

Kersey Graves's Sixteen Crucified Saviors: Prometheus as Test Case



“Be advised! ’Tis shameful for
the wise to persist in error.”
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (1.1039).¹

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If one wants to enter into the old discussion of the “dying and rising” gods, one must resign oneself to the idea of having to straddle the line separating real scholarship and pseudo-scholarly rubbish.² It comes with the territory. Claims that Prometheus is to be counted among the so-called “crucified saviors” hail almost exclusively from the rubbish side. As to the scholarly side, Prometheus’s name only appears once in the cumulative index of James George Frazer’s classic multi-volume work, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1935), and then only in relation to his theft of fire from Olympus in the chapter “The Origin of

¹ *Aeschylus* (LCL; vol. 1 of 2; Cambridge, MA: trans. ET: Hubert Weir Smyth; Harvard University/London: William Heinemann, 1923), 311.

² My use of the term “rubbish” is not intended to be derisive but descriptive of a genre of literature that, first, is characterized by a pretense to scholarship that is not sustained by the substance of what is presented, and second, is not rooted in an authentic love or pursuit of truth or knowledge, but rather exists only to feed the prejudices and/or prurient interests (scandal, sensation, cynicism, hatred) of the readers who consume it. It is often characterized by (1) sensationalism and conspiratorial thinking, (2) demonization of religious people, (3) wide-ranging plagiarism, (4) bogus etymologies, (5) embellishment of sources, (4) preferring old, outdated scholarship, or long-debunked pseudo-scholarship to newer, better research.

Perpetual Fires.”³ Prometheus is not mentioned at all in the index of Tryggve N. D. Mettinger’s recent scholarly review and restatement *The Riddle of the Resurrection: “Dying and Rising God’s” in the Ancient Near East* (2001).⁴ In view of this we may at first be surprised to encounter the following statement in Martin Hengel’s classic study of crucifixion in the ancient world:⁵

The only possibility of something like a ‘crucified god’ appearing on the periphery of the ancient world of gods was in the form of a malicious parody, intended to mock the arbitrariness and wickedness of the father of the gods on Olympus, who had now become obsolete. This happens in the dialogue called *Prometheus*, written by Lucian, the Voltaire of antiquity.

One of the striking things about Hengel’s statement is that it implicitly rules out all crucified gods (besides Jesus) *except* Prometheus. Hengel did not, in other words, count the usual candidates, such as Attis, Adonis, or Tammuz, as really representing crucified gods.

I. KERSEY GRAVES AND HIS *THE WORLD’S SIXTEEN CRUCIFIED SAVIORS* (1875)

But before we come round to Hengel’s singling out Prometheus in connection with his being a “crucified god,” we must first address the history of that claim as a common-place in the literature, or to be more precise, the illiterature of rubbish. As we pass along that road into the past we are inevitably led back to a significant bottleneck at Kersey Graves’s, *The World’s Sixteen Crucified Saviors* (1875). The first thing to understand about Graves is that he was no scholar. What he wrote about Prometheus he took over more or less chunk by undigested chunk from earlier writers who were also, for the most part at least, not scholars. Still it would be Graves’s book, more than any of the earlier

³ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (12 vols.; 3rd ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1935), 2.260 and 12.422.

⁴ Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of the Resurrection: “Dying and Rising Gods” in the Ancient Near East* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001).

⁵ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (trans. by John Bowden; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977), 11.

books he had plundered for his content, that would become the main source of the story for those who followed after him.

It is uncertain how much Graves's reading carried him beyond the popular denunciations emanating from the rubbish presses of his day. From what he says it seems highly probable that he never actually read the myths of Prometheus in the texts of the classical authors themselves. As a result, Graves makes a number of outlandish claims, which we shall first summarize and then attempt to answer in turn.

Prometheus appears as the ninth on the list of Graves's sixteen crucified saviors. Graves claims that the traditional Prometheus story, which has him "bound to a rock for thirty years, while vultures preyed upon his vitals," is in fact a modern story and an "impious Christian fraud." The real story, he says, as given by the ancient authors, of whom he names most prominently Aeschylus, but then also Hesiod and Seneca,⁶ held, or so Graves claims, that Prometheus was "nailed to an upright beam of timber, to which were affixed extended arms of wood, and that this cross was situated near the Caspian Straits,"⁷ and in fact "that the whole story of Prometheus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection was acted in pantomime in Athens five hundred years before Christ, which proves its great antiquity." For the latter claim Graves credits Robert Taylor's *Syntagma of the Evidences of the Christian Religion* (1828), who, in his context, was discussing Aeschylus's tragedy *Prometheus Bound*. But by far the most remarkable feature of Graves's argument is:

II. AN ANCIENT HYMN CELEBRATING PROMETHEUS AS CRUCIFED SAVIOR?

Graves presents the following supposedly ancient hymn fragment celebrating Prometheus's "propitiatory offering," which he seems to want his readers to think came from Aeschylus:

"Lo, streaming from the fatal tree
His all-atoning blood,
Is this the Infinite; yes, 'tis he,
Prometheus, and a God.
"Well might the sun in darkness hide,

⁶ Kersey Graves, *The Worlds Sixteen Crucified Saviors* (4th ed. rev. and enl.; Boston: Colby and Rich, 1876), 110-11. Aeschylus is given prominence by being listed in the title of the section, Hesiod and Seneca in the body of the text.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

And veil his glories in,
When God, the great Prometheus, died
For man the creature's sin."

If these really were authentic lines from an ancient hymn to Prometheus it would amount to serious evidence for Prometheus's being, to use Graves's terminology, a "sin-aton[ing], oriental Savior." But they are NOT authentic, nor were they originally written about Prometheus. Rather they represent rewritten lines to a much-beloved Christian hymn by the famous British hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674-1748): "At the Cross".

Graves was not the originator of this imposition upon and plagiarism of Isaac Watts. And despite the fact that he does not tell us his source, and that this falsified Prometheus hymn has had a very wide circulation both in Graves's day and ours, we are still able to trace its origin. It came from a writer named Robert Taylor. In the passage under discussion from Graves, explicit mention is made to Robert Taylor's *Syntagma* (1828), but the bogus Prometheus hymn is from another of Taylor's works: *The Diegesis* (1829).

One of the features of Taylor's recasting of Watts's hymn that gave me pause when I first encountered it was the slight variation of one line from the hymn as I knew it. Where Taylor had "Well might the Sun in darkness hide /And veil his glories in," the more familiar version had not "veil his glories in," but "shut his glories in."⁸ Yet happily it was just this variation that helped me establish that Robert Taylor did in fact know Isaac Watts's hymn and use it as the basis of his own falsified Prometheus hymn. In a Good Friday-Sermon entitled "The Crucifixion of Christ," which Taylor says he delivered in the Rotunda, Blackfriars-Road, on November 14, 1830,⁹ Taylor actually quoted the same passage from Watts's hymn in its original form, with the same variant I spoke of before intact, and he actually credits the hymn to Watts. I place the two Taylor passages next to one another below to make their literary interdependence absolutely plain:

⁸ *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts* (9 vols.; Leeds: Edward Baines, 1813), 9.162-63.

⁹ The difficulty is (1) why would you preach a Good-Friday Sermon in November, (2) November 19 fell on a Saturday not a Friday in 1830, and (3) the reprint of the same sermon appearing in *The Comet* 1.15 (Sun. Nov. 15, 1832): 225, has it occurring in the same place but on April 3, 1831, which was a Sunday not a Friday.

Taylor's "Good Friday" Sermon ¹⁰	Taylor's <i>Diegesis</i> ¹¹
<p>Lo! streaming from the fatal tree, His all-atoning blood: Is this the Infinite? 'tis He, My Saviour and my God. Well might the Sun in darkness hide, And veil his glories in; When God, the mighty Maker, died, For man the (Creature)'s sin"</p> <p><i>Watts Hymns, Book 2; Hymn 9.</i></p>	<p>Lo, streaming from the fatal tree, His all-atoning blood! Is this the Infinite? 'Tis he— Prometheus, and a God! Well might the sun in darkness hide, And veil his glories in, When God, the great Prometheus, died, For man, the creature's sin.</p>

To give Taylor the benefit of the doubt, however, we must note that he never actually represented his rewrite of Watts's hymn as an authentic ancient Prometheus hymn. Nor, on the other hand, did he make any effort to indicate that it was not. But even there he might be exonerated from the charge of intentional fraud on the ground that he may well have considered Watts's hymn to be far too familiar for anyone to miss his allusion to it. If that be the case, he seriously underestimated the level of cultural illiteracy that would characterize writers coming after him, writers like Kersey Graves.

¹⁰ "'The Crucifixion of Christ: A Good-Friday Sermon,' Preached by his Highness's Chaplain, The Rev. Robert Taylor, B.A. At the Rotunda, Blackfriars-Road, April 3, 1831"; in *The Devils' Pulpit* 1/14 (June 3, 1831): 209, repr. in Robert Taylor, *The Astronomical-Theological Discourses...Originally Published under the title The Devil's Pulpit* (vol. 1; London, Richard Carlisle; repr. W. Dugdale, n.d.), 209.

¹¹Robert Taylor, *The Diegesis: A Discovery of the Origin, Evidences, and Early History of Christianity, Never Yet Before or Elsewhere So Fully and Faithfully Set Fourth* (Boston: Abner Kneeland, 1834 [orig. ed. London: J. Cunningham, 1829]), 194.



**Fig. 1: Prometheus Tied/Impaled?
c. 600 BC, Louvre¹²**



**Fig. 2: Prometheus Tied
to Fluted Column
c. 560-550 BC, Vatican
Gregorian Etruscan
Museum**

III. PLAGIARIZING ROBERT TAYLOR'S BOGUS PROMETHEUS HYMN

Graves was scarcely alone in thinking that Taylor was presenting an authentically ancient hymn to Prometheus. And given that plagiarism and extensive block quoting have always been part and parcel of the rubbish genre, this culturally illiterate misimpression has been widely in evidence right down to the present. And wherever it has been repeated, only those lines originally given by Robert Taylor appear, indicating once again that Taylor was their ultimate originator. At this point a few examples of the coterie of plagiarizing copy-cats are in order.

1. *John Atwood*. This fisherman of Cape Cod, in his somewhat redundantly titled *The Pilgrimage of a Pilgrim Eighty Years* brings the falsified Prometheus hymn into his book as part of a larger chunk on Prometheus he plagiarizes from Taylor.¹³ This is a curious dependency, given Atwood's claims in his Prospectus that his book "contains a great variety of novel subjects not to be found in any other book now in print," and that the "author flatters himself that his path to wisdom has never before been trodden by any man of learning."¹⁴

¹² Picture credits: Figures 1 and 2 public domain at Wikimedia Commons (commons.wikimedia.org), Figures 3 and 4 public domain, accessed Aaron Atsma's www.theoi.com.

¹³ John Atwood, *The Pilgrimage of a Pilgrim Eighty Years* (Boston: By the author, 1892), 156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

2. *D. M. Bennett.* Taylor's plagiarizers however are probably outnumbered by Graves's. D. M. Bennett, for example, reproduces the falsified Prometheus hymn in his *The Champions of the Church: Their Crimes and Persecutions*, published in 1878 for the grandly named Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, when plagiarizing directly from Graves. In the process Bennett makes the attribution of Taylor's falsified hymn to Aeschylus more explicit than Graves himself had done.¹⁵

3. *Frank B. Robinson.* Yet another example of a Graves plagiarizer is Frank B. Robinson, founder of the once well known but now, happily, defunct positive thinking mail-order religion from Moscow, Idaho, called Psychiana. It appears in a book entitled *GOD...and Dr. Bannister: This War Can Be Stopped* (1941),¹⁶ in which Robinson predicted the speedy downfall for Adolf Hitler when everyone got together and spoke the tyrant's overthrow into existence by shouting "The Spirit of God Will Bring Your Speedy Downfall" at his picture.¹⁷ In the process of transferring text without attribution directly from the pages of Graves to the lips of his main character, Dr. Bannister, Robinson transfers Taylor's falsified Prometheus hymn as well.

4. *James R. Morrell.* Finally there are those who reproduce the falsified hymn without our being able to easily establish where they got it, as in the case of James R. Morrell, who repeats it at the beginning of a chapter in his book *Spiritism and the Beginnings of Christianity* (1936), and credits it directly to Aeschylus.¹⁸

5. *J. M. Hill.* It was probably inevitable that even in the uncritical world of rubbish mongering someone would eventually discover the link between the falsified Prometheus hymn and the famous hymn by Isaac Watts. It was perhaps also inevitable that someone from that world would come up with the bright idea of trying to turn the facts on their heads by accusing Isaac Watts of plagiarizing the hymn from the worshippers of Prometheus. J. H. Hill, in his book *Astral Worship* (1895?) does this. He includes the falsified hymn, and interestingly attributes it to the "Potter's translation" of Aeschylus's, *Prometheus*

¹⁵ D. M. Bennett, *The Champions of the Church: Their Crimes and Persecutions* (New York: D. M. Bennett, Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1878), 17-18.

¹⁶ Frank B. Robinson, *GOD...and Dr. Bannister: This War Can Be Stopped* (Moscow, ID: "Psychiana," 1941), 147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁸ James R. Morrell, *Spiritism and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Goodland, IN., L. Morrell, 1936), 61.

Bound. He goes on to say that the hymn will be “readily recognized as the original of a Christian song.”¹⁹

Where did Hill come up with the idea of crediting the Prometheus hymn to a particular translation of Aeschylus? The translator he names is Robert Potter (1721–1804), who published an edition of the tragedies of Aeschylus in 1777, which was often reprinted afterward.²⁰ It seems a risky business if he knew the hymn wasn’t there, which he certainly would have known if he had troubled to check, as I have. It may be that Hill picked up the idea that the falsified Prometheus hymn came from Potter’s translation from Taylor himself, who in his discussions of Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* in the *Diegesis* mentions using it.²¹

6. D. M. Murdock/ Acharya S. Finally we come to a contemporary author named D. M. Murdock, who writes under the name Acharya S. and who represents herself on her website (truthbeknown.com) as a member of the American School of Classical Studies, Athens, Scholar of Archaeology, History, Mythology and Languages, but who, despite her high flying claims, is actually just another regurgitator of long-debunked rubbish. In an online article entitled “The Origins of Christianity and the Quest for the Historical Jesus,” Murdock does not actually plagiarize from Taylor but she nevertheless treats his falsified hymn as authentic. In a lengthy footnote mentioning the problem of finding a source for the falsified Prometheus hymn Murdock writes:²²

Taylor, *The Diegesis*, pp. 192-4. Taylor indicates that the following stanza is found in "Potter's beautiful translation" of Aeschylus's play: "Lo, streaming from the fatal tree, His all-atoning blood! Is this the Infinite? 'Tis he - Prometheus, and a God! Well might the sun in darkness hide, And veil his glories in, When God, the great Prometheus, died, For man, the creature's sin." However, this stanza apparently does not appear in modern translations, including Potter's. It is well-known that the Christians mutilated or destroyed virtually all of the works of

¹⁹ J. H. Hill, *Astral Worship* (New York: Truth Seeker Company, [1895?]), 45.

²⁰ See, e.g., “Prometheus Chain’d,” *The Tragedies of Aeschylus* (trans. R. Potter; Norwich: J. Crouse, 1777), and frequently afterward: e.g.; Oxford: N. Bliss, for M. Bliss and R. Bliss, 1808. See further, J. Michael Walton, *Found in Translation: Greek Drama in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 198.

²¹ Taylor, *Diegesis*, 192.

²² [Http://www.truthbeknown.com/origins4.htm#foot63](http://www.truthbeknown.com/origins4.htm#foot63).

ancient Greek and Roman authors, such that we might suspect this stanza has either been removed or obfuscated through mistranslation. On the other hand, it may be a mistake on Taylor's part or a result of his ambiguous language preceding the passage, or he may have been thinking of another "Prometheus Bound" written after the Christian era, perhaps by Milton. Taylor was in prison when he wrote *The Diegesis*, thereby having difficulty accessing books, so he is to be excused for errors that invariably creep into anyone's work.

Murdock is right to admit the problem of finding the falsified hymn in Aeschylus, but her rush to exonerate Taylor is out of place given the fact that Taylor did not explicitly say the hymn comes from Aeschylus. It is interesting in any case how she continues to endorse the authenticity of the erroneous hymn with another false claim, namely, that it is "well-known that the Christians mutilated or destroyed virtually all of the works of ancient Greek and Roman authors."

Since I initially copied the above footnote from Murdock's website she has removed it. That she still considers the hymn genuine, however, is suggested in the text of the current online edition of "The Origins of Christianity and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," where she quotes a bit of the hymn in her section on Prometheus when she says that "Taylor states that in the play [i.e., Prometheus Bound] Prometheus is crucified 'on a fatal tree.'" To this she attaches a footnote directing the reader to the same pages in Taylor as in the footnote cited above, but now with all her earlier additional comments removed.²³

IV. KERSEY GRAVES, GODFREY HIGGINS AND PROMETHEUS CRUCIFIED

As noted earlier, when introducing Prometheus as the ninth of his alleged sixteen crucified saviors, Graves had claimed that according to the classical sources, Prometheus "was nailed to an upright beam of timber, to which were affixed extended arms of wood, and that this cross was situated near the Caspian Straits," but that the "modern story of this

²³ Acharya S. "The Origins of Christianity and the Quest for the Historical Jesus Christ," excerpted from idem, *The Christ Myth Anthology* (19, and n. 183) (<http://www.stellarhousepublishing.com/originsofchristianity.pdf>) (accessed Dec. 6, 2009). At the time of writing (12.6.09), the original form of the Murdock's text of the footnote could still be found online at <http://www.mega.nu/ampp/acharyanotes.html#foot63>.

crucified God, which represents him as having been bound to a rock for thirty years, while vultures preyed upon his vitals, Mr. Higgins pronounces an impious Christian fraud. ‘For,’ says this learned historical writer, ‘I have seen the account which declares he was nailed to a cross with hammer and nails.’”²⁴

Graves asserts a little later, that on this cross Prometheus died, “gave up the ghost,” and that “the whole story of Prometheus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection was acted in pantomime in Athens five hundred years before Christ.”²⁵

Graves credits his dismissal of what he describes as the familiar Prometheus myth to Godfrey Higgins’s *Anacalypsis: An Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of Saitic Isis* (1836). Like Graves, Higgins writings hailed from the rubbish side rather than the scholarly side. Even a friendly reviewer commented in reference to the *Anacalypsis*: “Never was there more wildness of speculation than in this attempt to lift the veil of Isis.”²⁶ Graves even offers his reader what is supposed to be a quotation from Higgins, for which he wrongly directs his reader to page 327 of the first volume of Higgins’s work. But he gets neither the page right (seemingly²⁷), nor the quotation right. What Higgins had actually said was:²⁸

Prometheus is said to have been nailed up with arms extended, near the Caspian Straits, on Caucasus...In our versions of the tragedy of Æschylus, Prometheus is always fraudulently said to be Bound. It is called *Prometheus vincetus*, He was nailed up in the form of a cross, with hammer and nails. The object of this impudent fraud need not be pointed out. In this case Protestants and Papists are all alike.

In his supposed quotation of Higgins, Graves over-specifies what the earlier author had actually said. Below I give first the part where Graves is apparently relying on Higgins as his source (= 1), followed by the place where Graves actually represents himself as quoting Higgins (=2):

²⁴ Graves, *Sixteen Crucified Saviors*, 111.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

²⁶ “Godfrey Higgins,” in *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott 1988).

²⁷ Was Graves using an edition other than the ones I have seen?

²⁸ Godfrey Higgins, *Anacalypsis: An Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of Saitic Isis; Or, An Inquiry into the Origin of Languages, Nations, and Religions* (vol. 2, London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, 1836), 113.

Higgins, <i>Anacalypsis</i> 2:113	Graves, <i>Sixteen Crucified Saviors</i> (p. 111)
<p>(1) Prometheus is said to have been nailed up with arms extended, near the Caspian Straits, on Caucasus...</p> <p>(2)</p> <p>He was nailed up in the form of a cross, with hammer and nails.</p>	<p>[Prometheus] was nailed to an upright beam of timber, to which were affixed extended arms of wood, and that this cross was situated near the Caspian Straits.</p> <p>(2) “For,” says this learned historical writer, “I have seen the account which declares he was nailed to a cross with hammer and nails.”</p>

The embellishments added by Graves are highly significant. Graves greatly expands Higgins’s statement about Prometheus’s being “nailed up with arms extended,” by turning it into an explicit statement about a wooden cross: “an upright beam of timber, to which were affixed extended arms of wood,” a “cross.” And even when presenting himself as quoting Higgins, Graves still takes the liberty of elaborating upon what Higgins had said about Prometheus’s being “nailed up in the form of a cross,” to have him instead actually being nailed “to a cross.” All this aids Graves’s program of representing of Prometheus as a pre-Christian crucified savior.

What Graves really seems interested in here is to be able to claim that Prometheus did not merely suffer, but, as he positively asserts a bit later, that Prometheus actually died, that he “gave up the ghost,” and that “the whole story of Prometheus’ crucifixion, burial, and resurrection was acted in pantomime in Athens five hundred years before Christ.”²⁹ If there was no cross, no death, no burial, no resurrection there, then Prometheus falls short as a dying and rising god.

In contrast, what Higgins had insisted was only that Prometheus had been nailed in the *form of* a cross, and he objected to what he saw as the implication of the common English translation of the name of Aeschylus’s play as *Prometheus Bound*, a point he makes explicitly

²⁹ Graves, *Sixteen Crucified Saviors*, 111-112.

elsewhere when he complains about “the plays of Æschylus, in which, as I have before remarked, we have the Prometheus *bound*, so called to disguise it, but which ought to be the Prometheus *crucified*.”³⁰

Taken together then Graves and Higgins make the following assertions which we shall attempt to answer in the remainder of the present discussion:

1. That the tradition myth, which, according to Graves, describes Prometheus “as having been bound to a rock for thirty years, while vultures preyed upon his vitals,” is in fact a modern story and an “impious Christian fraud.”
2. That Prometheus was really nailed either *in the form of a cross* (Higgins) or else *to a wooden cross* consisting of “an upright beam of timber, to which were affixed extended arms of wood” (Graves).
3. That calling Aeschylus’s play *Prometheus Bound*, rather than *Prometheus Crucified* represents an “impudent fraud,” on the part of “Protestants and Papists.”
4. That Prometheus died and rose from the dead just like Jesus.

V. IS THE TRADITIONAL MYTH A MODERN INVENTION?

For an example of the traditional Prometheus story, I resort to a copy of a child’s book of mythology given to my children long ago by their grandparents:³¹

Zeus ordered that Prometheus be chained to the rugged Caucasus Mountains between the Black and Caspian seas. There one of Zeus’ birds, a gigantic eagle, would devour Prometheus’ liver every day. At night, his liver would miraculously restore itself, only to be eaten again the following day...Finally...Zeus allowed his son Herakles to prove his great skill by killing the wretched eagle.

³⁰ Higgins, *Anacalypsis*, 2.136.

³¹ Charles F. Baker III and Rosalie F. Baker, *Myths and Legends of Mount Olympus* (ill. Joyce Audy Zarins; Peterborough, NH: Cobblestone, 1992), 18.

1. *Vultures and Vitals?* The reader will immediately notice a number of details that are different in the above description of the traditional myth from what Graves says about it in assertion #1. Graves had spoken of “vultures” (plural) feeding on Prometheus’s vitals, yet in the ancient (and therefore also the traditional) tellings of the myth, it is not a number of vultures, but a single eagle (Greek: *aetos/aeitos* : Latin: Aquila)³² that gorges itself, and it is on Prometheus’s liver in particular (Greek: *hēpar* : Latin: *iecur*),³³ not his “vitals” generally, that it feeds.³⁴

2. *Thirty Years?* Thirty as the number of years Prometheus was bound is also not modern as Graves claims but is derived from one reading of the first-century Hyginus’s *Fabulae* 54 and 144 (“post triginta annos”),³⁵ which should probably read instead not *triginta*, “thirty,” but *triginta milia*, “thirty thousand,” to agree with what Hyginus himself notes in his *Astronomica* 2:15, where he says: “But Prometheus he [Zeus] bound with an iron chain to a mountain in Scythia named Caucasus for thirty thousand years, as Aeschylus, writer of tragedies, says.”³⁶ The confusion between thirty and thirty thousand arose from the fact that in the manuscripts of the *Fabulae*, thirty thousand was indicated not with words but with XXX with a line written over them. In

³² Greek: e.g., Hesiod, *Theogony* 523; Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 1022; Apollodorus, *Library* 1.7.1 and 2.5.11, Lucian, *Prometheus* 2, *On Sacrifices* 6, *Dialogues of the Gods* 5.1 / Latin: e.g., Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2.15, *Fabulae* 54, 144. It should be said that it was common in the nineteenth century to call the bird that gorged itself on Prometheus’s liver a vulture. See, for example, the article on Prometheus in John Lemprière’s *A Classical Dictionary* (6th American ed.; corr. and improved. by Charles Anthon; New York: Evert Duyckinck, Collins, Collins & Hannay, G. & C. Carvill, and O.A. Roorback, 1897), 676, which uses almost the precise words Graves used: “the fable of the vulture preying on his vitals.” Lemprière also speaks of the “vulture, or, according to others, the eagle, which devoured the liver of Prometheus.” Also note the translation of *aetoi* at Matt 24:28 and Luke 17:37 as “eagles” in the KJV and the ASV, but as “vultures” in the NRSV, NIV, NASB, NLT, ESV, and the NAB.

³³ Greek: e.g., Hesiod, *Theogony* 523; Lucian, *Prometheus* 2; Apollodorus, *Library* 1.7.1 and 2.5.11 / Latin: e. g., Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 2.10.24.

³⁴ Although the Latin writer Hyginus (*Fabulae* 54, 144), who lived in the time of the emperor Augustus, has “heart” (*cor*) rather than “liver” (*iecur*).

³⁵ *Hygini Fabulae* (ed. Mauricius Schmidt; Jena: Hermann Dufft, 1872).

³⁶ Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2:15 (ET: Mary Grant, *The Myths of Hyginus* [Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1960]: *Prometheum autem in monte Scythiae nomine Caucaso ferrea catena vinxit; quem alligatum ad triginta milia annorum Aeschylus tragoediarum scriptor ait.*

manuscripts where the over-lining had been inadvertently left out, the figure was reduced to XXX or thirty.³⁷

3. *Did Prometheus Die?* Graves wanted to portray Prometheus as a dying and rising savior when in fact Prometheus did not, could not die. Indeed the engine that drives the plot of the story and makes Prometheus's situation so utterly wretched, is that he was immortal, and therefore could never hope to escape from his suffering through death. No matter how much the eagle gorged itself on Prometheus's liver one day, it would be whole again the next, and so on into perpetuity. Thus in Aeschylus, Prometheus contrasts his own potentially endless suffering with the mortal suffering of Io: "You'd have a hard time with my fate, then, for I can't die. Death would deliver me, but there is no limit to my suffering until Zeus falls from power" (752-56).³⁸ Then later, when asked by the Chorus why he is not afraid to hurl taunts at Zeus, Prometheus retorts: "If I can't die, what should I fear?" (934 [p. 190]).

4. *A Wooden Crucifix?* As for the second assertion, in its more explicit form, namely that Prometheus was nailed to a wooden cross consisting of "an upright beam of timber, to which were affixed extended arms of wood," that simply isn't true. In a few sources we encounter something like an "upright beam" but are given no encouragement to think it was made of timber or elaborated by "extended arms of wood." In the early account of Hesiod (8th/7th cent. BC) there is mention of the involvement of a shaft or pillar, but translators have had trouble deciding just how the pillar functioned. Thus in the new Loeb Classical Library edition of the *Theogony* 522-23, Glenn W. Most's translation has Hesiod saying that Zeus bound Prometheus "with distressful bonds, driving them

³⁷ See H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (6th ed.; London: Methuen, 1958), 72-73, n. 60. The overlining is included, for example, in the Latin edition of Marshall: Hyginus, *Fabulae* (2nd rev. ed.; ed. P. K. Marshall; Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana; Munich: K.G. Saur, 2002), 59 and 126. And is assumed in the recent English edition: *Apollodorus' Library and Hyginus' Fabulae: Two Handbooks of Greek Mythology* (trans. R. Scott Smith and Stephen M. Trzaskoma; Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2007).

³⁸ ET: William Matthews in *Aeschylus, 2: The Persians, Seven Against Thebes, The Suppliants, Prometheus Bound* (eds. David R. Slavitt and Palmer Bovie; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 550. The line numbers follow the Loeb edition and are at variance with those of the University of Pennsylvania edition. To compensate I also give the page numbers for the latter in each case.

through the middle of a pillar,”³⁹ while the older Loeb edition of H. G. Evelyn-White has the pillar being driven through the middle of Prometheus.⁴⁰ The word “pillar,” in Hesiod here is *kiōn*. It appears in the Septuagint four times, three in reference to the pillars that the blinded Samson pushed apart to bring down the Philistine theater (Judges 16:25,26, and 29), and the other in reference to a silver pillar placed in the temple by King Asa (1 Kings 15:15).

A similar item appears in Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*. After he rivets Prometheus to the rock of the mountain Hephaestus is told: “Now straight through his [Prometheus’s] chest, drive the adamantine wedge’s stubborn edge with full force” (64-65). Here the word is not “pillar” *kiōn* but “wedge” *sphēn*, but the idea of Prometheus’s being run through is still present. Cicero, in the *Tusculan Disputations* (2.10.23), in a Latin translation of a fragment of a play by Aeschylus (perhaps the lost play *Prometheus Unbound*) has Prometheus describing himself as *transverberatus*, i.e., “pierced through.” Again the Latin term for “wedge” is involved, this time in the plural (*cunei*).

Having Prometheus either bound to or run through by a pillar or wedge is not a regular feature of the myth. In the literary sources he is usually described as being attached directly to the rock of the mountain. This is true even in Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, where the wedge comes into play only *after* Prometheus had already been fixed to the mountain. Prometheus was fettered (*ochmazō*), says Aeschylus in one place, to *petrai*, i.e., rocks or crags (5, 147), and in another, to a *pharanx*, i.e., a mountain, cleft, chasm, or gully (15, 142).

Still, given its presence in the two important early sources presence, Hesiod and Aeschylus, it is scarcely surprising to find some echoes of it running in both directions (i.e, bound and run through) in the ancient iconography of Prometheus as well, though, again, not very frequently.

5. *Iconography of the Pillar*. A famous Laconian kylix (drinking cup) dating c. 560-550 BC at the Vatican’s Gregorian Etruscan Museum shows Prometheus with his arms and legs tied with cords to a free-standing pillar or, more precisely, to a fluted column (fig. 2, cf. fig. 1).⁴¹

³⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia* (LCL; trans. Glenn W. Most; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 45.

⁴⁰ “Prometheus he bound with inextricable bonds, cruel chains, and drove a shaft through his middle” *Hesiod, Homeric Hymns and Homeric* (LCL; trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University/London: William Heinemann, 1914), 117.

⁴¹ Cat. 16592. See also the similar image in the black-figure vase (c. 500 BC) in the Louvre (MNE 1309), See fig. 1.

Similarly there are a number of depictions of Prometheus apparently impaled (the long way) on a pillar, which show him so arranged as to be essentially sitting on it with one end apparently entering at his fundamental aperture and apparently exiting between his shoulder blades at the base of his neck. (I say apparently because the depictions, which are in profile, could also appear to present Prometheus as simply superimposed on the pillar). In one of these, now at the National Museum, Athens (16384), Prometheus has his hands tied behind him and his feet tied together as well (fig. 3). In a second, at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (F. 1722), his arms are outstretched in front of him with his wrists tied together but with his feet unbound. In a third, at the Museo Archeologico, Florence (76359), his arms *and* his feet are both free. Each of these images appears on black-figure amphorae (two handled ceramic vase with extended neck) from the sixth-century BC. Most pictures described that included the pillar depict the moment Heracles arrives and begins showering arrows in the direction of the eagle (figs. 1 and 3, not 2)

VI. PROMETHEUS BOUND...OR NAILED?

Both Graves and Higgins insisted that Prometheus was fixed in place with nails. As we have seen Higgins even went so far as to object to calling Aeschylus's play *Prometheus Bound* instead of *Prometheus Crucified*. In making this point Higgins had made the charge that "in our versions of the tragedy of Aeschylus, Prometheus is always fraudulently said to be Bound [*sic*]. It is called *Prometheus vincitus*, He was nailed up in the form of a cross, with hammer and nails."⁴² Here we are a bit confused by the structure Higgins's statement because it leaves us unclear as to whether he presents the Latin name of Prometheus's play as the corrective to the problem of the English title, or as its cause. If the former is the case, he would apparently have meant to say that the word *vincitus* in the Latin title meant "*crucified*" not "*bound*." But if that were so the Latin could have easily had some other reading, something like *Prometheus crucifixus*, since *vincitus* really does mean "bound." Perhaps then Higgins was treating *vincitus* as the source of the inadequate English word "bound" in the title. The problem there is that the Latin title fairly translates the Greek title *Prometheus desmōtēs*.

Desmōtēs in the Greek title echoes its use as an adjective meaning "fettered," "in chains," that is to say, "bound," in line 118 of the play

⁴² Higgins, *Anacalypsis* 2:113.

itself, where Prometheus says: “Behold me, an ill-fated god, immanacled (*desmōtēn*), the foe of Zeus.”⁴³ Furthermore in the play Aeschylus has Prometheus attached to the rocks in fetters or shackles (*desma/desmoi*) (6, 52, 141, 147). In line 54 these are called *psalia*, which Weir translated “bracelets” (= *pselia*?). These Haephaestus is instructed to place around Prometheus’s wrists before fastening him—presumably by fastening them—to the rocks “*passaleue pros petrais*” (56). Hesiod had also used the word *desmos* to describe what bound Prometheus (*Theogony* 522, 616). Two other words Aeschylus uses in his play to describe Prometheus’s bonds are *chalkeumata* “brass bonds” (19), and *pedai* “fetters” (76).

This way of describing Prometheus’s binding is also well attested in the iconography of the Prometheus myth, which regularly shows his wrists in shackles with the shackles riveted to the rock (fig. 4). An especially fine example of this is the sculpture of Prometheus being freed, from the first-century AD Sebasteion of Aphrodisias,⁴⁴ but several other examples could be mentioned.⁴⁵

1. *No Cross, Yet Still Cruciform?* Is there clear evidence of a consistent motif of presenting Prometheus affixed to the rock, as Higgins suggested, in the “form of a cross.” A perusal of the rich offerings of images of Prometheus in the seventh volume of the magisterial *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*⁴⁶ reveals that there was really no fixed way of portraying Prometheus bound in terms of the arrangement of his limbs. Sometimes his hands are bound above his head, as in the elegant Etruscan gem from the fifth century BC, now in the British Museum (1966.7-27.1).⁴⁷ Sometimes one arm is up and the other down.⁴⁸ Quite often his hands are tied behind his back.⁴⁹

⁴³ English translation: H. Weir Smyth.

⁴⁴ Marianne Bergmann, *Chiragan, Aphrodisias, Konstantinopel: Zur mythologischen Skulptur der Spätantike* (Weisbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1999), tafel (pl.) 69.

⁴⁵ E.g., Princeton University Art Museum y1989.30; Besançon, Musée des Beaux-Arts et d’Archéologie D 863.3.314; Rome, Musei Capitolini 329; Trier, Rheinisches Landesmuseum S T 2821a-b.

⁴⁶ Multivolumed: Zurich/ Dusseldorf and Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1981-2009.

⁴⁷ LIMC (= *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* 7.423.36. See also LIMC 7.425.63c and 63f.

⁴⁸ E.g., LIMC 7.424.42.

⁴⁹ E.g., LIMC 7.422.26; 7.423.30, 38, 39, 41, 41a.

Occasionally indeed his arms are outstretched, thus rendering his body more or less cruciform.⁵⁰ Tom Harpur, in his book, *The Pagan Christ*, asserts that Prometheus “was pinned by the wrists and ankles to a rock in the Caucasus Mountains.”⁵¹ But Harpur’s generalization is wrong. Usually Prometheus’s feet are left free.⁵² This is not surprising, since both Aeschylus and Lucian, though both have Prometheus affixed in an upright position,⁵³ speak only of his wrists being bound, not his feet.⁵⁴

One very interesting type of image in which the arms are outstretched but the feet left free has Prometheus standing in the middle of a rock arch (a cave’s mouth?) with one wrist chained to each side. One very beautiful example of this is a fourth century, BC, red-figure vase at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (1969.9) (fig. 4 [below]). A very similar example of this motif can be seen at the Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptotek, Munich (9679).

With Prometheus’s arms outstretched, and with the uncharacteristically placid expression on his bearded face, these two images come closest of any I have seen to what early medieval portrayals of the crucified Christ looked like.⁵⁵ Conceivably images like these could influenced medieval Christian artists. But to admit this is certainly not to suggest that the idea of a crucified Jesus itself ultimately derived from such images. For one thing, they did not really portray a crucified Prometheus. In any case, given the preponderance of the pictorial and literary evidence, Higgins’s idea that Prometheus’s limbs had to be arranged cruciform can be definitively ruled out.

2. *Getting Prometheus Unstuck.* Another item that needs considering to make our discussion complete is the aid of Heracles, who comes and shoots Zeus’s eagle and then sets Prometheus free. This is a prominent feature in the various ancient retellings of the myth,⁵⁶ with the result that

⁵⁰ E.g., LIMC 7.424.45 g; 7.425.60; 7.427.72 bis, 77.

⁵¹ Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* (New York: Walker, 2004), 84-85.

⁵² Exceptions being, e.g., LIMC 7.427.72 bis and 7.424.54.

⁵³ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 29-34; Lucian, *Prometheus* 1.

⁵⁴ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 52-65; Lucian, *Prometheus* 2.

⁵⁵ LIMC Suppl. 2009 (2), pl. 209, add 2. A third related image is a mosaic floor from the Domus della Fortuna Annonaria which shows Prometheus chained not to a stone arch but to what look like two rock pillars that lean inward but do not join at the top (LIMC suppl. 2009 [2], pl. 208, add 1).

⁵⁶ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 771-74; Hesiod, *Theogony* 525-30; Apollodorus, *Library* 2.5.11; Hyginus *Fabulae* 54, 144 and *Astronomica* 2.15; Lucian. *Prometheus* 20.

the iconography of Prometheus represents not, as Graves and Higgins claimed, our being delivered from our sin by Prometheus, but Prometheus's being delivered from his chains and from Zeus's eagle by Heracles.

Most often, when Heracles is included, he is seen in the process of shooting the eagle,⁵⁷ although in the first-century AD sculpture from the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias discussed earlier we see the eagle already lying dead and Heracles actually helping Prometheus out of his bonds. Similarly an Etruscan engraved hand-mirror from Bolsena (early 3rd cent. BC) now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, shows Prumathe (Prometheus) already freed and being bandaged by Esplace (Asclepius) with the eagle lying dead and a seated Heracle (Heracles) at rest.⁵⁸



Fig. 3: Prometheus Impaled
6th cent. BC, National
Museum Athens



**Fig.4 : Prometheus Shackled
Cruciform? 4th cent. BC,**
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

VIII. HENGEL, LUCIAN, AND PROMETHEUS CRUCIFIED

If Prometheus is not the crucified savior Graves presented him to be, as we have sought to show, then whence comes Hengel's remark quoted at the beginning in connection with Lucian's *Prometheus*? Well, it comes from the simple fact that Lucian intentionally adopts the

⁵⁷ Eg., LIMC 7.425.60, 67, 69; 7.426.70, 71; 7.427.72 bis., 78a, 79.

⁵⁸ Larissa Bonfante, *Corpus Speculorum Etruscorum U.S.A. 3*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1997), 40-43, pl. 11a-b (pp. [121-22]). Also, L. B. van der Meer, *Interpretatio Etrusca: Greek Myths on Etruscan Mirrors* (Amsterdam: J. C. Geiben, 1995), 76-79.

terminology of crucifixion as part of his program of belittling the gods. Three verbs are commonly translated “to crucify” in *Prometheus*: (1) *anastauraō* (chs. 1, 4, 17), (2) *stauraō* (ch. 1), and (3) *anaskolopizō* (chs. 2, 7, 10). The first two appear in the New Testament,⁵⁹ the third does not. The use of these words does not mean, however, that Lucian was expecting his readers to imagine that Prometheus had been crucified on a traditional cross, to say nothing of his ever having existed at all, he only uses the language analogically, and he does so in such a way as to leave his readers no room to suppose that he, in his second-century AD retelling of the already centuries old myth, was departing from its traditional form in any essentials. Lucian uses a number of terms to describe what Prometheus was actually affixed to, including *krēmnos*, “beetling crag” (ch. 1), *horos*, “mountain” (ch. 1), *petrai*, “rocks,” (ch. 1), *Kaukasos*, the name of the mountain: “Caucasus” (chs. 1, 4, 9). It is the mountain that Hermes refers to as *epikairotatos...ho stauros*, “a very fitting cross,” (ch. 1) not an actual cross (cf., chs. 9 and 10). And again as in the earlier versions we have Prometheus first placed in *desma* (ch. 1, cf., ch. 9) and only afterward attached to the mountain by them: “Now then,” says Hermes, “let us look about for a suitable rock (*krēmnos*), if there is a place anywhere that has no snow on it, so that the irons (*desma*) may be riveted in more firmly and he may be in full sight of everybody as he hangs there” (ch. 1).⁶⁰ The adoption of crucifixion language is part of the spoof and provides Lucian with fodder for mocking the absurdity of the vicious Zeus, while at the same time, as Hengel had pointed out, making Hermes and Haphaestus appear to “carry out their gruesome work like two slaves, threatened by their strict master with the same punishment if they weaken.”⁶¹ Thus when Prometheus asks Hephaestus and Hermes for pity for his unjust sentence, Hermes responds: “You mean, be crucified (*anaskolopisthēnai*) in your stead the instant we disobey the order! Don’t you suppose the Causcus has room enough to hold two more pegged up (*prospattaleuthentas*)?” (ch. 2).

All the other details in Lucian echo the traditional myth. An eagle comes to eat Prometheus’s liver (chs. 2, 4, 9, 20-21). There is, again, no question of his actually dying. He foresees both his misfortune and his future deliverance when “someone will come from Thebes, a brother of yours [i.e., Heracles], to shoot down the eagle” (ch. 20). The reasons

⁵⁹ *Anastauraō* (1x = Heb 6:6); *stauraō* (46x).

⁶⁰ *Lucian* (LCL; vol. 2 of 8; trans. A. M. Harmon; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University/London: William Heinemann, 1915), 243.

⁶¹ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 11.

Prometheus is crucified are the three traditional ones: First, he had tricked Zeus into taking the inferior part of a sacrifice by wrapping bones in gleaming fat,⁶² second, he created humans and especially women,⁶³ and third, he stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans (ch. 3).⁶⁴ In the course of having Prometheus defend himself against the justice of his punishment, Lucian has him make an interesting point that touches upon the idea in the literature of rubbish that Lucian portrayed a Prometheus who was worshipped as a crucified god. It was a good thing for the Olympian gods, Lucian's Prometheus says, that he had made humans, because in doing so he had provided them with worshippers. His own lack of self-interest in doing this, Prometheus goes on to argue, is proven by the fact that although the humans build temples to many of the gods, they do not build temples to him: "In fact," he says, "there are temples to Zeus, to Apollo, to Hera and to you, Hermes, in sight everywhere, but nowhere any to Prometheus" (ch. 14). In Lucian's mind, then, Prometheus *was not worshipped*. Lucian had never heard Taylor's falsified Prometheus hymn sung in the streets and temples where he lived. In fact no one did prior to 1829.

⁶² Cf., Hesiod, *Theogony* 535-58.

⁶³ Cf., Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1:82 and 363; Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods* 5:1.

⁶⁴ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 50-53, *Theogony* 565-707; Aescylus, *Prometheus Bound* 254; Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods* 5:1.