

CHAPTER 6
THE WORLD IN DECLINE:
ALIENATION OF THE HUMAN AND DIVINE

MAIN POINTS

1. The ambiguity of Hesiod's creation account also exists in his view of human history: with Zeus as the new leader of the gods, the universe is less chaotic, but humans are worse off than before.
2. When Prometheus steals fire from the gods and gives it to humans, Zeus, already angered by Prometheus's tricking him into accepting the inferior parts of the sacrifice, chains him to a mountain crag, where an eagle feasts on his liver.
3. While Hesiod describes Prometheus as a mere trouble-making trickster (an archetypal character), other versions of the myth show him as cultural hero and even as creator of the first human being.
4. In Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus suffers a terrible punishment after giving fire—a metaphor for all the arts of civilization—to miserable human beings.
5. To punish men for accepting Prometheus's gift, Zeus has Hephaestus make the first woman, Pandora. Before Pandora, men mingled with the gods; after her appearance, the gods withdraw from the world of mortals.
6. Here Hesiod emphasizes a connection between food, sacrifice, fire, cooking, and woman: the guilt of killing a fellow creature and the breaking of human ties to nature is compounded by cooking and eating the animal. As a result of this act, human ties to the gods are also broken: cooking and using the sacrificial ox as a medium of communication means that the gods will no longer dine with men but will only inhale the smoke of the sacrifice.
7. The Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions agree on seeing woman as the catalyst of humanity's historical decline.
8. Pandora opens a jar, her gift from Zeus, releasing all evils but retaining Hope. Her act ends the Golden Age. She serves the same mythic function as Eve in Genesis.
9. In Genesis, a serpent persuades Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, which gives knowledge of good and evil.
10. The forbidden fruit is the biblical counterpart of the Promethean fire: it represents enlightenment and cultural separation from nature.
11. In both the Bible and Greek myth, humanity pays a price for knowledge: loss of innocence, loss of peace, and loss of paradise.
12. Pandora may have been an earth goddess, the "Giver of All."
13. Other versions of the Pandora myth claim that the jar contains blessings, which she inadvertently lets out; only Hope is caught before it can escape.
14. A more positive view of woman's mythic role, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* tells of Enkidu, the savage male, who is civilized through a sexual relationship with a priestess of the goddess Ishtar.
15. Greek mythology is essentially male and typically views female intelligence as a threat to male security.
16. Hesiod saw the cosmos permeated with two forms of Strife: mindless aggression and healthy competition.

17. Hesiod's *Works and Days* divides human history into five ages, containing no account of man's creation.
18. During the first period, the Age of Gold, Cronus ruled the world. Humans lived in complete freedom and in company with the gods. Their bodies died after a long, vigorous life, but their spirits remained alive.
19. The Age of Silver, a lesser age, is characterized by opposites: people had a childhood of a hundred years, but died through violence soon after maturation. Zeus ordered their extinction because they refused to worship their creators.
20. During the Age of Bronze, men were created by Zeus from ash trees and pursued mindless, violent conflicts. In the end, they annihilated each other.

NOTE: The theme of the ash tree finds a parallel in Nordic mythology, which may have an ancient Indo-European root in common with Greek myth: the first man and woman are created from trees by Odin and his brothers, and in the middle of the world grows the world tree Yggdrasil, a mighty ash tree with roots in the Underworld and branches reaching to the home of the gods; humans live in the middle on its lower branches, in Midgaard.

21. The Age of Heroes: Probably inserted into an older tradition, this age has no corresponding metal and does not signify a steady decline. The great heroes of the siege of Troy and other battles live and die during this epoch; after death they are allowed to live in a remote paradise.
22. The biblical Book of Daniel has a similar account of four historical ages symbolized by a huge statue composed of four different metals.

NOTE: Other myth systems also include a succession of "ages," often ending in a present age of corruption that moves inexorably toward apocalypse. Aztec myth speaks of Five Worlds of earth, air, fire and water, followed by the present age; if this world is not kept in balance by continual sacrifice, it, too, will be destroyed. Norse myths tell of the present age ending in the cosmic conflagration of Ragnarok; afterward, a new world will be reborn, peopled by two humans who survive the destruction by clinging to the branches of the World Tree. Hindu myths speak of four gradually declining ages ending with the age of Kali, goddess of destruction. In all these stories, the themes of degeneration and apocalypse serve to characterize the real world of the mythmakers and their society as morally corrupt and to warn about the consequences.

23. The Age of Iron, the time of Hesiod himself, is brutal and harsh and will end when Zeus wipes out the present generation. The End is near when even newborns have gray hair and social order disappears.
24. Hesiod's view of history is apocalyptic: an end of the world, preceded by four mass extinctions. There is no way to escape the designs of Zeus.
25. The motif of the universal flood derives from Mesopotamian sources. Sumerian and Babylonian texts relate the gods' attempt to destroy humanity. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, as in the Genesis account and the Greek one that derives from it, the divine plan is foiled and human life continues.
26. Although not mentioned by Hesiod, the myth of the global flood is an important element in Greek mythology. Deucalion and Pyrrha survive the flood in an ark and, when the waters have subsided, repopulate the earth by throwing stones over their shoulders, which become men and women.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Hesiod, *Works and Days*

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Cronus, son of Uranus, father of Zeus

Prometheus, a Titan

Pandora, the first woman in the Greek tradition

Eve, the first woman in the Judeo-Christian tradition

Adam, the first man in the Judeo-Christian tradition

Yahweh, God of the Judeo-Christian tradition

Epimetheus, Prometheus's brother

Enkidu, the savage man, Gilgamesh's friend

Gilgamesh, the Sumerian king of Uruk

Ishtar, the Great Goddess of Sumerian tradition

Deucalion, Prometheus's son, survivor of the flood

Pyrrha, Deucalion's wife, survivor of the global flood

Hellen, eponymous ancestor of the Greeks

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Hesiod (eighth century B.C.)

Apollodorus (c. 140 B.C.)

Ovid (43 B.C.–A.D. 17)

Aeschylus, Greek tragic dramatist (525–456 B.C.)