Prometheus in Greek Mythology

Prometheus was the Fire-Bringer and Benefactor of Mankind

By N.S. Gill, About.com

Prometheus is famous for a couple of seemingly unrelated stories: (1) the gift of fire to mankind and (2) being chained to a rock where every day an eagle came to eat his liver. There is a connection, however, and one that shows why Prometheus, the father of the Greek Noah, was called the benefactor of mankind.

Prometheus - Gift of Fire to Mankind

Zeus sent most of the Titans to Tartarus [see Hades' Realm] to punish them for fighting against him in the Titanomachy, but since second-generation Titan Prometheus had not sided with his aunts, uncles, and brother Atlas, Zeus spared him. Zeus then assigned Prometheus the task of forming man from water and earth, which Prometheus did, but in the process, became fonder of men than Zeus had anticipated. Zeus didn't share Prometheus' feelings and wanted to prevent men from having power, especially over fire. Prometheus cared more for man than for the wrath of the increasingly powerful and autocratic king of the gods, so he stole fire from Zeus' lightning, concealed it in a hollow stalk of fennel, and brought it to man. Prometheus also stole skills from Hephaestus and Athena to give to man.

Prometheus and the Form of Ritual Sacrifice

The next stage in Prometheus' career as benefactor of mankind came when Zeus and he were developing the ceremonial forms for animal sacrifice. The astute Prometheus devised a sure-fire way to help man. He divided the slaughtered animal parts into two packets. In one was the ox-meat and innards wrapped up in the stomach lining. In the other packet were the ox-bones wrapped up in its own rich fat. One would go to the gods and the other to the humans making the sacrifice. Prometheus presented Zeus with a choice between the two, and Zeus took the deceptively richer appearing: the fat-encased, but inedible bones.

Next time someone says "don't judge a book by its cover," you may find your mind wandering to this cautionary tale.

As a result of Prometheus' trick, for ever after, whenever man sacrificed to the gods, he would be able to feast on the meat, so long as he burned the bones as an offering for the gods.

Zeus Gets Back at Prometheus

Zeus reacted to these tricks by presenting man with a "gift," Pandora, the first woman. While Prometheus may have crafted man, woman was a different sort of creature. She came from the forge of Hephaestus, beautiful as a goddess and beguiling. Zeus presented her as a bride to Prometheus' brother Epimetheus. Prometheus had the gift of thinking ahead, but Epimetheus was only capable of afterthought, so Prometheus, expecting retribution for his audacity, had warned his brother against accepting gifts from Zeus.
Zeus gave the gods-crafted Pandora as bride to Epimetheus, along with a box that they were instructed to keep closed. Epimetheus was dazzled by Pandora and forgot the advice of his prescient brother.

**Pandora Opens the Box**

Unfortunately, one day while her husband Epimetheus was away, Pandora opened the box Zeus had given them along with the warning never to open it. When she opened it, Pandora unleashed all the evils now known to man. No longer could man loll about all day, but he would have to work and would succumb to illnesses.

**Prometheus Continues to Defy Zeus**

Prometheus was still not awed by the might of Zeus and continued to defy him, refusing to warn him of the dangers of the nymph Thetis (future mother of Achilles). Zeus had tried punishing Prometheus through his loved ones, but this time he decided to punish him more directly. He bade Hephaestus (or Hermes) chain Prometheus to Mount Caucasus where an eagle/vulture ate his ever-regenerating liver each day. This is the topic of Aeschylus' tragedy *Prometheus Bound* and many paintings.

Eventually Hercules rescued Prometheus, and Zeus and the Titan were reconciled.

1. Summarize the role of Prometheus, his defiance of Zeus, his punishments and eventual release.
2. Mary Shelley subtitled her book “A Modern Prometheus” referring to this myth. Who and what is she referring to?
   a. In her story, what character has the most resemblance to Prometheus?
   c. Fire is certain knowledge that the god Zeus doesn’t want the people to have. Why wouldn’t Zeus want humans to have it?
   d. What certain knowledge (akin to fire) could the gods not want humans to have and possibly punish them for in *Frankenstein*?
   e. Why would the gods not want humans to have this knowledge?