Deucalion and Pyrrha

The ancient Greeks · Greece

Where It Comes From

The Greeks remembered a flood in the time of Deucalion, son of the Titan Prometheus. Plato and Aristotle both mention it. The two fullest tellings that survive are by the Roman poet Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses* (about AD 8), and in the *Library*, a Greek handbook of myths from the first or second century AD that goes under the name of Apollodorus. The two tellings differ in places.

What Happens

Zeus, king of the gods, decides to destroy the people of the Bronze Age. In Ovid's telling, he has just seen the cruelty of King Lycaon, who served human flesh at his table, and he judges the whole race to be wicked.

Prometheus warns his son Deucalion. Deucalion builds a wooden chest (in Ovid, a small boat), fills it with food, and climbs in with his wife, Pyrrha.

Zeus pours down rain, and the sea god Poseidon lets the rivers loose. Most of Greece is drowned. For nine days and nights the chest floats, until it comes to rest on Mount Parnassus.

When the rain stops, Deucalion makes an offering to Zeus, and Zeus sends Hermes to grant him a wish. He asks for people. In Ovid's telling, the lonely couple ask the goddess Themis at her shrine, and she tells them to throw the bones of their great mother over their shoulders. Deucalion works out that she means the stones of the earth, the mother of all.

The stones that Deucalion throws become men, and the stones Pyrrha throws become women. (In Greek, the word for people, *laos*, sounds like the word for stone, *laas*.)

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. Zeus's anger at a wicked age of humankind.

Who was saved, and how. Deucalion and Pyrrha, a husband and wife, warned by Prometheus. In Ovid, they are the only good people left.

The boat or the refuge. A wooden chest, or a small boat, landing on Mount Parnassus.

What came after. An offering, a riddle, and a new human race from stones.

Other Greek towns claimed the chest had landed on their own mountain: Othrys, Athos, even Etna in Sicily. It is a reminder that peoples liked to place the great stories in their own country.

THINK IT THROUGH

Deucalion and Pyrrha had to work out what "your mother's bones" meant before they could start again. Why do you think the story gives them a riddle instead of a plain instruction?

Sources

Apollodorus, *Library* 1.7.2, translation at theoi.com.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.163–415, translation at theoi.com; and “Deukalion”, theoi.com.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.