

Hesiod

THE FIVE AGES

Hesiod proceeds to expound another myth that deals with the present miserable state of humanity, the story of the five ages. It could have been otherwise, he said at the beginning of the tale of Prometheus and Pandora; in the golden age, it was—the earth yielded its crops without men having to do a hand's turn. But the golden age was succeeded by the silver, the bronze, and the iron ages, each worse than the one before. Our age, the iron, is the worst of all, and will get worse still. This myth of human regress, expressed in terms of metallic ages, has many parallels in the lore of the Middle East. The same four metals turn up in a Persian myth; and in the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian conqueror of Jerusalem, dreams of an image with a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of brass, and feet part iron and part clay. The prophet Daniel interprets it as a succession of kingdoms, each inferior to its predecessor.

Hesiod's version, however, interrupts the process of steady degeneration by inserting a non-metallic age just before the arrival of the iron age in which we now live. It is the age of the "divine race of heroes" who fought at seven-gated Thebes and at Troy; and although some died in battle, others were settled by Zeus in the islands of the blessed, where crops ripen three times a year. Hesiod interrupts the downhill sequence with this glamorous vision because the Greeks all believed that there was a great heroic age (a memory, perhaps, of Mycenaean civilization) immediately preceding the miserable age they now lived in, and so it had to be inserted, even though it is not associated with a metal and does not fit the pattern of the story. What it does, though, is to intensify the wretch-

edness of humanity's present state, a relapse into degeneration after a glorious break with the relentless decline from the golden age.

At first the immortals who dwell on Olympos created a golden race of mortal men.

That was when Kronos was king of the sky, and they lived like gods, carefree in their hearts, shielded from pain and misery. Helpless old age did not exist, and with limbs of unsagging vigor they enjoyed the delights of feasts, out of evil's reach.

A sleeplike death subdued them, and every good thing was theirs; the barley-giving earth asked for no toil to bring forth a rich and plentiful harvest. They knew no constraint and lived in peace and abundance as lords of their lands, rich in flocks and dear to the blessed gods.

But the earth covered this race, and they became holy spirits that haunt it, benign protectors of mortals that drive harm away and keep a watchful eye over lawsuits and wicked deeds, swathed in misty veils as they wander over the earth.

They are givers of wealth by kingly prerogative.

The gods of Olympos made a second race—a much worse one—this time of silver, unlike the golden one in thought or looks.

For a hundred years they were nurtured by their prudent mothers as playful children—each a big baby in his house—but when they grew up and reached adolescence they lived only for a short while, plagued by the pains of foolishness. They could not refrain from reckless violence against one another and did not want to worship the gods and on holy altars perform sacrifices for them, as custom differing from place to place dictates.

In time Zeus, son of Kronos, was angered and buried them because they denied the blessed Olympians their due honors.

The earth covered this race, too;

they dwell under the ground and are called blessed mortals—they are second but, still, greatly honored.

Zeus the father made a third race of mortals,

this time of bronze, not at all like the silver one.

Fashioned from ash trees, they were dreadful and mighty and bent on the harsh deeds of war and violence;

1. Golden Age

2. Silver Age

3. Bronze Age

they ate no bread and their hearts were strong as steel.
 No one could come near them, for their strength was great
 and mighty arms grew from the shoulders of their sturdy bodies.
 Bronze were their weapons, bronze their homes
 and bronze was what they worked—there was no black iron then.
 With their hands they worked one another's destruction
 and they reached the dank home of cold Hades
 nameless. Black death claimed them for all their fierceness,
 and they left the bright sunlight behind them.
 But when the earth covered this race, too,
 Zeus, son of Kronos, made upon the nourishing land
 yet another race—the fourth one—better and more just.
 They were the divine race of heroes, who are called
 demigods; they preceded us on this boundless earth.
 Evil war and dreadful battle wiped them all out,
 some fighting over the flocks of Oidipous
 at seven-gated Thebes, in the land of Kadmos,
 others over the great gulf of the sea in ships
 that had sailed to Troy for the sake of lovely-haired Helen;
 there death threw his dark mantle over them.
 Yet others of them father Zeus, son of Kronos, settled at earth's
 ends,
 apart from men, and gave them shelter and food.
 They lived there with hearts unburdened by cares
 in the islands of the blessed, near stormy Okeanos,
 these blissful heroes for whom three times a year
 the barley-giving land brings forth full grain sweet as honey.
 I wish I were not counted among the fifth race of men,
 but rather had died before, or been born after it.
 This is the race of iron. Neither day nor night
 will give them rest as they waste away with toil
 and pain. Growing cares will be given them by the gods,
 and their lot will be a blend of good and bad.
 Zeus will destroy this race of mortals
 when children are born gray at the temples.
 Children will not resemble their fathers,
 and there will be no affection between guest and host
 and no love between friends or brothers as in the past.
 Sons and daughters will be quick to offend their aging parents
 and rebuke them and speak to them with rudeness
 and cruelty, not knowing about divine retribution;
 they will not even repay their parents for their keep—

4. Non-Metallic,
 Heroic.

5. Iron Age

these law-breakers—and they will sack one another's cities,
 The man who keeps his oath, or is just and good,
 will not be favored, but the evil-doers and scoundrels
 will be honored, for might will make right and shame will vanish.
 Base men will harm their betters with words
 that are crooked and then swear they are fair.
 And all toiling humanity will be blighted by envy,
 grim and strident envy that takes its joy in the ruin of others.
 Then Shame and Retribution will cover their fair bodies
 with white cloaks and, leaving men behind,
 will go to Olympos from the broad-pathed earth
 to be among the race of the immortals, while grief and pain
 will linger among men, whom harm will find defenseless.

Translated by Apostolos Athanasiadis