Carolina Lopez-Ruiz, “How to Start a Cosmogony: On the Poetics of Beginnings in Greece and the Near East,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 12, no. 1 (2012): 30-48; Glen Most, “Plato’s Hesiod: An acquired taste?” in *Plato & Hesiod*, 62-63.

¹⁸ Albin Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, trans. Cornelis de Heer and James Willes (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), 97.

¹⁹ Jenny Strauss Clay, *Hesiod’s Cosmos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

²⁰ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture*, 65.

²¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 9.22.

²² Plutarch, *Amatorius (Dialogue on Love)* 13. Translators often give *Eros* or *eros* as “Love” or “love” rather than “Desire” or “desire.”

²³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.984b.1.

²⁴ In order, the material cited in this paragraph comes from: Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 10.52; Aeschines, *Against Ctesiphon* 3.135; Isocrates, *To Nicocles* 2.43; Pindar, *Isthmian* 6; Basil the Great, *How to Benefit from Reading Greek Literature*, 5.5; Lilah Grace Canevaro, *Hesiod’s Works & Days: How to Teach Self-Sufficiency*, 8.

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