The Myth of Prometheus

Prometheus was a Titan from Greek myth. Born from the union of the Titan Iapetus and the Nymph Asia, he was one of four children born to the pair. The siblings of Prometheus included Menoeetius, Atlas and Epimetheus, all of them Titans. The name Prometheus means “foresight”; his brother’s name Epimetheus means “hindsight.”

Their father, Iapetus led the revolt against the Gods, and his children Menoeetius and Atlas joined with him. His other two sons, Prometheus and Epimetheus sided with the Gods. Menoeetius was killed during the revolt and Atlas was given the weight of the world to bear for his actions during the revolt.

According to the myths, a horrendous headache overcame Zeus and no healer of the realm was able to help the Lord of the Gods. Prometheus came to him and declared that he knew how to heal Zeus. Taking a rock from the ground, Prometheus proceeded to hit Zeus in the head with it. From out of Zeus’s head popped the Goddess Athena, and with her emergence Zeus’ headache disappeared.

Prometheus and Epimetheus journeyed to Earth from Olympus; they ventured to the Greek province of Boitia and made clay figures. Athena took the figures and breathed life into them. The figures that Prometheus had created became Man. The figures that his brother Epimetheus had created became the beasts.

Zeus was angered by the brothers’ actions; he forbade the pair from teaching Man the ways of civilization. Athena chose to cross Zeus and taught Prometheus so that he might teach Man.

For their actions, Zeus demanded a sacrifice from Man to the Gods to show that they were obedient and worshipful. Man went to Prometheus to inquire which parts belonged to Zeus and the Gods, and which parts belonged to Man. At Prometheus’s instructions, Man sacrificed an ox and placed the sacrifice into two bags. In the first bag, the bones were placed with the fat from the ox placed on top to conceal them. In the second bag the meat was placed with the intestines on top to conceal them as well. Prometheus called for Zeus to choose which portion of the sacrifice he and the other Gods demanded. Zeus chose the bag with the fat on top, giving the Gods the bones of the ox as their sacrifice.

Zeus was angered by the actions of Man and Prometheus. He forbade the Gods to give fire to Man. Prometheus was upset with Zeus’s proclamation and was determined to bring fire to Man. Zeus had guarded the entrance to Olympus. Athena told Prometheus about an unguarded back entrance to Olympus where he would be able to enter with ease.
Prometheus snuck into Olympus at night through the back entrance that Athena had told him of. He made his way to the Chariot of the Sun and lit a torch from the fires that burned there. Extinguishing the torch, Prometheus carried the still hot coals down the mountain in a pithy fennel stalk to prevent being seen. Upon reaching the lands of Men, Prometheus gave to them the coals, breaking Zeus’ order by giving fire to Man.

Zeus was extremely angered by Prometheus’ actions. He had not wanted fire to be given to Man. Zeus set out to make a trap for Prometheus. Zeus gathered the gifts of the Gods and created Pandora and her box. Into the box he placed all the horrors of the world. Pandora was sent to Prometheus as a gift from Zeus himself.

Prometheus saw the curse that Pandora and her box carried, he refused the gift, giving it instead to his brother Epimetheus who opened the box and released the chained horrors upon the world.

Zeus was personally affronted by Prometheus’s refusal of a gift from the Lord of the Gods himself. At Zeus’s order Prometheus was chained to a rock in the Caucasus Mountains where his torture was to be carried out. Every day a great Eagle would come to Prometheus and eat his liver, leaving only at nightfall when the liver would begin to grow back once more, only to repeat the process again the next day.

Throughout history, Prometheus has symbolized unyielding strength that resists oppression.


1) What knowledge was forbidden to man by Zeus? Why?

2) What might have motivated Prometheus to defy Zeus?

3) What was Prometheus’s punishment? What does it symbolize?