



Prometheus Gives Fire to Man

Prometheus [pro-MEE-thee-uhs] was the greatest of that race of giants, the Titans, descended from Gaea [JEE-uh], Earth Goddess, and Uranus [YUR-an-uhs], Sky God. To please

Uranus, Prometheus created men out of clay (there were no women yet). He made these clay modelings look like gods, but he put into them bits and pieces of other creatures he had made already—the dog, the fox, the deer, the lion, the serpent, and the dove—so that this new creature, man, was a mixture of all these. These mixed traits were often at odds with each other, for courage might become rashness, caution might become timidity, and curiosity might be good or bad.

To balance out these different traits, men required education. So Prometheus, their father or big brother, so to speak, taught them many things. First of all, he taught them how to make crude tools and weapons out of stone and bone. But to go any further—beyond stone to the use of metals—he needed fire. Zeus [ZOOS] on his Olympian throne was the only one who had fire then, and he wanted to keep it for himself and his son, Hephaestus [hee-FES-tuhs], the blacksmith.

Zeus feared what men would do if they had fire. He had a low regard for them and really wanted to destroy them. There was always a chance of war between gods and men. Prometheus, the gentle giant, wanted to keep the peace, but as man's creator and benefactor, he knew his creature would never advance without fire. He decided he would steal a spark from the heavenly hearth on Olympus where the gods did their cooking. This he did secretly, catching a spark in the hollow of a fennel stalk (a plant used to flavor sauces), just walking out with it, as though it were a walking stick, and taking it down to earth.

Men's lives would never be the same again. Prometheus showed them how to make a hearth to hold the fire and then how to build huts around the hearth. So men began to come out of damp caves and dark holes in the ground and live in houses.

Then kind Prometheus taught them more: how to tame dogs, sheep,



Zeus = Jupiter, Jove

Hephaestus = Vulcan

Prometheus stole fire from Mt. Olympus to give to the race of men he created.

oxen, and horses, and how to plant seeds in the earth and raise crops—grains like wheat and rye and barley—to increase their food supply. He also taught them astronomy—all about the sun, moon, and stars—and how to gather plants and herbs for medicine to cure their ailments. Finally, he taught them how to write and how to figure arithmetic, which brought them very close to true civilization. But above all, he taught them how to live joyfully and with hope.

Zeus didn't like this. He had issued an order that the sacred element of fire should never be bestowed on mortals, and that any who disobeyed would be severely punished. Prometheus pleaded for the race of men, pointing out that the earth was getting colder, entering an Ice Age, and no longer radiating warmth as in the Age of Gold. Without fire, men would perish. But Zeus would not listen, and one day when he saw smoke rising from Arcadia in the heart of southern Greece, he knew that Prometheus had disobeyed. Outraged, he considered destroying the whole race of men, but on second thought he decided to punish the Titan alone. Prometheus, being a god, could not be killed, but he could still be made to suffer.

Zeus had two servants named Kratos [KRAY-tohs] (power, might) and Bia [BI-uh] (force). They were a pair of twin giants. He sent them to a forge in Mount Aetna (Sicily), the volcanic workshop of the blacksmith-god Hephaestus. The immortal blacksmith was compelled, much against his will, to forge the chain that would keep Prometheus bound.

Prometheus, whose name means "foresight" or "forethought", was well aware of his coming fate. He went to see his brother Epimetheus [ep-ee-MEE-thee-uhs] ("afterthought") and told him he was going on a long

journey, which he had for some time foreseen and was prepared to accept, though he hated to leave beautiful Arcady. He told Epimetheus to take good care of himself. Then Prometheus gave him a large sealed box and told him to guard it well. He also warned him not to accept any gifts from Zeus, man's foe.

He then, without resistance, went with Kratos, Bia, and Hephaestus to his place of punishment—a high narrow valley of icy rocks in the rugged mountains of the Caucasus, west of the Caspian Sea. Nothing living had ever grown there since the world was made. It was a place of terrible lightnings, gusty winds, and whirling snow. Here



Zeus ordered Prometheus bound to a rock as punishment for stealing fire.

Hephaestus, though he hated to do it—for he loved Prometheus for his goodness, as all the gods did, save Zeus alone—bound the Titan to a huge high rock and riveted the chains. Kratos and Bia taunted their victim, saying how with all his foresight he had failed to learn in time what it means to be

the friend of Man and the enemy of Zeus. Hephaestus, angry, told them to go away, which they did. He then told Prometheus exactly what was in store for him, how he would suffer from the heat and cold and terrible loneliness. And then Hephaestus sorrowfully limped away.

Prometheus, alone as no one has ever been alone since the creation of the world, had foreseen the price he'd have to pay for his generosity and kindness. He knew it wasn't really Zeus who was responsible for his suffering and pain. Zeus was only an agent of Fate, and Zeus in time must submit to Fate, too. Even the greatest gods have their limits.

And so Prometheus accepted his destiny and in this way achieved a kind of victory. He is, for all generations of readers, a legendary rebel against injustice.



Beyond the Myth

1. How does the Greek legend explain the different traits in human nature?
2. What are the different things people need to know to create a truly civilized culture?
3. Discuss other examples of how great people sometimes suffer for their good deeds. Cite some cases from history.

Identify:

Epimetheus	the blacksmith god
Prometheus	Kratos
Bia	

Define:

fennel	fate	benefactor
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Locate on a map:

Arcadia (Arcady)	Mount Aetna
Caucasus Mountains	Sicily