

Phaethon

A short excerpt from

Varitan's ILLUSTRATED GREEK Myths

He had us all convinced. He seemed so confident! When he spoke of the planet and its government, it was as if he had received such a strong vision of things as they were and must be that no other way of seeing was possible. Yes, we listened, we watched, we bought—and now we reap the catastrophe that was sewn among us. We could not forget him if we tried! Even our landscape—marred and marked by that hand long since turned to ash—calls out his accursed name: “Phaethon! Phaethon, the son of the Sun, who dared steer the course of the planet!”

Phaethon, born a mortal human, never knew his father. How could he? His father was Helios, the god of the sun, and though he watched his carriage daily from afar, he never could look directly at him or try to approach, for fear of going blind or burning up. Such is the result of many immortal-mortal pairings: not resentment, not rancor, but quite simply insuperable distance. His father was there and would always be there—not here, not for him.

As a child Phaethon was unusually withdrawn, overly sensitive, and sometimes deeply mortified about who he was or was not: the mortal son of an immortal father powerful beyond measure and visible by all men from all nations, including all of Phaethon’s young friends, but not by Phaethon himself—at least not in the way he would have liked.

He took refuge in fantasies and lies, and soon he himself came to believe them. He told everyone he met that he was being groomed to succeed his father—yes, that he, Phaethon, a mortal and schoolchild, would one day guide the radiant sun across the sky, responsible for each day and each night, revered by all nations.

So adamantly and so often did he throw on this godly mantle that it began to look natural on him. He taught himself about revolutions and rotations, about gravitational attraction and magnetic repulsion, and as soon as he could absorb this celestial information he was delivering it back authoritatively in public lectures to his friends and neighbors and even his teachers. He became, in fact, our resident expert on the economy of heavenly bodies and how it affected our lives.

And that was how it went awry, for just because some mathematical soul can observe the systems and cycles of the spheres does not mean that this same soul has any aptitude for reading human signs or dispensing advice to families and rituals to honor the gods. Yet long before his rightful time, Phaethon was doing all this and more. In truth, the system of the stars is only the foundation

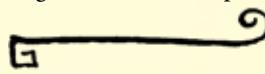
on which the earthly edifice is raised and human fate is decided. It takes a lifetime of learning for one kind of knowledge to blossom into the other—but Phaethon had feigned this blossoming, and thus prematurely he set about recommending courses of action, with both his eyes on his tables and little regard for human data.

Soon it was not individual fates but the fate of the entire globe that Phaethon put in his own hands with supreme confidence. For he had developed an idea, a plan, a project rooted deep in the chasm of his own cloven nature. It was a heroic but diabolical plan: to alter the course of the sun.

“The systems of the skies and the earth are quite simple,” he would say, “and only a slight structural adjustment to the sun and its revolutions would do away with winter altogether and restore our parched lands to the kind of fertility they once knew long ago, and better. Yes, my friends: the Eriadnus river once so vitally swift and now so loathsomely dry will once again flow its course.”

And who could contradict him? He couched his ideas far more expertly than he developed them: the lost golden age of winterless years and abundant harvests, the minor alteration to the system of planetary government, and—of course!—the simplicity of it all, its obviousness.

It is true again and again, but we forget, that the ideas stated with most certainty and most quickly accepted by people are those that should be most suspected of shoddiness, most inspected for rotten foundations. But we did not question Phaethon. He was the guardian of the planet by birthright. He was our top expert.



Time passed, the sun and earth danced around each other again and again, and Phaethon grew up. He reached middle age, and the sun beating down on his now-balding head each day painfully reminded him of his unfulfilled promise. People still asked him for professional advice on when to plant their crops and when to harvest, but behind his back they began to speak skeptically: “He probably made that whole thing up. Helios would never give up his reigns, not even to his own grown child.”

Phaethon had never been able to stand such grumblings. In his zeal to banish them he had given no thought to how, when they inevitably resurfaced, he would address them again. From the very depths of his cocoon of lies he asked his aged

mother how he could at last meet his father, Helios, Lord of the Sun.

Helios had expected this day long before and had instructed his once-lover, Phaethon's mother, how to respond: Phaethon must travel west as far as he could and meet his father in his evening palace, where his rays could do no harm.

Phaethon left within the week and within three months he had sailed farther west than any known man. There, as the evening's rays dimmed on the horizon, he called out: "Father Sun, I have come to know you, who once so abruptly abandoned me."

Helios responded slowly: "Welcome, my son. It is only natural that you should long to know of your origins. In truth I can neither reject your scorn nor accept your blame—but only offer to grant some request as a token of my love. Thus is the nature of such pairings as your mother and I made. Whether our intimacy was well-advised is only for you to decide with the way of your life."

"Glad I am you have offered—without my having to ask—some piece of your majesty for myself," Phaethon pronounced eagerly. "Long have I studied the development of the heavens and marked the sun's progress in our skies. Long have I served in my city as your earthly counterpart, interpreting these patterns and the wide tangle of data they present in terms of human quantities and earthly economies. And long have I yearned to take hold of your chariot's reigns for one day and chart its path for the good of all men and all nations, and for the glory of my luminescent house, which you, great Helios, did build."

Helios, reddening and shivering on the horizon, answered softly: "My son, you have practiced well my ways, yet the government of my path is best left in unearthly hands. So many are the obstacles, so dangerous the route, and so critical its completion for all forms of life—not just man's—that to give it up to another god no less to my mortal son would be a grave error indeed. Though I admit I am bound by my word to grant you what you wish, I tell you once and plainly: no good can come of this commandeering, and plenty, *plenty* of bad."

Helios was fast disappearing into his nightly seat—only a sliver remained, and to that sliver Phaethon steely remarked: "I hear your warning but dismiss it, for I sense you feel threatened and envious of the son who would be Sun, whose mastery of the earth and the heavens could surpass yours. Step aside, old man, for tomorrow you shall see the waters of the Eriadnus flow as never before, and do not be surprised if amidst the

general rejoicing of nations whose better development my formulas fuel I am prevented from delivering those luminous reigns back into your withered old hands."

With a sigh, Helios sank beneath the waters. "And so it shall be: your very own morning, first or last we shall see. Be prepared."

The night seemed to last forever for Phaethon, shivering below his ship's deck. Sleep he could not, so he reviewed his detailed plans to proceed: the consensus of the greatest earth-bound experts on the optimal course to steer for global harmony—a prescription that seemed as clear as day.

And so began Phaethon's day, the strangest day we have known. The sun was late in rising, its steeds unaccustomed to Phaethon's commands. All of us held our breath, thinking some catastrophe was upon us. Even the wild animals stared at the horizon, questioning this longest of dawns. Then suddenly it was up and off, racing across the sky as if to make up for lost time. But what time was it? Eight o'clock? Ten? For the sun was racing toward its zenith, and just as it reached it, two hours too early, it began to grow. The sun got bigger and bigger and began to fill the sky. It became unbearably hot and so bright that no one could open their eyes without being blinded.

People and animals alike were thrown into chaos—no one knew what to do. Brush fires sprang up spontaneously and spread rapidly through forests and prairies. Even the ancient glaciers on top of our mountains for millennia—they melted, in a day, and began to cascade down the foothills. Soon the Eriadnus river was flowing again, and overflowing, and flooding our towns and our fields, leaving all of us to scramble desperately for higher ground.

It is useless to describe what damage was wrought on that day. Deserts were born, and lakes, where once there were forests and fields; storms were brewed that did not die down for years; countless creatures perished. Who could believe that such a catastrophe could be caused by one man? That the private discontent and public acquisitiveness of one fleshy body could accomplish such ill for us all!

Zeus ended Phaethon's life in a moment, turning him to ashes with a bolt. The ashes came fluttering down on us and on the river Eriadnus—made stronger, indeed, as he had promised. They come down on us still, after all these years, and perhaps forevermore.

