

Concerning Sacrifices:

So, concerning their sacrifices – those practicing nonsense – and the festivals and proceedings of the gods; and the things they ask, and the things they pray, and what they know concerning them ...one would need to be broken and depressed if he didn't laugh at their stupidity. Looking on the things they do, there is much – I suppose – that before laughing with oneself, to first ask: Should he call them pious, or enemies to the gods and possessed by demons? What a wretch, base theory about the gods: that they need human fawning to be pleased and will become indignant if ignored!

But, think about the Aetolian suffering, and the lamentations of the Calydonians, and so much bloodshed and the end of Meleager. They say the grudge of Artemis caused all these things, because she wasn't invited to the sacrifice by Oeneus. It really hit her hard, that grand animal slaughtered: Methinks I see her, in heaven, alone – all the other gods having already gone to Oeneus – and she's pitching a fit because she had to stay behind during such a party.

[2] What about those Ethiopians: blessed and thrice happy, as some might say, as they remember the joy of Zeus partying with them for 12 days straight – that time he took along all the other gods.

So nothing, so it seems, will the gods do without getting something back: they will sell any good thing to human beings. It is possible to purchase good health for a calf; become rich for four cows; to rule, 100 cows; to safely return from Ilios to Pylos, 9 bulls; Aulos to Ilion? A virgin princess. Heccuba paid 12 cows and a robe to Athene so that the city wouldn't be destroyed.

It seems that a rooster, a crown or even frankincense will each buy something.

[3] It was like this, I suppose, for Chryses – so holy and so advanced and so wise concerning divine things – after he leaves Agamemnon, without the win. Chryses pleads a return for all the bribes he had given to Apollo. He has absolutely no shame in saying,

"O Great Apollo! How often I have dressed your unadorned temples, and burned thousands of bulls and goats on your altars. But you ignore my sufferings: the 'Benefactor' counts these as nothing."

So by these words he shames Apollo, who grabs some arrows, drops himself in the harbor and rains plague upon the Achaeans and on their donkeys and dogs.

[4] Since I've brought Apollo to mind, I am of the mind to mention something: something wisemen say about him – this doesn't concern questions of misfortune in the matter of Hyacinth's murder or his mistreatment of Daphne – but rather the condemnation and order of exile from heaven for the Cyclopes' death. He was sent to earth to share in human luck. Then he became a menial for Admetus in Thessalia and for Leadmon in Phrygia – in this he was not alone: Poisden was with him. They both made bricks and built the wall. And, they didn't even receive their full wage, they say the pair are still owed 30 odd Trojan drachmae.

[5] The poets speak such eloquent words about the gods – a great deal about these most divine things when it comes to Hephaestus and Prometheus and Cronus and Rhea, nearly the entire family of Zeus.

When they begin, they call upon the Muses to sing with them, and so inspired of the gods they sing of how Kronos castrated his father Uranus, then ruled in his place. He, of course, like Thyestes of Argos did latter, devoured his own children.

Or Zeus: saved by the fraud of Rhea (his mother) who substituted a stone (his father tried to eat him); later exposed on Crete; raised by a goat; he drove off his father and threw him in prison; married many women; and just like the Persian and the Assyrians, he married his own sister. Or what of his erotic dealings, his gushing lust, recklessly filling heaven with children: some were gods; but many were bastards bred with mortals upon earth: he came as a noble shower of gold, once a bull, once a swan, once an eagle – he was more changable than Proteus! Once he sprouted Athene from his head; conceiving her right in his own brain. Finally, they say when Dionysis was half-done, and his mother was on

fire, Zeus snatched out of his mother, buried him (Dionysus) in his thigh until he cut him out, because the gestation was finished.

[6] I also suppose those things they say about Hera, how she – without any man – being lifted by the wind gave birth to Hephaestus – who really didn't have good luck, because he was just a blacksmith at the forge with bronze and fire and sparks going up all around him; oh, and he had bad feet. He was lame from the fall, when Zeus threw him out of heaven; and if the Lemnians had not done him good, carrying him and showing him hospitality, he would be dead to us (just like Astyanax being thrown down from the tower); and so Hephaestus survived.

But what about Prometheus: who doesn't know what he suffered, just because he was a great philanthropist. And so Zeus dragged him out to Scythia and crucified him on the Caucasus, where an eagle stood watch, eating his liver every day.

[7] This should complete the condemnation: Rhea – there is need to speak just as much about these things – how she was not ashamed to act so wild – an old woman, already out of time and the mother of gods! Yet she chased boys, crazy jealous and dragging Attis about on lions; but enough about such things. Who then can blame Aphrodite for adultery; or Selena for falling out of the sky – repeatedly — to be with Endymion?

[8] Enough of such things! Let us ascend to heaven, in a poetical flight along the same path as Homer and Hesiod, and there let us see how everything has been arranged.

It is brass on the outside, as we had heard from Homer, but peering a little over this, and simply turning your neck, the brightest light appears and pure sun and radiant light and the ground is gold.

Upon first entering there are the Hours, for these are the gates. After this we find Iris and Hermes, the servants and message bearers for Zeus. Next is Hephaestus with his forge and every sort of contrivance; after this the dwelling places for the gods and the palace of Zeus – all these spectacular things Hephaestus appointed.

[9]

Then the gods sitting about Zeus

-- It's fitting, I suppose to talk fancy when we go above

All of the gods scoping out the earth, looking around and stooping down if perhaps they see a fire winging up or the savor of sacrificial smoke twisting. If there is a sacrifice, they greedily gulp down the smoke and drink the blood from altars ... like flies.

When they are at home, nectar and ambrosia is their repast.

It used to be that even humans could eat with them, like Ixion or Tantalus. But those two were uppity and talkative, and now they are being tormented. So heaven has become inaccessible & forbidden to the mortal race.

[10] Well, so much for the life of the gods

Thus it is that human beings are in harmony with them, fitted for the rituals they worry themselves about. First of all, a grove is appropriated, a mountain consecrated, a hen devoted, and fruit assigned to each god.

Afterwards they worship according to their custom and cities are assigned: Delphos and Delios to Apollon, Athene to Athens – her home is testified to by the name – and Hera an Argive, Rhea a Mygdonian, Aphrodite a Paphian.

And was it not the Cretans – as they say – who raised up Zeus, and also his tomb they point out. We have been deceived all this time, supposing Zeus commands thunder, rain and all the rest! He lies hidden, having died of old, buried with the Cretans.

[11] Then after they raised temples -- so that the gods would not be homeless nor lack a place for prayers -- they fashioned images for them, having called upon the sculptors Praxiteles or Polyclitus, or Phidias (even though they'd never seen the gods). And so the sculptors whipped-up statues of Zeus with a beard, Apollon forever young, a boyish beard on Hermes, Poseidon with sea-blue hair, and Athene with flashing eyes.

But the tourists who came to the did the temple didn't seem to realize that the Indian ivory and the gold dug up in Thrace were not actually the son of Cronus and Rhea translated by Phidias to desolate Pisa, set up to oversee it all — and loving-it if perhaps every five years one might sacrifice to him during the Olympian games.

[12] The altar dressed, the public call complete, the lustration done, they begin to present the sacrifices. A farmer brings a plough-ox, the shepherd a sheep, the goatherd a goat; someone brings frankincense or a honey cake. A poor man makes propitiation to the god by kissing his right hand. – But I am most concerned with the sacrificers.

Having garlanded the animal, which beforehand had been carefully examined to see if it was in fact completely perfect (who wants to slaughter that which can't help), they lead up the beast and kill it straight before the god; while the animal dolefully moans and the flute plays lovely semi-tones.

Who could possibly suppose the gods are not delighted looking down upon such a scene?

[13] Then there is the public proclamation: “No one may enter the sacred space washed clean who is not himself clean.”

Yet, there stands the priest, his hands bloody, just like the Cyclopes, cutting out guts, tearing out hearts, and shaking blood on the altar; what piety is not completed?

After a fire starts, he deposits a goat bearing its skin or a still-wooled sheep. The divine and reverent steam drifts above, gently scattering to heaven.

Now the Scythian rejects all such sacrifices, instead leading humiliated men that may be presented to Artemis — and this pleases that god.

[14] These things are about the same as was that done by Assyria, and by Phrygia & Lydia. But if you should go to Egypt, then and only then, will you see sacred matters truly worthy of heaven! Zeus has a rams'-

face, Hermes — the best of them all — has a dog-face; and Pan is all goat. One is a ibis, another a crocodile or an ape.

If you want to gain a good understanding of all this stuff, you can learn a lot from sages and scribes and prophets (shaved and discoursing) — after they say the word and close the door on the commoners. — How after the war and uprising of the giants, the gods were frightened and fled to Egypt, and here they escaped the attack. One hiding as a goat, another like a ram, others as a beast or bird, and so now the gods are protected by these forms.

These things are not to be overlooked in their shrines, having been kept there for more than ten thousand years!

[15] Their (the Egyptian) sacrifices are the same, except that they mourn over the sacrificial victim, and standing about they strike themselves; and after the it has been slain they bury it.

Now the Apis Bull is a great god to them, so if it should die, they make big ado and shave their head to show their mourning — even if they had have the purple lock of Nisus. After that, a new Apis — a god — is hand chosen from the herd, the one most beautiful and august from all the cattle.

Since these things are so, and many are determined to believe, it seems to me they lack only A Heracultis laughing at their ignorance and a Democritus lamenting their stupidity.