Shorter writings

Methodius of Olympus (d. c. AD 311)

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I.

But, perhaps, since the friends of Job imagined, that they understood the reason why he suffered such things, that just man, using a long speech to them, confesses that the wisdom of the divine judgment is incomprehensible, not only to him, but also to every man, and declares that this earthly region is not the fitting place for understanding the knowledge of the divine counsels. One might say, that perfect and absolute piety-a thing plainly divine, and of God alone given to man, is in this place called wisdom. But the sense of the words is as follows: God, he says, hath given great things unto men, sowing, as it were, in their nature the power of discovery, together with wisdom, and the faculty of art. And men having received this, dig metals out of the earth, and cultivate it; but that wisdom which is conjoined with piety, it is not possible in any place to discover. Man cannot obtain it from his own resources, nor can he give it unto others. Hence it was that the wise men of the Greeks, who in their own strength sought to search out piety, and the worship of the Deity, did not attain their end. For it is a thing, as we have said, which exceeds human strength, the gift and the grace of God; and therefore from the beginning, partly by visions, partly by the intervention of angels, partly by the discourses of the divinely-inspired prophets, God instructed man in the principles of true religion. Nay, moreover, that contemplative wisdom by which we are impelled to the arts, and to other pursuits, and with which we are all in common, just and unjust, alike endued, is the gift of God: if we have been made rational creatures, we have received this. Wherefore, also, in a former place it was said, as of a thing that is of God bestowed, ”Is it not the Lord who teacheth understanding and knowledge? ”

II.

Observe that the Lord was not wont from the beginning to speak with man; but after that the soul was prepared, and exercised in many ways, and had ascended into the height by contemplation, so far as it is possible for human nature to ascend, then is it His wont to speak, and to reveal His Word unto those who have attained unto this elevation. But since the whirlwind is the producer of the tempests, and Job, in the tempest of his afflictions, had not made shipwreck of his faith, but his constancy shone forth the rather; therefore it was that He who gave him an answer answered him by the whirlwind, to signify the tempest of calamity which had befallen him; but, because He changed the stormy condition of his affairs into one of serene tranquillity, He spoke to him not only by the whirlwind, but in clouds also.

III.

Many have descended into the deep, not so as to walk on it, but so as to be by its bonds restrained. Jesus alone walked on the deep, where there are no traces of walkers, as a free man. For He chose death, to which He was not subject, that He might deliver those who were the bondslaves of death; saying to the prisoners, "Go forth; and to them that are in darkness, show yourselves." With which, also, the things which follow are consistent.

IV.

Seest thou how, at the end of the contest, with a loud proclamation he declares the praises of the combatant, and discovers that which was in his afflictions hidden. in the words: ”Thinkest thou that I had else answered thee, but that thou shouldest appear just? ” This is the salve of his wounds, this the reward of his patience. For as to what followed, although he received double his former possessions, these may seem to have been given him by divine providence as small indeed, and for trifling causes, even though to some they may appear great.

Fragment, Uncertain.

Thou contendest with Me, and settest thyself against Me, and opposest those who combat for Me. But where weft thou when I made the world? What wert thou then? Hadst thou yet, says He, fallen from thy mother? for there was darkness, in the beginning of the world's creation, He says, upon the face of the deep. Now this darkness was no created darkness, but one which of set purpose had place, by reason of the absence of light.

V.

But Methodius: The Holy Spirit, who of God is given to all men, and of whom Solomon said, "For Thine incorruptible Spirit is in all things," He receives for the conscience, which condemns the offending soul.

VI. The Same Methodius.

I account it a greater good to be reproved than to reprove, inasmuch as it is more excellent to free oneself from evil than to free another.

VII. The Same Methodius.

Human nature cannot clearly perceive pure justice in the soul, since, as to many of its thoughts, it is but dim-sighted.

VIII. The Same Methodius.

Wickedness never could recognise virtue or its own self.

IX. The Same Methodius.

Justice, as it seems, is four square, on all sides equal and like. The just judgment of God is accommodated to our affections; and such as our estate is, proportionate and similar shall the retribution be which is allotted us.

I.

The beginning of every good action has its foundation in our wills, but the conclusion is of God.

II.

Perhaps these three persons of our ancestors, being in an image the consubstantial representatives of humanity, are, as also Methodius thinks, types of the Holy and Consubstantial Trinity, the innocent and unbegotten Adam being the type and resemblance of God the Father Almighty, who is uncaused, and the cause of all; his begotten son shadowing forth the image of the begotten Son and Word of God; whilst Eve, that proceedeth forth from Adam, signifies the person and procession of the Holy Spirit.

The Banquet of the Ten Virgins

Or, Concerning Chastity. — Persons of the Dialogue: Euboulios, Gregorion, Arete; Marcella, Theophila, Thaleia, Theopatra, Thallousa, Agathe, Procilla, Thekla, Tusiane, Domnina. — Introduction.-Plan of the Work; Way to Paradise; Description and Personification of Virtue; The Agnos a Symbol of Chastity; Marcella, the Eldest and Foremost Among the Virgins of Christ.

Euboulios. You have arrived most seasonably, Gregorion, for I have just been looking for you, wanting to hear of the meeting of Marcella and Theopatra, and of the other virgins who were present at the banquet, and of the nature of their discourses on the subject of chastity; for it is said that they argued with such ability and power that there was nothing lacking to the full consideration of the subject. If, therefore, you have come here for any other purpose, put that off to another time, and do not delay to give us a complete and connected account of the matter of which we are inquiring. Gregorion. I seem to be disappointed of my hope, as some one else has given you intelligence beforehand on the subject respecting which you ask me. For I thought that you had heard nothing of what had happened, and I was flattering myself greatly with the idea that I should be the first to tell you of it. And for this reason I made all haste to come here to you, fearing the very thing which has happened, that some one might anticipate me.

Euboulios. Be comforted, my excellent friend, for we have had no precise information respecting anything which happened; since the person who brought us the intelligence had nothing to tell us, except that there had been dialogues; but when he was asked what they were, and to what purpose, he did not know. Gregorion. Well then, as I came here for this reason, do you want to hear all that was said from the beginning; or shall I pass by parts of it, and recall only those points which I consider worthy of mention? Euboulios. By no means the latter; but first, Gregorion, relate to us from the very beginning where the meeting was, and about the setting forth of the viands, and about yourself, how you poured out the wine"They in golden cups Each other pledged, while towards broad heaven they looked." Gregorion. You are always skilful in discussions, and excessively powerful in argument-thoroughly confuting all your adversaries.

Euboulios. It is not worth while, Gregorion, to contend about these things at present; but do oblige us by simply telling us what happened from the beginning. Gregorion. Well, I will

try. But first answer me this: You know, I presume, Arete, the daughter of Philosophia? Euboulios. Why do you ask?

Gregorion. "We went by invitation to a garden of hers with an eastern aspect, to enjoy the fruits of the season, myself, and Procilla, and Tusiane. I am repeating the words of Theopatra, for it was of her I obtained the information. "We went, Gregorion, by a very rough, steep, and arduous path: when we drew near to the place," said Theopatra, "we were met by a tall and beautiful woman walking along quietly and gracefully, clothed in a shining robe as white as snow. Her beauty was something altogether inconceivable and divine. Modesty, blended with majesty, bloomed on her countenance. It was a face," she said, "such as I know not that I had ever seen, awe-inspiring, yet tempered with gentleness and mirth; for it was wholly unadorned by art, and had nothing counterfeit. She came up to us, and, like a mother who sees her daughters after a long separation, she embraced and kissed each one of us with great joy, saying, 'O, my daughters you have come with toil and pain to me who am earnestly longing to conduct you to the pasture of immortality; toilsomely have you come by a way abounding with many frightful reptiles; for, as I looked, I saw you often stepping aside, and I was fearing lest you should turn back and slip over the precipices.

But thanks to the Bridegroom to whom I have espoused you, my children, for having granted an effectual answer to all our prayers.' And, while she is thus speaking," said Theopatra, "we arrive at the enclosure, the doors not being shut as yet, and as we enter we come upon Thekla and Agathe and Marcella preparing to sup. And Arete immediately said, 'Do you also come hither, and sit down here in your place along with these your fellows.' Now," said she to me, "we who were there as guests were altogether, I think, ten in number; and the place was marvellously beautiful, and abounding in the means of recreation. The air was diffused in soft and regular currents, mingled with pure beams of light, and a stream flowing as gently as oil through the very middle of the garden, threw up a most delicious drink; and the water flowing from it, transparent and pure, formed itself into fountains, and these, overflowing like rivers, watered all the garden with their abundant streams; and there were different kinds of trees there, full of fresh fruits, and the fruits that hung joyfully from their branches were of equal beauty; and there were ever-blooming meadows strewn with variegated and sweet-scented flowers, from which came a gentle breeze laden with sweetest odour. And the agnos grew near, a lofty tree, under which we reposed, from its being exceedingly wide-spreading and shady."

Euboulios. You seem to me, my good friend, to be making a revelation of a second paradise. Gregorion. You speak truly and wisely. "When there," she said, "we had all kinds of food and a variety of festivities, so that no delight was wanting. After this Arete, entering, gave utterance to these words:- ""Young maidens, the glory of my greatness, beautiful virgins, who tend the undefiled meadows of Christ with unwedded hands, we have now had enough of food and feasting, for all things are abundant and plentiful with us. What is there, then, besides which I wish and expect? That each of you shall pronounce a discourse in praise of virginity. Let Marcella begin, since she sits in the highest place, and is at the same time

the eldest. I shall be ashamed of myself if I do not make the successful disputant an object of envy, binding her with the unfading flowers of wisdom.'

"And then," I think she said, "Marcella immediately began to speak as follows."

I.

Methodius, Bishop, to those who say: What doth it profit us that the Son of God was crucified upon earth, and made man? And wherefore did He endure to suffer in the manner of the cross, and not by some other punishment? And what was the advantage of the cross?

Christ, the Son of God, by the command of the Father, became conversant with the visible creature, in order that, by overturning the dominion of the tyrants, the demons, that is, He might deliver our souls from their dreadful bondage, by reason of which our whole nature, intoxicated by the draughts of iniquity, had become full of tumult and disorder, and could by no means return to the remembrance of good and useful things. Wherefore, also, it was the more easily carried away to idols, inasmuch as evil had overwhelmed it entirely, and had spread over all generations, on account of the change which had come over our fleshy tabernacles in consequence of disobedience; until Christ, the Lord, by the flesh in which He lived and appeared, weakened the force of Pleasure's onslaughts, by means of which the infernal powers that were in arms against us reduced our minds to slavery, and freed mankind from all their evils. For with this end the Lord Jesus both wore our flesh, and became man, and by the divine dispensation was nailed to the cross; in order that by the flesh in which the demons had proudly and falsely feigned themselves gods, having carried our souls captive unto death by deceitful wiles, even by this they might be overturned, and discovered to be no gods. For he prevented their arrogance from raising itself higher, by becoming man;

in order that by the body in which the race possessed of reason had become estranged from the worship of the true God, and had suffered injury, even by the same receiving into itself in an ineffable manner the Word of Wisdom, the enemy might be discovered to be the destroyers and not the benefactors of our souls. For it had not been wonderful if Christ, by the terror of His divinity, and the greatness of His invincible power, had reduced to weakness the adverse nature of the demons. But since this was to cause them greater grief and torment, for they would have preferred to be overcome by one stronger than themselves, therefore it was that by a man He procured the safety of the race; in order that men, after that very Life and Truth had entered into them in bodily form, might be able to return to the form and light of the Word, overcoming the power of the enticements of sin; and that the demons,

being conquered by one weaker than they, and thus brought into contempt, might desist from their over-bold confidence, their hellish wrath being repressed.

It was for this mainly that the cross was brought in, being erected as a trophy against iniquity, and a deterrent from it, that henceforth man might be no longer subject to wrath, after that he had made up for the defeat which, by his disobedience, be had received, and had lawfully conquered the infernal powers, and by the gift of God had been set free from every debt. Since, therefore, the first-born Word of God thus fortified the manhood in which He tabernacled with the armour of righteousness, He overcame, as has been said, the powers that enslaved us by the figure of the cross, and showed forth man, who had been oppressed by corruption, as by a tyrant power, to be free, with unfettered hands. For the cross, if you wish to define it, is the confirmation of the victory, the way by which God to man descended, the trophy against material spirits, the repulsion of death, the foundation of the ascent to the true day; and the ladder for those who are hastening to enjoy the light that is there, the engine by which those who are fitted for the edifice of the Church are raised up from below, like a stone four square, to be compacted on to the divine Word. Hence it is that our kings, perceiving that the figure of the cross is used for the dissipating of every evil, have made vexillas, as they are called in the Latin language. Hence the sea, yielding to this figure, makes itself navigable to men.

For every creature, so to speak, has, for the sake of liberty, been marked with this sign; for the birds which fly aloft, form the figure of the cross by the expansion of their wings; and man himself, also, with his hands outstretched, represents the same. Hence, when the Lord had fashioned him in this form, in which He had from the beginning flamed him, He joined on his body to the Deity, in order that it might be henceforth an instrument consecrated to God, freed from all discord and want of harmony. For man cannot, after that he has been formed for the worship of God, and hath sung, as it were, the incorruptible song of truth, and by this hath been made capable of holding the Deity, being fitted to the lyre of life as the chords and strings, he cannot, I say, return to discord and corruption.

II.

The Same Methodius to Those Who are Ashamed of the Cross of Christ.
Some think that God also, whom they measure with the measure of their own feelings, judges the same thing that wicked and foolish men judge to be subjects of praise and blame, and that He uses the opinions of men as His rule and measure, not taking into account the fact that, by reason of the ignorance that is in them, every creature falls short of the beauty of God. For He draws all things to life by His Word, from their universal substance and nature. For whether He would have good, He Himself is the Very Good, and remains in Himself; or, whether the beautiful is pleasing to Him, since He Himself is the Only Beautiful, He beholds Himself, holding in no estimation the things which move the admiration of men. That, verily, is to be accounted as in reality the most beautiful and praiseworthy, which God Himself esteems to be beautiful, even though it be contemned and despised by all else-not that which men fancy to be beautiful. Whence it is, that although by this figure He hath willed to deliver the soul from corrupt affections, to the signal putting to shame of the demons, we ought to receive it, and not to speak evil of it, as being that which was given us to deliver us, and set us free from the chains which for our disobedience we incurred.

For the Word suffered, being in the flesh affixed to the cross, that He might bring man, who had been deceived by error, to His supreme and godlike majesty, restoring him to that divine life from which he had become alienated. By this figure, in truth, the passions are blunted; the passion of the passions having taken place by the Passion, and the death of death by the death of Christ, He not having been subdued by death, nor overcome by the pains of the Passion. For neither did the Passion cast Him down from His equanimity, nor did death hurt Him, but He was in the passible remaining impassible, and in the mortal remaining immortal, comprehending all that the air, and this middle state, and the heaven above contained, and attempering the mortal to the immortal divinity. Death was vanquished entirely; the flesh being crucified to draw forth its immortality.

III.

The Same Methodius: How Christ the Son of God, in a Brief and Definite Time, Being Enclosed by the Body, and Existing Impassible, Became Obnoxious to the Passion.

For since this virtue was in Him, now it is of the essence of power to be contracted in a small space, and to be diminished, and again to be expanded in a large space, and to be increased. But if it is possible for Him to be with the larger extended, and to be made equal, and yet not with the smaller to be contracted and diminished, then power is not in Him. For if you say that this is possible to power, and that impossible, you deny it to be power; as being infirm and incapable with regard to the things which it cannot do. Nor again, further, will it ever contain any excellence of divinity with respect to those things which suffer change. For both man and the other animals, with respect to those things which they can effect, energise; but with respect to those things which they cannot perform, are weak, and fade away. Wherefore for this cause the Son of God was in the manhood enclosed, because this was not impossible to Him. For with power He suffered, remaining impassible; and He died, bestowing the gift of immortality upon mortals. Since the body, when struck or cut by a body, is just so far struck or cut as the striker strikes it, or he that cuts it cut it. For according to the rebound of the thing struck, the blow reflects upon the striker, since it is necessary that the two must suffer equally, both the agent and the sufferer.

If, in truth, that which is cut, from its small size, does not correspond to that which cuts it, it will not be able to cut it at all. For if the subject body does not resist the blow of the sword, but rather yields to it, the operation will be void of effect, even as one sees in the thin and subtle bodies of fire and air; for in such cases the impetus of the more solid bodies is relaxed, and remains without effect. But if fire, or air, or stone, or iron, or anything which men use against themselves for the purposes of mutual destruction-if it is not possible to pierce or divide these, because of the subtle nature which they possess, why should not rather Wisdom remain invulnerable and impassible, in nothing injured by anything, even though it were conjoined to the body which was pierced and transfixed with nails, inasmuch as it is purer and more excellent than any other nature, if you except only that of God who begat Him?

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.