

PLUTARCH'S MORALS.

WHY THE ORACLES CEASE TO GIVE ANSWERS.

LAMPRIAS, CLEOMBROTUS, DIDYMU, PHILIPPUS, DEMETRIUS,
AMMONIUS, HERACLEON.

1. THERE is an old story, friend Terentius Priscus, that heretofore eagles or swans, flying from the opposite bounds of the earth, met together where now stands the temple of Apollo Pythius, in the place now called the Navel; and that some while after, Epimenides the Phaestian, willing to satisfy his curiosity, enquired of the oracle of Apollo with regard to this story, but received such an answer as made him never a jot the wiser; upon which he said:

No navel is there of the earth or sea:
'Tis known to Gods alone, if one there be.

Thus fitly did the God chastise this bold enquirer into ancient traditions.

2. But in our time, not long before the celebration of the Pythian games during the magistracy of Callistratus, there were two holy men who, coming as it were from the two opposite ends of the world, met together at the city of Delphi. The one was Demetrius the grammarian, who came from England to return to Tarsus in Cilicia, where he was born; the other, Cleombrotus the Lacedaemonian, who had been long conversant in Egypt and the Troglodytic country, and had made several voyages, as well on the Red Sea as other parts, — not as a merchant, to get

money, but to improve his knowledge and enrich his mind ; for he had enough to live upon, and cared for no more. And he was collecting history, as the material for philosophy, the end whereof (as he called it) is theology. He, having been lately at the temple and oracle of Jupiter Ammon, seemed not much to marvel at any thing he there saw ; yet he mentioned to us one particular (which he said was told him by the priest of the temple) touching the lamp that is never extinguished and spendeth less every year than the former. Whence they conjectured an inequality of years, whereby each year was shorter than the preceding.

3. This discourse was much wondered at by the company, and Demetrius amongst the rest affirmed it unreasonable to ground the knowledge of such great matters on such slight and trivial conjectures ; for this was not (as Alcaeus said) to paint the lion from the measure of his claw,* but to change and disorder the motions of celestial bodies for the sake of a lamp or the snuff of a candle, and to overthrow at one stroke all the mathematical sciences. These men, replied Cleombrotus, will not be moved by what you say ; for first, they will not yield to mathematicians in point of certainty, seeing they may be more easily mistaken in their comprehension of time, it being so slippery in its motions and with such distant periods, than these men in the measures of their oil, about which they are so exact and careful because of the strangeness of the thing. Moreover, Demetrius, by denying that small things are oft the signs and indications of great, must prejudice several arts and sciences, and deprive them of the proofs of several conclusions and predictions. And yet you grammarians will needs vouch that the Demi-gods and princes at the Trojan war shaved with razors, because you find in Homer the mention of such an instrument ; that

* Ἐξ ὀνυχὸς τὸν λέοντα, *ex ungue leonem*

also usury was then in fashion, because he says in one place,

A debt is due me neither new nor small,*

where you interpret *ὀφέλλεται* to mean *increases*. And again, when he calls the night quick and sharp, you will needs have him to mean by this word, that the shadow of the earth being round groweth sharp at the end like the body of a cone. Again, who is he that, denying small things to be the signs and proofs of great, will allow what physicians tell us, namely, that we may prognosticate a pestilent summer when great numbers of spiders are seen, and also when the fig leaves in the spring resemble crows' feet? And who will permit us to measure the greatness of the sun's body by a pint or gallon of water, or will grant that a small table like a tile, making a sharp angle leaning on a plane superficies, can show the just measure of the elevation of the pole from the horizon which is ever to be seen in our hemisphere? And this is what the priests may allege in favor of what they affirm; so that we must offer other arguments against them, if we will maintain the course of the sun to be fixed and unchangeable, as we here hold it to be.

4. Not only of the sun, cried out aloud the philosopher Ammonius, who was there present, but also of the whole heaven; for, if the years really decrease, the passage which the sun makes from one tropic to another must of necessity be shortened, so that it shall not take up so great a part of the horizon as the mathematicians do imagine, but become less and shorter as the southern part approaches the northern. Whence consequently the summer will fall out to be shorter and the temperature of the air colder, by reason of the sun's turning more inwardly, and describing greater parallels within the signs of the tropics than it now does in

* Ἐνθα χρειός μοι ὀφέλλεται, σὲ τι νέον γε οὐδ' ὀλίγον. Od. III. 367. The same interpretation is found in the Scholia on the Odyssey. (G.)

the longest day in summer and the shortest in winter. It would moreover also follow, that the pins of the dials in the city of Syene will no longer appear shadowless at the summer solstice, and some fixed stars will run under the horizon, and others against one another, for want of room. And should it be alleged that all the other celestial bodies keep their courses and ordinary motions without any change, they will never be able to cite any cause which shall hasten his motion alone above all the rest; but they will be forced to confound and disorder all evident appearances which do clearly show themselves to our eyes, and especially those of the moon. So that there will be no need of observing these measures of oil to know the difference of the years; because the eclipses will do this, if there be any, seeing the sun does oft meet with the moon, and the moon as oft falls within the shadow of the earth; so that we need not any longer hold arguing on this matter.

But, says Cleombrotus, I myself have seen the measure of the oil, for they have shown it several years; but that of the present is far less than that of ancient times. Unto which Ammonius answered: How comes it to pass then that other people who have an inextinguishable fire in veneration, and have preserved it even time out of mind, could never remark this? And granting what you say concerning this measure of oil, is it not better to attribute the cause of this to some coldness or dampness of air; or, on the contrary, to some heat or dryness, by which the fire in the lamp being weakened needs not so much nourishment, and could not consume the same quantity? For it is well known that fire burns better in winter than in summer, its heat being drawn in and enclosed by the cold; whereas in great heats and dry weather it is weakened, lying dead and languishing without any strength; and if it be kindled in the sunshine, its efficacy is small, for it hardly catches hold of the wood, and slowly consumes the fuel.

But we may with greater probability attribute the circumstance of the oil to the oil itself; for oil formerly was of less nutriment, as squeezed out of olives which grew upon young trees; but being since better ordered, as coming of plants more fully grown, it must needs be more effectual to the nourishing and keeping of the fire. And this is the best way of saving the credit of the Ammonian priests in their supposition, which will not endure the test of reason.

5. Ammonius having finished his discourse, I pray, said I, Cleombrotus, give us some account of the oracle; for it ever has been in great esteem in those parts till these times, wherein its divinity and reputation seem to be decayed. Unto which Cleombrotus making no answer, but looking down to the ground, Demetrius took up the discourse, saying: You need not busy yourself in enquiries after the oracles in those parts, seeing we find the oracles in these parts to fail or (to speak better) to be totally silenced, except two or three; so that it would be more to the purpose to search into the cause of this silence. But we are more concerned in Boeotia, which, although formerly famous throughout all the world for oracles, is now like a fountain dried up, so that at present we find them dumb. For at this day there is no place in all Boeotia, unless in the town of Lebadea, where one can draw out any divination, all other parts being become silent and forsaken. Yet in the time of the war against the Persians, the oracle of Apollo Ptoüs was in request, as also that of Amphiaraus; for both of them were tried. The priest of Apollo Ptoüs, who was always wont to return the oracle's answers in Aeolic Greek, spake to him that was sent from the barbarians in their own barbarous language, so that none of the assistants understood a word; whereby they were given to understand, that it was not lawful for the barbarians to have the use of the Greek tongue to serve their pleasure. And as to that of Amphiaraus, the

person that was sent thither, having fallen asleep in the sanctuary, dreamed that he heard the minister of that God bidding him be gone out of the temple and saying that the God forbade him to remain, and that he presently shoved him out thence with both his hands ; and seeing he still stopped by the way, he took up a great stone and struck him with it on the head. And what was this but a prediction and denunciation of what was to come to pass ? For Mardonius was not long after defeated by Pausanias, who was no king, but only the king of Lacedaemonia's guardian and minister, and the then lieutenant of the Grecians' army, and was with a stone flung out of a sling felled to the ground, just as the Lydian servant thought he was struck in his dream. In the same manner also flourished the oracle near Tegyra, where it is said Apollo himself was born ; and in effect, there are two streams that glide near the place, one of which is still called the Palm-tree, and the other the Olive-tree. And at this oracle, in the time of the Medes' war, Echeocrates being then the prophet, the God Apollo answered by his mouth, that the honor and profit of this war would fall to the Greeks' share. And during the Peloponnesian war, the Delians having been driven out of their island, they had word brought them from the oracle of Delphi, that they should search for the place where Apollo was born, and there make some certain sacrifice. At which they marvelling, and demanding whether Apollo was born elsewhere than in their parts, the prophetess Pythia moreover told them that a crow would show them the place. These deputies from the Delians, in their return home, passed by chance through the city of Chaeronea, where they heard their hostess at the inn talking to some travellers about the oracle of Tegyra, to which they were going, and at their parting they heard them say to her Adieu, Dame Corone.* By

* Κορώνη, that is, Crow.

this they comprehended the meaning of Pythia's answer ; and having offered their sacrifices at Tegyra, they were soon after restored and established in their own country. Yet there have been given later answers from these oracles than those you have mentioned ; but now they have wholly ceased, so that it will not be besides the matter, seeing we are near by Apollo Pythius, to enquire after the cause of this change.

6. Thus discoursing together, we left the temple, and were come as far as the Cnidian Hall, where entering in, we found our friends which we looked for, being set down in expectation of our coming. All the rest were at leisure, by reason of the time of the day, and did nothing but anoint their bodies, or gaze on the wrestlers who were exercising themselves. Whereupon Demetrius laughing said to them : It seems to me that you are not discoursing of any matter of great consequence, for I see you labor not under deep thoughts. It is true, replied Heracleon the Megarean, we are not a disputing, whether the verb *βάλλω* in his future tense loses one of his *λλ*, nor from what positive or primitive are formed or derived these two comparatives, *χείρον* and *βέλτιον*, and these two superlatives, *χείριστον* and *βέλτιστον* ; for such questions as these make people knit their brows. A man may discourse of all other matters, especially of philosophy, without these frowning angry looks that put the by-standers into a fright. Receive us then, said Demetrius, into your company, and, if you please, the question too which has been now agitated amongst us, which does well agree with the place where we are, and, relating to the God Apollo, concerns therefore all that are here ; but, however, let us have no knitting of the brows or frowning looks.

7. Being then all set down close together, and Demetrius having proposed the question we were upon, Didymus the Cynic philosopher, surnamed Planetiades, getting upon

END OF SAMPLE TEXT



The Complete Text can be found on our CD:
Primary Literary Sources For Ancient Literature
which can be purchased on our Website :
www.Brainfly.net

or

by sending **\$64.95** in check or money order to :
Brainfly Inc.
5100 Garfield Ave. #46
Sacramento CA 95841-3839

TEACHER'S DISCOUNT:

If you are a **TEACHER** you can take advantage of our teacher's discount. Click on **Teachers Discount** on our website (www.Brainfly.net) or **Send us \$55.95** and we will send you a full copy of *Primary Literary Sources For Ancient Literature* **AND** our *5000 Classics CD (a collection of over 5000 classic works of literature in electronic format (.txt))* plus our *Wholesale price list*.

If you have any suggestions such as books you would like to see added to the collection or if you would like our wholesale prices list please send us an email to:

webcomments@brainfly.net