Hypomnemata

Ambrose the Syrian (6th century)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

Hypomnemata

HYPOMNEMATA,
WHICH AMBROSE, A CHIEF MAN OF GREECE, WROTE; WHO BECAME A CHRISTIAN: AND ALL HIS FELLOW-SENATORS RAISED A CLAMOUR AGAINST HIM; AND HE FLED FROM THEM, AND WROTE AND SHEWED THEM ALL THEIR FOLLY; AND AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS DISCOURSE HE ANSWERED AND SAID: Do not suppose, Men and Greeks, that my separation from your customs has taken place without a befitting and just cause; for I have investigated the whole of your wisdom of poetry, and rhetoric, and philosophy; and when I found not any thing right or worthy of the Deity, I was desirous of investigating the wisdom of the Christians also, and of learning and seeing who they are, and when, and what is this its recent and strange production, or on what good things they rely who follow this wisdom, so as to speak the truth.

Men and Greeks, when I had made the inquiry I found not any folly, as in the famous Homer, who says respecting the wars of the two trials, "for the sake of Helen many of the Greeks perished at Troy, far from their beloved home." For first they say respecting Agamemnon their king, that through, the folly of Menelaus his brother, and the vehemence of his madness, and the incontinence of his lust, he was desirous to go and rescue Helen from a leprous shepherd: but when the Greeks had been |62 victorious in the war, and had burnt some cities, and taken some women and boys captive, and the land was filled with blood, and the rivers were filled with dead bodies, Agamemnon himself too was found to be taken captive by passion for Briseis: and Patroclus was slain, and Achilles, the son of the goddess Thetis, lamented over him; and Hector was dragged; and Priam, together with Hecuba, wept over the loss of their children; and Astyanax, the son of Hector, was thrown from the walls of Ilium, and his mother, Andromache, Ajax the great took; and that which had been captured in war after a little while was consumed in lust.

But respecting the perfidy of Ulysses, the son of Laertes, and his murders, who shall tell? for in one day his house became the grave for a hundred and ten suitors, and was filled with dead bodies and blood; who also by his vice has gained praises, because through the excess of his cunning he concealed himself: who also, as ye say, sailed over the sea, and heard not the voice of the Sirens, because he stopped his ears with wax. But Achilles himself, the son of Peleus, who leaped over the river, and put to flight the Trojans, and slew Hector, this

your champion became the slave of Philoxena, and was vanquished by an Amazon while |63 she lay dead: and he stripped off his armour, and put on the bridal dress, and at last was sacrificed to love.

So much, then, with respect to heroes; and I should have been satisfied for Homer to be left to thee, if thy vain words had only proceeded to speak of men, and not concerning the gods, because, touching the gods, I am ashamed even to utter them; for the fabled accounts are very wicked and horrible, and surpassing all belief, and necessarily ridiculous; for a man must laugh when he approaches them, nor will he believe when he hears them: gods, indeed! who have not one of them observed the laws of righteousness, and chastity, and modesty, but are adulterers, and have lived in dissipation, and yet have not been condemned to death, as it was just. For the Lord of the gods, that "Father of gods and men," according to what you say, was not only an adulterer, for this would have been too little, but he also slew his own father, and was a paederast. First, then, I will speak concerning his adultery, although I am ashamed, for he appeared to Antiope like a Satyr; and he dropped down upon Danae like gold; and to Europa he became a bull, and a swan |64 to Leda. But the love of Semele, the mother of Bacchus, proved both his own importunity, and also the jealousy of the chaste Juno. And he caught up Ganymede the Phrygian like an eagle, in order that a beautiful and becoming boy might be his cupbearer.

Moreover that Lord of the gods slew Saturn his own Father, in order that he might seize upon his kingdom. Oh! of how many censures is the Lord of the gods guilty, and to how many deaths is he obnoxious, as an adulterer, and as a sorcerer, and as a paederast? Read to the Lord of the gods, oh men and Greeks, the law respecting parricide, and the sentence against adultery, and the shame of the obscenity of paederastism. For how many adulterers has the Lord of the gods instructed? For how many paederasts, and sorcerers, and murderers? for if a man be found to be guilty of lust, he shall not be put to death, because he does this to be like the Lord of the gods; and if he be detected as a murderer, he has an apology in the Lord of the gods; and if a man be a sorcerer, he has learnt it from the Lord of the gods; and if he be a paederast, the Lord of the gods is his advocate. |65

But if a man should speak about courage, Achilles was braver than the Lord of the gods, because .he slew him who had slain his friend; but the Lord of the gods wept over Sarpendon, his own son, while he was dying, being very sorry. And Pluto, who also is a god, ravished Proserpine, but the mother of Proserpine was in great trepidation, and searching for her daughter in every desert. And Alexander Paris, when he had carried off Helen, received the judgment of vengeance, as being her lover by force; but Pluto, who was a god, and ravished Proserpine, remained without any disgrace. And Menelaus, who was a man, knew how to go in search of Helen his wife, but Ceres, who was a goddess, knew not where to look for her daughter Proserpine. Let Vulcan pass over his jealousy, and be not envious, for he is forgotten because he is old and lame; but Mars is loved because he is a youth and beautiful in stature. But there was the reproach of adultery because Vulcan was not aware of the love of his wife Venus and Mars; but when he did know, Vulcan said, "Come, see a ridiculous

and foolish deed, how me, who am her own, Venus, the daughter of the Lord of the gods, is disgracing me, who am her own, and honouring Mars who is a stranger to her. And is it not a shameful thing for the Lord of the gods, because he loved those which were like these? And Penelope continued as a widow twenty years, because she was expecting her husband Ulysses, and was employed with works, and diligent in occupations during the time that all those suitors were urging her; but Venus, who is a goddess, while her husband Vulcan was present with her, abandoned him because she was overcome by love for Mars.

Hear, men and Greeks, which of you would dare to do this, or |66 could even bear to behold it. And if one should dare, what torment is reserved for him, or what stripes? Nevertheless, Saturn, who is a god, who ate up all those children, is not even brought before a tribunal. They say, however, that the Lord of the gods, his son, only escaped from him, and the madness of his father Saturn was deceived, because Rhea his wife, the mother of the Lord of the gods, gave him a stone instead of his son the Lord of the gods, to prevent him from devouring him. Hear, men and Greeks, and reflect upon this madness; for the brute beast, that feedeth in the field knoweth its own food, and will not touch strange food; likewise the animals and the reptiles too, and the birds also, know their own food; but respecting men it is not meet for me to say any thing: you know indeed their food, and understand; but Saturn, who is a god, not knowing his proper food, swallowed a stone. Wherefore, oh men and Greeks, if ye be willing to have such gods, do not blame one another whenever ye do such things as these; and be not thou angry against thy son when he purposeth to kill thee, because he is imitating the Lord of the gods.

And if a man be guilty of adultery with thy wife, why dost thou reckon him as an enemy, and yet worshippest and servest the Lord of the gods, who resembles him? And why dost thou blame thy wife, when she is guilty of adultery and is without punishment, but honourest Venus and settest her in temples? Persuade Solon to break his own laws, Lycurgus also to abstain from making laws, and let the judges of the Areopagus break theirs and not judge again, nor let there be any more councils for the |67 Athenians. Let the Athenians dismiss Socrates, for no one resembling Saturn has ever been brought before him. Neither let them put Orestes, who slew his own mother, to death; for, lo! the Lord of the gods has done worse things than these to his father. Oedipus also too hastily inflicted injury upon himself, who put out his eyes because he had slain his father unawares, because he did not look to the Lord of the gods, who killed his father, and remained without any punishment. The Corinthians also expelled Medaea, because she had slain her children, but they serve and honour Saturn, who ate up his own children. And as for Alexander Paris, he did right in ravishing Helen in order that he might imitate the god Pluto, who carried off Proserpine.

Let men be freed from the laws, and let cities belong to lascivious women, and be the abode of sorcerers; for this reason, oh men and Greeks, because your gods are debased like yourselves, but your warriors are brave as your dramas relate, and your histories proclaim; respecting the furies of Orestes, and the bed of Thyestes, and the pollution of Pelops; and concerning Danaus, who through his jealousy slew and cut off some of his sons in their banqueting;

and also the feasting of Thyestes upon a corpse in vengeance, and Procne up to this time crying as she flies, and also her sister piping with her tongue cut out. But what is it fit to say respecting the murder of Oedipus, who married his own mother, and whose brothers, who were also his own sons, slew one another?

And I hate also your festivals, for there is no moderation there |68 to the sweet pipes that drive away care, which play with a tremulous motion, and the preparation of the unguents with which ye anoint yourselves) and the garlands which ye put on. And in the abundance of your wickedness ye have forgotten shame, your understandings also are blinded, ye have been tempted too by importunity, and have loved the bed of lying. And if these things had been said by another, perhaps they would have brought an accusation against him that they are not true; but your own poets declare them, and your songs and dramas proclaim them. Come, then, and be instructed by the Word of God, and by consoling wisdom: rejoice and partake of it: know too the King incorruptible, and become acquainted with his servants, which boast not in armour, neither make slaughter: because our Captain delighteth not in the multitude of an army, neither in the horsemen and in their beauty, nor in the illustriousness of family; but he delighteth in the pure soul, which a wall of justice |69 sur- rounds. But the Word of God is always instructing us, and the promises of our good King and the works of God. Oh the soul that is purchased by the power of the Word! oh the trumpet of peace without war! oh the doctrine quenching the natural fire of the soul, which maketh not poets, nor produceth philosophers, nor the crowd-followed orator; but goeth and maketh the dead pass over that he die not, and raiseth men from earth as Gods, to the region which is above the firmament. Come, be instructed, and be like me, for I also have been like you.

[Selected endnotes moved here and numbered] 1. P. 61. M. Renan has inserted a few lines from this in the Journal Asiatique. The text is correctly printed, with the exception of .... for ..., but he has erred greatly in the translation. ... 2. P. 61, L. 11. Wars of the two trials. I suppose the author means, of the gods as well as the men engaged in it; to which also reference is made in the Cohortatio ad Gentiles, c. ii. edit. Otto, p. 24; and the passage of Homer, Il. xx. v. 66-72 cited, ... Compare Tertullian, Ad Nationes i. c. 10, p. 329. 3. L. 12. For the sake of Helen, &c. Homer, Il. ii. v. 177. 4. L. 16. A leprous shepherd. The Syriac proves the antiquity of the Greek reading leprou~, which has been suspected by critics. See Otto's notes. 5. P. 63. Compare what is said here relative to the Gods with Justin Martyr, Apol. i, c. 21. See also Augustin, De Civitate Dei ii, c. 7, 8; and Joh. Ludov. Vives' notes to these chapters: edit. Fancof. 1061.

6. L. 13. Father of Gods and men. The common expression "of Homer ..., which Ennius among the Latins translated "patrum divumque hominunque." See Cicero, De Nat. Deor. p. 104. 7. L. 15. Concerning his adultery. Compare the passage of Homer, Il.xiv.315-327, in which Jupiter recounts his amours to Juno.: cited also in the Cohortatio ad Gent. c. 2. p. 22. 8. P. 64, L. 6. Of how many censures is the Lord of the gods guilty, &c. Compare Tertullian, Apol. c. 11, vol. i. p. 159:... 9. P. 65, L. 3. Wept over Sarpedon. He alludes to

the following lines of Homer, Il. xvi. 433, which Athenagoras also quotes, Legat. c. 21 ... This is also quoted in the Cohort. ad Gent. c. 2. p. 20.

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