

Prometheus

You will remember that Zeus had not punished all the Titans after his victory over them. He had spared Prometheus and Epimetheus, for they had fought on his side. Prometheus, "the forethinker", realizing that Zeus would win, had persuaded his brother to join him in helping the Olympians. Prometheus was very clever, having learned all that Athene, the goddess of wisdom, could teach him of agriculture, astronomy, navigation, arithmetic, medicine, architecture and metal work. These arts he passed on to his favourite creature - man.

There are many stories about the origin of man. Some even say that Prometheus himself was man's creator, but in all of them, he appears as man's champion.

Some early stories about the creation tell that Gaea the Earth-Mother created both gods and men, and that she bore them spontaneously in Attica or in Boeotia long before the moon itself existed. She named the first man Alalcomeneus, "the guardian". He and his fellows lived in the Golden Age under Cronus, spending their days and evenings in eating the wild fruit and honey of the earth. After they had lived for many centuries, they all died in their sleep and became the genii or spirits of the countryside.

Then, the divinely made men of the Silver Age were created. They cultivated the land and made their own bread, but these men were not as happy as their predecessors. Because they did not worship the gods, Zeus, under whom they lived, destroyed them without mercy.

Another race of men followed in the Bronze Age - a race of heroes who ate the flesh of animals and fought among themselves with brazen weapons. But they, too, perished.

At last, the men of the Iron Age took their place and continued to wage war with weapons of steel.

Some stories relate that the gods ordered Prometheus and Epimetheus to create all the mortal creatures, animals and men, by moulding their yet unliving forms out of clay. Epimetheus, who was not as wise as his brother, began by equipping the beasts first. He worked so quickly and so heedlessly that he had distributed almost all the benefits of fur and claw and strength and swiftness before Prometheus could bestow any on man. Seeing man unprotected and naked, ingenious Prometheus made man stand tall, straight, and beautiful among the stooped creatures. From this time on, Prometheus was always on the lookout for opportunities of helping man.

One of these opportunities soon presented itself. Zeus was unhappy because both men and gods were sharing some of the pleasant groves and hunting grounds, and he decided to put man in his proper place by separating him from the gods. He called a great meeting in the Poppy Field in Sicyon and commanded Prometheus to arrange the ceremonies. One of the disputes to be settled was the argument over which parts of the sacrificed bull men should offer to the gods, and which parts they should keep for themselves to feast on. Prometheus saw his chance to trick Zeus and to help the mortals. While the savoury meat was being prepared and the whole company of gods and men was engaged in debate, Prometheus skinned the bull and cut up the joints of meat. He then took the unpalatable stomach case, and using it as a bag he filled it with the best meat and the sweetest juices of the bull. Next, he wrapped the bones and what remained in a thick layer of edible and mouth-watering fat. When the time came for the division of the sacrifice which was to establish the ritual forever, Prometheus placed the two parcels before Zeus and began to speak: "O Father Zeus, lord of the sky and the thunder, choose for yourself that portion of the sacrifice that most pleases you. Man will forever be contented with what remains". Zeus passed over the unwholesome-looking stomach, and greedily chose the fat portion. Too late, he discovered the deceit. "Son of Iapetus," he bellowed, "in your cunning you have tricked us in favour of these weak mortals."

They shall feel my thunder and my punishment. The price man will pay is to eat his meat raw, for I shall withhold what I was planning to give him as my gift at this assembly - the gift of fire." In a cloud of hollow thunder and red lightning, Zeus and the gods broke up the council, and left man to himself.

Nevertheless, Prometheus was determined to obtain fire for man; he could not endure the idea of man's eating his food raw. He knew too that fire would give man some of the advantages he had lost to the beasts when slow-witted Epimetheus was spilling out the gods' beneficences. Prometheus sped at once to his teacher Athena, and together they worked out a plan to steal the fire from Olympus. With the goddess' help, the Titan crept silently through a small side door into the deserted hall of the gods. There, in the middle of the floor, was the hearth-fire of the gods, with its thin plume of smoke drifting out through the roof-hole. Quickly Prometheus took the tongs, snatched up a live coal, and tucked it into the hollow neck of a giant fennel plant, plugging the end with moss. He was soon flying among the villages, distributing the fire from house to house.

The next morning when Zeus looked down from Olympus, he shook with rage to see columns of smoke lifting into the blue skies of Greece. He wanted to punish Prometheus for this second trick and at the same time to prove to himself and the other gods that he was as clever as this Titan. A scheme took shape in his immortal brain. He sent Hermes to fetch Prometheus so that the trickster could feel the Thunderer's power. "Son of Iapetus," said Zeus, "you are laughing because you have stolen my fire and made me look silly before both gods and men. Now, it is my turn to laugh. Man shall receive a gift from me, one they will rejoice in, but one that will cause them pain. As yet man has lived without woman. Now, he will have a mate." With a mountain-shaking laugh, Zeus commanded Hephaestus to form a maiden out of clay and water. The four winds gave her breath of life; Aphrodite gave her beauty and charm; Athena taught her household tasks and weaving. When the maiden, dressed in gold and decked with spring flowers, was ready to leave, Zeus called her to him and before all the gods named her Pandora, which means, "she who has all the gifts". Presenting her with a great earthenware jar of matchless design as her dowry, and giving her orders never to open the jar, Zeus sent Pandora in Hermes' care to Epimetheus to be his wife.

Prometheus foresaw disaster, and warned his brother not to accept Zeus' gift, but Pandora's beauty overcame the imprudent Epimetheus. Again, Prometheus warned him, and insisted that he never open the lid of the jar. Zeus overheard Prometheus and unable to control his wrath, cried out, "Chain him to the craggy rocks of Caucasus in the eastern end of the world, and let a vulture devour his liver every day. Every night let the liver grow again so that his pain will never stop." And it was done.

Epimetheus, left without the guidance of his wise brother, succumbed to Pandora's charm, and married her, accepting the jar as her dowry. In addition to the other gifts from the gods, Pandora had also received woman's curiosity, and it sprang to life within her when she looked at the sealed jar. What could be in it? Was it just an ordinary storage jar for wine or oil? These questions and others raced through her mind. But Epimetheus refused to let her tamper with the jar. One day, when her husband was out, Pandora gently pried the lid from its rim. She was surprised at how easily it moved. Suddenly, the jar opened wide, and amid screeching and fluttering out flew the most horrible winged creatures bearing the plagues that have ever since afflicted mankind: old age, war, sickness, vices, hatred, greed, and a thousand more. Fearing Epimetheus' anger, Pandora clamped down the lid, managing to capture within the jar one last flying thing: it was the spirit of hope that is ever man's refuge.