

Prometheus

Prometheus was a son of Iapetus by Clymene. He was a brother of Atlas, Menoetuis, and Epimetheus. He surpassed all in cunning and deceit. He held no awe for the gods, and he ridiculed Zeus, the leader of the gods.

Prometheus was the creator of man. When he and Epimetheus set out to make creatures to populate the earth under the orders of Zeus, Epimetheus went with quantity and made many creatures, endowing them with many gifts that were allotted for that purpose (fur, claws, wings, and fins were some of these gifts). While his brother was making creatures, Prometheus was carefully crafting a creature after the shape of the gods. It was a human. However, Prometheus took so long in crafting his masterpiece that when he was finished, Epimetheus had already used up all the gifts from Zeus. Prometheus was sorry for his creations, and watched as they shivered in the cold winter nights. He decided to steal fire from the gods after Zeus disagreed with his idea of helping the humans. He climbed Olympus and stole fire from the chariot of Helios (or, in later mythology, Apollo). He carried the fire back in the stalk of a fennel plant, which burns slowly and so was appropriate for this task. Thus mankind was warm. To appease Zeus, Prometheus told the humans to burn offerings to the gods. He killed a great bull for this purpose. When the gods smelled the offerings, Prometheus decided to play a trick

on the gods. The meat he hid beneath a layer of bone and sinew, whilst the bones he disguised with delicious-looking fat. He then offered Zeus his choice of “meat” for the gods to eat. Zeus picked the plate of bones, and Prometheus took the plate of meat for himself and the mortals. To punish Prometheus for this hubris (and all of mankind in the process), Zeus took fire away from the earth.

To get revenge on Prometheus for his continued offenses, Zeus had Hephaestus (Vulcan) make a woman made of clay named Pandora. Zeus brought her to life and sent her to Prometheus, along with a jar containing all the valuable presents she had received from the gods. Prometheus was suspicious and would have nothing to do with Pandora, claiming that she was foolish (lacking foresight), and she was sent on to Epimetheus, who married her.

Zeus was further enraged by Prometheus’s escape and had Prometheus carried to Mount Caucasus, where an eagle by the name of Ethon would eat out his liver; it would grow back each day and the eagle would eat it again. This punishment was to last 30,000 years. About 12 generations later, Heracles (known as Hercules in Roman mythology), passing by on his way to find the apples of the Hesperides as part of the Twelve Labours, freed Prometheus, in a bargain he had agreed with Zeus in exchange for Chiron’s immortality, by shooting the eagle with an arrow. Zeus did not mind this time that Prometheus had again evaded his punishment, as the act brought more glory to Heracles, who was Zeus’s son. Prometheus was invited to return to Olympus, though he still had to carry with him the rock that he was chained to.



Vulcan Chaining Prometheus, 1623
Dirck van Baburen of Utrecht brings to the myth the gritty realism of Caravaggio, as well as his theatrical lighting and perspective.
(Rijksmuseum)