

## Melian Nymphs

Scholars widely assume that Hesiod alludes to an older tradition that human beings sprang from ash trees or their nymphs (West 1978, on *WD* 145-6, Most 1997, 109-110; Hardie 2000, 20; Yates 2004; Sistakou 2009, 253 n. 35): at *Theog.* 187, where the Meliae, like the Giants, are born from Gaia and Ouranos' blood, perhaps at *Theog.* 563, and at *WD* 145, where Zeus makes the Bronze Race from ash-trees.

However, there really is no evidence for such a tradition before Hesiod; it is an interpretation of Hesiod's text. Hesiod narrates how Zeus withdrew fire at *Theog.* 563-4,:

οὐκ ἐδίδου μελίησι πυρὸς μένος ἀκαμάτιο

θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποις οἳ ἐπὶ χθονὶ ναιετάουσιν

He was not giving the power of tireless fire to the ash-trees for the benefit of mortal men who live on the earth

Ancient commentators took μελίησι as a synonym for ἀνθρώποις, as the scholia show:

563b.) μελίησιν: ἀντὶ τοῦ μελιγενῆς ἢ ἀπό τινος Μελίας οὕτω καλουμένης νύμφης. ἄλλως. ἢ ὅτι ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἐκ Μελιῶν νυμφῶν ἐγεννῶντο οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἢ ὅτι γεννώμενοι ἐρρίπτοντο ὑπὸ ταῖς μελίαις, ἦτοι τοῖς δένδροις.

Ash-trees: instead of "ash-born" or from a certain nymph who was named this way, Melia. Or because in the beginning people were born from the Melian nymphs or because at birth they were cast under ash-trees, or simply trees.

We cannot know why ancient scholars preferred this interpretation instead of the simpler one that Zeus transmitted fire into trees (ash is an excellent firewood). The tradition of human origins from the nymphs need not have preceded this interpretation, however, since the ancient scholars could have inferred such a tradition from *WD* 145. There, Hesiod probably had Zeus make the bellicose Bronze Race from ash-wood because in

epic it is so closely associated with spears, or because they resemble the Giants, born along with the Meliai.

Only in ancient scholarship do ash-trees or their nymphs appear as the origin of humanity generally. Apollonius of Rhodes calls Talos "born of ash," but Talos is a survivor of the Bronze Race:

τὸν μὲν, χαλκείης μελιγενέων ἀνθρώπων  
ρίζης λοιπὸν ἔόντα μετ' ἀνδράσιν ἡμιθέοισιν (4.1641-2)

He, who remained among the demigod-heroes from the bronze root of  
the people born of ash

Palaephatus 35 says:

Καὶ τᾶλλα φαύλως εἶπον καὶ τὸ πρῶτον γένος ἀνθρώπων ἐκ μελιῶν  
γενέσθαι [φασίν]. ἐμοὶ δὲ δοκεῖ ἀμήχανον ἐκ ξύλων ἀνθρώπους  
γενέσθαι. ἀλλὰ Μέλιος τις ἐγένετο καὶ Μελίαι ἐκλήθησαν ἀπὸ  
τούτου, ὥσπερ Ἑλληνας ἀπὸ Ἑλλήνος καὶ Ἴωνες ἀπὸ Ἴωνος.  
ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνο μὲν ἐφθάρη τὸ γένος ὅλον, καὶ δὴ καὶ τὸ ὄνομα ἀπέσβη.  
σιδηρᾷ δὲ καὶ χαλκῇ γενεᾷ οὐδέποτε ἐγένετο, ἀλλ' ἐφλυαρήθη ταῦτα.

They said other stupid things and that the first race of human beings  
were born from ash-trees. To me it seems impossible that people came  
from trees. But there was someone named Melias and they were named  
Meliai from him, just like the Hellenes from Hellen and Ionians from  
Ion. But that entire clan perished, and the name was obliterated. There  
were never bronze and iron race, but this was invented nonsense.

The reference to the iron and bronze races demonstrates that "they" are Hesiod.

While the creation of humanity by Prometheus is found in authors from Plato to Pausanias and Lucian, in contexts that suggest that the story is widely known, the absence of the ash-tree tradition from literature offers an unusually strong argument from silence. References to a human origin from ash-trees are all learned. Homeric scholia include *Od.*

24. verse 13, κατ' ἀσφοδελὸν λειμῶνα] ἐν λειμῶνι τέ φησι τὰς ψυχὰς οἰκεῖν, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐκ μελιᾶν ("he says that they live in an asphodel meadow, since they were after all from ash-trees") and *Il.* 22.126-7a, bT (explaining Hector's references to speaking "from a tree or a rock") ἢ ἐπεὶ μελιηγενεῖς λέγονται οἱ πρώην ἄνδρες καὶ <λαοὶ> ἀπὸ τῶν λίθων Δευκαλίωνος ("or because primeval men are called 'ash-born' and *laoi* from Deucalion's stones"). Hesychius 693, μελίης καρπός· τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένος ("fruit of ash—the human race") is the strongest evidence for an independent tradition, and the lemma probably comes from a learned author who was alluding to this scholarly interpretation.

Hesiod did not allude to an earlier tradition in which humanity arose from ash-trees or their nymphs. Rather, this tradition, based on the interpretation of Hesiod, can be relevant for understanding later, learned authors, but not for Hesiod himself.

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