

Appendix: Prometheus Abridged

In Chapter 6 I make the case for the profound influence of the Greek Prometheus myth on the change in attitude towards Creation about the time of the Reformation. Readers may feel they know less about the myth itself than they would like, so I summarise it here.

Greek theogeny (how the gods came to be gods) is actually a story of dynastic struggle between generations of deities. But at its heart is a univocal idea of the world, for the gods' origin is in the same world, and from the same kinds of causes, as the origin of mankind. This means that the privileges and powers of gods, compared to the poverty and struggles of mankind, are somewhat fortuitous. This idea has a bearing on the role of Prometheus as some kind of champion of mankind against the gods. It means that reverence for the gods seems to have more to do with the fact that they hold the reins of government, rather than because of their intrinsic worthiness.

The story that follows is a simplified and composite one, based on several centuries of adaptations and retellings, which is my attempt to give the general "feel" of the Prometheus story, and how it became linked to Renaissance ideas of human autonomy.

The forerunner of the gods is Uranus (Ouranos), the heaven itself. His children are called Titans, who subsequently usurp his rule. The generation after that are the Olympians, led by Zeus, who fight against, and eventually conquer the Titans, consigning them to Tartarus (under the earth) and taking over the world. Being Greek mythology, and adapted from generation to generation, the family history is actually more complicated than that!

One complication is that Prometheus, descended from Titans, is still regarded as a Titan rather than an Olympian. But note that this makes him by nature equal to the Olympian gods – he just comes from the losing family in the struggle for power. Note also that his name implies "Forethought", and that of his dull brother, Epimetheus, signifies "Afterthought".

Maybe because of this forethought, Prometheus takes the side of the Olympians against his own kind, and actually helps secure their victory. Accordingly, Zeus spares him (and his brother) their kinsmen's fate, and assigns him the task of creating mankind. Nevertheless, you'll see that from the start, Prometheus has a "history" with Zeus – the latter has wiped out his family, and Prometheus himself has only survived by cunningly changing sides.

The role as mankind's originator is the basis for Renaissance Europeans' transference to him of the role of Adam. But that's to reach ahead of ourselves. The dull brother, Epimetheus, is responsible for handing out attributes to all the worlds' creatures, and as a result of imprudence has nothing left to give mankind in the way of claws, wings and so on. So Prometheus decides to make him walk upright, like the gods, and also gives him the divine gift of fire.

Not long after this, a meeting is called between the gods and man at Mecone, in order to decide who gets what when men sacrifice an animal. This, in fact, is an aetiological tale to explain why, in Greek sacrifices, the gods get the fat and bones, and the worshippers the rather more enjoyable remainder. Prometheus gets to organise the event and, presumably to get even with Zeus for his

family's defeat, wraps the bones of the sacrificial ox in a tasty piece of fat, and the best of the carcase in its unappetising stomach, and gets Zeus to choose his portion, setting a precedent for all time. Zeus is fooled into taking the fat and bones, and takes out his anger on mankind by withdrawing fire from them (and in some accounts, the very means of subsistence).

Prometheus, in the most famous bit of the cycle, then steals fire back from heaven for mankind out of compassion for his creation (and continuing spite against the Olympians). I should add that though the earliest source, Hesiod, presents Prometheus as a *"lowly trickster and semi-comic foil to Zeus's authority"*¹, in Aeschylus's later play *Prometheus Bound* he also teaches men *"all the civilizing arts, such as writing, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, metallurgy, architecture, and agriculture"*.²

Zeus punishes Prometheus by binding him to a rock and having an eagle devour his liver each day, only for it to regenerate, according to the Titan's immortality, each night. In fact, Zeus has another motive for this torture, in that Prometheus knows of a prophecy about a potential overthrower of Zeus's rule, whose name he refuses to reveal: the torture is intended to extract the name to secure his release. In the event, you'll be pleased to know that Zeus's alternative escape-route is eventually fulfilled when the centaur Chiron offers his life in return for that of Prometheus, and Herakles kills the marauding eagle.

Meanwhile, Zeus also extracts a penalty from man, by procuring the creation of a woman, Pandora (= every gift), and sending her to earth with a box of troubles, whose contents are unknown to her and which she is forbidden to open. Despite Prometheus's warnings (presumably between hepatectomies) not to accept any gifts from Zeus even if they have fluttering eyes, Epimetheus lodges her at his place, and as we all know curiosity overcomes her, she looks inside the jar, and all the troubles in the world are released.

In the earlier versions, foresight alone is left in the jar, preventing mankind from avoiding trouble and so adding to his woes; in the later versions, hope remains hiding under the rim as a kind of consolation.

In mediaeval times, the limited portions of the Prometheus cycle then available were used as an example, like Icarus, of those who reach too high and come a cropper – rather in the vein of the biblical Adam. As I have shown in chapter 6, this was slowly transformed into something more like its role in ancient Greece. So Prometheus became the benefactor of mankind, unjustly punished for bringing knowledge and self-sufficiency, against the malevolence and self-interest of the gods. In Renaissance Europe, of course, the target was not Zeus, the usurper of supreme power by force and intrigue, but the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of all things from nothing and author of life and love. That fact makes the use of the myth far more subversive.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prometheus_Bound#Departures_from_Hesiod (accessed 18/08/2016)

² *Ibid.*