

Topic Page: [Prometheus \(Greek deity\)](#)

Definition: **Prometheus** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

In Greek mythology, the fire-giver. He created the human race, provided them with reason and stole fire from the gods. For this theft, Zeus had him chained to a rock where an eagle consumed his liver for eternity. In some myths, he was rescued by Heracles.



Image from: [An anonymous artist sculpted this version of... in Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology](#)

Summary Article: **Prometheus (“Forethought”)**

From *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*

One of the TITANS, and the champion and benefactor of mankind, whose most important gift to mortals was that of fire. His myth first occurs in Hesiod, where he is the son of the Titan IAPETUS and the Oceanid Clymene, and the brother of EPIMETHEUS (“Afterthought”), ATLAS and MENOETIUS (1). When gods and men were about to share a meal at Mecone (later Sicyon), it was Prometheus’ task to divide up a great ox and set out two portions of food, one for the gods and one for mortals. He produced one portion consisting of succulent meats, unappealingly covered with the ox’s stomach, and another of the bones, dressed in a layer of rich and appetising fat. ZEUS was to choose

the gods’ portion, and although Hesiod defends the great god’s wisdom by saying that he was not deceived, nevertheless Zeus still chose the fat-covered bones. From that day forward, men always took the best meat from sacrifices for themselves and burned the bones for the gods.

Zeus was angry at this trick and he punished mankind by withholding from them the gift of fire. So Prometheus stole fire from heaven and carried it secretly down to earth in a fennel stalk (the white pith of which burns slowly and so makes it possible to carry fire from one place to another). Once again Zeus was full of wrath, so he decided to balance this blessing by giving men a bane to plague their lives. He had HEPHAESTUS fashion the first woman, PANDORA (Fig. 63), who was beautiful but deceitful, and would let loose sorrows and sickness throughout the world. Zeus sent her to Prometheus’ gullible brother Epimetheus, and he, charmed by this vision of loveliness, took her as his bride.

Zeus also punished Prometheus himself: he had him chained to a cliff in the Caucasian Mountains and sent an eagle, offspring of the monsters TYPHON and ECHIDNA, to prey on him. Every day the eagle tore out Prometheus’ liver, which every night grew whole again so that his torment might continue. Long ages passed before this daily agony ended, when Zeus’ son HERACLES, on his way to fetch the golden apples of the Hesperides, shot the eagle dead and released the Titan. Zeus allowed this to happen, pleased that this feat increased the fame and honour of his son, and he at last relinquished his long anger. He set the arrow in the stars as the constellation Sagitta (The Arrow). Prometheus rewarded Heracles by advising him that he would obtain the golden apples if he sent Atlas to fetch them, while he himself held up the sky. Heracles did as Prometheus suggested and accomplished his difficult Labour successfully.



Fig. 146. Hera and Prometheus.

The chaining of Prometheus is dramatised in the tragedy *Prometheus Bound*, traditionally said to be by Aeschylus, which was the first (and only extant) play in a Prometheus trilogy. Here Zeus is depicted as a brutal tyrant, and Prometheus, son of THEMIS/Gaia, has done more for mankind than simply bring them fire: he has stopped Zeus from wiping out the human race when he wished to do so, and has taught men many useful and civilising skills, including architecture, agriculture, writing, medicine, the domestication of animals, the use of ships, mining for metals, and divination. Chained to his crag by an unwilling Hephaestus, at the bidding of Cratos (Might) and BIA (Violence), he is comforted in his misery by a Chorus of OCEANIDS and by their father, OCEANUS. He is visited by IO, transformed into a cow by Zeus, and he predicts her future and his own eventual release by her descendant Heracles. HERMES arrives, demanding to be told a secret that the Titan knows, vital to Zeus' safety, but in vain, and Prometheus continues to cry heroic defiance at Zeus, fearless of his thunderbolts (1041–53):

*Let the twisted fork of lightning fire be flung
against me: let the high air be stirred
with thunderclaps and the convulsive fury
of the winds: let earth to the roots of her foundations*

*shake before the blasting storm: let it confound
the waves of the sea and the paths of the heavenly stars
in a wild turmoil, and let him raise
my body high and dash it whirling down
to murky Tartarus. He cannot make me die.*

At the end of the play Zeus hurls Prometheus down to TARTARUS, rock and all.

We know something of the second play, *Prometheus Freed*, from fragments. Heracles killed the eagle, and Prometheus was reconciled with Zeus and set free in exchange for an important secret told him by Themis: that the sea-goddess THETIS was destined to bear a son greater than his father. Zeus, who was at that time wooing Thetis, was thus saved from being overthrown by a mighty son, the very fate that he had inflicted on his own father, Cronus. Thetis was later married off to the mortal Peleus and the fruit of their union was Achilles, a son indeed greater than his father.

In later tradition Prometheus was sometimes said to have been not only the benefactor of the human race, but also its creator. "Prometheus moulded men out of earth and water", says Apollodoros (1.7.1); and although there is no reference to this story in our extant sources before the fourth century BC, it may well have been much older. When the traveller Pausanias visited Panopeus in Phocis, he saw two huge rocks, apparently smelling of human flesh, which were said to have been formed from the leftover clay after Prometheus had fashioned the human race (10.4.4).

But mankind originated from Prometheus in another sense too, for his son DEUCALION (1) married Pyrrha, the daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora, and when Zeus sent the Great Flood over the earth, Deucalion and Pyrrha were the sole survivors. On Prometheus' advice they built a large chest, stocked it with food, and lived safely in it until the rain ceased. As the only mortals left alive, it was then their task to repopulate an empty world. On Zeus' instructions, brought to them by Hermes, they picked up stones from the earth and threw them over their shoulders. Deucalion's stones were transformed into men and Pyrrha's into women. Thus, in one way or another, the human race owes its existence to Prometheus.

The Titan also plays a part in other myths. He (instead of Hephaestus) was occasionally said to have been the "midwife" who split Zeus' head with an axe so that he might give birth to ATHENA. He was also said to have released the Centaur CHEIRON from endless suffering when he was wounded by one of Heracles' arrows. The immortal Centaur, in agony, longed in vain to die, so Prometheus offered himself to Zeus to be made immortal in Cheiron's place, and the Centaur gratefully died. This story implausibly ignores the fact that Prometheus, being a Titan, was already immortal.

Prometheus attacked by the eagle, with Heracles rescuing him, occurs in ancient art as early as the seventh century BC, and it was the subject of one of the panels painted by Panaenus around Pheidias' great statue of Zeus at Olympia. Prometheus (Fig. 146) was worshipped in several places in the ancient world, including Athens where his cult was celebrated by a torch race, commemorating his gift of fire to man. The Church Fathers later saw his agonies as a mystical symbol of the Passion, and Tertullian even wrote of Christ as the "true Prometheus". As the suffering champion of mankind, hurling defiance at Zeus' thunderbolts, Prometheus has been of tremendous inspiration in the postclassical arts, where he

is often celebrated as a glorious symbol of the human spirit struggling against tyranny. His release in Shelley's verse drama *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) ushers in a golden age of love and beauty instead of hatred and oppression.

[Hesiod, *Theogony* 507–616, *Works and Days* 47–105; Apollodorus 1.2.3, 1.3.6, 1.7.1–2, 2.5.4, 2.5.11, 3.13.5; Pausanias 1.30.2, 2.19.5, 2.19.8, 5.11.6, 10.4.4; Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods* 5.

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