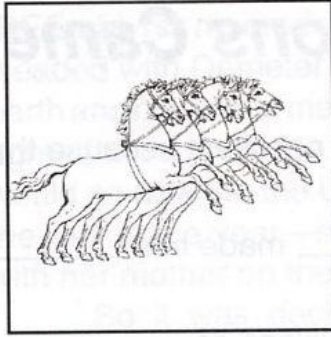


The Horses of the Sun



Saturn = Cronus

Jove = Zeus

Before Apollo [uh-PAW-loh] took over the sun, it was under the charge of Helios [HEE-lee-uhs], a Titan and nephew of old Saturn [SAT-urn]. He did a good job and never rebelled against Jove, so Jove let him alone.

Helios had a son, Phaethon [FAY-eh-thon], which means “shining” or “the shiner.” One day as he was coming home from school, another boy asked him who his father was. Phaethon answered proudly, “My father is the Sun God, Helios, who drives the horses of the day and the golden chariot. He lights up earth and sky. I am his son.”

The other boys jeered at him; they would not believe it. Phaethon ran home, crying out to his mother, Clymene [KLIM-eh-nee], what had happened. “Is Helios really my father?” he asked.

“He is indeed,” Clymene answered, smiling. “Why not go to the land where the sun rises and find out for yourself?”

Phaethon decided to make the journey. He traveled far to the east, across rivers and over mountains, until he came to the palace of the sun, bathed in white light. Helios received him with joy and, as proof of his loving fatherhood, told the boy he would give him anything he wished.

“Oh my father,” Phaethon replied, “let me drive the Horses of the Sun for just one day.”

Helios was shocked and appalled. He realized how rash he had been in promising the boy anything. But he could not recall his promise—that was one of the eternal rules of the gods. All he could do was caution Phaethon and beg him to ask for something else. He warned the boy about the steepness of the way, both the ascent in the morning and the coming down in the evening. He warned him, too, about the monsters of the sky that lay in wait: the wild bull (Taurus), the giant crab with tearing claws (Cancer), the stinging scorpion (Scorpio), and the lion with huge jaws (Leo)—what we call the Signs of the Zodiac. “At times, Phaethon” he said, “the horses rear and plunge so that even I can’t hold them! And you, after all, are only a boy.”

But Phaethon was determined. All these dangers were only challenges for him. Sometimes children just won’t listen.

So Helios sadly accepted what he could not call back. He led the way to the chariot of gold.

Eos [EE-ohs], the Dawn, flung open the silvery doors of the East with her pink fingers. They saw the stars fade and the moon hurry off, growing pale. The four horses, breathing fire, their hoofs gleaming with light, were led out from their stalls and harnessed to the shining chariot.

Helios gave Phaethon some last warnings. “Spare the whip, my boy, and follow the wheel tracks.” He pointed out that the route did not lie straight through the skies, but rather in a slant, a wide curve, that avoided both the



Phaethon

North Pole and the South Pole. “Don’t go too high,” he said, “or you’ll burn the dwellings of the heavens—even Mount Olympus! But don’t go too low, or you’ll burn up the earth. Always keep to the middle way and follow the track!”

With joy Phaethon seized the reins, and the Horses of the Sun dashed off into a sky that was still the color of violets and roses. But now that changed to gold. Clouds fell away, and the sun rose.

Almost at once the four horses sensed that the driver behind them was not their master. They felt the lighter weight, the lighter touch on the reins. They began to move faster and faster. Leaving the main track, they dashed off toward the high stars. Phaethon could not hold them. In terror he saw the earth spread out below him and the sky monsters closing in on him. The Crab reached out its sharp claws, and the Lion opened its huge jaws to roar; the Scorpion pounced with its long stingers. Somehow he escaped them, but meanwhile the horses turned and headed downward. Now the earth was burning, cracking open. The mountains were the first to go—the Alps and the Appenines of Italy, Mount Ida of Troyland, Mount Athos of Thrace, the Caucasus. Grasslands burned into deserts and seas shrank; the Nereids dove down to the deepest parts of the sea.

With heaven and sea and earth threatening to sink into Chaos again, the Earth Mother raised a mighty prayer to Jove. She could no longer supply men with food, all life was threatened, the very gates of heaven were smoking, the clouds flamed. “Great Jove, deliver us!” she prayed. Jove heard, but he had already seen the disaster. Earth’s highest mountains were ablaze—Parnassus and Helicon, where the Muses lived, and highest Olympus were all scorched. Fearing the end of all things soon, the whole work of Creation reversed, Jove hurled an enormous lightning bolt at the careening chariot, then rapidly shuffled the clouds and drenched the blazing earth with rain until the fires were put out.

The forked lightning fell true and ignited the chariot. Phaethon, still hanging on, fell like a streak of lightning, or a falling star, and plunged head first into the river Eridanus. Here the Naiads, nymphs of brooks, fountains, and springs, found him. Full of admiration for his courage and pity for his tragic fate, dying so young, they buried him and erected a tombstone paying homage to his bravery. He had failed in his too-ambitious enterprise, but he had shown greatness, even though his reach had exceeded his grasp. His sisters, the Heliades, came to mourn him and were turned into poplar trees, their tears forever falling from their leaves into the river, shining there like



It took a very powerful god to handle the Horses of the Sun.



Jove

golden drops of amber.

Heli�s, of course, was full of grief. He no longer wanted to drive the Horses of the Sun across the sky. But Jove insisted and gave him a new chariot. The horses had come back all right, once they had shaken Phaethon off with some help from the lightning bolt. They galloped away to their stables in the West, like any horses after a long day's work. So Heli�s reluctantly resumed his duties, until the younger Apollo was ready to take them over. Clearly, only a Titan or a High God could handle that job. For anyone else:

"Who drives the horses of the sun, Shall lord it but a day."
Or even less, as in the sad story of Phaethon.