

ON THE TRUE NATURE OF THE GODS

INTRODUCTION, TRANSLATION AND NOTES

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The following text was found by chance in the Burgerbibliothek of Bern. It had apparently belonged to a private collection in Germany. Its former owner, a certain Eduard von Schopenländer, bequeathed it to the library in 1903. On the cover, he wrote: “*Ein besseres Verhütungsmittel als die Jungfräulichkeit Marias*” (a better contraceptive than Mary's virginity).

Our text, written in Latin, is anonymous. On the first page, we discover this singular title: *De Vera Natura Deorum*, obviously a reference to Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*. It is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, the author shows that procreation is pointless and cannot overcome the problem of death. In the second chapter, he argues that the gods are actually human parents. In the third chapter, he explains that a large number of offspring will inevitably lead to the birth of great unfortunates. The fourth chapter offers some thoughts on the extinction of mankind. The fifth chapter is the conclusion.

ON THE TRUE NATURE OF THE GODS

CHAPTER I

Generation is a good, you say? But what good is it to reproduce sin and death? Gregory of Nyssa asked: “Who indeed does not know that the result of carnal union is the creation of mortal bodies?”¹ Mortality comes from sin, *for the wages of sin is death*². To procreate, then, is to accumulate sins against God.

The wisest men, even among pagans, advise us not to beget children. Theophrastus, who cannot be forgotten, writes: “Moreover, to take a wife in order to have children, either so that our name does not disappear, or so that they support us in old age and we benefit from heirs on whom we can rely, is the most stupid thing of all. After all, what does it matter to us when we leave this world if no one is named after us? Even a son doesn't necessarily bear his father's name, and there are countless people who share the same name. And what good is it for old age to feed in your home someone who may die before you, or have depraved morals, or, when he reaches middle age, will certainly find you long in dying. Friends and companions, on the other hand, are heirs you choose with thought; they are better and safer than those you are obliged to accept, whether you like it or not.”³

It's a mistake to think we can cheat death by leaving something behind. Will the future know our name? Yet the very wise Solomon assures us that, *indeed, the memory of the wise, like that of the*

1 Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 13, 3.

2 Romans 6:23.

3 This fragment of Theophrastus is quoted by Jerome (*Against Jovinianus*, I, 47).

*foolish, will not be eternal, and in times to come, all will similarly sink into oblivion; the learned die in the same way as the ignorant*⁴.

And if we want to pass on an inheritance, isn't it better to choose people we can already trust? Children are typically the kind of successors who offer no guarantees, the very ones who force Solomon to lament thus: *I have hated all the work I have done under the sun, for I leave it to the one who will come after me. For who knows whether he will be wise or foolish? But he will be master of all my work, all that I obtained by wisdom under the sun; this again is vanity*⁵.

If your son is a fool, you will lose your wealth, but if he is wise and dear to you, you risk losing a priceless treasure! We must not forget to mention this anecdote about Thales: after Solon asked him why he had no children, Thales spread the rumour that Solon's son had died. When he decided to reveal the hoax to his friend, who was now moping about what he had heard, Thales explained: "It is precisely this, O Solon, that keeps me away from marriage and procreation."⁶

The danger we run by procreating is therefore threefold: our inheritance may go to the undeserving, we may have to mourn the fruit of our womb and, inevitably, our child, who asked for nothing, will have to suffer and die sooner or later.

Man tries to minimize the tragedy of death by inventing all kinds of fables. He claims that an afterlife exists and that his body will not return to dust like a mere animal. But that's just fooling ourselves, *because the end of man and the end of the beast are one and the same: death for one, death for the other, and they share the same breath. What does man have that the beast does not? Nothing, since all is vanity*⁷.

Rejecting their animal nature, denying their mortal condition, men then raised their eyes to heaven and set out to become like the Immortals.

CHAPTER II

Euhemerus believes that those we call gods today are in fact illustrious figures from antiquity whom fame has made divine, so to speak. I have no doubt that this is true. Indeed, it is not uncommon for men, driven by inordinate pride, to seek to become the equal of God. This was the sin of the kings of Babylon and Tyre, who believed themselves superior to the Most High⁸.

As for me, I affirm that it is not only a few great men who have the audacity to make themselves gods, but also a host of males and females whose cult is perpetuated by each generation. Look at those who, in Rome, worship the Great Mother⁹ and Jupiter, the name behind which the paternal letters are hidden¹⁰. Your father and your mother, these are your two idols, O world!

Is it any wonder that the pagan gods resemble their parents? It only proves that they made them themselves! Doesn't Xenophanes rightly imagine that if animals were capable of doing it, they would fashion gods in their own likeness¹¹? They thus perverted the worship of God so that they do

4 Ecclesiastes 2:16.

5 Ecclesiastes 2:18-19.

6 Cf. Plutarch, *Solon*, 6.

7 Ecclesiastes 3:19.

8 Cf. Isaiah 14:3-23 and Ezechiel 28:1-19.

9 *Magna Mater* is the Latin name given to the goddess Cybele.

10 *Jupiter* contains the word *pater*.

11 This is an allusion to this fragment of Xenophanes, quoted by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata*, V, 14): "But if oxen or lions had hands so that with them they could draw and perform the same tasks as men, then horses would represent the gods with images of horses, and oxen with images of oxen; they would make their bodies after their own and give them their stature."

not serve him anymore, and so that his name serves them. This is why it is written: “In the beginning, breeders created God in their own image.”¹²

In the early days of mankind, the serpent said to Eve about the fruit of the tree of knowledge: *On the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods*¹³. What is the tree of “knowledge”? It is, as the so-called Encratites¹⁴ well understood, a metaphor for a man “knowing” his wife. Several months after tasting the fruit, on a painful night that heralded the sorrows of the race to come¹⁵, Adam *begat in his own image and likeness*¹⁶, thus becoming a god as well as the rival of the one who had said: *Let us make man in our image and likeness*¹⁷. From then on, the sons of men honored their parents as gods, which the Lord condemned when he said: *He who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me*¹⁸; and even: “From now on, no one who chooses to procreate will be worthy to be my disciple”¹⁹.

CHAPTER III

If God has not prevented mankind from reproducing, it's because he has seen fit to grant it the freedom of its choices, without, however, approving of its evil deeds. Indeed, the Apostle says: *All things are lawful, but not all things are advantageous; all things are lawful, but not all things edify*²⁰.

One day, God wanted to test his servant Abraham by ordering him to sacrifice his son Isaac²¹. This was not to test his fidelity, for God abhors human sacrifice, but to ensure his goodness and compassion. But when God saw that Abraham was actually about to kill Isaac, his anger was kindled against him, and he rewarded him in accordance with his own folly: to the one who consented to sacrifice his only son, God gave a posterity *as numerous as the stars and the sand on the sea shore*²².

After that, Abraham ensured that Isaac lived a happy life, free from misfortune: he found him a wife and bequeathed him everything he owned on the day of his death²³. Isaac did indeed lead a peaceful life, and died *old and full of days*²⁴. But the father's responsibility did not end with his son's

12 Matti 1:1 ; for more on this text, see *infra*, note 19.

13 Genesis 3:5.

14 The Encratites were an ascetic movement in early Christianity. In particular, they rejected marriage, procreation, wine and meat. We know that they interpreted this episode of Genesis as an allusion to the sexual act (cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, III, 17).

15 God cursed mankind by making childbirth and labor painful (cf. Genesis 3:16-19).

16 Genesis 5:3.

17 Genesis 1:26.

18 Matthew 10:37.

19 This extract comes from the *Gospel of Theophilus*, an early Christian text that predates our canonical Gospels. It was recently found by a fisherman in an iceberg from an Icelandic glacier. It has been rightly suggested that Joseph of Arimathea may have passed it on to the Nordic countries during his exile among the Hyperboreans. A French translation of the *Gospel* is available here: <<https://theophiledegiraud.e-monsite.com/medias/files/evangile-selon-theophile.pdf>> (Accessed: 21 May 2024). The *Epistle of Matti* was apparently written in Finland at an unknown date. Given that these two documents share a hostility towards procreation and that they were both found in Northern Europe, we can assume that they share a common origin. Indeed, I believe that the full name that appears on the *Epistle*, Häyry Matti, is undoubtedly a distortion of *Haramati* ("of Arimathea" in Hebrew).

20 1 Corinthians 10:23.

21 Cf. Genesis 22:2.

22 Genesis 22:17.

23 Cf. Genesis 24 et 25:5.

24 Genesis 35:29.

integrity. For his son would have children, who would in turn have children, and so on. By begetting once, the patriarch had become the demiurge of an entire universe.

Abraham's descendants included many men blessed by God: Joseph, Moses, David and many others. But for all these fortunate men, there were bound to be some less fortunate souls. What of Dinah, Joseph's sister, who was dishonored and raped²⁵? What of the sons of Israel who, unlike Moses, were not spared by the hand of Pharaoh²⁶? And what of Uriah the Hittite who was murdered by David²⁷? Abraham allowed these unfortunates to exist, which is why his descendants are not a source of glory, but a curse through which he corrupted himself. Today, the name of Abraham is anathema to all the wretched people who come from his womb, which is why Jeremiah the prophet cried out: *Cursed be the day in which I was born! Blessed be not the day in which my mother bore me!*²⁸

Some will say that the small number of unfortunate children is not a good enough reason to stop increasing the human race, that the large number of blessed ones deserves to be born. But our Lord does not think this way. For he prefers to save the one lost sheep from hell, rather than worry about the ninety-nine righteous who are already destined for paradise²⁹. This is why he says: *See that you despise not one of these little ones*³⁰.

CHAPTER IV

If everyone stopped taking part in reproduction, our kind would quickly become extinct. There are three kinds of attitude towards this obvious fact.

The first abhor the end of mankind. This was the case of Nimrod, who wanted to build himself a tower high enough to prevent the waters of a new flood from wiping mankind off the face of the earth³¹. Some go so far as to commit the most heinous crimes to ensure the continuation of their race; the Romans, for example, lacking wives, abducted the Sabine women to make them the mothers of their future empire.

The second promote celibacy for all, without fully assuming its natural consequences, counting on the possibility of a miracle that would allow the species to survive in spite of everything. Such is the case of John Chrysostom, who said: "What marriage, let it be known to me, gave birth to Adam? What travail gave birth to Eve? You don't know what to answer. Then why do you fear without reason, and why do you tremble that mankind will come to an end with the cessation of marriage? Myriads upon myriads of angels serve God and thousands upon thousands of archangels assist him, yet none of them owe their existence to a lineage, a birth, a travail or a conception. Couldn't God, then, create many more humans without recourse to marriage, in the same way as he created the first from whom all humanity descends?"³²

The third group rejoices in the extinction that universal continence would bring. This is obviously the case with Augustine who, it should not be forgotten, wrote this: "I know there are some who

25 Cf. Genesis 34.

26 Cf. Exodus 1:22.

27 Cf. 2 Samuel 11-12. Uriah the Hittite is not a descendant of Abraham; the author probably means to indicate that birth is not only a harm for the person who is born, but also for those around him, because of the crimes he might commit.

28 Jeremiah 20:14.

29 Cf. Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7.

30 Matthew 18:10.

31 The tradition of Nimrod seeking protection from a second flood is found in Flavius Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, I, 4).

32 John Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, 14.

murmur: ‘But if all men decided to abstain from all sexual union, how would the human race subsist?’ May they all make that decision! Simply out of charity from a pure heart, out of good conscience and genuine faith! The city of God would be filled much more quickly, and the end of time would be hastened!”³³

Apart from the cessation of births, the end of time can come in two other ways: either with the return of our Lord, which is why true Christians, taking no part in worldly affairs, pray and wait impatiently for his coming as if it were tomorrow, or by inventing a means of exterminating all men.

The story goes that Phaethon, son of the Sun, wanted to drive his father's chariot. However, the reckless driver lost control of the quadriga and sent it crashing into the Earth, which burst into flames that nearly destroyed all humanity. It's conceivable that some ill-intentioned man could find a way to build a similar chariot and recreate the incident in this fable. This would perhaps make extinction possible, but would not be appropriate at all, for it is written: *Thou shalt not kill*³⁴. We therefore only have the preaching of continence to hasten the end of time. Undoubtedly, the world will not want to hear it, but the Lord expects nothing more from us, for he says: *And if anyone does not receive you and listen to your words, go out of the house or town and shake off the dust from your feet*³⁵.

Ironically, our species could be brought to an end more quickly by more births, rather than fewer. For with a large number of men, there's also a greater risk of one of them becoming a bloodthirsty tyrant. Nero, who set fire to Rome, lacked not madness, but only the bellows to allow his inferno to spread beyond the City and devour the whole earth; he thus came close to becoming a non-fictional Phaethon.

CHAPTER V

Let's now hear the end of this speech. The Scriptures depicted reproduction in the guise of a serpent slithering in the Garden of Eden, or “voluptuousness” in Hebrew, which undoubtedly refers to the pleasures associated with mating³⁶. This animal, with its elongated form representing the shameful parts of man, scatters its poisonous seed in the woman's cavity; that's why God says to the serpent: I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; she will crush your head, and you will attack her heel³⁷. “Attacking her heel” obviously means penetrating the woman, for in Hebrew, feet can refer to what lies between; this is the meaning of this verse: *For this reason, Saphora took a sharp stone, circumcised her son's foreskin and touched his feet*³⁸. Here we see Saphora, the “seed of the woman”, “crushing the serpent's head”, that is, removing, so to speak, the head of the virile member.

The Lord called the scribes and Pharisees snakes and broods of vipers, because they were the sons of those who had killed the prophets³⁹. By this, he certainly wanted to show that procreation is like a cycle that makes iniquity repeat itself. The viper is the symbol par excellence of the abomination caused by reproduction: isn't it said that the female devours her husband after mating with him, and that her young, having reached the end of their development, gnaw at their mother's womb to see

33 Augustine of Hippo, *Of the Good of Marriage*, 10, 10.

34 Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17.

35 Matthew 10:14.

36 The Hebrew word ‘*ednah*, a feminine form of ‘*eden*, refers to sexual pleasure in Genesis 18:12.

37 Genesis 3:15.

38 Exodus 4:25 ; feet can indeed serve as a euphemism for genitals, as is also the case in Isaiah 7:20.

39 Cf. Matthew 23:29-33.

the light of day? That's why it is called a viper, because it gives birth in violence⁴⁰. Through the bloody sacrifice of his Son, God wanted to show us the violence of fatherhood. He thus became the Demiurge, lowering himself to the level of men, reproducing Abraham's sin by begetting and sacrificing his only Son.

One might have thought that the profoundly painful and unholy nature of existence would have been enough to convince men to stop reproducing. But instead, they preferred to make idols and worship the strength of their numbers, rather than the power of God. That's why he said: *Because they did not do my ordinances, and rejected my precepts, and profaned my Sabbaths, and set their eyes on the idols of their fathers, I gave them precepts that were not good, and ordinances by which they could not live. And I defiled them with their offerings, when they killed every one of their first-born children*⁴¹. The “idols of their fathers” undoubtedly refer to the parents themselves, whom pagans worship as gods. The “precepts that were not good” are, of course, all the times when God commanded men to multiply, which in a way amounts to sacrificing one's offspring to Death.

The Lord gave us the means to put an end to this carnage when he said: *And there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to understand, let him understand*⁴². Here he shows us the only way to preserve one's name without counting on the life, suffering and death of many descendants; indeed, God says: *To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, choose what I delight in and are attached to my covenant, I will give them a place and a name in my house and within my walls that is better than sons and daughters; I will give them an eternal name that will not be destroyed*⁴³.

40 The ancients believed that the viper reproduced this way; “it gives birth in violence” is said *vi pariat* in Latin, which resembles *vipera*; we find this popular etymology in Isidore of Seville (*Etymologies*, XII, 10, 4) and in Servius (*Commentary on the Georgics of Vergil*, III, 416).

41 Ezechiel 20:24-26.

42 Matthew 19:12.

43 Isaiah 56:4-5.