

The Works and Days of Hesiod

Lines 381-617 – When and How to Do What – The Agrarian Calendar and Other Advice

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Reading 10

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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 ten of the *Works and Days*).

IF YOUR SPIRIT within you longs for wealth, then work in this way, and add work upon work.

Begin your harvest when the Pleiades, the daughters of Atlas, rise. Plow when they set. For forty days and nights they are hidden. But as the year cycles around, they appear again when you first sharpen your iron tools. This is the custom of the plains, as well as for those who dwell near the sea, and for those in wooded valleys, [390] far from the swelling sea, dwelling in rich land.

Sow naked, plow naked, and reap naked. That's

how you do it if you wish to receive Demeter's goods in due season and have each thing grow at the right time. In that way you will not have to go as a poor man begging to other men's houses, achieving nothing, which is how you have recently come to me. But I will give you no more, nor will I measure out more for you. Foolish Perses, work! Work at the tasks the gods have assigned to human beings.

399-409 Hesiod warns Perses against looking to his neighbors for a handout. They will eventually refuse him, and so

he, his wife, and his children will someday go hungry, being without what it takes to live.

Perses can rid himself of debt and ward off hunger by having a house and buying an ox and a slave woman, who will care for the ox. He must also ready everything in his house for the following season.

410-413 Do not put your work off until tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. For the aimless worker who puts his work off does not fill his storehouse. Careful attention prospers work. But the negligent man is always wrestling with ruin.

414-436 Hesiod directs Perses to remember to cut wood at the right time—that is, when the sun softens, Zeus sends the autumnal rains, a man's skin feels cooler, and the star Sirius is mostly out at night rather than during the day. The trees have by then shed their leaves, have stopped growing, and are relatively worm free. He gives Perses specific measurements for various pieces of farm equipment—a mortar and pestle for grinding, a cart and axles, a dirt clod breaker, and a plow or two (one as a spare). He explains which tree is best for what: laurel for this, elm or oak for that.

436-447 Hesiod now offers specific advice on the ox, or oxen, Perses should buy. They should be two strong nine year olds, "the best for working" since they won't fight each other. A forty year-old man should follow behind them with the plow. He'll keep his mind on the work rather than palling around with others as younger men do. Another man the same age should scatter the seed.

448-464 The voice of the migrating crane signals the time to plow and the winter rains. Hesiod reminds Perses to be ready with everything rather than merely daydreaming about being ready. On wet days and dry, he and his slaves should rise early "so that your fields will be full." Hesiod directs him to plow in the spring and let some land lay fallow in the summer, for fallow land defends against death and thus soothes children with the grain she eventually provides.

465-471 Hesiod advises Perses to "offer prayers to Zeus of the earth and holy Demeter" for a full harvest of "heavy grain" as soon as he begins to plow. A slave should follow behind, "making toil for the birds by hiding the seed."

472 To be well-ordered is best for mortal human beings. Mismanagement and disorder is the worst.

473-492 Hesiod declares that order results in a full harvest if Zeus gives it. Perses will rejoice in everything he has and make it through the winter to spring with plenty. In fact, others in need will come to Perses for help. This won't be true for the man who waits until the winter solstice to plow. He won't have much later on, and so, "few will gaze at and admire him." Still, one never knows what Zeus will do as his "mind is different at different times." He may send his rain after all, and then the "late plower will be a match for the early plower."

493-497 Hesiod tells Perses not to hang out in the fiery and warm bronze smith's shed deep in the cold winter. Rather, he should be resolute and make things indoors, increasing his household. Otherwise, lady Poverty may catch him with an impossible winter.

498-503 But the lazy man, needing what it takes to live and waiting upon an empty hope, plots all sorts of evil in his spirit. [500] Hope doesn't take care of the needy man seated on a couch, the one who doesn't securely have what it takes to live.

While it is still the middle of summer, make this point to your slaves, saying, "It will not always be summer. Make huts for yourselves."

504-518 Hesiod recommends "shunning the wretched days of the month of Lenaion" in deep winter when the north wind Boreas blows down from Thrace over the earth, bending trees and old men, and chilling oxen and goats—but not woolly sheep.

519-524 Nor does Boreas, the North Wind, blow through the soft-skinned maiden—the one who doesn't know the works of golden Aphrodite—[520] the one who remains indoors with her dear mother. She washes her delicate body and anoints herself with oil and lies down in an inner room of the house on a wintry day.

525-535 This is when the sun shines more on "the dark people and their cities" (of Africa) while it "appears tardily

for all the Greeks.” This is also when the forest animals miserably look for shelter.

536-547 Then, just as I encourage you, put on a soft overcoat and a tunic that drops down to your toes. Weave a thick woof on a thin warp. Clothe yourself in these garments so that your hair keeps still [540] and doesn’t bristle and stand up on end all over your body. Tie close-fitting oxhide boots to your feet. Thickly line them inside with felt. And when the frosty season comes, stitch together skins of newly born kids so that you may put them over your back to keep off the rain. And on your head above wear a shaped cap of felt to keep your ears from getting wet—for the dawn is cold when the north wind Boreas blows.

548-560 *Hesiod explains how at dawn a wet, misty fog falls upon the fields of blessed men, a fog that rises from nearby rivers and streams. Sometimes it rains toward the evening. Sometimes the north wind drives off the rain. Get home before the rain, he advises.*

Hesiod recommends half rations for the oxen during this hardest month of Lenaion, but more than usual for the working man.

561-600 When Zeus has finished sixty wintry days after the solstice, then the star Arcturus first rises at sundown, brilliant, leaving the holy stream of Ocean. After him, the swallow, the early-wailing daughter of Pandion, appears to men when spring is just beginning. [570] It is better to prune the vines before she comes.

But when the house-carrier, the snail, climbs up the plants from the earth to escape the Pleiades, then it is no longer time for hoeing vines. Rather, sharpen your sickles and rouse your slaves. Avoid shady seats and sleeping until dawn during the harvest season when the sun dries up the skin and body. Be busy then and bring home the fruits of the field. Rise when the cock crows so that you may securely have what it takes to live. For dawn takes away a third part of your work. Dawn carries a man forward on the pathway to

success, advancing his work—[580] dawn, which appears and makes many human beings go upon the way and puts yokes on many oxen.

When the thistle flowers, and the chirping grasshopper sits in a tree and pours down his clear-sounding song from beneath his wings in the season of toilsome summer, then are goats plumpest and the wine best. Women are the most lustful at this time, while men are at their weakest because Sirius parches head and knees, and the heat dries a man’s skin.

At that time, find a shady spot beneath a tree or rock and have some Bibline wine, and eat [590] barley cakes made from the best flour and milk, and goat cheese, and roasted meat from a forest-fed cow. . . . It is time to drink shining wine, sitting in the shade, satisfying yourself with food, with your face turned toward fresh-blowing Zephyros, the West Wind. Pour three measures of water from a clear and flowing spring, and a fourth measure of wine.

Urge your slaves on to winnow Demeter’s holy grain when strong Orion first appears. They should do it on a smooth threshing floor in an open and airy place. [600] Then measure the grain and store it in storage vessels.

601-608 *Hesiod counsels Perses to store everything—what it takes to live—inside his house under the guard of a dog with “jagged teeth.” That way the “day-sleeper,” a thief, won’t take anything. Now is the time for everyone to rest—slaves and animals alike.*

609-617 When Orion and Sirius travel into the middle of the [610] sky, and rosy-fingered Dawn sees Arcturus, then, Perses, harvest all the grapes and take them home. Bring them into the light of the sun for ten days and ten nights, then shade them for five. On the sixth day draw out the gift of much-cheering Dionysus into storage vessels.

When the Pleiades and Hyades and strong Orion begin to set, then remember to plow in season.

May the full period of the year upon the earth fit together well.

So ends Reading 10, “When and How to Do What – The Agrarian Calendar and Other Advice.” **See you in Reading 11, “Sailing and Trading – Times and Measures.”**

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