



Prometheus the Fire-Bringer

Many ancient cultures have myths about gods or heroes who first taught humans to build fire or to plant crops. These stories show the importance that early people placed on this type of knowledge. It seemed so miraculous that it must have come from heaven! In Greek mythology **Prometheus** (prə mē' thē əs) stole fire from the gods and taught humans to build fire.

Jeremy Ingalls (1911–) has included her version of the Prometheus myth in her *Book of Legends*.

Conflict in Myth

Look For

Writing

Vocabulary

A **conflict** is a struggle between opposing sides or forces. In "Prometheus the Fire-Bringer," there is a conflict between Zeus, the king of the gods, and the race of humans he has created. The Titan Prometheus makes this struggle more equal by taking the side of the humans.

Like people, the Greek gods can show many different character traits. As you read this myth, look for the contrast between the personalities of Zeus and his adviser Prometheus. How does this contrast lead to a serious conflict? What is the effect of this conflict?

If fire can seem mysterious today, it must have seemed even more mysterious to humans of long ago. Imagine that you have been transported back to those times. You are sitting near a campfire at night, staring into the dancing yellow and red flames. Freewrite about this experience.

Knowing the following words will help you as you read "Prometheus the Fire-Bringer."

councilor (koun' sə lər) *n.*: Adviser (p. 563)

ominous (äm' ə nəəs) *adj.*: Threatening (p. 564)

hearth (härth) *n.*: Stone or brick floor of a fireplace (p. 566)

deftly (deft' lē) *adv.*: Skillfully (p. 568)

kindling (kin' dliŋ) *n.*: Bits of dry wood for starting a fire (p. 568)

gravely (gräv' lē) *adv.*: With great seriousness (p. 568)

Prometheus the Fire-Bringer

Jeremy Ingalls

Fire itself and the civilized life which fire makes possible—these were the gifts of Prometheus to the men of ancient times. Prometheus himself was not of the oldest race of men. He was not alive in the first age of mankind.

Ancient writers tell us there were three ages of men on earth before the fourth age in which we are now living. Each of the previous ages ended in terrible disasters which destroyed a large part of the human race. A raging fire ended the first age of the world. At the end of the second and of the third age, vast floods engulfed plains and mountains. According to the oldest poets these misfortunes were punishments the gods visited upon men for their wickedness and wrongdoing.

The story of Prometheus, remembered by the Greeks and set down in their books, tells of the days when Zeus¹ was king of the world and Prometheus was his chief councilor. From their ancestors they and their companions upon Mount Olympus had inherited the secrets of fire, of rain, of farming and metal-working. This knowledge gave them a power so great that they appeared as gods to the men who served them.

After the flood which destroyed many of the men of the second age, Zeus, with the help of Prometheus, had bred a new race of

men in Arcadia.² But Zeus did not find life on earth so simple for men and gods as it had been in earlier times.

When Cronus,³ the father of Zeus, had ruled the earth, summer had been the only season. Great land masses toward the north had barred all the icy winds. The age of Cronus was an age of contentment. No man

2. Arcadia (ār kā' dē ə): A beautiful region of ancient Greece.

3. Cronus (krō' nəs)



1. Zeus (zōōs)

had needed to work for food or clothes or a house to shelter him.

After the first flood, the land masses were broken. Winter winds blew upon countries which before had known only summer.

The race of gods did not suffer. They warmed their houses, having the secret of fire. And the women of the race were weavers of cloth, so that the gods were clothed and defended from the north wind.

But winter was a harsh season for the men and women who did not live on the gods' mountain. Without defense from the cold, they huddled with the animals. They complained against the gods, whom they must serve for what little comfort they might find of food and warmth. They scarcely believed the stories which their ancestors had handed down to them of a time when men had lived in endless summer weather, when men were friends and favorites of the gods.

Men became rebels and grumblers. For this reason Zeus, seeing winter coming on again, determined to destroy the people of Arcadia. Then Prometheus, his chief counselor, sought to save this third race of man from destruction.

"They quarrel among themselves," said Zeus angrily. "They start trouble in the fields. We must train up a new race of men who will learn more quickly what it means to serve the gods."

Zeus was walking across the bronze floor of his mountain palace. A tremendous, tall figure of a man he was, the king-god Zeus. But he who stood beside him, Prometheus of the family of Titans,⁴ was even taller.

"Worthless," Zeus was saying as if to himself. "Worthless," he repeated again, "the whole race. They complain of the winters. They are too weak a race for the climate of

these times. Why should we continue to struggle with them? Better to be rid of them, every man and woman of the troublesome tribe."

"And then?" inquired Prometheus. "What if you create a new race to provide manpower for the farms and the bigger buildings? That race, too, will rebel while they can see and envy our knowledge and our power."

"Even so, I will destroy these Arcadians," insisted Zeus stubbornly. "Men are our creatures. Let them learn to serve us, to do our will."

"Up here on your mountain," observed Prometheus thoughtfully, "you make men and destroy them. But what about the men themselves? How can they learn wisdom when, time after time, you visit them with destruction?"

"You have too much sympathy for them," answered Zeus in a sharp voice. "I believe you love these huddling, sheepish men."

"They have minds and hearts," replied Prometheus warmly, "and a courage that is worth admiring. They wish to live even as the gods wish to live. Don't we feed ourselves on nectar and ambrosia⁵ every day to preserve our lives?"

Prometheus was speaking rapidly. His voice was deep. "This is your way," he went on. "You won't look ahead. You won't be patient. You won't give men a chance to learn how to live. Over and over again, with floods or with cracking red thunderbolts, you destroy them."

"I have let you live, Prometheus," said Zeus in an ominous tone, "to advise me when you can. You are my cousin. But I am not your child to be scolded." Zeus was smiling, but there was thunder behind the smile.

4. Titans (tit'nz): Giant gods who were defeated by the Olympian gods.

5. nectar (nek' tar) and **ambrosia** (am brō' zhə): The drink and food of the gods; by feeding on these substances, the gods were able to live forever.

Silently Prometheus turned away. Leaving the marble-columned hall, he went out among the gardens of Olympus, the gods' mountain. The last roses were fading before the time of winter winds and rain.

This was not the first time Prometheus had heard thunder in the voice of Zeus. Prometheus knew that someday Zeus would turn against him, betray him, and punish him. Prometheus the Titan had the gift of reading the future. He could foresee the fate hidden and waiting for him and for others and even for Zeus himself.

Climbing among the upper gardens, Prometheus stopped at last beside an ancient, twisted ash tree. Leaning against its trunk, he looked toward the south. Beyond the last canal, the last steep sea wall, he could see the ocean. He looked far out toward that last shining circle of water. Then, with his head bent, he sat down on the tree roots bulging in thick knots above the ground.

It would be hard to tell you all the thoughts in the mind of the Titan—thoughts that coiled and twined like a nest of dragons. In his mighty brain were long memories of the past and far-reaching prophecies of what was to come.

He thought most often of the future, but the talk with Zeus just now had brought the past before him once again. He remembered once more the terrible war in which Zeus had seized the kingship of the gods. He thought of the exile and imprisonment of Cronus, the father of Zeus. He remembered the Titans, his people, now chained in the black pit of Tartarus.⁶

The great god Cronus himself, who had given peace to gods and men, where was he now? And the mighty-headed Titans, the magnificent engineers, builders of bridges

and temples, where were they? All of them fallen, helpless, as good as dead.

Zeus had triumphed. Of the Titans, only two now walked the upper earth—he, Prometheus, and Epimetheus,⁷ his brother.

And now, even now, Zeus was not content. It was not enough for his glory, it seemed, to have dethroned his own father, not enough to have driven the race of Titans from the houses of the gods. Now Zeus was plotting to kill the race of men.

Prometheus had endured the war against the Titans, his own people. He had even given help to Zeus. Having seen what was to come, he had thought, "Since Zeus must win, I'll guide him. I'll control his fierce anger and his greed for power."

But Prometheus could not submit to this latest plot of Zeus. He would use all his wits to save the men of Arcadia from destruction.

Why were they to be destroyed? Because they were cold and full of fears, huddled together in caves like animals. It was well enough in the warm months. They worked willingly in the fields of the gods and reared the horses and bulls and guarded the sheep. But when the cold days came, they grumbled against Olympus. They grumbled because they must eat and hunt like the animals and had no hoof nor claw nor heavy fur for protection.

What did they need? What protection would be better than hoof or claw? Prometheus knew. It was fire they needed—fire to cook with, to warm them, to harden metal for weapons. With fire they could frighten the wolf and the bear and the mountain lion.

Why did they lack the gift of fire? Prometheus knew that too. He knew how jealously the gods sat guard about their flame.

More than once he had told Zeus the

6. Tartarus (tär' tər əs): A dark pit beneath Hades (hä' dəz), the home of the dead, which itself was under the earth.

7. Epimetheus (ə' pi mē' thē əs)

need men had of fire. He knew why Zeus would not consent to teach men this secret of the gods. The gift of fire to men would be a gift of power. Hardened in the fire, the spears which men might make to chase the mountain lion might also, in time, be hurled against the gods. With fire would come comfort and time to think while the flames leaped up the walls of hidden caves. Men who had time to think would have time to question the laws of the gods. Among men who asked questions disorder might breed, and rebellion stronger than any mere squabble in the fields.

"But men are worth the gift of fire," thought Prometheus, sitting against the roots of his favorite ash tree. He could see ahead dimly into that time to come when gods would lose their power. And he, Prometheus, through his love for men, must help to bring on that time.

Prometheus did not hesitate. By the fall of night his plans were accomplished. As the sun went down, his tall figure appeared upon a sea beach. Above the sands a hundred caves, long ago deserted by the waters of the ocean, sheltered families of Arcadians. To them the Titan was bringing this very night the secret of the gods.

He came along the pebble line of high water. In his hand he carried a yellow reed.

This curious yellow stalk was made of metal, the most precious of the metals of the gods. From it the metalworkers molded rare and delicate shapes. From it they made the reedlike and hollow stalks which carried in wisps of fennel⁸ straw, coals from the gods' ever-burning fire. The gods who knew the sources of flame never built new fires in the sight of men. Going abroad on journeys, they took from their central hearth a smoldering coal.

Prometheus had left Olympus as one

upon a journey. He alone knew he was not going to visit the home of Poseidon,⁹ Zeus's brother, lord of the sea—nor going into India nor into the cold north. He was going only as far as the nearest sea beach.

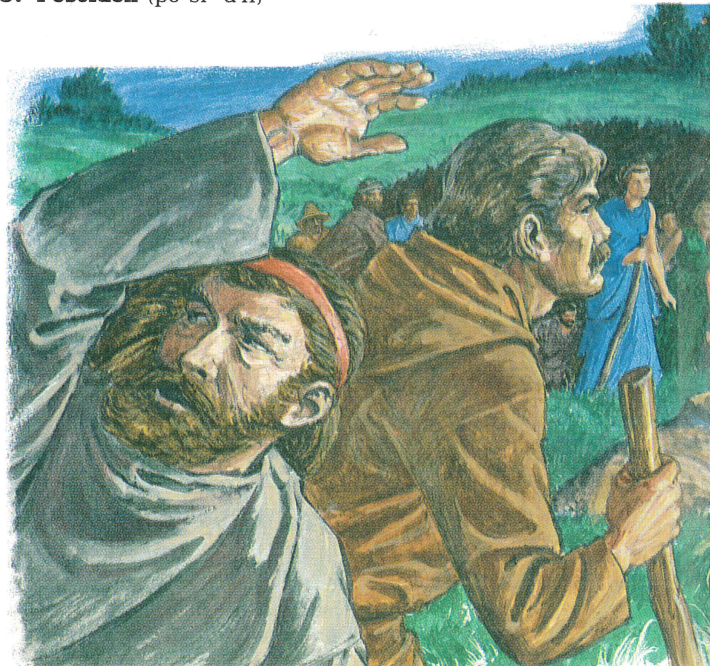
He knew that, though he was going only to the sea beach, he was in truth starting upon a journey. He knew the hatred of Zeus would follow him. He knew that now he, Prometheus, could never return to the house of the gods. From this night he must live his life among the men he wished to save.

While the stars came out, bright as they are on nights when winter will soon come on, Prometheus gathered together a heap of driftwood. Opening the metal stalk, he set the flame of the gods in the waiting fuel.

Eating into the wood, the fire leaped up, fanned in the night breeze. Prometheus sat down beside the fire he had made. He was not long alone.

Shadowy figures appeared at the mouths of caves. One by one, men, women, and children crept toward the blaze. The night was

9. Poseidon (pō sī' d'n)



8. fennel (fen' 1): A tall herb.

cold. North winds had blown that day. The winds had blown on the lands of men, even as they had blown on the head of Zeus in his palace above them. Now in the night they came, the people of men, to the warmth of the beckoning fire.

Hundreds there were of them now. Those nearest the tall fire-bringer, the Titan, were talking with him. They knew him well. It was not the first time Prometheus had come to talk with them. But never before had he come late, alone, and lighted a fire against the dark.

It was not the first time men had seen a

fire or felt its warmth. More than once a god, walking the earth, had set a fire, lit from the coals he carried secretly. Men revered the slender magic wands with which, it seemed, the gods could call up flame. But never before had they stood so near a fire nor seen the firewand.

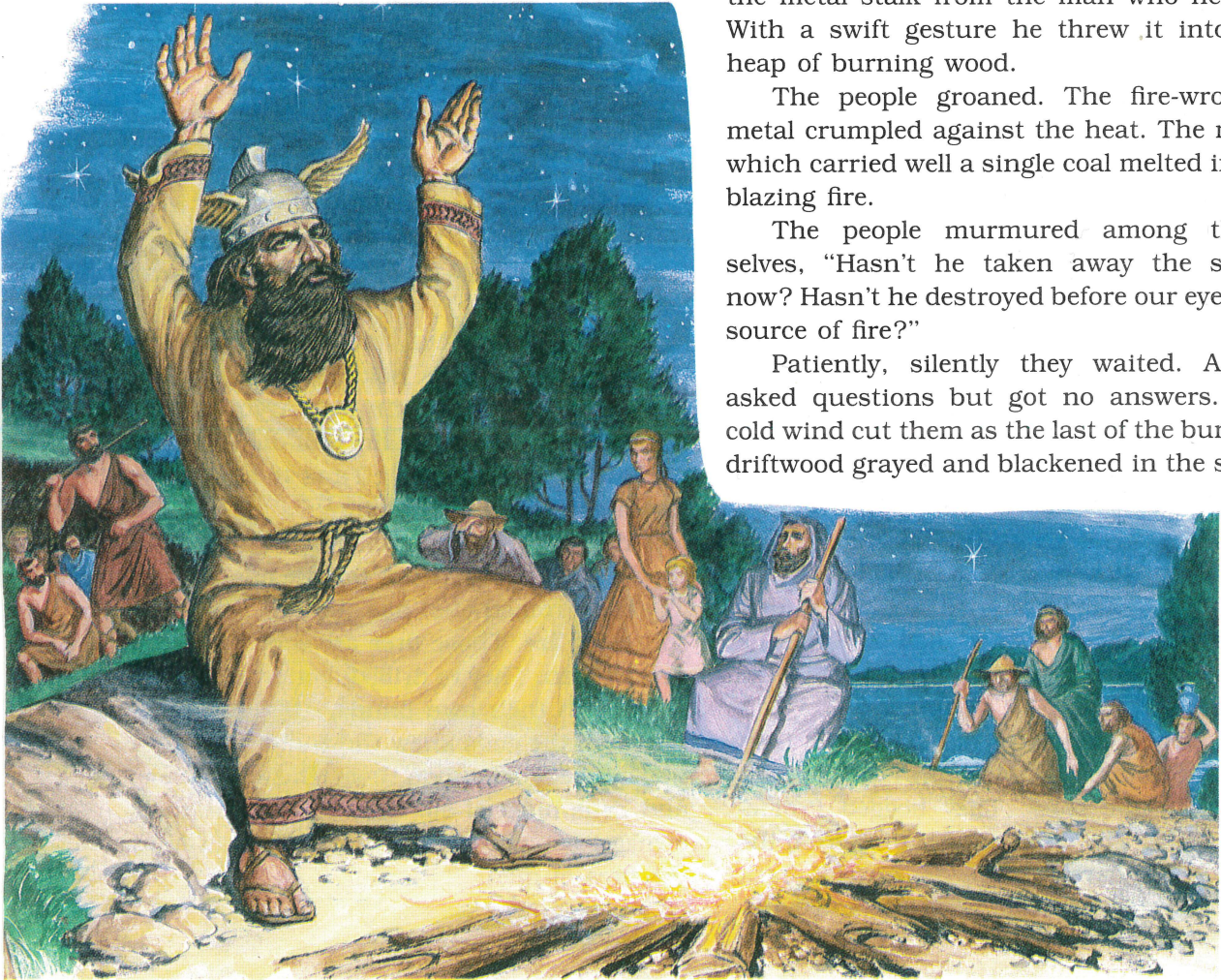
Now men might hold in their own hands the mysterious yellow rod. They said "Look" and "See" and, fingering the metal, "How wonderfully the gods can mold what is hard in the hands."

For a while Prometheus let them talk. He watched with pleasure the gleam of firelight in their shining eyes. Then quietly he took the metal stalk from the man who held it. With a swift gesture he threw it into the heap of burning wood.

The people groaned. The fire-wrought metal crumpled against the heat. The metal which carried well a single coal melted in the blazing fire.

The people murmured among themselves, "Hasn't he taken away the secret now? Hasn't he destroyed before our eyes the source of fire?"

Patiently, silently they waited. A few asked questions but got no answers. The cold wind cut them as the last of the burning driftwood grayed and blackened in the sand.



While the embers crumbled away, Prometheus rose, calling with him a few of the men who had asked him questions. Watching, they saw him scrape a hollow pit. Wondering, they followed his every movement, his hands holding a bronze knife, shaving chips of wood, taking from the fold of his cloak handfuls of bark and straw.

Next he set in his pit a chunk of ashwood, flat and firm, notched cleanly on one side. Beneath and around this notch he laid in bark and straw. Into the notch he set a pointed branch, slender, hard-tipped, and firm. Then slowly he swung the branch in his palms, twirled it in a steady rhythm, boring, drilling more and more rapidly with his skilled and powerful hands.

The wood grew warm. The dust ground from the ash block heated to smoldering. The straw caught. Light sputtered from the pit. Small sparks glowed, flew up, went out. Tugged by the night wind, smoke curled from the dry straw, from the bark, from the wood shavings fed gently from the heap Prometheus had made ready to his hand. At last, more suddenly than the eye could follow, out of the pit in the sand rose the living flame.

Deftly Prometheus removed the ash block, added heavier kindling. Last of all, the driftwood yielded to the strengthening fire. He knelt beside it a while, breathing upon it, guarding, urging the blaze. At last he rose, stood back, folded his arms. As if considering a thought, half sorrow, half pleasure, he looked up at the glare of fire invading the night sky.

Whispers and murmuring first, then cries, then shouting. Men ran to scoop new hollows in the sand. They begged Prometheus' knife. The children, running from the beach to the caves and fields, hurried back with fists crammed full of straw and withered leaves.

The people of the caves were breathless with excitement. Here was no secret. The fire-wand did not breed the fire as they had thought. No nameless power of the gods bred the flame.

The hard, pale ashwood passed from hand to hand as men struggled to light their own fires. They despaired at first. New sparks flew up and died. Or the hands were weak, too weak to drill the flame. But at last came triumph. A dozen fires sprang up. Women and children ran with laden arms to feed each growing blaze.

The gods, from their distant houses, saw the glow. There to the south it shone, fighting against the starlight, the glare in the sky. Was it the end of the world? Would the terrible fire consume the earth again?

Hermes,¹⁰ the messenger, came at last with an answer to all their questions.

"Great Zeus," said Hermes gravely in the assembly of the gods, "Prometheus, your cousin, stands in the midst of those rising fires. He took coals from the central hearth as for a journey."

"So?" asked Zeus, nodding his head. Then, as if he were holding an argument with himself, he continued, saying, "But then? What then? The fire will die. It is not a crime for a god or for a Titan to light a fire for himself on a cold evening."

"But that fire will not die," interrupted Hermes. "That fire is not the fire of gods and Titans. Prometheus has taught men the source of fire. Those fires are their own, the fires of men. They've drilled flame out of hard wood with their own hands."

Then the gods knew the end of the world was not yet come upon them. But they knew, and Zeus most of all, that it might be their own great power that was burning away in the fires of men.

10. **Hermes** (hər' mēz).

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Recalling

1. What was the earth like during the age of Cronus, the father of Zeus? How many ages of human beings has there been?
2. Why are humans unhappy under the rule of Zeus? How do they show their unhappiness?
3. How does Zeus want to solve the problem?
4. What does Prometheus say about this plan?
5. How will the gift of fire help humans?

Interpreting

6. In Greek, Prometheus means “forethought,” or the ability to plan. Why is this a fitting name for the Titan?
7. Why does Prometheus feel “half sorrow, half pleasure” after building a fire for humans?
8. How will the gift of fire mark a change in the relationship between humans and gods?

Applying

9. Imagine that someone from a more advanced civilization could visit earth. We already know how to use fire, but what other important gift could this being bring to us?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Conflict in Myth

A **conflict** is a struggle between opposing sides or forces. In this myth Prometheus opposes the plans of Zeus, who wants to destroy the human race.

1. Why is there a conflict between Zeus and human beings?
2. How is the conflict between Prometheus and Zeus resolved in this myth?
3. Do you think this resolution is final, or will the conflict continue? Explain.

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Evaluating the Reasons for a Conflict

Conflicts between gods seem more awesome than struggles between humans. However, gods

oppose each other for many of the same reasons that humans do. Whether on Mount Olympus or earth, conflicts can result from differences in personality and background.

1. Compare and contrast the personalities of Zeus and Prometheus.
2. How might the fact that Prometheus is a Titan and not an Olympian god influence his attitude toward Zeus?
3. Show how their disagreement about humans arises from differences in their personalities and backgrounds.
4. Why do you think Prometheus disobeys Zeus?

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE

Interpreting the Adjective *Promethean*

As a result of this myth, the adjective *Promethean* has become part of our language. The general meaning of this word is “about or like Prometheus.”

1. Recall what you know about Prometheus’s personality and actions. Based on this knowledge, what kind of person or deed would you call Promethean?
2. Look up the word in a dictionary to see whether the definition you have arrived at is correct.

THINKING AND WRITING

Predicting the Outcome of a Conflict

Imagine that you have written a successful screenplay based on this version of the Prometheus myth. So many people have seen your movie that the producer wants to make a sequel called “Prometheus II.” Briefly outline some of the events that would occur where this story leaves off. Would Zeus punish Prometheus? If so, what kind of punishment would he devise? How would the conflict be resolved? Use your outline to write a letter to the producer describing the plot of the new movie. As you revise this letter, make sure that moviegoers will be satisfied by the way you have resolved the conflict.