

# PROMETHEUS BOUND

By Aeschylus

In dealing with "Prometheus Bound," it helps to know something about Greek mythology, in particular, the generations of divine beings which preceded Zeus, Athena, Aphrodite, Dionysus, and the pantheon of Greek gods with whom we are familiar.

Among other immortal beings at the dawn of time were the Titans, who fought against Zeus when he defeated his father, Cronos. With the help of the Hecatoncheires (the hundred-handed monsters), and the Cyclopes, Zeus prevailed, gradually taming his ferocious allies and reaching a rough accommodation with the Titans.

One of the Titans was Prometheus, who remained somewhat rebellious. His name means forethought. His brother, Epimetheus, (afterthought) was slow to figure things out, but Prometheus could look ahead. He knew things the gods did not know.

Prometheus had what the gods considered a character flaw: he had sympathy for humans. The Olympian gods were completely indifferent to the fate of mankind and were content to let them struggle for existence. Prometheus decided to give them something forbidden: fire. In giving humanity physical fire, he also endowed them with mental fire: intelligence and self-awareness.

For this he was severely punished. His story was told by the Greek tragedian Aeschylus in three plays, only the first of which survives. Actually, scholars now doubt that Aeschylus was the author because the play calls for stage effects that did not exist when Aeschylus was alive. We can't be completely sure, because knowledge of dramatic techniques 25 centuries ago is sketchy, at best.

However, what we can glean of Aeschylus' thought and temperament seems reflected in the play, so most are willing to cite him as its author until we have definitive proof otherwise.

The plot of "Prometheus Bound" is fairly simple.

The scene is a rocky wilderness in Scythia, the "end of the earth" according to the Greeks. Prometheus has been brought here by Force and Violence, led by Hephaistos, the god of fire. They have been ordered by Zeus to chain Prometheus to a cliff and, to be sure he stays put, to drive a spike through his chest. Although Hephaistos has reason to be unhappy with Prometheus, he is reluctant to so humiliate a fellow immortal. But Force has no qualms. Violence, significantly, says nothing throughout the scene, but happily does the dirty work. They leave Prometheus alone.

As Prometheus laments his fate, a chorus of sea birds fly in to console and to mourn for him. He explains to them that he has helped humans out of pity for their helplessness. He also hints that he knows how Zeus can be overthrown.

Ocean, the spirit of the sea, comes riding in on a grotesque sea monster, offering to make a personal plea before Zeus in Prometheus' behalf. When he is warned just how dangerous this might be, he thinks better of it and leaves.

Next, Io blunders into the scene. She was one of many human women in whom Zeus had taken a romantic interest. Hera punished Io by turning her into a half-woman; half-cow, and set a gadfly to chase her around the world. She is another victim of the gods' indifferent cruelty to humans. To her, Prometheus reveals that Zeus will be defeated by another amorous relationship, but he will not give details. He also reveals to Io what her future will be and how, many years later, one of her offspring, the hero Herakles, will release him from his suffering. Io then flees, stung by Hera's gadfly.

The chorus of sea birds speaks solemnly of the danger inherent in traffic with the gods, vowing to live their lives according to the situation Fate has allotted them.

At this point, Hermes, messenger of the gods, arrives to demand from Prometheus just what this secret is about Zeus. Prometheus refuses to tell what he foresees. Hermes then threatens him with further punishment. He will be crushed under an avalanche. Then, many centuries later, after he struggles to the surface, he will be imprisoned again and an eagle will arrive every day to eat away his liver, which will grow back again at night. (A Titan is immortal; he cannot die. This means that Prometheus' suffering can go on as long as the earth lasts. When it perishes, all creation, including the gods, will disappear.)

Prometheus still refuses and Hermes leaves, warning the chorus members to save themselves. They say they will stay with Prometheus. Then thunder rolls; it is Zeus, who calls the mountain down upon the Titan, who shouts his defiance to the end.

And so the first part of the trilogy ends in dramatic fashion, with thunder and an avalanche. While the second and third plays have been lost, scholars can piece together basic plots for them, using surviving fragments and the general outline of the myth. In them, Prometheus suffers further punishment - the liver-eating eagle - until he is finally set free by Herakles and reconciled with Zeus, the king of the gods whom Prometheus has so stubbornly defied.

Aeschylus

If this play is not by Aeschylus, it certainly reflects his heaven-storming spirit. He is considered the father of tragedy and, hence, the founder of dramatic art.

There were other, earlier writer/composers with whom he competed, but his name and his plays stand at the beginning of what we know of theatrical history.

We can trace the origin of theatre to two annual events in Athens, both dedicated to Dionysus. In them, Dramatic poets competed for prizes at choral competitions. According to tradition, a soloist in one of these events, named Thespis, did not sing of the god, but sang as if he were the god himself. He may have worn a mask to heighten the effect. To this day, actors are called Thespians in his honor.

This innovation electrified the audience and quickly caught on. Aeschylus then made a dramatic improvement: he added a second soloist to the choric dithyramb, making possible the exchanges of dialogue which are basic to plot development and character, a process pushed much further along by Sophocles, who introduced a third actor in his dramas.

In short order, these events changed from celebrations of the gods into celebrations of humans. It is likely that the great plays of that era were sung and danced, but we have no sure idea how it was done or how it sounded. In fact, it was an attempt by Renaissance poets to re-create Greek tragedy that resulted in a new art form: opera.

Aeschylus was born into a noble family, the son of Euphorion, around the year 525 B.C.E. in the town of Eleusis, an important center of Greek worship, the site of the Eleusinian Mysteries. He fought at Marathon and probably was involved in subsequent battles at Salamis and Plataea. It was the success of these military operations that gave Athens its ultimate victory over the Empire of Persia and led to the establishment of its own empire and the rise of Athenian democracy.

Aeschylus died Gela in Sicily. He had gone to the court of Hiero, Tyrant of Syracuse to compose a (lost) tragedy to celebrate the founding of the city of Etna. There are stories about his being forced to leave Athens or his death being the result of an eagle dropping a tortoise on his bald head, mistaking it for a rock. But these are legends, not fact.

Although he was revered in his lifetime for his tragedies, Aeschylus himself considered his military service to Athens the most significant fact of his life. His epitaph is said to have been composed by the poet himself:

"Here, in the fertile soil of Gela, lies Aeschylus, son of Euphorion. Of his notable courage the field of Marathon could speak, and the long-haired Mede; for he knows it well."

Aeschylus wrote at least 90 tragedies, of which seven survive, along with fragments of and references to about 72 others. The only complete trilogy which survives from classic times is his Oresteia, one of the most important works in Western Civilization. (Tragedians customarily wrote and presented three plays to be presented together.)

Aeschylus won first prize thirteen times, his first victory coming in 485 B.C.E.

His surviving plays:

The Oresteia (458 B.C.E.)

- consisting of three tragedies:

Agamemnon

Choreophores (The Libation Bearers)

Eumenides (The Furies)

Seven Against Thebes (469 B.C.E.)

The Persians (472 B.C.E.)

The Suppliants (490 B.C.E. ?)

Prometheus Bound (?)