

3.5. Hesiod / The Beginnings of Things

From *Works and Days* (c.700 BCE)—Hesiod describes the harsh, practical world from the standpoint of the independent farmer.

Hes. *WD* 106–250. Source: Hesiod. *Works of Hesiod*. Trans. Richard Lattimore. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959.

Or if you will, I will outline it for you in a different story, well and knowledgeably—store it up in your understanding—the beginnings of things, which were the same for gods as for mortals.

In the beginning, the immortals who have their homes on Olympos created the golden generation of mortal people. These lived in Kronos' time, when he was the king in heaven. They lived as if they were gods, their hearts free from all sorrow, by themselves, and without hard work or pain; no miserable old age came their way; their hands, their feet, did not alter. They took their pleasure in festivals, and lived without troubles. When they died, it was as if they fell asleep. All goods were theirs. The fruitful grainland yielded its harvest to them of its own accord; this was great and abundant, while they at their pleasure quietly looked after their works, in the midst of good things prosperous in flocks, on friendly terms with the blessed immortals.

Now that the earth has gathered over this generation, these are called pure and blessed spirits; they live upon earth, and are good, they watch over mortal men and defend them from evil; they keep watch over lawsuits and hard dealings; they mantle themselves in dark mist and wander all over the country; they bestow wealth; for this right as of kings was given them.

Next after these the dwellers upon Olympos created a second generation, of silver, far worse than the other. They were not like the golden ones either in shape or spirit. A child was a child for a hundred years, looked after and playing by his gracious mother, kept at home, a complete booby. But when it came time for them to grow up and gain full measure, they lived for only a poor short time; by their own foolishness they had troubles, for they were not able to keep away from reckless crime against each other, nor would they worship the gods, nor do sacrifice on the sacred altars of the blessed ones, which is the right thing among the customs of men, and therefore Zeus, son of Kronos, in anger engulfed them, for they paid no due honors to the blessed gods who live on Olympos.

But when the earth had gathered over this generation also—and they too are called blessed spirits by men, though under the ground, and secondary, but still they have their due worship—then Zeus the father created the third generation of mortals, the age of bronze. They were not like the generation of silver. They came from ash spears. They were terrible and strong, and the ghastly action of Ares was theirs, and violence. They ate no bread, but maintained an indomitable and adamant spirit. None could come near them; their strength was big, and from their shoulders the arms grew irresistible on their ponderous bodies. The weapons of these men were bronze, of bronze their houses, and they worked as bronzesmiths. There was not yet any black iron. Yet even these, destroyed beneath the hands of

each other, went down into the moldering domain of cold Hades; nameless; for all they were formidable black death seized them, and they had to forsake the shining sunlight.

Now when the earth had gathered over this generation also, Zeus, son of Kronos, created yet another fourth generation on the fertile earth, and these were better and nobler, the wonderful generation of hero-men, who are also called half-gods, the generation before our own on this vast earth. But of these too, evil war and the terrible carnage took some; some by seven-gated Thebes in the land of Kadmos as they fought together over the flocks of Oidipous; others war had taken in ships over the great gulf of the sea, where they also fought for the sake of lovely-haired Helen. There, for these, the end of death was misted about them. But on others Zeus, son of Kronos, settled a living and a country of their own, apart from human kind, at the end of the world. And there they have their dwelling place, and hearts free of sorrow in the islands of the blessed by the deep-swirling stream of the ocean, prospering heroes, on whom in every year three times over the fruitful grainland bestows its sweet yield. These live far from the immortals, and Kronos is king among them. For Zeus, father of gods and mortals, set him free from his bondage, although the position and the glory still belong to the young gods.

After this, Zeus of the wide brows established yet one more generation of men, the fifth, to be on the fertile earth. And I wish that I were not any part of the fifth generation of men, but had died before it came, or been born afterward. For here now is the age of iron. Never by daytime will there be an end to hard work and pain, nor in the night to weariness, when the gods will send anxieties to trouble us. Yet here also there shall be some good things mixed with the evils. But Zeus will destroy this generation of mortals also, in the time when children, as they are born, grow gray on the temples, when the father no longer agrees with the children, nor children with their father, when guest is no longer at one with host, nor companion to companion, when your brother is no longer your friend, as he was in the old days. Men will deprive their parents of all rights, as they grow old, and people will mock them too, babbling bitter words against them, harshly, and without shame in the sight of the gods; not even to their aging parents will they give back what once was given. Strong of hand, one man shall seek the city of another. There will be no favor for the man who keeps his oath, for the righteous and the good man, rather men shall give their praise to violence and the doer of evil. Right will be in the arm. Shame will not be. The vile man will crowd his better out, and attack him with twisted accusations and swear an oath to his story. The spirit of Envy, with grim face and screaming voice, who delights in evil, will be the constant companion of wretched humanity, and at last Nemesis and Aidōs, Decency and Respect, shrouding their bright forms in pale mantles, shall go from the wide-wayed earth back on their way to Olympos, forsaking the whole race of mortal men, and all that will be left by them to mankind will be wretched pain. And there shall be no defense against evil.

Now I will tell you a fable for the barons; they understand it. This is what the hawk said when he had caught a nightingale

with spangled neck in his claws and carried her high among the clouds. She, spitted on the clawhooks, was wailing pitifully, but the hawk, in his masterful manner, gave her an answer: "What is the matter with you? Why scream? Your master has you. You shall go wherever I take you, for all your singing. If I like, I can let you go. If I like, I can eat you for dinner. He is a fool who tries to match his strength with the stronger. He will lose his battle, and with the shame will be hurt also." So spoke the hawk, the bird who flies so fast on his long wings.

But as for you, Perses, listen to justice; do not try to practice violence; violence is bad for a weak man; even a noble cannot lightly carry the burden of her, but she weighs him down when he loses his way in delusions; that other road is the better which leads toward just dealings. For Justice wins over violence as they come out in the end. The fool knows after he's suffered. The spirit of Oath is one who runs beside crooked judgments. There is an outcry when Justice is dragged perforce, when bribe-eating men pull her about, and judge their cases with crooked decisions. She follows perforce, weeping, to the city and gatherings of people. She puts a dark mist upon her and brings a curse upon all those who drive her out, who deal in her and twist her in dealing.

But when men issue straight decisions to their own people and to strangers, and do not step at all off the road of rightness, their city flourishes, and the people blossom inside it. Peace, who brings boys to manhood, is in their land, nor does Zeus of the wide brows ever ordain that hard war shall be with them. Neither famine nor inward disaster comes the way of those people who are straight and just; they do their work as if work were a holiday; the earth gives them great livelihood, on their mountains the oaks bear acorns for them in their crowns, and bees in their middles. Their wool-bearing sheep are weighted

down with fleecy burdens. Their women bear them children who resemble their parents. They prosper in good things throughout. They need have no traffic with ships, for their own grain-giving land yields them its harvest. But when men like harsh violence and cruel acts, Zeus of the wide brows, the son of Kronos, ordains their punishment. Often a whole city is paid punishment for one bad man who commits crimes and plans reckless action. On this man's people the son of Kronos out of the sky inflicts great suffering, famine and plague together, and the people die and diminish. The women bear children no longer, the houses dwindle by design of Olympian Zeus; or again at other times, he destroys the wide camped army of a people, or wrecks their city with its walls, or their ships on the open water.

You barons also, cannot even you understand for yourselves how justice works? For the immortals are close to us, they mingle with men, and are aware of those who by crooked decisions break other men, and care nothing for what the gods think of it. Upon the prospering earth there are thirty thousand immortal spirits, who keep watch for Zeus and all that men do. They have an eye on decrees given and on harsh dealings, and invisible in their dark mist they hover on the whole earth. Justice herself is a young maiden. She is Zeus's daughter, and seemly, and respected by all the gods of Olympos. When any man uses force on her by false impeachment she goes and sits at the feet of Zeus Kronion, her father, and cries out on the wicked purpose of men, so that their people must pay for the profligacy of their rulers, who for their own greedy purposes twist the courses of justice aslant by false proclamations. Beware, you barons, of such spirits. Straighten your decisions you eaters of bribes. Banish from your minds the twisting of justice.