

The War in Heaven

LESSON PLAN

OBJECTIVES

- To inhabit the Greek conception of the *cosmos*, its forces, powers, foundations, and its realms
- To come to terms with Zeus and the other Olympians as the principles of the ordered cosmos
- To apprehend man's place and participatory role in the on-going formation and evolution of the cosmos

SYMPOSIUM

As Charles Taylor has noted, we live in a disenchanted age, one where belief in the supernatural is uncommon and rare, out of fashion. The tendency of most modern readers as they approach Hesiod is to separate ourselves from him, from the world he lives in and beholds. These are but fanciful stories, stories we tell with a wink and a nod, never belief. They are quaint and clearly

untrue—not factual, but mythical. But a first encounter with Hesiod ought never to present him as telling etiological falsehoods. Imagine a lesson delivered in a place or time quite distant from us:

People in the twenty-first century believed in a myriad of physical “laws,” the results of forces that could only be fully expressed mathematically, but which were responsible for everything from the motion of the planets and galaxies to magnets and baseballs. They believed that everything was made up of extremely tiny bits of matter called “atoms,” and that these in turn were ultimately dependent upon infinitesimal vibrating “strings” that caused them to exist. The physical laws themselves were abstractions, and the mathematical expressions’ idealized conditions were never fully realized in the world. No one ever observed an ideal gas, a perfect circle, or an object in motion remaining forever in motion. They believed that the world was hurtling through the cosmos at tremendous speed, that the sun didn’t move, and that all bodies exerted a force they called gravity, with larger objects’ more powerful force overwhelming those of smaller objects. The teachings of their scientists included concepts such as dark matter, an infinitude of parallel universes, and spatial dimensions beyond the three we can experience.

Everything about the phrasing, from the past tense to the nebulous “they,” makes the tone condescending and the beliefs sound quaint, rhetorically creating a vast distance between the listener and the object of study. Intentionally or not, this is the exact effect such explanations have when we study the



Greeks, Medievals, or any other time and place. The problem, aside from historical snobbery, is that the Greeks did not conceive of themselves in this way, and though we might consider it a “factual” account of the Greek experience, the Greeks would surely object. The explanations would not ring true to the Greek experience. The Greeks didn’t “believe” that the universe was oriented according to an absolute up and down any more than anyone today would say that we “believe” in gravity. We *know* it. It just *is*. That’s the way the world works; that’s our unspoken, partially-understood but always believed-in basis for interpreting our world. Though very few could adequately articulate, explain or defend this understanding to a true skeptic, it is the foundation that we all implicitly assume, the lens through and by which we interpret, interact with, and understand the world. In reading Hesiod, then, we ought not to approach the gods as quaint and obviously false. The teacher needs to attempt to find and defend the *ratio* behind and within the vision of the cosmos Hesiod presents, to understand the text on its own terms is the goal of a charitable hermeneutic.

WARM-UP

Listen to Brahms’ orchestral arrangement of Schubert’s *An Schwager Kronos*. Alternatively, if you have time for a longer piece, play Holst’s *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age* for your students. In what sense might this be called poetry? Does the piece suggest order or chaos, serenity or dread? How does it do so—try to encourage the students not to offer interpretation but description: e.g. it sounds rushed or there are many notes that don’t seem to fit together. What effect does the dissonance produce in us? How does the dissonance make you feel? Is this consonant with Hesiod’s characterization of Kronos? Does the piece seem to depart from this conception of Kronos?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Why is Zeus so slow to seek help from Briareos, Cottus, and Gyes? Why does he wait ten years? Why aren’t they upset that they were made to wait so long?
2. Why do Briareos, Cottus, and Gyes agree to fight for Zeus, to do what they previously refused? Are they merely angry about having been imprisoned?
3. If we conceive of the gods not only as persons, but as personifications, what is the significance of their going to war? What are they fighting over, and for what do they fight? Does Zeus, for example, simply want more power, or is he after something else?
4. Why is night called “evil”? Are the gods inherently good or bad, or are they just what they are? Are lions good or evil? What about when they attack humans?
5. Who or what determines right and wrong, good and bad? What does it mean that the gods suffer punishment for perjuring themselves? What does it mean that they can punish one another?
6. Why is Aphrodite, the goddess of love, involved in the birth of Typhon, the last and greatest of the Titans?
7. In the beginning, the universe emerges from Chaos. Immortals, Titans, gods, and monsters continually rise up, clash, conquer, or die. What does this reveal of the nature of the cosmos? Is there a natural or resting state? Is the world ever done or is it constantly in a state of becoming?
8. Zeus continues to order creation, appointing realms and domains, assigning punishments and rewards, instituting sacrifices and rites. He also occasionally allows what he has done to be undone, as with Prometheus. If creation is ever an on-going process, then by what art is it directed? By what artist?

CONCLUSION

We mustn't distort the text to accommodate our predispositions, which often present *post hoc* rationalizations of unexplainable natural phenomena. We must guide our students away from the tendency to proceed from a hermeneutic of suspicion, which begins in opposition to the terms of the text, and toward the way a text conceives of and presents itself. The modern approaches Hesiod saying, "I know this to be untrue, and it must be read accordingly." So, the modern is wrong from the start. He thinks he knows more than Hesiod, but if he will submit himself to the text, he will discover that Hesiod knows infinitely more than he does. The classical teacher, then, ought not present Hesiod as an anthropologist does: at a critical distance and with an eye toward using myth for something, to explain how and why the Greeks were the way they were. We ought instead to approach the myths as upstream from the Greeks and Greek culture. The best way to do this is through what Ryan Wilson terms "hospitality," a charitable hermeneutic that consents to the grammar of the story. The classical teacher ought to defend the myths: if a student ridicules the idea that Memory mothered the Muses, or that Gaia birthed Famine and Plenty, he ought to defend those moments. Are famine and plenty not literally born from the land? Can any art be created without memory; is not making a form of instantiating something you hold in your mind's eye, in your memory? How could we object to this?

TEACHER'S TIPS

- In answer to questions three and four, we should temporarily set aside conceptions of Zeus as king or thunder-bearer, which is how he appears in other texts. We need to strive to see him as he appears in Hesiod. Outside knowledge can be helpful to students, but it can also be dangerous, leading them to ignore the text before them and see the character in their own image. In Hesiod, we find Zeus contextualized as one who, by arduous struggle and labor, becomes the principle of order among the harsh forces of the universe—chaos, ravaging time, night, ocean, sky, earth, and so on. He strives against these forces to establish measure, a proper place for things and beings, and fitting limits. He circumscribes them and imposes *nous* or mind: "hitherto shalt thou come, but no further." In this sense he is not fighting for man, but he is man's great benefactor, and man is the direct beneficiary of his agony or struggle. The father of gods and men may himself be a harsh master—never, according to Homer, pouring out unmixed blessings—but he is infinitely preferable to chaos. The monsters are, just as lions, features of the cosmos. They, like the proverbial scorpion, simply follow the dictates of their nature.
- Question five is an attempt to draw out the absolute morality that seems to be present in Greek thought. While the last sentence in the paragraph above might lead modern readers to assume that good and evil are relative depending on the nature considered, on whether one is the chimera or Bellerophon, Hesiod seems more comfortable consigning entire swaths of creation to simply being evil. It's not the case that the scorpion merely follows his nature and that it must be accepted, or even that, for the frog, it may be considered unfortunate. Good and evil, right and wrong, justice and wickedness are just as real and objective as light and dark, up and down. This, too, will be foreign to our students, whether they are religious or not. The goal in expositing these realities is not to encourage belief or consent to them in and of themselves, but to see that if we do not consent to the grammar of the myth we cannot enter into it in a meaningful way. They are standards exterior and superior to the gods themselves. Job cannot contend with God because there is no higher authority—if morality is arbitrary, then God is the arbiter. For Homer, even the gods are punished for the sin of adultery.

- The last two questions begin to get at the idea that the cosmos is constantly in a state of war or strife, and that order can be imposed, lost, reimposed, or discarded. For the Greeks, creation is not something completed from nothing in six days and beheld from a state of resting peace. It is an activity, an operating upon an eternally preexisting material reality, divine and ongoing, in which even we may participate. Tolkien and Lewis reflect this understanding of *poiesis* in their myths: Eru and Aslan sing worlds into being. What Tolkien recognizes as “subcreation,” the work of an artist in making his world, is for the Greeks no different from the works of the gods themselves.

FURTHER READING

- Percy, Walker. *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*. New York: Picador, 2000. In his essay “The Loss of the Creature,” Percy exhorts us to come into real contact with objects, locations, art, and all experiences free of expectations or preconceived notions that will tend to diminish or trivialize the encountered.
- Lewis, C S, and Walter Hooper. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014. In his essay “Myth Became Fact”, Lewis presents the idea that myth is not necessarily what we would commonly term fiction; rather, it is concrete or particularized presentation of some universal truth. He is comfortable, as Tolkien is in his famous *On Fairy Stories*, recognizing his Christian faith as “true myth.” As Rudolf Bultmann says, “we cannot use electric lights and radios, and in the event of illness avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder of the New Testament.” This does not present the Christian with an either/or dichotomy: Bultmann recognizes the New Testament as truth, and dwells in the wonder and miracle of it, not to the exclusion of modern scientific discovery, but exclusive of and contrary to the suppositions of the materialistic modern scientists who would view their understanding as dispositively precluding the Christian faith.
- Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) is an authoritative exposition of the disenchantment of the modern world. It is also 850 pages and difficult. His brief essay “Buffered and Porous Selves” introduces some of his analysis in a coherent and more readily accessible form. The essay discusses how mankind has become “buffered,” closing off the self to other selves and the world at large. “Porous” selves, by contrast, are open to the wonder of the other. The essay can be found here: <https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/>
- Wilson, Ryan. *How to Think like a Poet*. Menomonee Falls, WI: Wiseblood Books, 2019. Wilson discourses on *xenia* as the proper disposition towards poetry and art, which requires a certain humility and submission on the part of the beholder in order to rightly apprehend and appraise a given work. The book grew out of an essay, which you can find here: <https://www.dappledthings.org/nonfiction/7507/how-to-think-like-a-poet>



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Gods in the Image of Man

LESSON PLAN

OBJECTIVES

- Understand that Zeus is the principle of all good gods and that they are his issue, coming forth from him
- See the gods as they are in themselves, and as they relate to us and to one another
- Deepen our understanding of the mythic conception of the nature of divinity

SYMPOSIUM

Once again, we see the gods as ordering principles of the universe around us. It is not strange that we should conceive of these forces as personal. They are by turns capricious and fickle, cruel, harsh, kind, and benevolent. In some way, the representation of the god does not merely represent but truly is the god. The statue above the hearth *is* the household god. So too the sacred land, tree, animal or totem *is* the god. In this same mysterious way, the god even *is* the tribe, group, or people who identify with it—*esprit de corps*—the spirit of the body. Scientific thought, the system of thought typified by separation of self from nature and the things around us, reaches maturity in the scientific revolution—things and tools are not a part of or an extension of me, but external objects to be mastered and used by the separable and separate thing that I am. But our thoughts, our feelings, our very being, are intimately connected to the divinities. Madmen are said to be “touched,” and the brilliant, as well: Aristotle posits that no genius is without some admixture of madness. So in these hymns we begin to see that in a certain way, Aphrodite *is* love, coming over us and overwhelming us when we are in her power. In this sense, the divine and the human participated one with another.



WARM-UP

Read the students the story “Mercury and the Sculptor” from Aesop. Have them consider why the tale features Mercury in particular (the Latin name for Hermes), as opposed to any of the other gods.

Mercury had a great mind once to learn what credit he had in the world, and he knew no better way than to put on the shape of a man and take occasion to discourse the matter, as by the by, with a sculptor: so away he went to the house of a great master, where, among other curious figures, he saw several excellent pieces of the gods. The first he haggled over was a Jupiter, which would have been quite cheap. “Very well,” says Mercury, “and what’s the cost of that Juno there?” The carver priced that a little higher. The next figure was a Mercury, with his rod and his wings, and all the ensigns of his commission. “Why, this is as it should be,” says he, to himself: “for here am I in the quality of Jupiter’s messenger, and the patron of artisans, with all my trade about me: and now will this fellow ask me fifteen times as much for this as he did for the other.” And so he put it to him, what he valued that piece at. “Why truly,” says the sculptor, “you seem like a good fellow. If you give me my asking price for the other two, I shall throw that one into the bargain.”

Adapted from L’Estrange, 1692.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Gaia laid a “snare” and Hades actually seized Persephone, yet there is “no other of the deathless gods to blame but Zeus.” How can this be? Is it really true? What does this suggest about Zeus and his relationship to the other gods?
2. Hecate and Helios are both at their ease when Persephone is seized, and both hear her cries for help. At what time or hour does this take place? When does the sudden capture of Persephone transpire?
3. Do the Homeric Hymns present the same picture of Zeus that we see in Hesiod, or do their conceptions of him differ?
4. When Demeter is disguised as a mortal, does Callidice offer her sound advice? Would it have made a fool of Callidice if Demeter revealed herself?
5. How could fire have made Demophoön immortal? Assuming such a ritual were possible, what does this suggest about human nature?
6. Demeter manages to forget her sorrow during the time she cares for Demophoön. Is she punishing the earth with famine for his loss? For the loss of her daughter? What does she really want?
7. What ramifications follow from the fact that Hermes, the liar and trickster, invents music and musical instruments? What does this suggest about this and other of the Homeric Hymns? Does this agree with or differ from Hesiod’s song?
8. What manner of child is Hermes, who sings of his own begetting? Why is he born with the desire to taste flesh?
9. Why are Hestia, Artemis, and Athena unaffected by Aphrodite? Is it merely a matter of will or is something else at play? Why are the other gods not immune to her powers?
10. Love between immortals and mortals was taboo, wrong, and shameful. Why did Aphrodite tell Anchises to marry her honorably before she seduced him?
11. Hermes invents music, while Apollo is one of the patron gods of poetry and music: what does it mean for a god to be a patron of something that another god has created?

CONCLUSION

As moderns, we may have trouble conceiving of the world in this pre-scientific way. These ideas and practices sound like superstitious hokum or pagan animism. Even if we fail to recognize these very ways of thinking in ourselves, however, they do indeed still exist in us. Have you ever willed something to happen, and then it did? Who among us has never held a conversation with a dog? Many more have done so even with an object, or with our own reflection. Any time we shout out “*thank you!*” when the traffic light finally changes, the website finally loads properly when refreshed a sixth time, or we make it to the lavatory in the nick of time, we begin to engage with things and ideas as persons. We begin to interact with things and places as though they and we participate in some kind of mutually attainable, cooperative goal. Do you curse at objects when they displease you? Do you think of them as actually thwarting you? We even say “we won!” when our favorite team takes the championship, because in some way, we are part of a “we,” even though the players have never even seen us and do not even come from our home town. These thoughts and attitudes tacitly suggest that, as Thales has it, “all things are full of gods.” The world around us and the objects in it cooperate with us, and we participate in this, being ourselves objects in the universe. This attitude is not merely superstition; it is not even wrong. The goal in reading the Homeric Hymns, then, is not to see how we differ from the Greeks but to discover, if we read them carefully, subtly, and accurately, something about ourselves in and through the myths. To close one’s self off to the text is, among other things, to close oneself off to introspection.

TEACHER’S TIPS

- As the gloss on page 42 notes, “Hesiod made Typhon the last son of Kronos and Gaia, but the *Homeric Hymns* make Hera his mother.” It’s important here that in either case, Typhon cannot claim Zeus as his progenitor. Just as in chapter two, we reflected on Zeus as the architect of the cosmos (insofar as it is well-ordered), this chapter affords us opportunity to contemplate the Olympic deities as the out-workings of Zeus’s activity in the world. Much is made in popular culture of Zeus’s so-called dalliances and infidelities, and Hera is indeed a jealous wife, but it seems petty to label the father of gods and men a philanderer. The impulse is towards the sardonic: “there goes Zeus again—he just can’t help himself.” It diminishes Zeus to a comic character (as Aristotle says in *Poetics*, a comedic figure is one who is beneath us) who doesn’t control his roving eye and insatiable lust. His unions, however, are always fruitful—and what fruit! Apollo alone is justification for himself and for the deeds of his father—Sophocles is almost monotheistic in his veneration of him as “the god” in *Oedipus*. Zeus is abundantly more brimming with life than we. Good seeks to diffuse itself, as the medieval maxim goes, and Zeus is the greatest and most beneficent of all beings. Transcending time, Zeus calls gods both prior and posterior to himself forth to life. He is the youngest of Kronos’s children, reviving and giving rise to his antecedents and descendants.
- One answer to question five would seem to lie in conceiving of human nature as some admixture of the divine and the profane, or perhaps at least the mundane. If a child can be made immortal by fire, then it would seem to suggest that something in him is purified, that which Hopkins calls “whatever’s prized and passes of us, everything that’s fresh and fast flying of us.” Necessarily, then, it would seem to imply too that some other dross of our nature may be burned away. Indeed, as we shall see, the Greek hero offers us a vision of the divinity that can be achieved in man.
- Questions seven and eight harken back to questions one and two from chapter one, among others, and anticipate question one of chapter twenty-eight. These are difficult questions and bear no end of contemplation before we attempt to put a tidy bow around them and square them away. Don’t be

afraid to let your students leave the classroom without having come to a satisfying conclusion. The best questions about literature are those that, perhaps inevitably, only ever raise further questions. Instead of seeing this as a failure, an inability to answer a question, teachers ought to see that this only happens when students begin to converse, etymologically, to turn or dance with, a text. Far from a failure, it is evidence that students are sincerely engaging the text.

FURTHER READING

- Barfield, Owen. *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. Oxford, England: Barfield Press, 2011. Owen Barfield distinguishes between systems of thought that are characterized by what he terms participation and alpha thinking—roughly in line with the distinctions made in the symposium and conclusion to this chapter.
- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. New York: Touchstone, 1971. Buber teaches us how to engage with other people, places, things, and ideas in truly meaningful ways that transcend our sometimes solipsistic tendencies.

