

OF ISIS AND OSIRIS, OR OF THE ANCIENT RELIGION
AND PHILOSOPHY OF EGYPT.

1. It becomes wise men, dame Clea,* to go to the Gods for all the good things they would enjoy. Much more ought we, when we would aim at that knowledge of them which our nature can arrive at, to pray that they themselves would bestow it upon us; truth being the greatest good that man can receive, and the goodliest blessing that God can give. Other good things he bestows on men as they want them, they being not his own peculiars nor of any use to himself. For the blessedness of the Deity consists not in silver and gold, nor yet his power in lightnings and thunders, but in knowledge and wisdom. And it was the best thing Homer ever said of Gods, when he pronounced thus:

Both of one line, both of one country boast,
But royal Jove's the eldest and knows most;†

where he declares Jupiter's prerogative in wisdom and science to be the more honorable, by terming it the elder. I, for my own part, do believe that the felicity of eternal living which the Gods enjoy lies mainly in this, that nothing escapes their cognizance that passes in the sphere of generation, and that, should we set aside wisdom and the knowledge of true beings,‡ immortality itself would not be life, but merely a long time.

* This Clea was priestess to Isis and to Apollo Delphicus.

† II. XIII. 354.

‡ That is, τὰ ὄντα in the Platonic sense, as opposed to τὰ γινόμενα. (G.)

2. And therefore the desire of truth, especially in what relates to the Gods, is a sort of grasping after divinity, it using learning and enquiry for a kind of resumption of things sacred, a work doubtless of more religion than any ritual purgation or charge of temples whatever, and especially most acceptable to the Goddess you serve, since she is more eminently wise and speculative, and since knowledge and science (as her very name * seems to import) appertain more peculiarly to her than any other thing. For the name of Isis is Greek, and so is that of her adversary Typhon, who, being puffed up † through ignorance and mistake, pulls in pieces and destroys that holy doctrine, which she on the contrary collects, compiles, and delivers down to such as are regularly advanced unto the deified state; which, by constancy of sober diet, and abstaining from sundry meats and the use of women, both restrains the intemperate and voluptuous part, and habituates them to austere and hard services in the temples, the end of which is the knowledge of the original, supreme, and mental being, which the Goddess would have them enquire for, as near to herself and as dwelling with her. Besides, the very name of her temple most apparently promises the knowledge and acquaintance of true being (*τὸ ὄν*), for they call it Iseion (*Ἰσειον*), as who should say, We shall know true being, if with reason and sanctimony we approach the sacred temples of this Goddess.

3. Moreover, many have reported her the daughter of Hermes, and many of Prometheus; the latter of which they esteem as the author of wit and forecast, and the former of letters and music. For the same reason also they call the former of the Muses at Hermopolis at the same time Isis and Justice, Isis being (as we before said)

* Flutarch derives Isis, in the usual uncritical way of ancient etymology, from the Greek root *is* —, found in *isore* from *oida*. (G.)

† That is, *τετυφομένος*. (G.)

no other than wisdom, and revealing things divine to such as are truly and justly styled the sacred bearers, and keepers of the sacred robes; and these are such as have in their minds, as in an ark, the sacred doctrine about the Gods, cleansed from superstitious frights and vain curiosities, keeping out of sight all dark and shady colors, and exposing to sight the light and gay ones, to insinuate something of the like kind in our persuasion about the Gods as we have represented to us in the sacred vestments. Wherefore, in that the priests of Isis are dressed up in these when they are dead, it is a token to us that this doctrine goes with them to the other life, and that nothing else can accompany them thither. For as neither the nourishing of beards nor the wearing of mantles can render men philosophers, so neither will linen garments or shaved heads make priests to Isis; but he is a true priest of Isis, who, after he hath received from the laws the representations and actions that refer to the Gods, doth next apply his reason to the enquiry and speculation of the truth contained in them.

4. For the greater part of men are ignorant even of this most common and ordinary thing, for what reason priests lay aside their hair and go in linen garments. Some are not at all solicitous to be informed about such questions; and others say their veneration for sheep is the cause why they abstain from their wool as well as their flesh, and that they shave their heads in token of mourning, and that they wear linen because of the bloomy color which the flax sendeth forth, in imitation of that ethereal clarity that environs the world. But indeed the true reason of them all is one and the same. For it is not lawful (as Plato saith) for a clean thing to be touched by an unclean; but now no superfluity of food or excrementitious substance can be pure or clean; but wool, down, hair, and nails come up and grow from superfluous excrements. It would

be therefore an absurdity for them to lay aside their own hair in purgations, by shaving themselves and by making their bodies all over smooth, and yet in the mean time to wear and carry about them the hairs of brutes. For we ought to think that the poet Hesiod, when he saith,

Not at a feast of Gods from five-branched tree
With sharp-edged steel to part the green from dry,*

would teach us to keep the feast when we are already cleansed from such things as these, and not in the solemnities themselves to use purgation or removal of excrementitious superfluities. But now flax springs up from an immortal being, the earth, and bears an eatable fruit, and affords a simple and cleanly clothing, not burdensome to him that is covered with it, and convenient for every season of the year, and which besides (as they tell us) is the least subject to engender vermin; but of this to discourse in this place would not be pertinent.

5. But now the priests do so abhor all kinds of superfluous excrements, that they not only decline most sorts of pulse, and of flesh that of sheep and swine, which produce much superfluity, but also in the time of their purgations they exclude salt from their meals. For which, as they have several other good reasons, so more especially this, that it whets the appetite and renders men over-eager after meat and drink. For that the reason why salt is not accounted clean should be (as Aristagoras tells us) because that, when it is hardened together, many little animals are caught in it and there die, is fond and ridiculous. They are also said to water the Apis from a well of his own, and to restrain him altogether from the river Nile, — not because they hold the water for polluted by reason of the crocodile, as some suppose, for there is nothing in the world in more esteem with the Egyptians than the Nile,

* Hes. Works and Days, 740. That is, *Do not cut your nails at a banquet of the Gods*. The briefer precept of Pythagoras was, *Παῦθ' θυσίαν μὴ ἰνυχίζου* (G.)

but because the water of the Nile being drunk is observed to be very feeding, and above all others to conduce to the increase of flesh. But they would not have the Apis nor themselves neither to be over fat ; but that their bodies should sit light and easy about their souls, and not press and squeeze them down by a mortal part overpowering and weighing down the divine.

6. They also that at Heliopolis (*Sun-town*) wait upon the sun never bring wine into his temple, they looking upon it as a thing indecent and unfitting to drink by daylight, while their lord and king looks on. The rest of them do indeed use it, but very sparingly. They have likewise many purgations, wherein they prohibit the use of wine, in which they study philosophy, and pass their time in learning and teaching things divine. Moreover their kings, being priests also themselves, were wont to drink it by a certain measure prescribed them in the sacred books, as Hecataeus informs us. And they began first to drink it in the reign of Psammetichus ; but before that time they were not used to drink wine at all, no, nor to pour it forth in sacrifice as a thing they thought any way grateful to the Gods, but as the blood of those who in ancient times waged war against the Gods, from whom, falling down from heaven and mixing with the earth, they conceived vines to have first sprung ; which is the reason (say they) that drunkenness renders men besides themselves and mad ; they being, as it were, gorged with the blood of their ancestors. These things (as Eudoxus tells us in the second book of his Travels) are thus related by the priests.

7. As to sea-fish, they do not all of them abstain from all, but some from one sort, and some from another. As for example, the Oxyrynchites abstain from such as are caught with the angle and hook ; for, having the fish called oxyrynchus (the pike) in great veneration, they are

afraid lest the hook should chance to catch hold of it and by that means become polluted. They of Syene also abstain from the phagrus (or sea-bream) because it is observed to appear with the approaching overflow of the Nile, and to present itself a voluntary messenger of the joyful news of its increase. But the priests abstain from all in general. But on the ninth day of the first month, when every other Egyptian eats a fried fish before the outer door of his house, the priests do not eat any fish, but only burn them before their doors. For which they have two reasons; the one whereof, being sacred and very curious, I shall resume by and by (it agreeing with the pious reasonings we shall make upon Osiris and Typhon); the other is a very manifest and obvious one, which, by declaring fish to be not a necessary but a superfluous and curious sort of food, greatly confirms Homer, who never makes either the dainty Phaeacians or the Ithacans (though both islanders) to make use of fish; no, nor the companions of Ulysses either in so long a voyage at sea, until they came to the last extremity of want. In short, they reckon the sea itself to be made of fire and to lie out of Nature's confines, and not to be a part of the world or an element, but a preternatural, corrupt, and morbid excrement.

8. For nothing hath been ranked among their sacred and religious rites that savored of folly, romance, or superstition, as some do suppose; but some of them were such as contained some signification of morality and utility, and others such as were not without a fineness either in history or natural philosophy. As, for instance, in what refers to the onions; for that Dictys, the foster-father of Isis, as he was reaching at a handful of onions, fell into the river and was there drowned, is extremely improbable. But the true reason why the priests abhor, detest, and avoid the onion is because it is the only plant whose na-

ture it is to grow and spread forth in the wane of the moon. Besides, it is no proper food, either for such as would practise abstinence and use purgations, or for such as would observe the festivals; for the former, because it causeth thirst, and for the latter, because it forceth tears from those that eat it. They likewise esteem the swine as an unhallowed animal, because it is observed to be most apt to engender in the wane of the moon, and because that such as drink its milk have a leprosy and scabbed roughness in their bodies. But the story which they that sacrifice a swine at every full moon are wont to subjoin after their eating of it,—how that Typhon, being once about the full of the moon in pursuit of a certain swine, found by chance the wooden chest wherein lay the body of Osiris, and scattered it,—is not received by all, but looked upon as a misrepresented story, as a great many more such are. They tell us moreover, that the ancients did so much despise delicacy, sumptuousness, and a soft and effeminate way of living, that they erected a pillar in the temple at Thebes, having engraven upon it several grievous curses against King Meinis, who (as they tell us) was the first that brought off the Egyptians from a mean, wealthless, and simple way of living. There goes also another story, how that Technatis, father to Bocchoris, commanding an army against the Arabians, and his baggage and provisions not coming in as soon as was expected, heartily fed upon such things as he could next light on, and afterwards had a sound sleep upon a pallet, whereupon he fell greatly in love with a poor and mean life; and for this reason he cursed Meinis, and that with the consent of all the priests, and carved that curse upon a pillar.

9. But their kings (you must know) were always chosen either out of the priesthood or soldiery, the latter having the right of succession by reason of their military valor,

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