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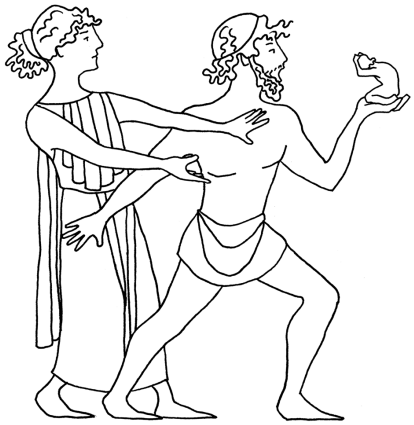
HESIOD'S *THEOGONY*

In the Beginning



WE LIVE IN AN AGE THAT HAS ALMOST completely lost its sense of history. Through a process that might best be described as cultural suicide, we have actively, willfully, systematically severed ourselves from our roots, our origins and our past traditions. Live in the now, we are counseled, or, better, keep our eyes fixed forever forward. If it's not cutting-edge, state of the art, or new and improved, then it is probably not worth bothering with: except perhaps as hip nostalgia to indulge in briefly and uncritically. And the same, alas, too often goes for most of our universities and many of our seminaries: the "progressive" agenda, the "enlightened" view, the "critical" reading will trump the traditional one every time.

Evangelicals and other traditional-minded Christians often complain, and rightly so, that many of our modern and postmodern educators, politicians and media people have attempted to cut America loose from her Greco-Roman and (especially) Judeo-Christian roots. And yet those who would fight boldly against this aggressive and irresponsible form of multiculturalism are often just as cut off from our ancient roots as those who have been lulled or beaten into silence by our modern prophets of progres-

sive thinking. If we are to regain our past, we must reconnect to it ourselves: not only because reconnection will provide us with information, but because the act of reconnection is itself one of the strongest critiques that can be leveled against the anti-traditional ethos of our day.

"The historical sense," writes T. S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence."[1] It is only when the past presses itself on us as a felt reality that is both relevant and contemporary that we will be empowered to embrace it as a source for determining our own purpose, worth and status as citizens of America, cultural heirs of the Mediterranean world, and members of the human race. The truism that says we can't know where we're going if we don't know where we came from is only half true. The one who knows nothing of his origins is more than merely lost; he is, in the most profound sense, cut off from himself. He knows not who he is.

If, then, we are to regain a sense of who we are, we must not only seek out our origins; we must learn as well to perceive those origins both as determiners of the past and touchstones of the present. In the Jewish world, this attempt to perceive both the pastness and presence of the past begins with the book of Genesis; in the Greek, it begins with Hesiod's *Theogony*.

HE ON WHOM THE MUSE BREATHES

Hesiod stands side by side with Homer at the head of that flood we call Western civilization. In keeping with most classicists, I would place both poets near the end of the eighth century B.C., with Hesiod composing on the west coast of the Aegean (modern-day Greece) and Homer on the east (modern-day Turkey). Like Homer, Hesiod begins his poem by calling on the Muses, the nine divine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, goddess of memory, for inspiration. However, whereas Homer's invocation of the Muse is brief and borders on the perfunctory, Hesiod goes into great detail as to how the Muses placed on his heart and on his lips the power of poetry. After a brief preamble in which he lays out his dramatis personae, Hesiod boldly yet humbly exclaims:

[1]Hazard Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato,* rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p. 761.

The Muses once taught Hesiod to sing
Sweet songs, while he was shepherding his lambs
On holy Helicon; the goddesses
Olympian, daughters of Zeus who holds
The aegis, first addressed these words to me:
"You rustic shepherds, shame: bellies you are,
Not men! We know enough to make up lies
Which are convincing, but we also have
The skill, when we've a mind, to speak the truth."

So spoke the fresh-voiced daughters of great Zeus
And plucked and gave a staff to me, a shoot
Of blooming laurel, wonderful to see,
And breathed a sacred voice into my mouth
With which to celebrate the things to come
And things which were before. They ordered me
To sing the race of blessed ones who live
Forever, and to hymn the Muses first
And at the end. No more delays; begin.[2]

Hesiod presents himself here as far more than a frustrated artist in need of an Olympian cure for writer's block. The divine breath of the Muse carries with it a calling; he is to be a channel not only of inspiration, but of revelation. He has been chosen, selected out, to perform a task for which he is not wholly adequate. He is, after all, one of many well-fed, self-satisfied rustic shepherds who live near the crest of the holy mountain. That is, until he is breathed upon by the numinous spirits who make their dwelling on Helicon and given a poetic staff of laurel to take the place of his shepherd's crook.

Jews and Christians who know their Bibles well will immediately see in the quoted passage many parallels to the prophetic books of the Old and New Testament, especially to the Psalms of David, Israel's great poet-shepherd. But the scene, for all its links to David, actually comes closer in detail and spirit to the event recorded in Exodus 3: a well-fed and perhaps self-satisfied rustic shepherd named Moses is tending his flock on Mount

[2]My text for Hesiod's *Theogony* is taken from *Hesiod and Theognis,* trans. Dorothea Wender (New York: Penguin, 1973), pp. 23-24.

Horeb when he is chosen, selected out, by a numinous God who speaks to him from a burning bush and gives him a magical rod. In pointing out this parallel, I do not suggest that Hesiod is somehow the Greek equivalent of Moses or that his *Theogony* is to be granted the same status as Genesis. I do suggest, however, that these parallel accounts of the meeting between a poet-prophet and his Muse can teach us something about the nature of origins that our age has forgotten.

Origins, as we are reminded in Genesis, Exodus 3 and the opening of the *Theogony,* are not to be discovered through empirical observation or scientific experimentation, but to be received as a gift of revelation. I expect that this statement will raise the eyebrows of many readers, but I do not retract it. If we are to have any understanding of our own individual birth, we must consult those who gave birth to us, or at least those close to our parents who witnessed the event. In the case of the birth of our species, our planet and our universe, it is only our Creator who can supply us, through inspiration and revelation, the information we desire. True, as rational beings we are able to determine something of our origins by reasoning backward from effect to cause; however, if we are to achieve a full, rounded, intimate picture of our human beginnings, we must rely at least in part on the voice that speaks from outside our spatiotemporal world. In court, judge and jury weigh both physical evidence and the testimony of reliable witnesses when determining their verdict; if the physical evidence does not exist or is impossible to interpret, they must rely on the testimony. Such is the case with the origin of ourselves and our world, but it is also to a lesser extent the case with our ancient human past.

The modern world tends to think that the best way to understand our past is to dig up physical artifacts and analyze the geographical, climatic and sociopolitical-economic factors of the age under study. But it is not so. The best way—perhaps the only way—to understand our great forebears is to lose ourselves in their highest poetry, to absorb Hesiod, Homer and the five books of Moses into our collective veins. If Moses and Hesiod tapped something of the divine mind, then we must seek to tap their minds. If we can't attach our metal ring directly to the magnet, then let us attach it to a larger and older ring that is already attached to the magnet.

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot exhorts the would-

be poet to allow his own private mind to be overlaid by "the mind of Europe," to "develop or procure the consciousness of the past and . . . continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career."[3] It is good advice, not only for poets, but for all of us who would reconnect with the past, who would know where we have come from, why we are here, and where we are going.

Of course, we do not and should not read Hesiod the same way we read Moses. The revelation given to Moses was far clearer than that given to Hesiod. Unlike Moses, who spoke with God face to face, Hesiod saw the divine face dimly through a dirty mirror. Hesiod, lacking the direct revelation vouchsafed to Moses and the prophets, knows nothing of creation ex nihilo. He does not know, cannot even conceive, that in the beginning there was not "stuff" but spirit, not matter but God (an inability, ironically, that he shares with our modern, post-Enlightenment world). But then again, Genesis 1 itself tells us very little about creation ex nihilo; only the first verse, in fact, directly addresses this vital biblical doctrine—which Hebrews 11:3 tells us can only be perceived and understood by faith. After the first verse, the remainder of Genesis 1 is concerned with describing how God shaped the primal chaos that he caused to appear out of nothing. And in this sense, the *Theogony* comes close to Genesis. For both Moses and Hesiod, the prime concern of God (the gods) is to bring order and shape to what was originally formless and void.

SHAPING THE CHAOS

Out of chaos, writes Hesiod, were born the primal forces of earth, night and love, and out of the former two came, with the help of Love, heaven and day. As in Genesis 1, order is established through a process of separation: earth from heaven, night from day. But here too there is a difference. Just as Hesiod is ignorant of creation ex nihilo, so does he lack the vision of a higher, self-existent, purely good God who has neither beginning nor end. Forced to conceive of the origins of the divine and the human, the spiritual and the physical apart from the biblical Yahweh, Hesiod must of necessity offer us a far messier and bloodier drama. The divine and perfect

[3]Ibid., p. 762.

justice that existed in the mind of Yahweh before the creation of matter must, perforce, come at the end of Hesiod's drama rather than at the beginning. Hesiod is writing, as it were, in the dark: called, yes, inspired, yes, but lacking direct access. Still, he gives it his best shot. He will struggle, poetically and prophetically, toward order and justice.

As Hesiod tells it, earth (Gaia) and heaven (Ouranos) become lovers and give birth to a race of Titans: Prometheus, Atlas, Ocean and so on. Unfortunately, these serene immortals are not all of the offspring of earth and heaven. Gaia bears as well to her sky god husband a brood of proud and insolent monsters. Afraid that one of his monstrous offspring will supplant him, Ouranos takes them and presses them back into the earth—which is to say, back into the womb of his wife. Gaia groans in agony, her belly stretched and bloated by the fierce sons hidden within her. In desperation, she fashions a "mighty sickle" and gives it to her strongest Titan son, Kronos. Sickle in hand, Kronos hides behind a rock, and the next time Ouranos swoops down from the sky to lie with Gaia, he "stretche[s] forth his left hand . . . [and harvests] his father's genitals." Kronos flings his father's testicles behind him and, as they soar over the land, blood drips down and mingles with the earth: out of the blood-soaked earth leap the Furies, hideous goddesses with snakes for hair and venomous teeth who relentlessly pursue those guilty of taboo crimes. In the end, the testicles fall into the ocean, producing a foam out of which rises Aphrodite, goddess of love.

Kronos then rules as king of the Titans and takes his sister Rhea as his wife. But Kronos, like his father before him, grows fearful of his sons and determines that he will not himself be supplanted. Accordingly, each time Rhea gives birth to a new child, Kronos seizes it and swallows it whole. Enlisting the aid of her mother, who perhaps now resents the son who carried out her bloody wishes, Rhea takes her next son, Zeus, and hides him away on the island of Crete. In place of the child, Rhea gives Kronos a large stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, which the ogre-father promptly swallows. When Zeus has grown to manhood, he returns and, with the help of the Titans, overthrows Kronos and releases his brothers and sisters from the belly of his father.

Zeus becomes lord of the Olympian gods along with his two brothers,

Poseidon, lord of the sea, and Hades, lord of the dead, and his sister Hera, whom he takes as his wife. Ares, god of War, is born to Zeus and Hera, but Athena, goddess of war and wisdom, is born out of the head of Zeus. In jealousy, Hera bears Hephaestus, the blacksmith of the gods, without the aid of Zeus. The other gods who dwell on Mount Olympus—Apollo, god of music and the bow; his sister Artemis, goddess of nature and the hunt; and Hermes, messenger of the gods—are born to Zeus and a lesser goddess. Zeus's two sisters, Hestia, goddess of the hearth, and Demeter, goddess of the grain, round out the Olympian gods, though Demeter tends to dwell on the earth.

At first, Zeus, who receives his own prophecy that one of his sons will overthrow him, rules with the same bloodthirstiness and paranoia as his father and grandfather, even showing particular cruelty to one of the Titans, Prometheus, who had helped him overthrow Kronos. When he learns that Prometheus, whose name in Greek means "forethought," knows the name of the goddess who will bear the son that will overthrow him, Zeus tortures Prometheus until he divulges the name. Having secured the name of the goddess, Zeus then forces that goddess, Thetis, to marry a mortal man, Peleus, so that her son, Achilles, will be a mortal and pose no threat to Zeus's rule. These machinations are as unpleasant as they are heartless, and they expose the new monarch of Olympus as cold and Machiavellian. However, once Zeus believes he has neutralized the threat to his rule, a wonderful change comes over him and he becomes a god of justice, order and civilization. Instead of Thetis, he takes as wives both Metis (wisdom) and Themis (justice) and defeats once and for all the more bestial of the primal gods. In a titanic battle, he even defeats with his thunderbolts a hundred-headed, chaos-causing, storm-producing dragon whom he imprisons in a volcano.

If we focus here only on the Oedipal violence of Ouranos's castration or the domestic violence that manifests as lust, betrayal and even cannibalism, we will not move beyond a Freudian reading that would interpret the *Theogony* as a repository of primal urges and repressed sexuality. But if we look to the end and view the cycles of violence and vengeance as culminating in the "civilizing" of Zeus, we will discover something very different, something that finds an echo in Genesis. Like Hesiod, Moses not only

presents creation as a kind of ordering, but he structures his narrative around a group of weak and stumbling patriarchs whose story nevertheless culminates in order, justice and promise. What Moses' patriarchs come slowly to learn about Yahweh, Hesiod's gods come to learn even more slowly about themselves.

Viewed from this perspective, the disturbing sexual violence that marks both the *Theogony* and Genesis—not to mention Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings—takes on a deeper meaning. Both books begin essentially with a fertility mandate, a cosmic call to be fruitful and multiply, to populate and exert dominion over the natural world. In carrying out this mandate, however, the gods of Hesiod, like the men of Genesis, pervert fertility into a series of intergenerational struggles that either sow strife between half-siblings (Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers) or ultimately prevent fertility rather than encourage it. Thus, as Kronos castrates Ouranos to prevent him from fathering more children, Onan "castrates" himself by spilling his seed on the ground rather than impregnating Tamar (Genesis 38:8-10). Onan is instructed to do this by his father, Judah, who seems as intent on preventing Tamar from bearing a child to his son as Zeus is on preventing his own offspring from being born. And yet, in the end, these despicable, repulsive schemes are used to further a higher divine plan. In Hesiod, we end up with a civilized Zeus and a mortal child, Achilles, who becomes the prototype of all tragic heroes to come. In Genesis, Tamar is impregnated by Judah and becomes the mother of a child whose descendant will be the greatest tragic hero of all: Jesus Christ.

But the biblical parallel does not stop here; physical as well as sexual violence has a role to play in the greater cosmic drama. As part of the long process by which Zeus brings order and balance to the heavens, he imprisons the rebellious Titans in Tartarus, a dark pit which is as far below the earth as the earth is below the heavens. Remarkably, in the New Testament, where hell is generally referred to by the Greek word *Hades,* there is only one instance in which the biblical writer uses the word *Tartarus* for hell: "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell [Tartarus], and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment" (2 Peter 2:4). Though the Bible offers scanty details, it is clear that before the creation of our world a war in heaven resulted in the

expulsion of Satan and his fallen angels. Through that war God restored justice and balance to the heavens, a justice that rested in part on imprisoning those who rebelled against his authority. Again, Hesiod knows nothing of Yahweh (he fails to conceive even of Zeus as a divinity of pure goodness, love and truth), but he knows that if the high God is truly to be the high God, he must have the power and will to control rebellion and disobedience.

And Hesiod knows something else. He knows that the search for origins must involve a study of language. Just as throughout the book of Genesis we are told the meaning of key figures' names—Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and so on—so Hesiod shows a near obsession with tracing the meaning behind the names of his key divine players. The word Cyclopes, he informs us, comes from *kuklos* ("circle") because the Cyclopes have a single large eye in the center of their head; *Aphrodite* comes from *aphro* ("foam") because she rose up out of the sea. To be honest, many of Hesiod's etymological attempts are doubtful at best, but the passion he shows to find meaning in names shows a passion for meaning itself.

It is no coincidence that the more our postmodern society loses its grounding in tradition, the more it loses its faith in language. To immerse ourselves in the works of Hesiod, Homer, Virgil and the Greek tragedians, all of whom felt a passion to explore origins, is to renew our love both for the past and for the words our great ancestors used to enshrine and interpret that past.