Pythagoreanism: Notes on the Golden Verses of Pythagoras From the Commentaries of Hierocles

The Golden Verses may be divided into two parts, the first treating of the Practical or Human Virtues, whose aim is the making of Good Men; and the second, treating of the Contemplative or Divine Virtues, the end of which is to make Good Men into Gods.

One is greatly struck by the wonderful completeness of the Verses, and their scientific arrangement. They can be divided into groups dealing with practically every aspect and affair of life.

At the end of the first part (verse 47), we find the Most Solemn Oath that if a man follow these precepts faithfully, he will be ready to tread the further path, to devote himself to the Contemplative Virtues, and to become truly God-like, overcoming Death, and gaining a knowledge of the Gods.

The Verses may be grouped in the following manner:–

PART I.–THE PRACTICAL VIRTUES.

Verses.

1-3. Concerning Higher Intelligences.

4. Concerning Relations.

5-8. Concerning Friends.

9-12. Concerning One's Lower Nature.

13-14. Concerning One's General Behaviour.

15-20. Concerning Death and Misfortunes.

21-23. Concerning Doctrines.

24-31. Concerning Actions and Speech.

32-34. Concerning the Body.

35-39. Concerning the Manner of Life.

40-45. Concerning Introspection.

46, 47. Oath Concerning the Result of the Practical Virtues.

PART II.–THE CONTEMPLATIVE VIRTUES.

48. Concerning the Help of the Gods.

49-51. Concerning the Nature and Constitution of Gods and Men.

52, 53. Concerning the Nature of the Universe, and what is possible.

54-60. Concerning Ignorance, and the Liberty of the Soul.

61-66. Concerning Knowledge and Deliverance.

67-69. Concerning Purifications.

70, 71. Concerning the Result of the Contemplative Virtues.

NOTES

Verse 1. “Worship the Immortal Gods” with an understanding as to their order and function in the universe. For it is Impossible to worship unless you understand to some extent the nature and function of that which you worship. The Gods do not occupy their position by accident, nor from carelessness on the part of the Great Architect, nor are they isolated units independent of each other, but rather are they linked together in such a way as to form one perfect whole, like the different parts of one animal.

Pythagoras seems to have divided the beings in the universe roughly into three orders:–

(1) The Immortal Gods whose who live perpetually in the knowledge of God the Father and Creator of all, being secured from change or separation from Him);

(2) The Heroes, and

(3) The Terrestrial Dæmons.

2. Besides the Power that creates a universe, it is necessary that there should be a power that preserves and sustains it, and this power is embodied in the created beings.

For in their essence all beings are of one nature with the Father, and just in so far as they are conscious of Him will they carry out His will and design. They are said to be bound by an Oath to preserve all things in their respective places and to maintain the beauty and harmony of the universe; but this Oath is in reality innate and essential to them, because it is born with them and is part of their divine nature. Therefore, the Oath is constantly observed by the Immortal Gods, they being always conscious of the Divine Will; but by the Heroes only to the extent to which they understand and know God.

The mortal Oath–that used amongst men–has to be reverenced as an image of the other, and as leading to the greatest strength and stability of character. And if man would reverence the Oath, then must he do all in his power to understand the laws that govern this universe, and endeavour to preserve harmony and order in all things.

The Illustrious Heroes are the second or middle order of beings, and are turned ever towards God, though not always to the same extent. They are divided into three subdivisions:–(1) The Angels, or Ambassadors (being nearest to the Immortal Gods in their nature); (2) The Dæmons, or Spirits; and (3) The Heroes.

3. The Terrestrial Dæmons are the souls of men, beautified with truth and virtue, being Masters of Wisdom, having true knowledge. They are “terrestrial,” remaining on earth in order to guide and govern men.

The best worship to be offered to these men (who are men and yet resemble the Illustrious Heroes), is by obeying those precepts they have left and recommended to us, and by following their instructions as laws; purposing to ourselves the same course of life they lead, the tradition of which they have set down in writing. This tradition gives the principles of truth and rules of virtue, as an immortal and paternal inheritance, to be preserved to all succeeding generations for the common good. To obey these, and live accordingly, is the truest reverence that can be done them.

4. “Reverence thy parents.” But how it those parents be depraved? “If the Divine Law directs us to one thing and our parents to another, then in this deliberation we ought to obey the best, disobeying our parents in those things only in which they recede from the Divine Laws.”

But always a most willing service and obedience must be rendered in all things pertaining to the body or estate.

To all others, the duties are in proportion to the nearness of the relationship.

7, 8. Never must friendship be broken for the sake of riches, or glory, or other frail and perishable things. Only if the friend falls into a corrupt and degraded mode of life is it right to break the sacred tie of friendship, and then only after every effort has been made to bring him back to the ways of virtue.

Hierocles warns us that we have far more strength than we imagine, and all we need is to feel the necessity of preserving friendship.

11, 12. If a man makes himself his own guardian, he is then not likely to fall into evil ways if he is out of the reach of public opinion, nor will he be rushed into folly through the influence of companions.

17. Such calamities as diseases, poverty, loss of friends, etc., are not real ills, for they hurt not the soul, unless it suffers Itself to be precipitated into vice by them.

21-23. One should be able to hear every sort of doctrine patiently, carefully discriminating between the true and the false.

“But it falsehoods be advanced,” i. e., false reasonings.

45. This verse completes the instruction concerning the Civil or Practical Virtues; verse 48 begins the Instruction concerning the Contemplative Virtues.

Regarding the practical virtues, Hierocles points out that the three aspects of the soul should be employed on them together, (1) Activity, (2) the Mind, and (3) the Emotions.

47. “I swear it by him,” i. e., by Pythagoras. The knowledge of the Quaternion was one of the chief precepts among the Pythagoreans.

51. “How far they extend themselves,” expresses their specific difference, and “What contains and binds them together” marks their generic community.

53. “Thou shalt not hope what thou ought'st not to hope,” knowing the nature of all things, and what is possible.

55. The Gods near at hand are virtue and truth.

59, 60. The fatal strife is caused by our inclination “madly to run counter to God's laws.” it is this strife that should be avoided by yielding to the will of God.

62. The Dæmon of whom they make use is their own soul, or essence, for to see and know this is to be freed from all evils.

67. The Purifications are divided into two parts, one concerning itself with the physical body, and the other with the “luminous body.”

The Deliverance of the Soul is accomplished by “Dialecticks, which science is the intimate inspection of beings.”

Of the two former, one purifies through diet and the whole management and usage of the mortal body; and the other employs the Mathematical Sciences, Meditation, and Religious Ceremonies.

All three Purifications must be accomplished if man would become free, and Godlike. It is to be noted that they deal with (1) the body, (2) the emotions and lower mind, and (3) the higher mind.