

On Joseph

Philo of Alexandria

tr. C. D. Yonge translation

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Chapter I

There are three different modes by which we proceed towards the most excellent end, namely, instruction, nature, and practice. There are also three persons, the oldest of the wise men who in the account given to us by Moses derive three names from these modes, whose lives I have now discussed, having examined the man who arrived at excellence in consequence of instruction, and him who was self-taught, and him who attained to the proposed end by practice. Accordingly, proceeding in regular order, I will now describe the life of the man occupied in civil affairs. And again, Moses has given us one of the patriarchs as deriving his name from this kind of life, in which he had been immersed from his earliest youth.

Now, this man began from the time he was seventeen years of age to be occupied with the consideration of the business of a shepherd, which corresponds to political business. On which account I think it is that the race of poets has been accustomed to call kings the shepherds of the people; for he who is skilful in the business of a shepherd will probably be also a most excellent king, having derived instruction in those matters which are deserving of inferior attention here to superintend a flock of those most excellent of all animals, namely, of men.

And just as attention to matters of hunting is indispensable to the man who is about to conduct a war or to govern an army, so in the same manner those who hope to have the government of a city will find the business of a shepherd very closely connected with them, since that is at is were a sort of prelude to any kind of government.

Therefore, as this man's father perceived in his son a very noble ability, and too great to be left in the obscurity of a private station, he admired him, and cultivated his talent, and loved him more than his other sons; because, too, he was the son of his old age, which last cause is one of the strongest incentives to affection possible. And like a man fond of virtue, he cherished and kindled the natural good disposition of his son by excessive and most diligent care and attention, in order that it might not only not be smothered, but might shine forth more brilliantly.

Chapter II

But envy is at all times an adversary to great good fortune, and at this time it attacked a house which was prospering in all its parts, and divided it, setting all the brothers in enmity against one, who displayed an ill feeling on their own parts, sufficient to counterbalance the affection of his father, hating their brother as much as their father loved him; but they did not divulge their hatred by words, but kept it in their own bosoms, on which account it very naturally became more grievous and bitter; for passions which are repressed, and which are not allowed to evaporate in language, are more difficult to bear.

This man, therefore, indulging a disposition free from all guile and malice, and having no suspicion of the ill will which was secretly cherished against him by his brethren, having seen a dream of favourable import, related it to them, as if they were well affected towards him. "For," said he, "I thought that the time of harvest was arrived, and that we had all gone down to the plain to gather the crops, and

had taken sickles in our hands to reap the harvest, and on a sudden my sheaf appeared to stand up, right, and to be raised up, and to erect itself; and I thought that your sheaves, as if at an appointed signal, ran up and fell down before it, and worshipped it with great Earnestness."

But they being men of acute intelligence, and shrewd in divining the nature of a matter thus intimated to them by means of a figure, with very felicitous conjectures, replied, "Dost thou think that thou shalt be king and lord over us? for this is what you are now intimating by this lying vision of yours." So their hatred was kindled against him more exceedingly than before, as it was continually receiving some fresh pretext for its increase.

And he, suspecting nothing, a few days afterwards saw another dream, still more astonishing than the former one, and again he related it to his brethren; for he thought that the sun, and the moon, and the eleven stars, all came and worshipped him, so that his father marvelling at what had thus happened, laid these events up in his mind, cherishing them, and considering within himself what was to happen.

But he reproved his son gravely, from a fear that he might be doing wrong in some respect, and said to him, "Shall I, and thy mother, and thy brethren, be able to fall down and worship thee? for by the sun you appear to indicate your father, and by the moon your mother, and by the eleven stars your eleven brethren? Let no such an idea ever come into your mind, O my son. But rather let all recollection of these visions which have appeared to you be forgotten, and let them pass from your mind; for to hope and expect a superiority over those of your family and kindred, is a

detestable thing in my opinion, and I think, indeed, in that of every one else, who has an regard for equality and the principles of justice that subsist among kinsman."

But his father, being afraid lest from his meeting with his brothers there might arise some quarrel and disturbance with them, inasmuch as they bore ill will against him on account of the dreams which he had seen, sent them away to keep their flocks at a distance, but retained him at home till a fitting season, knowing that time is said to be a powerful physician for all the passions and diseases of the soul, and a remover of grief, and an extinguisher of anger, and a healer of fear; for it softens and mitigates everything, even such things as are, according to their own nature, hard to be cured.

But when he conjectured that no hatred was any longer abiding in their hearts he sent this his son forth to salute his brethren, and also to bring him word how they and their flocks of sheep were.

Chapter III

This expedition of his was the origin both of great evils and also of great good, each of them being excessive beyond all expectation; for he, obeying the commands of his parents, went to visit his brethren; but they, seeing him coming towards them while at a great distance, conversed one with another, saying nothing of good omen, inasmuch as they did not choose even to call him by his name, but called him a dreamer, and a seer of visions, and such appellations as these.

And to such a height did they carry their rage that (I will not say all of them, but) the greater portion of them plotted his death; and designed, after having slain him, for the sake of not being detected, to throw him into a deep pit dug in the earth, for there are a great many such places in that district dug as receptacles for the rain water.

And they were very near incurring that most excessive pollution of fratricide, as they would have done if they had not been, though with difficulty, persuaded by the advice of their eldest brother, who counselled them not to meddle with such a pollution but merely to cast him into one of these pits, thinking then to contrive some means of saving him, so that when they had all departed he might send him back again to his father without having suffered any harm. And after they had agreed to this he came forward and saluted them; and they took him as though he had been an enemy, and stripped him of all his garments, and let him down into a vast pit, and then, having stained his cloak with the blood of a kid, they sent it to his father on the pretence that he had been slain by a wild beast.

Chapter IV

But on that day it happened by some chance that certain merchants who were accustomed to convey their merchandise from Arabia to Egypt were travelling that way, and so the eleven brethren drew Joseph up out of the pit and sold him to them; the one of them who was the fourth in respect of age instigating this contrivance; for in my opinion, he was afraid lest his brother might be treacherously slain by the others, who had conceived an

irreconcilable hatred against him, and therefore he proposed that he should be sold, substituting slavery for death, the lighter evil for the greater.

But the eldest, for he was not present when he was sold, looking down into the pit, and not seeing him whom he had left there a short time before, cried out and lamented loudly, and rent his clothes, and tossed his hands up and down like a madman, and beat his breast and tore his hair, saying,

“What has become of him? Tell me, is he alive, or is he dead? If he is dead, show me his corpse that I may weep over his body, and so alleviate my grief. When I see him lying dead I shall be comforted; for why should we bear ill will to the dead? There is no envy excited against those who are out of sight. And if he is alive, to what country has he departed?

Where is he kept? for I am not, as he was, an object of suspicion, so as to be distrusted by you.” And when they replied that he had been sold, and when they showed him the money which they had received for him, he said, “A fine trade, indeed, you have been driving? Let us divide the gain: let us wear crowns of victory after thus rivalling the slavedealers, and bearing off from them the prizes of iniquity;

we may well pride ourselves now that we have surpassed them in barbarity, for they indeed traffic in the liberty of strangers, but we in that of those who are most nearly related to and most dear to us. Surely here is newly contrived a great disgrace and a shame which will be known

far and wide. Our fathers left behind them in every part of the world memorials of their virtue and excellence; we shall leave behind us the guilt of a charge of faithlessness and treacherous inhumanity which can never be effaced; for the reputation of extraordinary actions penetrates everywhere; those which are praiseworthy being admired, and those which are blameable meeting with blame and accusation.

In what manner now will our father receive the news of what has happened? You will now, as far as depends upon us, have made the life of him who has hitherto been wonderfully happy and fortunate, not worth living; which will he pity, the child who has been sold, for his slavery? or those who have sold him, for their inhumanity? I am sure he will pity us much the most; since to do wrong is a more terrible evil than to suffer wrong, for the one has for an alleviation two consolations of the greatest influence, hope and pity; but the other is destitute of both these mitigations, and is more unfortunate in the judgment of every one.

But why do I mourn and bewail in this manner? It is better for me to be silent, lest I too should be treated in some terrible manner; for ye are most merciless men in your dispositions, and implacable; and the rage which was kindled in each of you is still furious and vehement."

Chapter V

But when their father heard, not the truth indeed, that his son had been sold, but a falsehood that he was dead, and that he had been slain by wild beasts, he was smitten in his ears by the news that was reported to him, and in his eyes by what was shown to him (for they brought to him his son's

coat rent and torn and defiled with quantities of blood); and being wholly bewildered by the exceeding greatness of the calamity, he lay for a long time without speaking, not being able even to lift up his head, the calamity overwhelming and completely prostrating him;

then suddenly pouring forth as it were a stream of tears with bitter lamentations, he bedewed his cheeks, and his chin, and his breast, and all the garments on his chest, saying at the same time such words as these, "It is not thy death that grieves me, O my son, but such a tomb as has fallen to your lot; for if you had been buried in your own land I should have been comforted; I would have cherished you, I would have tended you in sickness if you had died before me, I would have given you my last embrace, I would have closed your eyes, I would have wept over your dead body lying before me, I would have buried you sumptuously, I would have omitted none of the customary observances.

"Again, even if you had died in a foreign land, I should have said, nature has claimed what was due to, and what belonged to her; and therefore, O my mind, be not cast down; for living men have indeed their separate countries, but the whole earth is the grave of the dead; and all men are destined to a speedy death; for even the longest lived man is but short lived if compared with eternity;

but if it was necessary that he should die violently and by treachery, it would have been a lighter evil to me for him to have been slain by men, who would have laid out his corpse, and have pitied him so far as to scatter dust over him, and at least to have concealed his body; and even if they had been the most merciless of all people, what more could they

have done than have thrown him out unburied, and so got rid of him? And then, perhaps, some one of the passers by on the road, standing by, and beholding him, and conceiving pity for our common nature, would have thought him worthy of some care, and of burial; but now, as the saying is, O my son, thou has become a feast, and a banquet for savage and carnivorous wild beasts, who will eat and devour thy bowels;

I am compelled to endure distresses which I never had imagined, I am without any cause practised in enduring many miseries; I am a wanderer, a stranger, a slave, living under compulsion, having even my very life plotted against by those whom it least became to do so. And I have seen many things, and I have heard many things, and I have suffered many things, all of which have been incurable evils, which however I have learnt to bear with moderation, so as not to yield to them. "But nothing has ever happened more intolerable than this misfortune which has now befallen me; which has consumed and destroyed all the vigour of my soul;

for what can be a greater or more pitiable calamity? The garment of my child has been brought to me, who am his father; but of him himself there is no portion brought, not a limb, not a small fragment, but he has been wholly and entirely destroyed and devoured, not being able even to receive burial; and it seems to me that even his garment would never have been sent to me at all if it had not been by the way of a reminder of my grief, and as a refreshment of my memory as to the sufferings which he endured, so as to afflict me with a never to be forgotten and never ending

sorrow." He indeed bewailed his son in these terms; but the merchants sold his son in Egypt to one of the king's eunuchs who was his chief cook.

Chapter VI

It is worth while, however, after having thus explained the literal account given to us of these events, to proceed to explain also the figurative meaning concealed under that account; for we say that nearly all, or that at all events, the greater part of the history of the giving of the law is full of allegories; now the disposition which we have at present under consideration, is called by the Hebrews Joseph; but the name being interpreted in the Greek language means, "the addition of the Lord," a name most felicitously given, and most appropriate to the account given of the person so called; for the democratic constitution in vogue among states is an addition of nature which has sovereign authority over everything;

for this world is a sort of large state, and has one constitution, and one law, and the word of nature enjoins what one ought to do, and forbids what one ought not to do: but the cities themselves in their several situations are unlimited in number, and enjoy different constitutions, and laws which are not all the same; for there are different customs and established regulations found out and established in different nations;

and the cause of this the want of union, and participation existing not merely between the Greeks and the barbarians, or between the barbarians and the Greeks, but also between the different tribes of each of these respective nations. Then

they, as it would seem, blaming those things which do not deserve blame, such as unexpected occurrences or opportunities, deficiency of crops, badness of soil, their own situation either as being by the sea-side, or inland, or insular, or on the continent, or anything of that sort, are silent as to the real truth. The real truth is their covetousness, their want of good faith towards and confidence in one another, on which account they have not been satisfied with the laws of nature, but have called those regulations, which have appeared to be for the common advantage of the agreeing and unanimous multitudes, laws, so that the individual constitutions do naturally appear rather in the light of additions to the one great general constitution of nature;

for the laws of individual cities are additions to the one right reason of nature; and so also the man who is occupied with political affairs is an addition to the man who lives in accordance with nature.

Chapter VII

And it is not without a particular and correct meaning that Joseph is said to have had a coat of many colours. For a political constitution is a many-coloured and multiform thing, admitting of an infinite variety of changes in its general appearance, in its affairs, in its moving causes, in the peculiar laws respecting strangers, in numberless differences respecting times and places.

For as the master of a ship collects together all the means which may tend to ensure him a favourable voyage with reference to and in dependency on the changes of the wind,

not always guiding his vessel in one and the same way; and as a physician does not apply one and the same means of cure to every sick person, nor even to one person if his disease varies in its character, but watches the periods of its abatement, and of its intensity, and of its becoming full or empty, and the alterations of the causes of the sickness, and so varies his remedies as much as possible to secure the safety of his patient, applying one remedy at one time and another at another;

in the same manner I conceive that the man immersed in political affairs is of necessity a multiform man, assuming many different appearances, one in time of peace and another in time of war; and a different character according as those who are opposed to him are numerous or few in number, withstanding a small number with vigorous resolution, but using persuasion and gentle means towards a large body. And in some cases where there is much danger, still for the sake of the common advantage he will take the place of every one, and manage the business in hand by himself; in other cases, where it is merely a question of labour he will let others minister to him as his assistants.

It was appropriately said that the man was sold. For the haranguer of the people and the demagogue, mounting the tribunal, like slaves who are being sold and exposed to view, is a slave instead of a free man, by reason of the honours which he seems to be receiving, being led away by ten thousand masters?

The same person is also represented as having been torn by wild beasts; and vainglory, which lies in wait for a man,

is an untameable wild beast, tearing and destroying all who give into it. And they who have been purchasers are likewise sellers; for there is one master only to the citizens who live in any city; but there is a multitude of masters, one succeeding another in a certain succession and regular order. But those who have been sold three times change their masters like bad slaves, not remaining with their original ones, by reason of the speedily satisfied irregularity of their dispositions, always thirsting after novelty.

Chapter VIII

This is enough to say on this part of the subject. Accordingly, the young man, having been conducted into Egypt, and there, as has already been stated, having become the slave of a eunuch, gave in a few days such proofs of virtue and excellence of disposition, that he had authority over his fellow servants given to him, and the management of the whole household committed to his charge; for already his master had learnt by many circumstances to perceive that his servant in all his words and in all his actions was under the immediate direction of divine providence.

Accordingly, in consequence of this opinion of his purchaser, he was appointed superintendent of his house, apparently indeed by his master, but, in fact and reality, by nature herself, which procured for him the government of a mighty city, and nation, and country. For it was necessary that one who was destined to be a statesman should be previously practised and trained in the management of a single household; for a household is a city on a small and

contracted scale, and the management of a household is a contracted kind of polity; so that a city may be called a large house, and the government of a city a widely spread economy.

And from these considerations we may see that the manager of a household and the governor of a state are identical, though the multitude and magnitude of the things committed to their charge may be different, as in the case too with the arts of painting and statuary; for the good statuary or painter, whether he is making many and colossal figures, or only few and those of a small size, is still the same person, and the art which he is practising is the same art.

Chapter IX

But while he is earning a very high reputation in the matters connected with the management of his master's house, he is plotted against by the wife of his master, because of the incontinent love which she had conceived for him; for she, being maddened by the beauty of the young man, and being unable to restrain the violence of her frenzy and passion, addressed a proposal of illicit intercourse to him; but he resisted it vigorously, and would not at all endure to approach her, by reason of the orderly and temperate disposition implanted in him by nature and habit.

But when she, inflaming and exciting her lawless desire, kept continually tempting him, and continually throwing herself in his way, and continually failing in her object, she at last, in the violence of her passion, had recourse to force, and seizing hold of his cloak dragged him vigorously toward

the bed, her passion endowing her strength with greater vigour, as it often does strengthen even the weak.

But he, proving more powerful than even the alluring opportunity, uttered a cry becoming a free man, and worthy of his race, saying, What are you forcing me to? We, the descendants of the Hebrews, are guided by special customs and laws of our own;

in other nations the youths are permitted, after they are fourteen years of age, to use concubines and prostitutes, and women who make gain by their persons, without restraint. But among us a harlot is not allowed even to live, but death is appointed as a punishment for any one who adopts such a way of life. Therefore, before our lawful marriage we know nothing of any connection with any other woman, but, without ever having experienced any similar cohabitation, we approach our virgin brides as pure as themselves, proposing as the end of our marriage not pleasure but the offspring of legitimate children.

I, therefore, having kept myself pure to this day, will not begin now to transgress the law by adultery which is the greatest of all sins, when I ought rather, even if in past time I had lived in an irregular manner, and had been led away by the impulses of youth, and had imitated the licentiousness of the natives, still not to seek to pollute the marriage of another man, an offence which who is there would not avenge with blood? For though different nations differ in other points, still all agree in this alone, that all men think him worthy of ten thousand deaths who does so, and give up the man who is detected in adultery without trial to the husband who has detected him.

But you, pressing me thus to load myself with guilt, would add even a third pollution in my case, since you bid me not merely commit adultery, but also to violate my mistress and my master's wife, unless, indeed, this is to be looked upon as the reason for which I entered your house, that I might neglect the duties which a servant ought to perform, and get drunk, and become intoxicated with hopes fit for my master who has bought me, polluting his marriage, and his house and his family.

Nevertheless I am induced to honour him not merely as my master, but also as one who has before now been my benefactor. He has committed to my care the whole management of his household; there is nothing whatever, be it great or small, which is withdrawn from my superintendence, except you who are his wife. In return for these kindnesses is it fitting for me to requite him with such an action as you recommend to me? I will rather, as becomes me, endeavour with honourable service to requite the kindness of which he has set me the example, and which is due him.

He, being my master, has made me, who was a captive and a slave, a free man and a citizen by his great goodness, as far at least as depended on him; and shall I, who am a slave, compare myself to my master as if he were a stranger and a captive? And with what disposition can I commit this unholy action? and with what face can I be impudent enough to look upon him? The consciousness of guilt which I shall have contracted will not suffer me to look him in the face, even if I should be able to be undiscovered, but in fact I shall never escape detection, for there are innumerable

witnesses of all the things which are done privily who may not be silent.

I forbear to say that, even if no one else should know it, or being privy to it should not divulge it, still I nevertheless shall be a witness against myself by my complexion, by my look, by my voice, as I said a little while ago, being convicted by my own conscience; and if no one else informs against me, shall I not fear nor respect, justice the assessor of God, and the overlooker of all human actions?

Chapter X

He put all these arguments together and philosophised in this way till she ceased to importune him; for the desires are powerful, to cast in the shade even the most powerful of the outward senses, which he, being aware of, fled from them, leaving his garment in her hands, as she had seized hold of him.

This circumstance gave her an opportunity to contrive a story, and to invent a plausible tale against the young man, by means of which she might revenge herself on him; for when her husband came from the public assembly, she, pretending to play the part of a modest and orderly woman, even among the intemperate habits by which she was surrounded, said to him, with excessive indignation, "You brought a servant into us, a slave of the Hebrews, who had not only corrupted his soul, since you, in a simple manner without due inquiry, committed your household to him, but has even dared to assault my body.

For he was not contented with seducing only his fellow servants, inasmuch as he has become a most lascivious and

debauched man, but he has attempted to defile even me, his mistress, and to use force to me; and the proofs of his insane lust are visible and clear; for when, having been very ill-treated by him, I cried out, calling to my aid assistants from within; he fled, from fear of being apprehended."

And showing his garment, she appeared to give a proof of the truth of what she said; and his master thinking that it was true, ordered his officers to conduct the man to prison, erring in two most important points: first, that without giving him any time to defend himself, he, without a trial, condemned one who had done no wrong, as if he had committed the greatest crimes; secondly, because the garment which the woman displayed as having been left behind by the young man, was indeed a proof of violence, but not of that which he had committed, but rather of that which had been offered to him, and of the fortitude with which he endured it from the woman; for if he had been offering violence, it was probable that he might have laid hold of the garment of his mistress; but it was owing to his having had violence offered to him that he was deprived of his own.

But perhaps he should be pardoned for his excessive ignorance, inasmuch as he lived chiefly in the cook's house, being filled with blood, and smoke, and ashes, his reasoning having no opportunity to become tranquillised and to enjoy leisure in itself, because it was confused still more, or, at all events, not less than the body.

Chapter XI

I have already sketched out three characters of the man immersed in civil business; that of him who is occupied as a shepherd, that of the regulator of a house, and that of the man possessed of fortitude: and we have now discussed the two first of these sufficiently. But the temperate man is no less connected with the regulation of political affairs than those two are;

for temperance is a beneficial and saving thing for all the affairs of life; and in affairs of state it is most especially so, as those who wish to understand the matter may learn from numerous and easily obtained proofs.

For who is there who does not know that great calamities have befallen nations, and districts, and whole countries all over the world, both by land and sea, in consequence of intemperance; for the most numerous and most serious wars have been kindled on account of love, and adultery, and the wiles of women; by which the most numerous and most excellent portion of both of the Grecian and barbarian race has been destroyed, and the youth of the cities has perished.

And of the consequences of intemperance, are domestic seditions, and wars, and evils upon evils in unutterable number. It is plain that the consequences of temperance, are stability, and peace, and the acquisition and enjoyment of perfect blessing.

Chapter XII

It is worth while, however, to proceed in regular order, and by this course to exhibit what is intended to be intimated by this figurative history. The man who brought

this servant of whom we are speaking is said to have been a eunuch; very naturally, for the multitude which purchases the services of a man skilful in affairs of state is truly a eunuch, having in appearance, indeed, the organs of generation, but being deprived of all the power requisite for generating; just as those persons who have a confused sight though they have eyes, are nevertheless deprived of the active use of them, inasmuch as they are not able to see clearly.

What, then, is the resemblance of eunuchs to the multitude? That the multitude too is unable to generate wisdom, but that it studies virtue; for when a multitude of men, brought promiscuously together from all quarters and of different races, meets in the same place, what is said indeed may be proper and becoming, but what is intended and what is done is quite contrary; since the multitude embraces what is spurious in preference to what is genuine, because it is carried away by false opinion, and has not studied what is truly honourable.

On which account (though it seems a most unnatural thing), a wife is represented as cohabiting with this eunuch; for the multitudes court desire, as a man courts a woman; for the sake of which it says and does everything, making it its counsellor in everything which should and should not be spoken, trifling or important, being not at all accustomed to attend to considerations of calm wisdom;

therefore the sacred historian very appropriately calls him the chief cook. For a cook studies nothing beyond the insatiable and immoderate pleasures of the belly, in the same manner the multitude, which is occupied with public

affairs, studies only those pleasures and allurements which are conveyed by means of the hearing, by which the energies of the mind are relaxed, as one may say the nerves of the soul are in a manner loosened.

And who is there who is not aware of the great quarrel which exists between physicians and cooks; since the first exert all their diligence and ingenuity in preparing things which are salutary, even if they are not pleasant; but the others, on the contrary, prepare only what is pleasant, disregarding what is advantageous?

Therefore, the laws which exist among a people and those who govern in accordance with the laws resemble physicians, and so also do those counsellors and judges who have a regard to the common safety and security of the state, and who use no flattery to the people. But the chief body of the younger men resembles cooks; for their object is not to supply what will be beneficial to the people, but only to contrive for the present moment to reap gratification.