

Classics 10: Chapter 5: Fall 2014

Myths of Creation II: The Origins of Mortals



Rubens, *Prometheus Bound*, 1610-1

[tiny bits from last time]

- I. Prometheus and Human Progress
- II. Pandora and Human Suffering
- III. Further Punishment for Human Decline
 - A. The Five Races
 - B. The Universal Flood

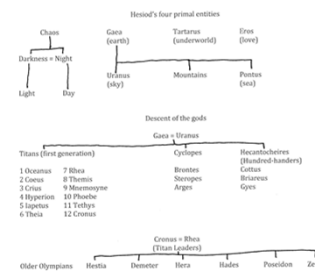
Themes in Greek Creation Story

- Divine Myth (gods) explains the world with folklore elements (tricksters, monsters, family dynamics in flux)
- Cosmos becoming increasingly complex, away from original unity
 - Creation begins asexually, becomes determined by sexual reproduction (and the power of its desires)
- Titans represent untamed forces of nature
 - Zeus overcomes them by **righting old wrongs** (against the Hecatonchires and the Cyclopes)
 - **Justice of Zeus** brings order from anarchy
 - Zeus **fairly distributes rights** to all the gods

Themes in Greek Creation Story

- The role of the female is ambiguous – creative and destructive
 - Women needed to produce next generation, yet cannot be trusted by ruling male, support young son
- Ascendancy of male over female
 - Gaea empowers Cronus, later the victim of Zeus
 - Zeus prevents succession by co-opting the female
 - Female antagonism remains, in a subdued form, in Hera
- The story ultimately answers the question: How did Zeus come to rule the world?

Divine Genealogy



Near Eastern and Hesiodic Succession Myths Compared, see pp. 102-05

Hittite: *Kingship in Heaven*

- Alalush

- Anush (= Sumerian Anu "Sky") castrated by his son

- Kumarbi

- Teshub (storm-god)

Hesiod: *Theogony*

- Chaos

- Uranus ("Sky") castrated by his son

- Cronos

- Zeus (storm-god)

What about human beings?

On the understanding that the gods were the origin and power of the world:

- What is the role of the human in the world?
- Where did we come from?
- Are we unique? How?
- Why are we here?
- Why do we suffer?

I. Prometheus and Human Progress

- No account of the origin of mortals in Hesiod (a striking omission—they just show up at a feast)
 - *Theogony* (divine perspective)
 - *Works and Days* (human perspective)
- Other, later sources generally identify Prometheus as the creator of mortals
 - Other accounts: Zeus, or other gods responsible
- Prometheus ("forethought" = trickster), the son of Clymene and Iapetus (a brother of Cronus) and so a cousin of Zeus
- Prometheus Titan took Zeus' side in the Titanomachy
 - Suggests a special role for him later

Prometheus: Maker of Mortals

- In much Near Eastern myth, humans explicitly created as servants for the gods
 - Man made from blood of a god (rebellious god, Kingu) and clay (in *Enuma Elish* and *Atrahasis*)
 - Hebrew account (*Genesis*): dust of the earth plus the breath of life from the Creator (fall from Eden)
- Prometheus makes man from earth and water (the primordial mud?) in Ovid
 - Man walks upright to look at heaven - not like beasts who stare at the ground – seeds of heaven in newly formed earth grant man a share of divinity

Hesiod: The Incident at Meconê

- Prometheus offered at a sacrifice 2 portions to Zeus and asked which Zeus preferred
 - One was huge strips of fat wrapped about bones
 - One was fatty meat wrapped inside an ox's stomach
- Zeus chose the better looking fat
- Etiological myth: why Greeks eat the meat (the good stuff) and offer the bones and fat to the gods
- Hesiod protects Zeus by saying he saw through the trick, but took the bones in order to justify punishing men, Prometheus' favorite (really an elaborate chess game)

Zeus Punishes Prometheus

- To punish Prometheus, Zeus harms man by removing fire from the human world
 - Mortals could no longer cook their meat, were starving, returned to a primitive state
- Prometheus sneaks some fire from heaven in a fennel stock and gives it back to mankind
 - Man has since been able to cook his meat, though he must work both to hunt the meat and to cook it
 - Life for mankind forever after one of labor to survive
- Prometheus punished by being bound to a rock, where every day an eagle gnaws his liver, which grows back at night—our livers do regenerate!

Prometheus and Eagle with Atlas, c. 550 BCE



Prometheus Unbound 350 BCE



A Modern Prometheus

20th century, by Paul Manship



Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*

- A play in a trilogy about Prometheus, the other two of which are lost
 - Athenian tragedy composed posthumously? (i.e., some time after 456 BCE)
- Zeus eventually learns to rule with justice
- Prometheus presented as one who taught man all the civilized arts—culture bearer
 - crafts, math, writing, farming, husbandry, seafaring, medicine, metallurgy, divination
 - human evolution thanks solely to Prometheus; he is the savior of mankind from cluelessness
 - **No Golden Age, a progression from nature to culture**

Prometheus Unbound

- Zeus eventually allows Heracles to break Prometheus' chains
- Prometheus tells him which female deity will give birth to a son that will defeat his father ("A son greater than his father"):
 - Thetis, a sea nymph (a daughter of Nereus) whom Zeus currently desired
 - So Zeus marries Thetis to a mortal, Peleus: that son will be Achilles, who is indeed greater than his father. But his father is now a mere mortal!

Why do we suffer?

- Zeus sought to punish men because Prometheus gave fire back to them—now must labor for his food, Zeus hid the origin of easy production
- Man's ultimate affliction from Zeus (says Hesiod): Woman
- But how else would men have reproduced?
- And why so openly misogynistic?
 - Constraints of monogamy?
 - Perceived impurity of female anatomy?
 - More mouths to feed?
 - Anxiety that man cannot control his own reproduction or his offspring? (Remember how Cronus and Zeus trick their fathers!)

II. Pandora and Human Suffering

- Zeus recruits the other gods to build him a woman from clay and water
 - Pandora ("All-gift"/ "Giver of All")
 - Woman is not from Adam's rib (as in *Genesis*), but made independently from the same materials, though with evil intent
- Given good looks, womanly skills (weaving), the power of desire and heartbreak, "thievish morals", "the soul of a bitch"
- "a curse to men who must live by bread"

Pandora, by Rossetti, 1878



Pandora and Epimetheus

- Epimetheus ("Afterthought") is Prometheus' ("Forethought") brother
- Epimetheus is warned by Prometheus not to receive any gift from Zeus, but he is foolish and discovers he is attracted to this gift
 - He wants the woman's company and thus accepts her as a gift
- She suddenly opens a jar (not a box), from which all ills and sorrows for men escape
- Hope alone fails to escape
 - What does this mean? Is it evil? Or is it all that we have to save us? Yet why is it in the jar?

Woman as "Original Sin"

- Compare Pandora to Eve
 - Woman responsible for downfall of man (yet Epimetheus should have known better, too)
- Compare Pandora (2) to Incident at Meconê (1)
 - What looks good on the outside
 - 1 pure fat, 2 female beauty
 - Is full of deceit inside
 - 1 bones, 2 feminine wiles
- Compare Pandora to Gaea/Mother Earth
 - Fertile source of all, yet unreliable to men

Pandora's "Box": Women as Containers

- Perhaps the jar is really just a metaphor and Pandora herself is the jar
 - i.e., women are the containers that receive and transport men's seed
 - Men have to place all their hope for offspring on/in women and all kinds of heartbreak can happen, but there is no other way
 - Men told in marriage ceremony to "plow his wife for the begetting of new children"
- Women associated with water jugs, hope chests, scent boxes, ritual baskets

III. Further Punishment for Human Decline

A. The Five Races

The Five Races

- Not entirely compatible with the Pandora story
- Different source (but still told by Hesiod)
 - Hesiod's second great work: *Works and Days*
 - The first is the *Theogony*: the main Greek account of the origins of the gods
- The descent from a perfect golden age into the wretched, modern age
- Built into the mechanism of time? The whimsy of the gods?
- Or brought on by our own wickedness?
- Circular or Linear Time?

The Five Races

- Golden Age** : **Cronus** ; lived like gods / died as passing into a dream / now guardian angels
- Silver Age** : Dumber / live at home a hundred years / violence / killed for being irreverent / earth spirits
- Bronze Age** : Bronze-equipped warriors from ash trees / killed each other off
- Heroic Age** : Legendary heroes of Homer / better than before, temporary interruption of decline
- Iron Age** : Current age / justice gradually will be completely abandoned

The Five Races

- Golden Age = Time before Pandora? No women.
- Heroic Age not part of Near Eastern Myth, shows importance of Late Bronze Age to Archaic Era (esp. the Homeric poems)
 - Hebrew Bible version in *Book of Daniel*: statue of five materials (**gold, silver, bronze, iron, iron and clay**)
- Heroic Age has Isles of the Blest, a happy reward for the greatest of the heroes at the edge of the world
- Pessimism of the current Age of Iron due to the great societal changes in Archaic Age?
 - Debt slavery, currency, social upheaval, etc.

III. Further Punishment for Human Decline

B. The Universal Flood (and the Race of the Hellenes)

Universal Flood

- Sumerian: Enki, god of freshwater, saves the pious Ziusudra by telling him to build large boat: Enlil plans to destroy humans—too many of them and too loud
- Akkadian: humans so noisy the gods can't sleep, Ea (Enki) tells Atrahasis to build large boat
- *Genesis*: **human wickedness** causes the Creator to regret his creation, drowns all but Noah, who is told to build a large boat (Tiamat > Tehom > Tethys)
- Near Eastern creation myths begin with water, not Chaos, so **universal flood = restart button?**

Greek Flood Story

- Not in Hesiod
- Perhaps he didn't know about it?
- Likely known by Classical Era
- Fullest surviving source is the Roman poet Ovid (1c. BCE), author of *Metamorphoses*

Greek (via Ovid) Flood Story

- Zeus confirms the alleged wickedness of humankind (visits Lycaon)
- First he wants to destroy the world with fire, yet fears Olympus will collapse, too
- Changes his mind, sends a flood, promises to raise a new (better) race
- All mortals drown except for one pious couple ('All but one' folktale motif, seen also in the Noah story): Deucalion (son of Prometheus) and Pyrrha (daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora)

Deucalion and Pyrrha

- Their raft lands on Mt. Parnassus (Delphi), near a small temple to Themis ("Law")
- Convenient to show their piety and to ask the goddess how to restore the human race
- Oracle: "Toss the bones of your mighty mother over your shoulders."
- Deucalion understands the riddle: Stones are the bones of their "mother" (mother earth / Gaea)
- So they throw stones, and humans emerge

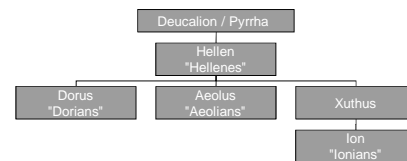
Deucalion and Pyrrha



Giovanni Maria Bottala, Deucalion and Pyrrha

The Race of the Hellenes

Most important of their biological children were the **eponymous** heroes of the Greeks
(**eponymous** = “giving one’s name to something”)



Origin of Mortals: Summary

- Humans created from the earth (Mother Earth?), likely an agricultural or artisan model (a seed grown or a pot shaped)
- Humans from stone, explains our stubborn nature and why we have both bones and flesh
- Human world did not arise all at once:
 - First men, then women, then a decline and a flood for a fresh start
- Humans now distinct from gods; the Golden Age gone forever; now we have to work to live, mate to reproduce, and face death

Human vs. Divine

- Separation of human and divine clear when Prometheus “tricks” Zeus into accepting sacrificial bones, not the meat
- Sacrifice now = medium between men and gods
- Men used to join the gods at feasts, as at Mecone, now the two are sundered
- Explains nature of humanity: midway between animals and gods
- Animals eat meat raw
- Humans cook meat and offer in sacrifice to gods
- Gods eat no meat, but receive the smoke of sacrifice

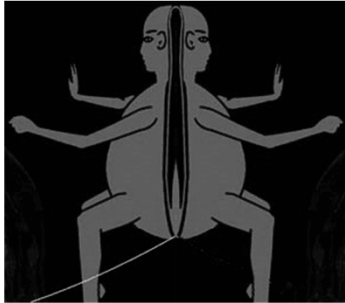
Human vs. Divine

- Zeus’ ultimate curse upon man (i.e., woman) is symbolic of the fact that man needs woman to reproduce, while the gods are immortal and ageless

Plato’s Comical Myth of Human Origins and Need for Sex

- From Plato’s dialogue about love, the *Symposium*, spoken by Aristophanes (the greatest Greek comic playwright)
- Humans once circular blobs, two heads, four hands, four feet, two sets of genitals
 - Were powerful and capable of great feats
 - Cartwheel their way into challenging gods
- Zeus cuts them in half as punishment; turned heads to cut side; belly button is where our halves sown up

Imaginative depiction of this two-person human at the moment of separation by Zeus



Plato on True Love

- Once split, each spends rest of life searching for “other half”, “soul mate”
 - Only one person is truly the one.
- If found, constant embrace until starvation
- Zeus thus turns genitals around so satisfaction of desire can be had, previously deposited seed into ground, like cicadas
- Explains both heterosexual and homosexual desire
 - I.e., some of us were man-woman, some man-man, some woman-woman before split into two!

Protagoras' Myth of Human Origins from Plato's *Protagoras* 320c-323a: **a myth of progress** (contrast with Hesiod 5 Ages)

- Once upon a time there were gods, but no mortal creatures. Gods formed human beings in the earth from earth and fire.
- Prometheus and Epimetheus were given the duty of equipping them and allotting suitable powers to each kind.
- Epimetheus begged to be the one to do this, and Prometheus served as reviewer.

Protagoras

- Epimetheus distributed the attributes thus:
 - Gave strength to some creatures but not speed
 - Weaker creatures gave speed
 - To some he gave weapons
 - To others he gave a means of defense
 - Small ones often were given flight, or a habitat underground
 - To the largest, their size was their protection

Protagoras

- After making sure each had the means to avoid their predators and to compete and thrive, he gave them ways of enduring the seasons.
 - Fur, feathers, hard skin, hooves
- Appointed for them different foods: fruit, nuts, other animals, etc.
- Those who died more frequently were more fertile and vice versa

Protagoras

- Epimetheus, you'll remember is not the most forward looking. So when he comes to the last creature, Man, he realizes that he's given away all the attributes in his possession.
- Prometheus was first at a loss how to remedy his brother's oversight. Then he stole Hephaestus' and Athena's skills in the arts, and he gave mankind fire.

Protagoras

- Because they knew divine skills, they were the only animals to worship the gods.
- But they died in droves because of animals
- Moved together for safety, but no political skills
- Zeus afraid they'd destroy themselves, so sent Hermes to teach them respect for each other and a sense of justice.
- Let all have the same share of these two qualities, not just a few.
- A progressive view of human development

Orphic Myth of Human Origins

- Many poems attributed to the legendary singer Orpheus.
- Religious in character, but no real orphic dogma
- Instead of ending the succession myth with Zeus, Orphic poetry ends with Dionysus (son here of Zeus and Persephone—some say Zeus abdicates peacefully for his son to rule)

Orphic Origins of Man

- Hera, jealous of young Dionysus, has the Titans kill, cook, and eat him for dinner.
- Zeus then blasted the Titans with his thunderbolts, remakes Dionysus from his still beating heart (places it in Semele).
– Still another version has Zeus grind up D.'s heart and serve it as a drink to Semele
- Mankind was formed from the soot of the scorched Titans. Explains our nature to rebel against the gods.

Why Orpheus?

- Eurydice dies of snakebite, newly wed, he descends to get her, puts everyone to sleep with his music and voice
- Eurydice allowed to return as long as Orpheus does not look back for her
- Of course, just at the entrance, he looks back!
- His trip to Hades gave him special connections with the underworld
- his singing ability and his magical quality to overcome others with song (another word in Greek for magical incantation/spell) also connects him with this special knowledge

Orphic golden tablets

6

1 I come pure from the pure, Queen of the Chthonian Ones,
2 Eucles and Euboleus and other gods – as many *daimones* (as do exist).
3 For I also claim to be of your happy race.
4 I have paid the penalty for unrighteous deeds.
5 Either Moira overcame me or the star-flinger with lightning.
6 Now I come, come as a suppliant (feminine) to Persephone,
7 so that she may kindly send me to the seats of the pure.

Source: *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife*. F. Graf and S. I. Johnston.