

Tantalus

by George Upton

Tantalus, a rich and powerful king, was deemed worthy by Zeus to visit the gold-gleaming mansions of the gods on high Olympus and to partake of nectar and ambrosia at their tables. Zeus and the other immortals even deigned to appear under Tantalus' roof, to sit at his table, and converse in his own speech. Such an honor was too great for a mortal to bear. Inflated with pride, he made himself hated by gods and men. He not only made sport of the names of the immortals and uttered falsehoods, but he would reveal their decrees to mortals and steal nectar and ambrosia for his friends. He at last grew so audacious that he was warned and threatened by the gods. Finally his penalty overtook him. Upon one occasion when the gods were visiting him and partaking of a banquet, he decided to test just how far they were omniscient. He killed his son Pelops, prepared his flesh as a test, and set the disgusting food before them. All recognized the unnatural deed of the father except Ceres, whose heart was full of sorrow over the loss of her daughter. So it happened that she partook of the food, and ate of the shoulder of Pelops. Zeus collected the parts of the body, substituted an ivory shoulder, recalled Pelops' soul from Tartarus, restored him to life, and then plunged Tantalus into Hades to suffer endless torment.

When Tantalus regained consciousness, he found himself standing up to his chin in water. Overcome with burning thirst, he bent his head to drink. But the more he bent his head the lower the water receded, and at last sunk into the ground, leaving nothing at his feet but dry, black dust. As he raised his head the water raised, only to disappear whenever he tried to drink. Over his head hung branches loaded with fruit. Between the green leaves were pomegranates, balsamic pears, olives, figs, and spicy apples, but whenever the victim raised his hands to pluck them, a wind drove the branches away from him. His torment was endless. A restless longing never to be satisfied was the punishment inflicted upon him by the revengeful divinity.

Salmoneus, Sisyphus, Ixion, and Phlegyas

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Salmoneus was a brother of Tantalus, whom Zeus punished so severely for his audacity. A similar fate overtook him also, for he had a spite against the gods and strove to be equal to them. He snatched the offerings intended for Zeus from his altars and commanded that they should be offered to himself. He imitated Zeus' thunderbolts with lighted torches, which he threw down upon the people, and represented thunder by the clashing of iron vessels. In fact he imitated the ruler of the universe in every way.

When he had reached the summit of his insolence his ruin overtook him. Zeus struck him with one of his bolts and hurled him down to Tartarus.

Sisyphus was in the same dreadful place. In the upper world he had been guilty of thefts both among men and the gods. In the very hour of his death he perpetrated an evil deed. He seized and bound Thanatos, the god of death, with brazen bands, and for a long time no one died on earth. The gods of the underworld sent to Zeus this message: "Behold Thanatos, who went to the upper world to bring Sisyphus here, has not returned. For several days no shade has entered our dark kingdom." Thereupon Zeus sent for the powerful war god, Ares, and ordered him to find the god of death. He soon found and released him from his fetters, and Sisyphus was taken to the underworld by Thanatos. Even then he continued his deceitful deeds. He said to his wife: "Do not bury my body and make the customary death offering to the gods of the underworld." Then he appeared before Hades and Persephone and said: "My wife has not buried my body and has neglected to make the death offering. Let me go to her and remind the faithless one of her duty. Then I surely will return."

His wish was granted and he returned to the upper world. As he did not come back, word was again sent to Zeus, who despatched the swift-flying Hermes to take the deceiver back. When Sisyphus saw the divine messenger, his courage gave way, for he knew that no mortal could outdo him in cunning. Hermes took him back to the dark kingdom, where a fearful penalty awaited him. He had to roll a huge block of marble up a high mountain which no sooner reached the top than it went thundering down. He had to begin his task over again with sweat of toil and anguish dropping from his brow to the earth.

Ixion, who had offered violence to the goddess Hera, suffered another penalty. He was tied to a wheel which never ceased revolving. Phlegyas, who burned the temple of Apollo, was also there. He was continually threatened by a rock hanging over his head, which exposed him to constant apprehension and unspeakable torture.

Source:

Upton, George. "Salmones, Sisyphus, Ixion, and Phlegyas." *Gods and Heroes*. Chicago: A.C. McLurg & Co., 1912. 61 – 65. Electronic.

Upton, George. "Tantalus." *Gods and Heroes*. Chicago: A.C. McLurg & Co., 1912. 57 – 60. Electronic.