

# *Hesiod's Advice to a Would-Be Greek Seafarer*

Hesiod



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## **OVERVIEW**

Though the ancient Greeks were a maritime people, not all Greeks loved the sea. Here the great poet Hesiod, who lived during the 700s B.C., gives some sage advice to his brother Perses concerning the perils of sea voyages.

## **GUIDED READING**

As you read, consider the following: In the last paragraph, Hesiod gives his brother a series of warnings. For example, Hesiod says, “Do not put all your livelihood in hollow ships. . . .”

- How might this have at least two meanings?
  - Can you find other sentences that have at least two meanings?
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**I**f you are afflicted with the desire for uncomfortable travelling over the sea, then remember that the blasts of all the winds rage when the Pleiades flee before the mighty strength of Orion and set in the misty deep. At such a time, keep your boats no longer in the wine-dark sea, but be mindful to work the soil as I bid you. Drag up your boat on the land, and pack it tightly around with stones to withstand the damp force of the gusting winds, taking out the plug so that the rain of heaven may not rot it. Put all the fitted tackle in your home, folding carefully the sails of the ship that travels the deep. Hang the well-made tiller above the smoke of the fire.

You yourself wait for a journey till the proper season comes. Then pull your swift boat down to the water, and load in it a fitting cargo, that you may bring home profit, just as my father and yours, foolish Perses, did, as he sailed far over the sea in his dark ship, leaving Cume in Aeolis. He fled not from abundance, riches and wealth, but from the evil poverty which Zeus gives to men. He came to live near Helicon in a dreadful village, Ascra, which is harsh in winter and stifling in summer, never good.

And you, Perses, remember the proper season for all work, especially that concerned with sea-faring. Give your praises to small boats, but put your goods in a large one. The cargo is greater and the gain will be greater too, if the winds keep their evil blasts away. Whenever you turn your senseless heart to merchandising and wish to escape debts and joyless poverty, I, though not very skilled in sea-faring or in ships, will show you the measures of the loud-resounding sea. I have never sailed on the broad sea in a boat except to Euboea from Aulis, where once the Achaeans waited for the storm when they raised a

mighty host from holy Greece against Troy, fair in women. I was crossing over to Chalcis to the games of great-hearted Amfidamas....

The right season for mortals to sail is fifty days after the solstice, when the burdensome days of summer come to an end. At that time you will not wreck your ship, nor will the sea destroy the men, unless the Earth-Shaker Poseidon desires it or Zeus, king of the immortals, wishes to destroy them. For in the gods is the end of good and bad alike. The winds then are easy to judge and the sea is free from blame. In those days entrust your swift ship to the winds without worry, drag it into the sea, and, putting all your cargo on it, hasten to come back home again quickly. But do not wait for the time of the new wine and the harvest showers, the coming of winter and the terrible blasts of the North Wind which accompany the heavy autumnal rain of Zeus, stirring up the sea and making it difficult.

Spring is another time for mortals to sail. When the fig-leaf first appears on the branch as big as the mark that a crow makes in the ground, then the sea can be crossed. This is the spring time for sailing. But I do not praise it and it is not pleasant to my heart, for it is a time which is stolen. Hardly would you escape evil. But men do even this in the senselessness of their hearts, for money is dear to wretched men. It is horrible to die in the waves. I bid you take thought of all these things in your heart. Do not put all your livelihood in hollow ships, but leave more behind, putting less on board. Dreadful it is to meet misfortune in the waves of the sea; dreadful, too, if you put an over-heavy weight on your wagon, break your axle, and spoil your load. Keep to moderation. The right time is the best time.