

Would that I did not live among the fifth men: apocalyptic narratives in Greek literature

This paper identifies apocalyptic elements in early Greek literature and contextualizes this material within Greek reception of Near Eastern traditions and the broader Indo-European background. When read against these backdrops, Greek poets clearly attempt to distance themselves (and perhaps even their audiences) from blame during age-ending divine retribution, and even strive to displace the brunt of the apocalypse's environmental and humanitarian horrors onto non-Greek peoples.

A stated goal of ecocriticism is to uncover “a counter-history” of literary traditions that describe the “eco-social interrelationships of humans with the world around them” (Parham and Westling 2016: 9). The idea is that human responses to the physical world are “mediated by [their] social and literary creation of it” (Rudd 2007: 35), so by accessing that creation, we may reassess and rehabilitate our responses to what Edith Hall calls “a dying world” (2025); in other words, we may develop an ecological consciousness crucial to our survival (Hall 2025: 65). Indeed, some ecocritical scholars have identified an ecological consciousness in Greek epic but characterize it as both latent and just one of many embedded perspectives (e.g. Catenaccio and Hutchins 2024). Other scholars such as Hall contend that the environment is present in epic only to serve as yet another thing for humans to exploit, consume, and destroy (2025: 124). I believe these seemingly contrary views can be resolved in a contextual reading of Greek epic.

In this paper, I argue that while Greek epic does recognize that self-preservation relies upon stewardship of the land via the king's justice, a widespread Indo-European motif (West 2007: 422-424), it simultaneously represents suspension of the king's justice as a necessary action to purge the earth of evil-doers, ultimately in order to preserve both the earth and the

divine structure of the cosmos. The resulting wars reorder social relationships, casualties often abound, and the earth typically suffers damage, but afterwards a new age begins in accordance with Indo-European myth, and this age is not always worse than the preceding one; even then, in most respects, humans (and their inevitable cycle of damage) simply begin anew. Whereas in Near Eastern sources divine judgment is passed on the gods' *own* people and annihilation is total, however (e.g. *Atrahasis*; *Epic of Gilgamesh*), in Greek literature the worst of the retribution falls primarily upon *non-Greeks* (like Trojans or, even later, Atlanteans) or the retribution stands as merely a putative future threat, as Hesiod acknowledges in *Works and Days* (ll.174-180):

“Would that I were not then among the fifth men, but either dead earlier or born later...Zeus will destroy this race of men also.” Further, just as Babylonian divination practices prevent future threats from becoming reality in Near Eastern traditions (Katz 2021), so too does the epic poet's performance heal his Greek listeners from strife and unjust behavior through poetic reliance upon divine knowledge, thus deferring the age's end. Even then, though, the use of an internal audience like Hesiod's miscreant “brother” Perses serves to distance the blame for these events from the poet's external audience (Gonzalez 2018). In other words it is neither the end nor the fault of *Greeks*, even though they must form part of the blameworthy, misbehaving overpopulation which first initiated divine destruction along the lines of the Near Eastern source material (e.g. West 1997: 22-23). This situation is out of character within Indo-European myth as well, where the apocalypse directly affects whichever population is telling its story, be it in eddic tales of Norse Ragnarok or the wars of India's *Mahabharata*. Dishearteningly (but critically) for the ecologically conscious, a similar sense of exceptionalism often presents in modern wealthy nations' responses to environmental disasters, wherein the worst ravages of capitalism are displaced onto other countries and peoples, and the next age is imagined to be

constructed in space; meanwhile, consumers are consoled that this occurs in the name of progress or moral triumph.

#### Works Cited

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