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Sample Entry "Prometheus"

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This painting, known as Prometheus Carrying Fire, was created by the Flemish artist Jan Cossiers (1600–1671). Prometheus was punished by the gods for giving the gift of fire to humans.

Prometheus

Προμηθευς

PRONUNCIATION: proh-MEE-thee-uhs

GENDER: Male

CULTURE: Greek

ATTRIBUTES: Forethought; Creator of Man; Trickster

Prometheus was the god of forethought. He stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind. Zeus, the king of the gods, punished Prometheus. Because he was immortal, Prometheus had to endure his punishment over and over. He is associated with invention and the arts.

Long ago, when the world was still young, two immortal brothers were given the task of assigning gifts to every animal and human. These brothers were Prometheus, the cunning god of forethought, and Epimetheus, the foolish god of afterthought.

Epimetheus began by giving gifts to the animals. He did not think to divide the gifts evenly. To some animals he gave warm fur, to some he gave wings, and to some he gave tremendous speed. Before Prometheus had a chance to pick a gift for humans, Epimetheus had given nearly all of the gifts away.

Prometheus had almost nothing left to give mankind. In the end, humans were given a single gift: a reasonable mind. Prometheus's humans could think for themselves, but they had no fur to keep them warm, nor long legs to help them run fast. The only thing they had to defend themselves with was fire.

A Trick

The children of Cronus, led by Zeus, rose up against their father and the other Titans. Prometheus, the god of forethought, knew Zeus' side would win. Because of this, Prometheus sided with Zeus. When the war was over, the Titans were defeated. Zeus and his siblings became the Olympian gods. They held a feast to celebrate their

victory. Zeus asked Prometheus to kill an ox and divide the meat into two equal portions: one for mankind and one for the gods.

Prometheus, who was sneaky and cunning, decided to play a trick on Zeus. He took all of the best meat and stuffed it inside the ox's stomach. The bulging stomach did not look very appetizing. Prometheus then took the bones and entrails of the ox and covered them in fat. Prometheus then presented the two shares of meat to Zeus, and told him to choose whichever looked better to him. Zeus did not like the look of the ox's stomach, but the white fat made his mouth water. Zeus chose the second pile, and was enraged to discover that it consisted mostly of bones.

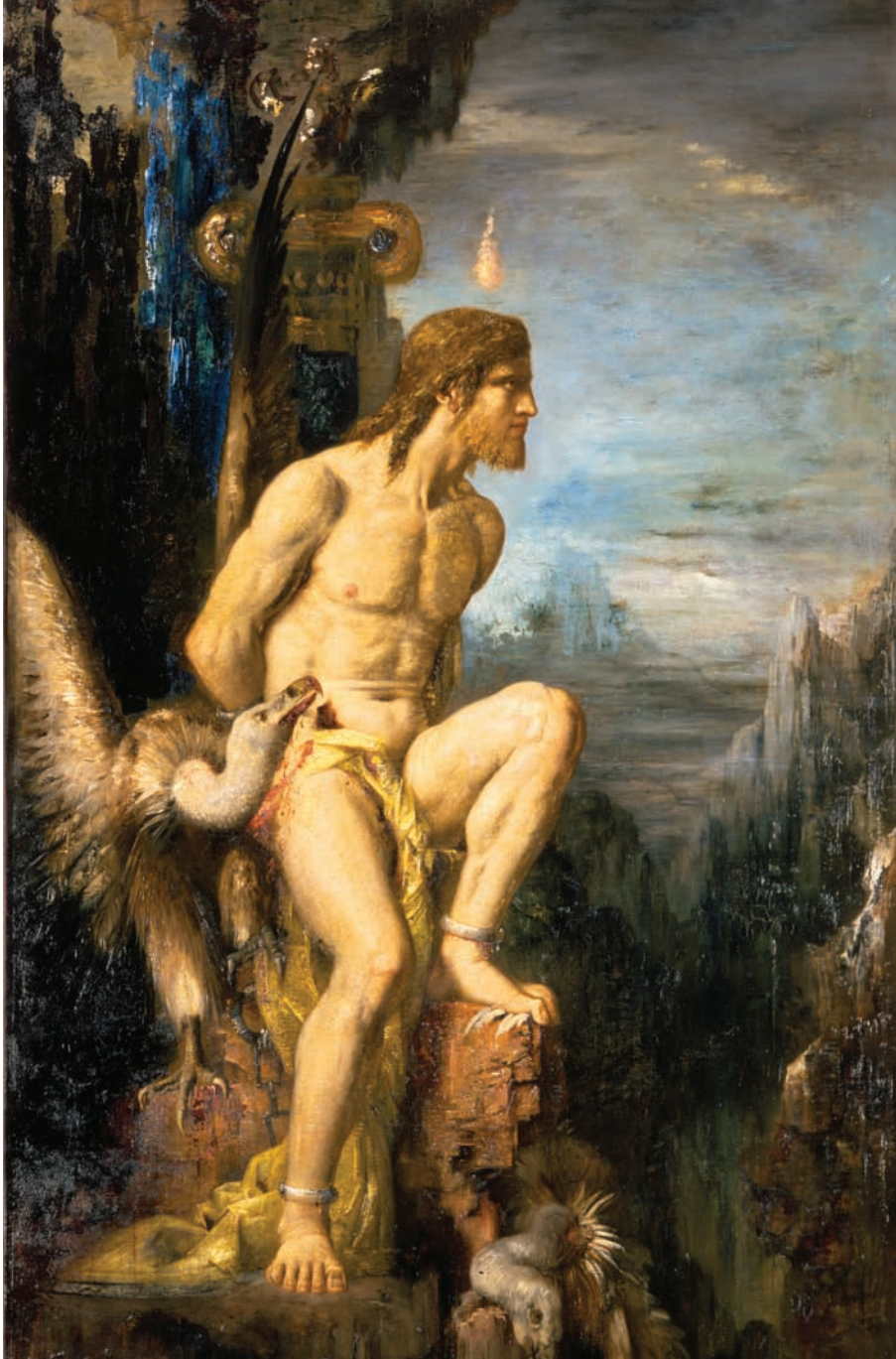


TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Prometheus was known as the god of forethought.
2. Prometheus and Epimetheus were brothers.
3. Prometheus gave the gift of fire to human beings.
4. Zeus ordered Prometheus to be chained to a tree.
5. Birds attacked Prometheus by pecking out his eyes.
6. Heracles broke the chains of Prometheus.
7. There is a constellation named for Prometheus.







This painting by the French artist Gustave Moreau (1826–1898) is called The Torture of Prometheus. It shows Prometheus bound in chains while a vulture eats his liver. Above his head there is the stolen flame.

to the top of Mount Caucasus and chain him to the side of the cliff.

The next day, a vulture swooped down on Prometheus and pecked out his liver. With his body chained to the mountain, there was nothing Prometheus could do to protect himself. Prometheus was immortal and could not die. At night his liver grew back again. The next day—and every day after—the vulture returned and every time it devoured Prometheus’s liver.

Heracles to the Rescue

Prometheus suffered for many years on Mount Caucasus. His life was pure misery until one day the great hero Heracles arrived to rescue him. Heracles shot the vulture with a poisoned arrow, killing it and freeing Prometheus from the cycle of having his liver pecked out each day. Heracles then grasped the chains that bound Prometheus to the mountain in his powerful bare hands. Heracles snapped the chains and set Prometheus free.

To show his gratitude, Prometheus gave Heracles some valuable advice. Heracles was on his way to pick the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, and Prometheus told him something he did not know: Only an immortal god could pick the apples.

See also Epimetheus; Pandora; Heracles.

The Stolen Flame

Zeus punished Prometheus by punishing mankind—he took away their fire. Prometheus could hear men wailing on Earth. Without fire they could not cook or keep themselves warm.

Prometheus decided he had to help them. He sneaked into the palace of the gods on Mount Olympus and stole a small flame from the gods’ sacred fire. He hid

the flickering flame inside a stalk of fennel. He then gave the flame to mankind, and the wailing on Earth stopped. Soon fires flickered all over Earth.

Prometheus Suffers Day after Day

When Zeus discovered what Prometheus had done, he was even angrier than before. He ordered Hephaestus, the god of fire and blacksmiths, to take Prometheus

FAMILY: Father was the Titan Iapetus; mother was Clymene, an Oceanid (ocean nymph); brother was Epimetheus; son was Deucalion.

IN ART: The torture of Prometheus was a common theme in ancient Greek vase paintings. Contemporary artists have portrayed other aspects of the Prometheus story, including Prometheus creating mankind, his theft of fire from the gods, and his release by Heracles. Three artists painted the torture of Prometheus—Italian artist Titian in 1547, Peter Paul Rubens in 1618, and Gustave Moreau in 1868. Seventeenth-century artist Jan Cossier painted Prometheus bringing fire to man.

IN LITERATURE: The story of Prometheus inspired many writers and poets. Well-known works include the poems *Prometheus* by Lord Byron and *Prometheus Unbound* by Percy Bysshe Shelley. In this passage from his play, *Love's Labour's Lost*, Elizabethan poet William Shakespeare referred to Prometheus's fire:

Thy favours, like Promethean
sacred fire
In dead and dull conceit can life
inspire;

In Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, the title character talks about the

life-giving nature of Prometheus's fire when he says:

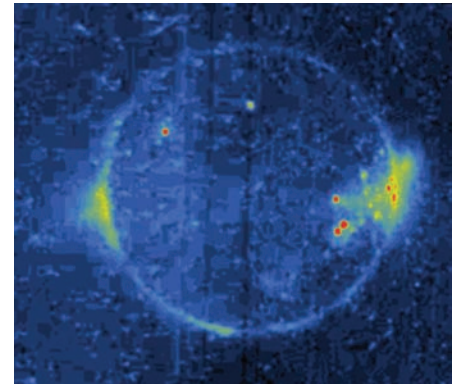
Put out the light, and then put out
the light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming
minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me: but once put
out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of
excelling nature,
I know not where is that
Promethean heat
That can thy light relume.

Act V scene 2, lines 12–18

IN SPACE: Prometheus is the name of one of the moons of Saturn. Prometheus is also the name of an active volcano on Io, one of the moons of Jupiter.

WORD HISTORY: The adjective *promethean* means daringly or rebelliously original or inspiring. To carry a *promethean fire* means to kindle inspiration for artistic or humanitarian endeavors. The Greek word for the fennel stalk in which Prometheus hid the flickering fire is “narthex.” In modern English, the narthex of a church is the entry area where worshipers light candles: flickering flames can still be seen in a church narthex!

MODERN USAGE: The Prometheus Society is a nonprofit organization that is open to individuals of extremely high intelligence. It only accepts members who, according to an accepted IQ test, score



The glow on the left of this image shows an eruption of the Prometheus volcano on Io, one of the moons of the planet Jupiter. Pictures taken during NASA's missions exploring the solar system reveal that the Prometheus volcano features a large caldera (depression formed by the collapse of the ground after a volcanic eruption). The Prometheus caldera is filled with lava (molten rock) and measures 28 kilometers (17 miles) long and 14 kilometers (9 miles) wide.

higher than 99.99997 percent of the general population. Their journal is entitled *The Gift of Fire*.

GO TO THE SOURCE: Prometheus is mentioned in the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* by Hesiod, as well as in books 1 and 2 of the *Library* by Apollodorus. Greek playwright Aeschylus wrote a tragic play, *Prometheus Bound*, which is still read and performed today.