

## CHAPTER 3

### IN THE BEGINNING: HESIOD'S THEOGONY

#### MAIN POINTS

1. The conception of the universe reflected in Greek verse is not a scientific one but a mythic one, with sources in ancient Near Eastern myth models and commonsensical observations of the environment.
2. According to the Greeks, the earth is a flat, circular disc with mountains touching the bowl of the sky; the land is surrounded by ocean, and below lies the Underworld, the land of the dead.
3. This model of heaven, earth, and the Underworld is called a cosmos. The subject of Hesiod's Theogony (the origin of the gods) is both a cosmogony (story of origin of the universe) and a cosmology (story of the nature and purpose of the universe).
4. Hesiod begins with Chaos and then tells of Gaea, Tartarus, and Eros springing into existence independently. A primary focus of the Theogony is divine genealogy. In this creation myth, Eros (love) is the driving force of creation in the universe.
5. Hesiod describes the cosmos as permeated by conflict. Hesiod's interest in conflict may have an autobiographical origin in a life of poverty and hard work and conflicts with his brother.
6. Hesiod ascribed the origin of his inspiration to the Muses, the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne.
7. Myth-based Greek literature reflects a sophisticated and complex view of a world filled with paradox.
8. During the fourth millennium B.C., a Semitic people called the Sumerians created a stunning, civilized world in the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, which the Greeks called "Mesopotamia." Not only did they build the first true cities, but they created a writing system and even used it to record literature—including the Epic of Gilgamesh.
9. Among the architectural achievements of the Sumerians was the ziggurat form—a massive many-tiered construction that included, at its pinnacle, a tiny sanctuary where a deity could reside.
10. The Sumerian ziggurat, the Tower of Babel from the Hebrew Bible, Jacob's dream ladder from the same book, and perhaps even the numinous mountains of Greece like Parnassus offered a place where (at least some) humans could rise to meet the gods as they descended to visit the earth.
11. Mesopotamian influence on Greek myth is pervasive and strong. In both myth systems, (1) the three-story universe is vertically structured; (2) the gods belong to generations that often quarrel among themselves; (3) gods are not eternal and are always liable to be driven out by other powerful gods; and (4) the hero is strong and ambitious and experiences a tension between his own limitations and the power of the gods.
12. Zeus's exploits as related in Theogony probably were based on the adventures of young Marduk in the Babylonian creation account Enuma Elish. Marduk killed the gods of the previous generation and became the new king.
13. Gilgamesh is the essential hero: he defends his city against its enemies and makes a journey in search of immortality.

14. In the Genesis account, a single deity only speaks and thereby creates an ordered universe out of watery confusion. In Theogony, the many deities are really only elements in a spontaneous evolution.
15. Zeus is the grandson of Gaea and her firstborn son, Uranus. Gaea's and Uranus's children are the Titans, including Cronus and Rhea, Zeus's parents.

NOTE: The myths about several generations of gods succeeding each other, often through combat, is common to many myth systems. The Norse god Odin is a third generation god; the Babylonian god Marduk rules after defeating the forces of his mother Tiamat in battle.

16. The castration of Uranus: Gaea resents Uranus for not allowing her to give birth to the children she is carrying. With a sickle made by Gaea, her son Cronus severs his father's genitals and throws them into the sea.
17. This act of separating earth and sky has a paradoxical effect, producing the spirits of violence and love. From the phallic blood spilled onto the earth, a race of giants is created, along with the Furies, female spirits of vengeance. The phallus itself, mixing with semen and foam, is transformed into Aphrodite rising from the sea.
18. The ambiguity of the story: it brings Zeus closer to preeminence among the gods, but it also introduces hatred and revenge. Also, the act of love can inspire acts of violent aggression along with joy and beauty. The fact that Aphrodite appears prior to Zeus and the Olympians implies the love goddess's primacy, in time and in significance.
19. Cronus attempts to avoid Uranus's fate by devouring his children.

NOTE: Many scholars have traditionally assumed that just as the name Uranus has a literal meaning ("starry sky"), so does the name Cronus (Kronos), since it is similar to the Greek word for "time," chronos. This has led to the famous symbolic interpretation that Time devours his children—i.e., all children born of time (including human beings) will, in the end, be devoured by time and die. However, other scholars believe that there is no etymological justification for this interpretation.

20. The separation of earth and sky is a theme common to many mythologies. In Egyptian mythology, Nut (sky) is separated from Geb (earth) by their father Shu (air).
21. The tale of a god whose body is mutilated and then used to form parts of the physical universe is a common theme. The Babylonian god Marduk cuts Tiamat's body into two sections, to form earth and sky. In Norse myth, the gods slay Ymir, a frost giant, and make earth, oceans, and sky from his body. In Chinese myth, it is Pangu whose body is the substance from which the world is created.

NOTE: Another example: the Aztec gods Tezcatlipoca and Quetzlcoatl also form the world from the body of a dismembered goddess.

22. Approaches to the castration myth from several theories of myth:
  - a. a feminist interpretation: a remnant of a matriarchal rite where the primal goddess's consort was killed and perhaps eaten as part of a fertility ritual
  - b. an etiological theory: an explanation of the psychological affinity between love and hate, of the division between masculine and feminine principles, and of why the "starry sky" is remote
  - c. a Freudian theory: a domestic psychodrama between father, son, and mother
23. The birth of Athene: Zeus marries his first wife, Metis. Worried that he may have a child strong enough to overthrow him, Zeus swallows the pregnant Metis; by assimilating her, he is able to give birth to Athene.
24. Athene combines in herself the wisdom of Metis and the power of Zeus. Lacking either of those qualities, Zeus would have found himself vulnerable. Thus, Athene is always depicted mythologically as the strongest support of Zeus's power.

25. Hera, Zeus's sister and last wife, is a contentious partner who often challenges her husband's decisions. Her emphatic assertiveness may reflect conditions before the introduction of Zeus-worship to Greece, when Hera was a powerful independent deity.
26. Hera gives birth (without male assistance) to Hephaestus, who becomes his mother's political support.
27. The last threat to Zeus's power was from Typhoeus, monstrous offspring of Gaea, who represents the feminine principle. The dragonlike Typhoeus may be a perversion, reflecting patriarchal fear and disgust, of the Great Goddess's wise serpent.

NOTE: The same theory of patriarchal perversion has been advanced in connection with the model for the story of Zeus and the monster, the Babylonian story of Marduk defeating Tiamat. The giant snake-monster Tiamat is herself female and a creator-goddess in the original story of Enuma Elish, thus bringing the theme closer to its supposed origin of the snake-monster in an ancient goddess religion. See Chapter 4.

28. The battle between Zeus and Typhoeus may contain a faint memory of a geological catastrophe such as a volcanic eruption.
29. Support for the theory: one etiological tradition states that Zeus defeated Typhoeus by burying him beneath Mount Etna, the largest and most active volcano in Europe.
30. Hesiod's worldview embraces paradox and apparent contradiction. Proliferation of life is also marked by acts of violence. Results of one action are often mixed: Aphrodite and the Furies are born as a consequence of Ouranos's castration.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Hesiod, Theogony

#### KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Gaea, the earth and the primordial mother

Eros, god of procreative love

Mnemosyne, a personification of memory

The Muses: Calliope (epic poetry), Clio (history), Polyhymnia (mime), Melpomene (tragedy), Thalia (comedy), Erato (lyric choral poetry), Euterpe (the flute), Terpsichore (light verse and dance), Urania (astronomy)

Uranus, firstborn son of Gaea

Titans, a race of giants born to Uranus and Gaea

Cronus, the Titan leader, Zeus's father

Rhea, Cronus's sister-wife, Zeus's mother

Aphrodite, goddess of love, beauty, and sexual desire

Athene, goddess of wisdom

Metis, Zeus's first wife, swallowed by Zeus

Hera, Zeus's sister and last wife

Hephaestus, Hera's son, disabled from birth or from an accident

Typhoeus, a reptilian monster, Gaea's youngest son with Tartarus; a monster/an abyss; defeated by Zeus in battle

Gilgamesh, hero of a Sumerian myth poem

Hades, brother of Zeus and ruler of the Underworld

Marduk, young god who achieves cosmic supremacy in the Babylonian creation account called Enuma Elish

Tiamat, personification of the salt sea, primordial dragon of chaos in Enuma Elish

**KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:**

Hesiod, Greek mythographer (eighth century B.C.)

Sumerians, a Semitic people who established an advanced civilization in Mesopotamia (ca. 3200 B.C.)

Babylonians, a Semitic people of Mesopotamia who have left an early creation account, Enuma Elish (ca. 1300 B.C.)