And so, to keep us calm when our prayers sometimes remain unanswered, and to help us to be as accepting as possible of the divine plan of the immortals, the ancients made up these stories about Phaëthon and other stories of the same sort. On the surface, they seemed like old wives' tales and the fables of the foolish and uneducated. But if one were to examine the inner core of these tales from the proper perspective, he would realize that they were clearly intended to make our lives better. But now let's see what the ancients had to tell us about Phaëthon.

### Chapter 1: On Phaëthon

The Sun and the Nymph Clymene were supposed to have been Phaëthon's parents. But when Phaëthon refused to back off from an argument with Jupiter's son Epaphus, and bragged that his father was the Sun, Epaphus claimed that his boasting was based on a falsehood. Ovid confirms this in the first book of his *Metamorphoses*:

> A son, Epaphus, was born to her, thought to have sprung at length from the seed of mighty Jove, and throughout the cities dwelt in temples with his mother. He had a companion of like mind and age named Phaëthon, child of the Sun. When this Phaëthon was once speaking proudly, and refused to give way to him, boasting that Phoebus was his father, the grandson of Inachus rebelled and said: "You are a fool to believe all your mother tells you, and you are swelled up with false notions about your father." Phaëthon grew red with rage, but repressed his anger through very shame and carried Epaphus' insulting taunt straight to his mother, Clymene. (748–56)

Tzetzes tells the same story in *Chiliad* 4, history 137 (300). But Pausanias, in his description of Attica, claims that Phaëthon was really the son of Aurora and Cephalus (1.3.1), and Hesiod repeats the same claim in his *Theogony*: "And Eos bare to Tithonus brazen-crested Memnon, king of the Ethiopians, and the Lord Emathion. And to Cephalus she bare a splendid son, strong Phaëthon, a man like the gods" (984–87).

The ancients fabled that Phaëthon was so enraged by Epaphus's insults that he wanted to tell everyone about his noble parents. So he ran off to his father the Sun, and kept petitioning him until his father took an oath that he would grant Phaëthon whatever he wanted. Then Phaëthon asked the Sun to allow him to use his chariot and to control the light for a full day. The Sun was terribly upset by Phaëthon's request, although he couldn't deny his son anything that he had promised to him under oath. So he used every argument he could to try to convince him that it would be a mistake to undertake such a difficult and strenuous task, especially since he lacked the raw skill and presence of mind required to complete it. But since neither warning Phaëthon, nor attempting to stop him, nor begging him to desist from taking up such a great burden had any effect, the



Sun reluctantly handed over the chariot and the horses' reins to his son. Ovid has a brilliant discussion of the dispute in the second book of his *Metamorphoses* (747ff.), and Lucian also talks about it in his *Dialogues of the Gods* (24.1 ff.).

However, since Phaëthon didn't know how to keep the chariot on its proper course, he took an alternate route; and because he was afraid of Scorpio, he brought the world too close to the fierce, burning heat. Even the land adjoining the poles was subject to unusual heat. And it wasn't long before the Ethiopians' country was devastated by a very severe and unusual cold snap.

Once Jupiter realized what was happening, and sensed the danger that every living thing might be wiped out, he flung Phaëthon from the chariot with a bolt of lightning from the heavens. Then Phaëthon was cast down on the banks of the Eridanus [Po] river, as Apollonius [of Rhodes] confirms in the fourth book of his *Argonautica*:

> . . . and entered deep into the stream of Eridanus; where once, smitten on the breast by a blazing bolt, Phaëthon half-consumed fell from the chariot of Helios into the opening of that deep lake; and even now it belcheth up heavy steam clouds from the smouldering wound. (596–600)

Lucretius, in his fifth book, observed that after Phaëthon was killed, the Sun took charge of the horses once more and went about his journey as usual:

> But the almighty Father, stirred then with fierce anger, crashed down ambitious Phaëthon from his car to the earth with a sudden thunderbolt, and the Sun, meeting his fall, caught up from him the everlasting lamp of the world, and bringing back the scattered horses yoked them in trembling, and then guiding them on their proper path, restored all again — . . . (399–404)

There's even a place in Celtic lands where Phaëthon is supposed to have come down. It's where the springs that are the source of the Eridanus [Po] river gush forth in the Pyrenees mountains, as Dionysius confirms in his *Geography*: "Here you will see the Pyrenees mountains and the Celts. They are not very far from the streams of Eridanus. There at night by the desolate rivers the Heliades grieved for their fallen brother Phaëthon" (D.P. 288–91).

It's said that Phaëthon's sisters (whose importance we considered in our chapter on the Sun [5.17]) took the death of Phaëthon so hard that the gods relieved them from their endless mourning by changing them into black poplar trees. Ovid tells the story in the first book of his *Letter From Pontus*: "Happy you also whose lips, in the act of calling upon your brother, the poplar clothed with new bark" (2.31–32). And their tears were changed into amber, as the same poet says in the second book of his *Metamorphoses*: "Still their tears flow on, and these tears, hardened into amber by the sun, drop down from the new-made trees, the clear river receives them, and bears them onward, one day to be worn by the brides of Rome" (264–66).

Still, according to Artemidorus of Ephesus, the Celtic version of this story was that Apollo's tears were made of amber, and not the tears of the Heliades.[3] (This was supposed to have happened when Apollo, overcome with grief over Aesculapius's death, launched an attack on the Hyperboreans for the outrage they had committed against him.) Other writers said all of this happened during the period when Apollo had to become a slave because he was responsible for the Cyclopes' death. Some writers even said that Phaëthon's name was really an epithet based on that heavenly fire; for his original name was Eridanus, and the Eridanus river was named in his honor.

These are the things that the ancients said about Phaëthon under the cover of myth. They said that Clymene and the Sun were Phaëthon's parents, because he represents heat or burning, which takes its origin from the Sun. For φαέθω means "I burn." His mother was supposed to be Clymene, because she represents water, the etymology of ἀπὸ τοῦ κλύειν, or "from flooding." For both Anaxagoras and Heraclitus knew that the stars were made of fire, and that they owed their continued existence to those vapors that the Sun's power draws from the earth.[4] For when these vapors get warmed up, the heat is really intense, as becomes obvious during summer days. And when the earth's vapors thicken and the Sun heats them up (a condition that's usually present just before it starts to rain), it gets so hot that it's almost intolerable. That's why Phaëthon (or the heat of those vapors stirred up by the Sun) is the Sun's and Clymene's child.

Other writers thought that Phaëthon was the son of Cephalus and Aurora, because Cephalus (really the Sun) is supposed to be the ruler [Gr. κεφαλή = head] over all the stars. For heat is in fact the product of the Sun's power as it makes its way through the sky. They fabricated that story about Phaëthon acquiring his father's chariot because the Sun's heat ranged far and wide, and many provinces were ruined by the severe heat. My own interpretation of the myth is as follows: at one time a confluence of certain planets produced extremely dry or extremely hot conditions that were simply unprecedented; and this would have happened toward the end of September, when the Sun was in the most remote part of Libra.

That's why the ancients made up the story about Phaëthon falling because he lost his courage as he approached Scorpio. For they imagined that he really lost his mind in that part of the Zodiac which is in the remotest part of Libra and heading towards Scorpio, where the road was supposed to have been burned up (there were ten grades on either side of it). And when the Sun's chariot had arrived at that point, and the short days still hadn't made it any cooler, the Sun's chariot is supposed to have gone off its usual route, and an opportunity for a myth was created.

[3] Artemidorus (*FGrH* 3B 428) is not the source. See *Schol. in A. R.* 4.611–17, ed. Wendel, 289.

[4] Kirk and Raven #529 (391)=DK 59 A42, 2: 15; 277 (202)=DK 22 A1, 1: 140.



Thus the story of Phaëthon simply refers to a very unusual dry spell brought on by the confluence of some wandering stars. He's supposed to have fallen down by the banks of the Eridanus river, because this type of dryness is usually followed by floods, or plague, or earthquakes, or a bad grain harvest. For in fact, when the Sun's awesome heat and the Earth's dryness were supposed to have attacked France, Greece, and Italy in the year of Our Lord 1242, the force of the plague that came in the following year was so terrible that they averaged barely one survivor out of ten thousand people. And the same thing happened in Egypt and Asia after they experienced unusually arid conditions and a sudden spate of floods. And in just one night, during Tiberius Caesar's reign, twelve cities were destroyed by an earthquake.[5] In fact, just by studying the stars Anaximander could predict for the Lacedaemonians not only storms, but even subterranean winds [earthquakes], and when they would occur.[6]

They fabled that Phaëthon was struck by Jupiter's lightning bolt on the banks of the river Eridanus, because the rising constellation Eridanus (just like the rising constellation of Orion) precedes a violent rainstorm. That's why Cicero remarks on the great power of that river in these verses from his translation of Aratus: "You will see Eridanus' quarters in this region: somber stream of heaven with its great force."[7]

This was the reason why they made up that story about Phaëthon being struck by lightning: vapors that have been dilated because of the heat in the uppermost realms of the air are then constricted by their chilly environment (for this is that part of the atmosphere where the Sun's rays simply stop being reflected from the earth and it gets much colder); and then these vapors explode into lightning and thunderbolts, until that heat is finally dissolved.

This also explains why Jupiter was supposed to have flung Phaëthon out of the chariot, and why, if he spots any human failing, he straightens it out. For on different occasions Jupiter represents heat, which gives life to every living thing; or the element of fire, just as burning Vulcan is the air, or the divine mind. And as soon as this air starts getting cold again, those human beings who were almost burned up and destroyed by the heat are restored to life.

Some felt that the ancients had a different reason for making up this story. For them, Phaëthon was the first man to discover how to track the Sun's course, but he died before he was able to perfect the process. And that's why they claimed that he was struck down by lightning, as Lucian says in his *Astrology* (19). Others

[5] Standard historical sources make no reference to a plague (in the technical sense of a contagious epidemic disease) in 1242/3. However, Conti does refer to some serious illnesses among Venetian troops around this time in his *Universal History of his Times* (Venice, 1581). In A.D. 17 an earthquake occurred in Asia Minor, which prompted Tiberius to institute a major rebuilding operation (*CAH* 10:650ff.).

[6] DK 12 A1 5a, 11, 1: 81, 82, 84.

[7] *Phaenomena*, 359–60; *The Poems of Cicero*, ed. Ewbank, 145–46.

claimed that the ancients used this story to warn us against permitting children, or adolescents, or untrained adults to have jurisdiction over matters of critical importance. For it's only fitting that prudent men should have absolute authority over everyone else. And those who put young men in charge of the public's business will often learn that they've made a big mistake, and have gravely compromised both the governors and the governed.[8]

There's also a myth about how Phaëthon's sisters were so inconsolable over his death that the gods took pity on them and changed them into poplar trees. This simply means that when moisture and the Sun's incredible heat get together, the usual result is that many different species of trees and plants start to grow. But once a substance starts to take in more heat than it can tolerate, it becomes a source not of generation, but of corruption. Finally, the last bit of juice to flow out of animal bodies or tree trunks, because it takes a lot of force to squeeze it out, is thicker than the rest; that's why they imagined that amber flowed out of those trees, when Phaëthon's sisters burst into tears.

Other writers played around with the myth until they got it to yield a historical interpretation. For all myths have some kind of basis in history. Thus Tzetzes wrote (in his *Chiliad* 127 [sic]) that Phaëthon was a certain king's son who drove his chariot in a very reckless way along the banks of the river Po (a Celtic river); eventually he fell into the river and died (*Chiliad* 4.137.370 ff.). His sisters wept for him, and they became so grief-stricken that they lost the power of speech. And that's all they meant by saying that they were changed into trees.

Plutarch, in his *Life of Pyrrhus*, said that Phaëthon was the first king of the Thesprotians and the Molossians in the post-flood era (1.1). That's why Lucian, in his *Dialogue On Astrology*, identified Phaëthon as the son of the Sun, but he went on to speculate that Phaëthon had received the chariot because he was the first man to figure out the Sun's course (*Astr.* 19).

Others sought the contorted basis for this fabled concoction in an actual comet that resembled the Sun and was of a huge size. It eventually dissolved and inflicted incredible heat on a number of localities. In fact it is in the nature of a comet (whether it takes the shape of a vapor gathered around the stars, or is long in its own right and burns up slowly, or comes into existence for some other reason) that dryness, heat, and drought follow in its wake, for vapors tend to gravitate more toward heated air than to rain.

As for the moral interpretation of this myth, what the ancients were after here was to crush the insolence of people who thought a good deal too much of themselves, and who assumed that they were experts on everything just because

[8] This conservative dictum is directly opposed to Machiavelli's admiration for youthful daring: "Since fortune is a woman, she is always well disposed towards young men, because they are less cautious and more aggressive, and treat her more boldly": *The Prince*, chap. 25, ed. and trans. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge, 1988), 87.



they were members of the nobility.[9] This kind of arrogance can really drag men into deep trouble. But now let's talk about Dawn.

## Chapter 2: On Dawn

Dawn was Hyperion's and Theia's daughter, and the Sun's and Moon's sister, as Hesiod tells us in these verses from his *Theogony*: "And Theia was subject in love to Hyperion and bare great Helius (Sun) and clear Selene (Moon) and Eos (Dawn) who shines upon all that are on earth and upon the deathless gods who live in the wide heaven" (371–74). Other writers thought that she was the daughter of Titan and Earth.

The ancients said that she prepared the way for the Sun (just as Lucifer prepared the way for her), because she lets us know that the rising Sun is almost upon us, as Orpheus says in his hymn *To Dawn*: "Messenger of the swift Titan, shining far and wide" (78.3).

Homer gives her rosy fingers, because she has a red or off-red color, and in his hymn *To Venus* [i.e., Aphrodite] he reminds us that she traveled on a golden throne: "So also golden-throned Eos rapt away / Tithonus who was of your race and like the deathless gods" (*H. Ven.* 218–19). The poets fabled that Dawn usually rode in a chariot drawn by a team of four rosy horses, as Vergil confirms in his sixth book: "In such interchange of talk, Dawn, with roseate car, had now crossed mid-heaven in her skyey course" (*Aen.* 6.535–36). And in another place he said she had a two-horse team: ". . . saffron-hued Aurora shone in roseate car" (*Aen.* 7.26). But for Theocritus, in his *Hylas*, her horses were not rosy, but white, as this verse makes clear: ". . . nor when Dawn's white steeds first galloped up into the home of Zeus" (13.11). But Lycophron, in his *Alexandra*, insisted that Dawn was usually drawn by the horse Pegasus, as he makes clear in these verses: "Dawn was just soaring over the steep crag of Phegion on swift wings of Pegasus, leaving in his bed by Cerne Tithonus, . . ." (16–18).

Homer, in these verses from his hymn *To Mercury* [i.e., Hermes], wrote that Dawn rose up from the Ocean just like the Sun and all the other planets: "Now Eos the early born was rising from deep-flowing Ocean, bringing light to men" (*H. Merc.*184–5).

Pausanias, in his description of Laconia, set it down that Dawn was so taken by the beauty of Cephalus, who was a very handsome young man, that she abducted him for her own pleasure.[10] And she also seized Orion, as Homer wrote

[9] For the debate on the relationship of nobility to personal worth see Baldesar Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, ed. G. C. Sansoni (Florence, 1929), 1.14–5 (38–43). Machiavelli regarded the nobles as powerful and potentially dangerous to the prince, but more able than the people at large: *The Prince*, ed. and trans. Skinner and Price, 34–37.

[10] 3.18.12. Paus. says that Cephalus is abducted by Day, not Dawn.