

LITERATURE.

THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS IN HESIOD
AND AESCHYLUS.

II.

IN a former number we examined the treatment of the Prometheus-myth in Hesiod. We shall now proceed to the much more complicated and difficult task of investigating the interpretation it has received from Aeschylus. The difficulty arises in great part from the fragmentary character of our material. It was the manner of Aeschylus to unfold his theme in the form of the so-called trilogy, or rather tetralogy, that is, in an organically connected series of three tragedies, relieved by a fantastic after-piece called a satyric drama. It is obvious that the significance of any single play in such a system cannot possibly be realised fully except in the light of the whole. Now of the Prometheus-trilogy we have only one tragedy entire, probably the first of the series, the Prometheus Bound. We know, however that this was followed by another called the Prometheus Unbound, and we have a few fragments of this latter play. A diligent use of this material, imperfect as it is, enables us to reconstruct the essential movement of the whole trilogy. That, considered carefully in the light of the peculiar way of thinking about God and man, which we find tolerably plainly and consistently expressed in the other work of this poet, may help us to answer in a more or less convincing manner the question which we have set ourselves—How did Aeschylus interpret the Prometheus myth?

In such a case as this demonstration is impossible. But even if the solution which we at present incline to, may not meet all objections—and it would be foolhardy to expect that it should—it may be hoped at least that it will contain some element of truth, and that the process by which it is arrived at will bring into prominence some characteristics of the poet which deserve attention.

The raw material out of which Aeschylus shaped his Prometheus-trilogy consisted of the following elements:

First, the war of Zeus against the Titans and Cronos, and the establishment of his sovereignty on the ruins of an older regime. This tradition we found in Hesiod and remarked upon. In Aeschylus and in Pindar we find a characteristic, and for our purposes, a most important addition to it. Zeus finally becomes reconciled to the powers he has displaced, frees them from Tartarus, and transfers them to happy seats in the Islands of the Blest, far in the western ocean, where the Titans and Heroes live in endless blessedness under Cronos their hoary king—the type of a serene old-age after past storm and conflict.

Second, Hesiod's account of Prometheus which we have already examined; his transgression, punishment, and deliverance by Heracles.

Third, the well-known legend in Hesiod (which, however, is not brought by him into connection with the Prometheus-myth) of the progressively deteriorating series of four ages and four generations of men upon the earth; the golden age with its virtuous and blessed people; the silver age vastly inferior to the first; third, the still worse brazen period of wild warriors who finally exterminate each other; fourth, and worst of all, the present heavy-laden and sin-stricken race from whom faith and shame have fled away to heaven, whose extinction cannot be far distant. Aeschylus makes no use of the details of this legend, but the possibility implied in it of the extinction of one kind of man and the substitution of another in his place, leads him, as we shall see, to a thought the proper comprehension of which is of cardinal importance to our right understanding of his meaning.

Fourth, the worship of Prometheus in Athens as the fire-bringer, the founder of human civilization, side by side with Hephaestus, also a fire-god, and Athene who is always prominently a civilizing power. Between the city and the famous deme Colonus, immortalized by the beautiful ode of Sophocles, was the grove of Academus, an old Athenian hero, a portion of which was dedicated to Athene. In her sacred precinct there was an ancient statue of Prometheus and an altar for his worship, at the entrance stood a sacred statue of him side by side with one of Hephaestus on the same pediment. Every year a festival was held in commemoration of the gift of fire to man; its special feature being a torch-light race in which the runners carried from the Academy to the city torches lighted at the altar of Prometheus. The first to reach the goal with his torch still burning was winner.

Fifth, an ancient legend which we find also in Pindar's seventh Pythian Ode, of a danger which once threatened Zeus. Zeus and Poseidon—so Pindar tells the story—contended for the love of Thetis, the sea-goddess mother of Achilles. The strife was healed by Themis (mother of Prometheus according to Aeschylus who identifies her with Earth). She, amid the assembled gods, expounded the decree of destiny that if Thetis should wed with Zeus, or any of the brethren of Zeus, she should bear a son mightier than any of the gods, "who should brandish in his hand a new bolt more fell than lightning or the resistless trident." So Themis advises that she be given to a mortal in marriage. She is given to Peleus, most just of men, and all the gods, Zeus himself and his rival Poseidon included, assemble in the "fair Peleian banquet hall" to grace the nuptials. The substance of this tale—the danger: