

HEROES OF THE CITY OF MAN

A CHRISTIAN GUIDE TO SELECT ANCIENT LITERATURE

PETER J. LEITHART

canonpress
Moscow, Idaho 

Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800-488-2034 | www.canonpress.com

Peter J. Leithart, *Heroes of the City of Man:
A Christian Guide to Select Ancient Literature*
Copyright © 1999 by Peter Leithart

Cover design by Laura Storm.
Printed in the United States of America.
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the author, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leithart, Peter J.
Heroes of the city of man : a Christian guide to select ancient literature /
Peter J. Leithart.
p. cm.

Summary: “[Analyzes specific ancient epics and Greek dramas in the light of Christian beliefs. Ancient poets and playwrights discussed: Hesiod, Homer, Virgil, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes.]”—Provided by publisher.

Contents: Pagan genesis : Hesiod, theogony — Fighters killing, fighters killed : Homer, the Iliad — Son of pain : Homer, the Odyssey — Patria and pietas : Virgil, the Aeneid — Blessings of terror : Aeschylus, the Eumenides — Riddles of one and many : Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannus — The contest of fetters and Thyrsus : Euripides, The Bacchae — Sophist in the city : Aristophanes, Clouds.

ISBN-13: 978-1-885767-55-4 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-885767-55-2 (pbk.)

1. Epic poetry, Classical—History and criticism. 2. Greek drama—History and criticism. 3. Christianity and literature. I. Title.

PA3022.E6L45 2006

880.09—dc22

2006012423

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 11

Introduction:
The Devil Has No Stories 13

SECTION I: ANCIENT EPIC

Introduction: Ancient Epic 43

Pagan Genesis:
Hesiod, *Theogony* 53

Fighters Killing, Fighters Killed:
Homer, *The Iliad* 85

Son of Pain:
Homer, *The Odyssey* 147

Patria and Pietas:
Virgil, *The Aeneid* 213

SECTION II: GREEK DRAMA

Introduction: Greek Drama 275

Blessings of Terror:
Aeschylus, *The Eumenides* 281

Riddles of One and Many:
Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* 305

The Contest of Fetters and Thyrsus:
Euripides, *The Bacchae* 335

Sophist in the City:
Aristophanes, *Clouds* 365

Additional Reading 391

Introduction:

THE DEVIL HAS NO STORIES

Perhaps those poets of long ago who sang
the Age of Gold, its pristine happiness,
were dreaming on Parnassus of this place.

The root of mankind's tree was guiltless here;
here, in an endless Spring, was every fruit,
such is the nectar praised by all these poets.

Purgatorio 28, 139–144

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian exclaimed, and his question has echoed through the following centuries. Tertullian’s own answer—“not much”—was not universally shared in the early church. Many of the early apologists, to be sure, expressed their disgust with the loose morality found in the gods of mythology (but then, so did Plato), and Augustine repented of his youthful passion for Virgil and the Roman theater. Yet, Origen and Clement, theologians of Alexandria, were deeply impressed with neo-Platonic philosophy, and Augustine’s impressive but incomplete escape from Platonism was the result of tremendous intellectual exertion.

Tertullian’s question has taken on fresh relevance today with the rise of classical Christian schools. In its origins, the Christian school movement was largely in line with Tertullian’s perspective: Christian schools were founded on the model of Jerusalem

rather than Athens. In the last decade, however, many Christian schools have introduced classical elements into their curricula, and among the elements of the classical approach is a renewed attention to classical literature. Jerusalem has moved marginally closer to Athens, and some are beginning to pose Tertullian's question again.

Heroes of the City of Man is a book about Athens by an author who resides contentedly in Jerusalem. One of the foundational assumptions of this study is that there is a profound antithesis, a conflict, a chasm, between Christian faith and all other forms of thought and life. Though I appreciate the sheer aesthetic attraction of classical poetry and drama, I have no interest in helping construct Athrusalem or Jerens; these hybrids are monstrosities whose walls the church should breach rather than build. Instead, I have attempted to view Athens from a point securely within the walls of Jerusalem.

An accurate view is possible in spite of the great gulf fixed between the two cities. We have the technology. And, I believe there is profit to be had from this exploration of foreign territory. The purpose of this introduction is to describe the technology and to enumerate some benefits of deploying it.

The Problem of the Classics

A recent book that pleads for a return to “the classics” provides a starting point for our discussion. According to Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath’s *Who Killed Homer?*,¹ the Greek view of the world, which they call “Greek wisdom,” is central to Western history and culture. Take away Greeks, and you take away all that is unique and good in our civilization: the autonomy of science and learning from religious and political authority, the civilian oversight of military power, constitutional and consensual government, separation of religion from political authority, faith in

¹ Subtitled *The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

the average citizen, private property, freedom of dissent and open criticism of government, religion, and the military.

On purely historical grounds, a number of the details of this sketch are highly questionable. The authors claim that religion and political authority were separated in the Greek city. As evidence, they point out that, unlike many ancient cities, authority in a Greek city-state was not in the hands of a priest-king and that no prophet or seer had power to overrule the decisions of a Greek assembly. Though these points are accurate, there is overwhelming evidence that the Greek city-state was a religious as well as a political organization. Every city was under the patronage of a god, goddess, or founder-hero. At the center of each city was the *hestia*, a common hearth-fire or altar that served as the center for civic festivals. When a Greek city established a colony, fire from the city *hestia* was taken to the new colony so that the altar in the colony burned with the same fire as the mother city. Meetings of the assembly at Athens began with the sacrifice of a pig. From these and many other practices, Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel conclude that Greek civic life was “impregnated” with religion and that there was “no separation between the sacred and the profane.”²

Hanson and Heath also claim that faith in the average citizen is an inheritance of the ancient Greeks. Perhaps there is some basis for this commonplace, but it must be remembered that citizenship was a very restricted privilege in Greek cities. Rules for citizenship became more stringent with time, and it was ultimately decided that only children of a legally recognized marriage between two Athenian citizens were themselves citizens. As

² *Religion in the Ancient Greek City* (trans. Paul Cartledge; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 92. See also Francois de Polignac, *Cults, Territory, and the Origins of the Greek City-State* (trans. Janet Lloyd; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980). An excellent brief summary is found in Christine Sourvinou-Inwood, “What is *Polis* Religion?” in Oswyn Murray and Simon Price, eds., *The Greek City: From Homer to Alexander* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

a result, a large proportion of the inhabitants of a Greek *polis* were not citizens but resident aliens. This is not faith in the “common man” but in the “right men.”

Putting these inaccuracies to one side, however, Hanson and Heath raise a more fundamental question: Did Greek wisdom build the West? Do we enjoy the freedoms we enjoy because of Greece? Is recovering the wisdom of the Greeks the way to restore our society? For Christians, the clear answer to these questions is a resounding “No.” Greeks worshiped and served what are not gods, and idolatry, the Bible assures us, has considerable social and cultural implications. When Paul visited Athens, he did not praise its artistic, literary, or philosophical achievements but was provoked at the countless idolatrous shrines and altars (Acts 17:16). To the extent we share Paul’s zeal to see the true God worshiped everywhere, we will react to Greek and Roman literature with similar provocation. Greek thought and culture, founded as it is in idolatry, does not represent “wisdom.” It is, at base, folly.

And it is folly that must provoke us, as it did Paul, to opposition. The basic biblical paradigm for dealing with idolatrous religions, their ideas, literature, and practices is unrelenting, total, holy war. Scripture instructs us to make war against the gods of the nations. God leaves us no room for neutrality, no room for borrowing weapons from Greece or from Rome, anymore than we are permitted to borrow some of the “good ideas” found in Hinduism, Islam, or Buddhism. Moses urged Israel in ferocious language to utterly destroy the gods of the Canaanites:

When the Lord your God shall bring you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and shall clear away many nations before you . . . and when the Lord your God shall deliver them before you, and shall defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. . . . But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire. (Deut. 7:1–5)

These are the statutes and the judgments which you shall carefully observe in the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess as long as you live on the earth. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. And you shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods, and you shall obliterate their name from that place. (Deut. 12:1–3)

These are fearful instructions, and the New Testament reiterates the same zeal in war against all idols (2 Cor. 6:7; 10:3–6; Eph. 6:10–20). Armed with the sword of the Spirit, the church is to destroy the gods of the nations until Jesus is acknowledged as king over all. Vanquishing “Greek wisdom” is as much a fundamental goal in the church’s evangelistic mission as throwing down modern secularism is.

According to some Christians, the Bible forbids us to study Baalistic and Canaanite mythologies, and the Greek myths are more humane, more decent, less crude, and thus closer to Christian teaching than ancient Palestinian myths. Zeus is an idol, but by this argument, he is not as bad as Baal. This argument will be convincing only to those who have been reading expurgated versions of Greek and Roman mythology, of the kind one finds in Edith Hamilton’s popular and seductive books. In the past several decades, classical scholars have found that the literature and culture of archaic and classical Greece is profoundly indebted to the literature and language of the Ancient Near East, and from Greece these influences were passed on to early Rome. Greeks apparently learned how to write from the Phoenicians and adapted the Phoenician alphabet. Artistic styles and crafts were introduced from the East. Religious beliefs and practices were also transferred from the region around Palestine to the Greek peninsula. Temples apparently did not exist in Greece until the “orientalizing revolution” of the eighth century (750–650), and many of the rituals of Greek religion were borrowed from the

same cultures.³ Borrowed from the East, Greek mythologies are quite as brutal and savage as the stories of Baal and Molech, as will become evident in our study of Hesiod's *Theogony* (chapter 1). As the visions of Daniel 7 suggest, Greece and Rome were, like Assyria and Babylon before them, bestial powers.

The passages from Deuteronomy thus raise a sharp question for Christian study of the ancient classics. Given the fact that the classics are idolatrous through and through, why should we want to preserve them? Why should we keep alive the memory of Greek gods? Should we be studying the exploits of heroes who served these gods? Should we not instead throw all of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Virgil into one flaming heap in the town square? Wouldn't Moses?

A part of the answer to these questions is that Christians have no more moral duty to read and study Greek and Roman literature than ancient Israelites had a duty to study the myths of Baal and Asteroth. Nor should Christian schools or homeschoolers think that they can have a good Christian education only if the "classics" are prominent in the curriculum. The goal of Christian education is to train a child to be faithful in serving God and His kingdom in a calling, and certainly this goal can be achieved by a student who never cracks the cover of a Homeric epic. Given the appalling ignorance of the Bible among evangelical Christians today, mastering Scripture must be an overwhelming priority in all Christian education. If one must choose between studying Leviticus or Livy, Habakkuk or Homer, Acts or Aeschylus, the decision is, to my mind, perfectly evident, and the point holds even if the non-biblical literature were Christian. The genealogies of 1 Chronicles 1–9 are vastly more important to study than Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, or Dickens.

³ For a brief but heavily documented study of this, see Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (trans. Margaret E. Pinder and Walter Burkert; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). See also Oswyn Murray, *Early Greece* (2d ed.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), ch. 6.

But, of course, students and teachers are not always faced with a stark either/or choice. Assuming a student has a strong grounding in Scripture, there may be good reasons for taking up a study of other literature. And a few texts of Scripture demonstrate that it is not necessarily sinful for believers to study pagan literature. Daniel and his three friends learned the language and literature of the Chaldeans (Dan. 1:4), which undoubtedly focused on Chaldean mythology. In the New Testament, Paul occasionally reveals that he knew some of the literature and philosophy of the Greeks and Romans. In Acts 17:28, he quotes a Greek poet, and some have suggested that the phrase “kicking against the goads” in Acts 26:14 comes from Aeschylus, though it might well have been a proverbial saying. In both cases, the context of these passages is important. Daniel learned Chaldean literature while in exile, and this helped to prepare him for a high profile position in an alien land. Paul quotes the Greek poets to the philosophers on Mars Hill as part of his effort to “win some” by becoming all things to all men. Both Daniel and Paul insisted that true insight and wisdom come from Yahweh, the God of Israel, not from Marduk or Apollo (see Dan. 2:28; 1 Cor. 2:6–16). Neither studied “the classics” in order to discover guidance and wisdom for a godly life. They used their knowledge of pagan literature to achieve the purposes of God. Daniel and Paul turned the weapons of Babylon and Greece against their makers, and thus Babylon and Greece fell into the pit they had dug (Ps. 7:16).

God, in short, calls us to war against the idols, but the Bible teaches a variety of strategies and tactics in war. The shrines of the Canaanites were to be utterly destroyed, and the gold and silver of their idols was not to be used, “for it is an abomination” (Deut. 7:25). Yet when the Israelites left Egypt, they received gold and silver from the Egyptians (Exod. 12:35–36), and this gold and silver was used to build the tabernacle at Sinai. Later, David gathered the plunder from his wars with the Philistines and others and gave it to Solomon to build the temple (1 Chr. 22:6–16). Citing these biblical examples, St. Augustine concluded that the church likewise was permitted to “plunder the Egyptians,” using

the achievements of pagan society to construct God's house and city. This is much easier to do with technology than with literature and philosophy. Whether or not the computer or the software was invented by a Christian, Christians can use computers for the advancement of Christ's kingdom. Plundering ideas is trickier, since the ideas must simultaneously be plundered and purged, received and rejected. With ideas and literature, the confrontation between the Bible and paganism will be more intense, but with great care and wisdom, we can plunder even pagan literature and make it work for us. As Proverbs says, the wealth of the wicked is stored up for the righteous (Prov. 13:22).

More specifically, pagan literature can be used as a weapon for Christian warfare because it gives insight into the works and ways of the enemy. Greek poets and philosophers are enemies of Christ and His church, and they are not remote enemies. The Heroic Age ended some three thousand years ago, but our inner cities, our television and movie screens, and our courtrooms are filled with characters who live by the creed of Achilles. To combat these enemies effectively, it helps to know them from the inside, and literature gives us unique insight into the unbelieving heart.

Moreover, by giving us a glimpse of a world largely untouched by God's truth, Greek and Roman literature help us identify the effect that the gospel has had on the world. Reading Greek and Roman literature, for example, highlights the difference between a world formed by polytheism and a world that worships the One Living God. This theological disagreement has enormous practical significance, but let me highlight one aspect. If the gods are as the Greek myths depict them, then, as Hesiod's work suggests, warfare and conflict are the ultimate reality. Gods and goddesses compete and fight with one another, promoting the good of their favorites and opposing their enemies among men. Peace is inherently impossible in a polytheistic world. This, I will suggest, is responsible for the despair that C.S. Lewis said pervades the Homeric epics. Homer vividly depicts the horror and waste of war (as well as its glories and beauties), but he can see no way of

life other than war. How could he? If the gods themselves are at war, how can we expect peace on earth—ever?

In a polytheistic world, a semblance of peace can be established in one of two ways. On the one hand, one god might be powerful enough to force the others into submission. But here cosmic war is replaced by cosmic tyranny; power flows to the one with the biggest gun. On the other hand, in Homeric epic, and even more in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Fate comes to the fore as the ruling force, and this gives some unity and harmony to the world. Individual gods might be at war, but Fate calmly works out the destiny of each man. But Fate is a mysterious, unapproachable, impersonal force. No one prays to fate or worships it (him). Classical epic thus leaves us with three fundamental theological options: Heaven rings with the petty squabbling of adolescent gods, which means the world is not under control at all, *or* heaven and earth are ruled by a heavenly Führer, *or* things are governed by an impersonal and faceless power that grinds along, indifferent to humanity or justice. Take your pick: chaos, totalitarianism, or determinism. Whichever you choose, the world is a pretty grim place, with no hope for redemption. Homer and Virgil powerfully render this world, and thus they give us insight into the horror of life under the cruel gods.

By contrast, the Bible proclaimed from the beginning that there is one God, Yahweh, who created the world good and rules all things. Violence and evil are not written into the fabric of creation but are due to sin and His righteous judgment on sin, and therefore there is hope of redemption from evil. Ultimate reality is *not* a gaggle of gods, nor an autocrat, nor an impersonal Fate. Rather, ultimate reality is Three Persons in an eternal communion of love. Above us is a God who is love, whose love overflows in creating a world He did not need and in redeeming a world that had turned from Him. Heaven is not a battlefield or a prison; it is a dance hall filled with song. And, one day, earth will join in.

In a similar way, Greek and Roman literature highlight by way of contrast the Christian view of creativity and culture (Hesiod);

the hero and heroism (Homer and Virgil); the relation of city and family (Aeschylus); fate, sin, and responsibility (Sophocles); the conflict of reason and emotion (Euripides); and the social effects of philosophical skepticism (Aristophanes). None of these poems or plays teach the wisdom of Christ in a direct way. Rather, by wrestling to evaluate these books biblically, we are led to discover biblical truth that we might otherwise have overlooked. Pagan literature can, rightly used, give us an important entry into the mind and culture of fallen humanity, and even sharpen our understanding of the Christian worldview. Given that our world has abandoned the Christian foundations of our civilization, we will increasingly be confronted with a variety of paganism. Modern paganism is not the same as ancient paganism, but pagan practices and habits of thought and life are being revived. Studying this literature can make us more aware of our enemies' habits and prepare us to wage skillful and victorious war against them. What we should refuse to do is embrace our enemies as friends.

By this argument, studying the mythologies of India, Africa, China, or American Indians would serve as well. Yet, the intended audience of this book lives in a civilization that has been shaped more by stories from Greece and Rome than by the Bhagavad Gita or the tribal mythologies studied by anthropologists. In addition to the "negative" use of Greco-Roman literature described above, then, there is a more "positive" use: Knowledge of the classics is necessary to understand contemporary thought and culture. Freud formulated a psychological theory using the Oedipus myth; the contemporary moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has revived a version of the "virtue ethics" found in Homer, Plato, and Aristotle; James Joyce's *Ulysses* follows the *Odyssey* in some detail, with the not insignificant difference that it is set in Dublin rather than the islands of Greece. If we want to have a sense of our historical situation, it will help to do some grappling with the classics.

Knowledge of Greek and Roman literature is, moreover, important to appreciate fully the literature and culture of the

Christian West. Shakespeare is full of classical allusions, as are Dante, Spenser, and Milton, and a knowledge of Greek and Roman literature enhances our understanding and enjoyment of this later literature. Sometimes, the allusions are for comic effect, as when Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida* shows us the Homeric heroes sitting around discussing whether they will come off well when Homer writes his epic. Watching the changing interpretations of classical literature provides a window into the changes in the mentality of Western writers and thinkers. Tennyson's *Ulysses* describes an aging but very Victorian Odysseus who itches to go on another voyage, for "'tis not too late to seek a newer world." His poem tells us a great deal about Tennyson and his age but very little about Homer's Odysseus, who was not a restless adventurer but a displaced homebody. W.H. Auden's haunting poem *Achilles' Shield* uses a Homeric motif to explore the horrors of modern war and totalitarianism. A reader with no knowledge of Homer will miss most of the point of these poems.

Of course, students can gain general knowledge of the stories of ancient Greece and Rome by reading adaptations and summaries. For many students, this kind of exposure will be sufficient, and far safer than detailed treatment of the works themselves. As James Jordan has said, pagan literature "can be a kind of intellectual pornography, since the sinful mind of man quite naturally resonates to the themes in Greek and Roman literature."

On Reading Homer

I have argued that it is permissible for Christians to study ancient pagan literature, provided it is done within a sound biblical framework and is intended to equip the student to serve God more faithfully. This, of course, raises questions about how it is to be done. Like many things, the best way to explain how to read is to offer a reading, and thus *Heroes of the City of Man* as a whole provides my fuller answer to these questions, but here I will make some sketchy introductory comments.

PAGAN GENESIS:

Hesiod, *Theogony*

According to the Greek historian Herodotus, Homer and Hesiod, both poets of the eighth-century B.C., were “the men who created the theogony of the Greeks and gave the gods their names, and described their forms.” A “theogony,” according to the definition of M. L. West, is a literary work dealing with “the origin of the world and the gods, and the events which led to the establishment of the present order.” By this definition, we can see that Hesiod’s epic poem covers much of the same ground as the book of Genesis. Both books tell about the origins of the world, the establishment of the present order in heaven and earth, and the arrangement of human life and civilization. One of the key questions that we will examine throughout the chapter is how Hesiod matches up, or fails to match up, to Genesis.

West’s definition helps us to see the unity of Hesiod’s poem, which sometimes seems little more than a list of names. In essence, Hesiod is telling two parallel stories. In the first story, he describes the origin of the gods in the form of a genealogy. Genealogies were important in the ancient world, and there are several lengthy genealogical passages in the Bible (Gen. 10; 1 Chr. 1–9). *Theogony* traces several sets of descendants, beginning with the original four “gods”—Chaos or Chasm, Earth, Eros, and Tartarus—and climaxing with the Olympians, especially Zeus (whose name is a form of the word for god), along with his siblings, wives, and children. Because many of these gods double as

places or things, the genealogy of the gods is also a record of the origin of the visible universe. The other story is known as a “succession myth,” because it describes how the leader of each generation of gods is overthrown and succeeded by one of his sons. The succession of chief gods also climaxes with Zeus, and the *Theogony* is largely about his rise to prominence and his success in defending his position. For Hesiod, the triumph of Zeus and the Olympians is a triumph of truth, justice, and the Greek way.

One of Hesiod’s techniques for arranging his poem is the ring or concentric construction, which I have described in the introduction to epic literature above. M.L. West has discovered a number of specific passages in Hesiod that are arranged in this manner. At the end of the first section of the prologue or *prooimion*, Hesiod refers to the Muses as those “who with their singing delight the great mind of Zeus father in Olympus” (p. 4).¹ Several lines follow that describe the content of the Muses’s song, and the poet concludes by saying that “they sing of the family of men and of powerful Giants to delight the mind of Zeus in Olympus” (p. 4). Thus, these lines form a unit that begins and ends with references to the Muses’ song that delights Zeus. A more complete ring is found in the description of Zeus’s battle with the Titans:

- A. The Hundred-Handers, allies of Zeus
 - B. The Titans and their prison
 - C. The roots of earth and sea
 - C. The sources of earth, sea, sky, Tartarus
 - B. The Titans and their prison
- A. The Hundred-Handers

After the second A section, a new episode begins, involving a war between Zeus and Typhoeus.

¹ I am using the translation of M.L. West in *Theogony & Works and Days*, World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Unfortunately, this edition does not have usable line numbers, so I have been forced to cite the text by page number.

On a larger scale, P. Walcott has pointed out that the poem includes five long stories, usually separated by genealogies or descriptive passages:

Prooimion (Prologue)

Earth and first generation of gods

First story: Kronos overthrows Heaven

Descendants of Night, Pontos, and others

Second story: Zeus overthrows Kronos

Sons of Iapetos

Third story: Prometheus

Fourth story: Zeus v. Titans

Description of Tartarus

Fifth story: Zeus v. Typhoeus

Zeus established as king

Marriages of Zeus

If we focus on the stories, several structural features of the poem become clearer. First, the stories have an obvious progression, beginning with Zeus's family history, then describing his rise to preeminence, and finally recounting the battles in which he successfully defends and consolidates his power. After these triumphs, Zeus enters his rest by contracting a great number of marriages. Thus, the poem has a "comic" structure, giving a series of conflicts and threats and ending with Zeus distributing the spoils of battle, marrying dozens of wives, and living happily ever after.

Second, from one perspective, the stories are arranged according to an A-A-B-C-C pattern. The first and second stories are closely parallel, since in both a god overthrows his father and seizes power. Stories four and five are similar in that each describes one of the wars of Zeus, and similar details are repeated. To combat the Titans, Zeus enlists the aid of giants with "a hundred arms" springing "from the shoulders—unshapen hulks—and fifty heads grew from the shoulders of each of them" (p. 7; cf. p. 24), while Typhoeus has "a hundred fearsome snake-heads with black tongues flickering" coming "out of his shoulders"

(p. 27). Descriptions of the two battles are also very similar. When Zeus fights the Titans, “long Olympus was shaken to its foundations by the onrush of the immortals; the heavy tremors of their feet reached misty Tartarus” (p. 23), and when he battles Typhoeus, “great Olympus quaked under the immortal feet of the lord as he went forth, and the earth groaned beneath him” (p. 28). The central story of the five, concerning Prometheus, is, significantly, the one most directly concerned with human life, which is Hesiod’s focus in his *Works and Days*.

From another angle, the five stories are arranged concentrically:

- A. Triumph of children of Earth (Kronos)
 - B. Triumph of children of Kronos (Zeus)
 - C. Zeus and Prometheus
 - B. Triumph of Zeus over brothers of Kronos (Titans)
- A. Triumph of Zeus over child of Earth (Typhoeus)

In the discussion below, I do not follow the order of Hesiod’s poem. Instead, after a discussion of the *prooimion*, I consider stories 1–2 and 3–4 (Zeus’s origins, rise to power, and wars) and then close with a detailed look at the central story, that of Prometheus, which describes the origins of human civilization.

The Muses

The lengthy *prooimion* of the *Theogony* divides into two sections. Hesiod begins with an invocation of the “Muses of Helicon,” but the poem then moves into more strictly auto-biographical material that ends on page 4. In the following line, he again invokes the Muses and begins to describe their songs, origins, and functions. This second invocation of the Muse marks a second beginning.

In the first section, Hesiod tells his name and describes himself as a shepherd taught to sing by the Muses. Each of these details raises questions. First, the name *Hesiodos* means “one who emits a voice.” Scholars have found no other examples of Greeks named Hesiod, and a number have suggested that the poet is employing a fictitious name that symbolizes his status as a poet. Second, when the Muses come to teach him to sing he is “tending his lambs below holy Helicon” (p. 3). Yet, the autobiographical section comes to an abrupt end with, “But what is my business round tree and rock?” Hesiod is apparently mocking the poetic devices he has been using to this point in the poem, as if to say “I am no shepherd. I have nothing to do with a pastoral landscape. I’m just pretending to be a shepherd because that is what poets are supposed to do.”

When the Muses appear, they hardly speak with the melodious voices that we expect and do not even promise to tell the truth:

Shepherds that camp in the wild, disgraces, merest bellies:
we know to tell many lies that sound like truth,
but we know to sing reality, when we will. (p. 3)

The Muses give Hesiod a “branch of springing bay to pluck for a staff” and “breathed into me wondrous voice.” These gifts, he says, equip him to “celebrate things of the future and things that were aforesaid,” especially concerning the gods and the Muses themselves (pp. 3–4). The staff is a mark of authority, and Hesiod’s initiation as a poet has overtones of investiture as a priest or a prophet. Like Moses on the mount of Yahweh, Hesiod claims that he has been visited by gods and become their mouthpiece.

But what kinds of gods are these? If Hesiod is inspired by Muses who tell lies, is he warning us that we should not really trust what he says? Perhaps Hesiod’s intention is to say something about the nature of poetry and of all art. No poetry or art can perfectly and exhaustively depict the world. Poets are always selective, and no painter can capture *every* detail of a scene on canvas. When we add to that the fact that all art employs “tricks”

to make the artistic product seem real, it is possible to see why Hesiod's Muses could boast of their ability to "lie." Perhaps the Muses also mean to suggest that it is through these "lies" and tricks that poetry communicates truth. A deeper point emerges here as well, one that is crucial for understanding Greek religion and culture as a whole. Poetry is a gift of the gods, and such gifts are prominent throughout the *Theogony*. Especially in the Prometheus story, relations between gods and men involve giving and withdrawal of gifts, but the Prometheus story indicates that all divine gifts are, like the poetry of the Muses, ambiguous. They both deceive and tell the truth, and they bring both good and evil. Divine gifts, for the ancient Greek, are to be received not with thanksgiving but with a degree of suspicion. This is precisely the serpent's line of temptation to Eve. God, he tells her, commanded her not to eat from the tree of knowledge because He knew that "in the day you eat from it . . . you will be like God" (Gen. 3:5). Before Eve noticed that the fruit was good, she had already, sinfully, begun to distrust God's goodness.

Though the first section leaves a number of ambiguities, already Hesiod announces that the major theme of his own song will be—like the song of the Muses—Zeus and "the rest of the holy family of immortals who are for ever" (p. 3). In these lines, the list of gods runs from Zeus to "Night," which is the opposite of the genealogy of the gods later in the poem. By starting with Zeus in this first "genealogy," Hesiod shows that the king of the gods is his central concern. Though chronologically last, Zeus is the "source" and goal of the gods. This focus is evident also in the second section of the *prooimion*, where Hesiod mentions the two main themes of the Muses' song:

They celebrate first in their song the august family of gods, from the beginning, those whom Earth and broad Heaven begot, and the gods that were born from them, givers of blessings. Second they sing of Zeus, father of gods and men, how far the highest of the gods he is, and the greatest in power. And again they sing of the family of men and of powerful Giants. (p. 4)