

## BOOK I

### The Life of Moses or Concerning Perfection In Virtue

#### Prologue

1. At horse races the spectators intent on victory shout to their favorites in the contest, even though the horses are eager to run. From the stands they participate in the race with their eyes, thinking to incite the charioteer to keener effort, at the same time urging <sup>1</sup> the horses on while leaning forward and flailing the air with their outstretched hands instead of with a whip. They do this not because their actions themselves contribute anything to the victory; but in this way, by their good will, they eagerly show in voice and deed their concern for the contestants. <sup>2</sup> I seem to be doing the same thing myself, most valued friend and brother. While you are competing admirably in the divine race along the course of virtue, lightfootedly leaping and straining constantly for the prize of the *heavenly calling*, <sup>3</sup> I exhort, urge and encourage you vigorously to increase your speed. I do this, not moved to it by some unconsidered impulse, but to humor the delights of a beloved child.

2. Since the letter which you recently sent requested us to furnish you with some counsel concerning the perfect life, I thought it only proper to answer your request. <sup>4</sup> Although there may be nothing useful for you in my words, perhaps this example of ready obedience will not be wholly unprofitable to you. For if we who have been appointed to the position of fathers <sup>5</sup> over so many souls consider it proper here in our old age <sup>6</sup> to accept a commission from youth, how much more suitable is it, inasmuch as we have taught you, a young man, to obey voluntarily, that the right action of ready obedience be confirmed in you.

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3. So much for that. We must take up the task that lies before us, taking God as our guide in our treatise. <sup>7</sup> You requested, dear friend, that we trace in outline for you what the perfect life is. Your intention clearly was to translate the grace disclosed by my word into your own life, if you should find in my treatise what you were seeking. I am at an equal loss about both things: It is beyond my power to encompass perfection in my treatise or to show in my life the insights <sup>8</sup> of the treatise. And perhaps I am not alone in this. Many great men, even those who excel in virtue, will admit that for them such an accomplishment as this is unattainable.

4. As I would not seem, in the words of the Psalmist, there *to tremble for fear, where no fear was*, <sup>9</sup> I shall set forth for you more clearly what I think.

5. The perfection of everything which can be measured by the senses is marked off by certain definite boundaries. Quantity, for example, admits of both continuity and limitation, for every quantitative measure is circumscribed by certain limits proper to itself. <sup>10</sup> The person who looks at a cubit or at the number ten knows that its perfection consists in the fact that it has both a beginning and an end. But in the case of virtue we have learned from the Apostle that its one limit of perfection is the fact that it has no limit. For that divine Apostle, great and lofty in understanding, ever running the course of virtue, never ceased *straining toward those things that are still to come*. <sup>11</sup> Coming to a stop in the race was not safe for him. Why? Because no Good has a limit in its own nature but is limited by the presence of its opposite, <sup>12</sup> as life is limited by death and light by darkness. And every good thing generally ends with all those things which are perceived to be contrary to the good.

6. Just as the end of life is the beginning of death, so also stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil. Thus our statement that grasping perfection with reference to virtue is impossible was not false, for it has been pointed out that what is marked off by boundaries is not virtue.

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I said that it is also impossible for those who pursue the life of virtue to attain perfection. The meaning of this statement will be explained.

7. The Divine One is himself the Good (in the primary and proper sense of the word), <sup>13</sup> whose very nature is goodness. This he is and he is so named, and is known by this nature. Since, then, it has not been demonstrated that there is any limit to virtue except evil, and since the Divine does not admit of an opposite, we hold the divine nature to be unlimited and infinite. Certainly whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God, because he is himself absolute virtue. <sup>14</sup> Since, then, those who know what is good by nature desire participation in it, and since this good has no limit, the participant's desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless. <sup>15</sup>

8. It is therefore undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection, since, as I have said, perfection is not marked off by limits: The one limit of virtue is the absence of a limit. How then would one arrive at the sought-for boundary when he can find no boundary? <sup>16</sup>

9. Although on the whole my argument has shown that what is sought for is unattainable, one should not disregard the commandment of the Lord which says, *Therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect.* <sup>17</sup> For in the case of those things which are good by nature, even if men of understanding were not able to attain to everything, by attaining even a part they could yet gain a great deal.

10. We should show great diligence not to fall away from the perfection which is attainable but to acquire as much as is possible: To that extent let us make progress within the realm of what we seek. For the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness. <sup>18</sup>

11. It seems good to me to make use of Scripture as a counselor in this matter. For the divine voice says somewhere in the prophecy of Isaiah, *Consider Abraham your father, and*

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*Sarah who gave you birth.* <sup>19</sup> Scripture gives this admonition to those who wander outside virtue. Just as at sea those who are carried away from the direction of the harbor bring themselves back on course by a clear sign, upon seeing either a beacon light raised up high or some mountain peak coming into view, in the same way Scripture by the example of Abraham and Sarah may guide again to the harbor of the divine will those adrift on the sea of life <sup>20</sup> with a pilotless mind.

12. Human nature is divided into male and female, and the free choice of virtue or of evil is set before both equally. For this reason the corresponding example of virtue for each sex has been exemplified by the divine voice, so that each, by observing the one to which he is akin (the men to Abraham and the women to Sarah), may be directed in the life of virtue by the appropriate examples. <sup>21</sup>

13. Perhaps, then, the memory of anyone distinguished in life would be enough to fill our need for a beacon light and to show us how we can bring our soul to the sheltered harbor of virtue <sup>22</sup> where it no longer has to pass the winter amid the storms of life or be shipwrecked in the deep water of evil by the successive billows of passion. It may be for this very reason that the daily life of those sublime individuals

is recorded in detail, that by imitating those earlier examples of right action those who follow them may conduct their lives to the good. <sup>23</sup>

14. What then? Some one will say, "How shall I imitate them, since I am not a Chaldaean as I remember Abraham was, nor was I nourished by the daughter of the Egyptian as Scripture teaches about Moses, and in general I do not have in these matters anything in my life corresponding to anyone of the ancients? How shall I place myself in the same rank with one of them, when I do not know how to imitate anyone so far removed from me by the circumstances of his life?" To him we reply that we do not consider being a Chaldaean a virtue or a vice, nor is anyone exiled from the life of virtue by living in Egypt or spending his life in Babylon, nor again has God been

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known to the esteemed individuals in Judaea only, <sup>24</sup> nor is Zion, as people commonly think, <sup>25</sup> the divine habitation. We need some subtlety of understanding and keenness of vision to discern from the history how, by removing ourselves from such Chaldaeans and Egyptians and by escaping from such a Babylonian captivity, we shall embark on the blessed life.

15. Let us put forth Moses as our example for life in our treatise. <sup>26</sup> First we shall go through in outline his life as we have learned it from the divine Scriptures. Then we shall seek out the spiritual understanding which corresponds to the history <sup>27</sup> in order to obtain suggestions of virtue. Through such understanding we may come to know the perfect life for men.

### History of Moses

16. Moses is said to have been born when the tyrant's law sought to prevent the birth of male offspring. <sup>28</sup> Yet in his outward grace he anticipated the whole contribution which he would make in time. Already appearing beautiful <sup>29</sup> in swaddling clothes, he caused his parents to draw back from having such a child destroyed by death.

17. Thus, when the threat of the tyrant prevailed, he was not simply thrown into the Nile but was placed in a basket *daubed* along its joints *with slime and pitch*, <sup>30</sup> and so was given to the current. (This was recounted by those who carefully gave a narrative concerning him.) <sup>31</sup> Guided by some divine power, the basket moved to a certain place along the sloping bank where it was washed up naturally by the lapping of the waves. As the king's daughter happened to come to that grassy bank where the basket washed up, she discovered him when he gave a childlike cry in the ark. When she saw the outward grace evident in him, the princess out of her good will immediately adopted him and took him as her son. But when he instinctively refused a stranger's nourishment, he was nursed at his mother's

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breast <sup>32</sup> through the contrivance of his close relatives.

18. After he had left childhood, and had been educated in pagan learning <sup>33</sup> during his royal upbringing, <sup>34</sup> he did not choose the things considered glorious by the pagans nor did he any longer recognize as his mother that wise woman by whom he had been adopted, but he returned to his natural mother and attached himself to his own kinsmen. <sup>35</sup> During a fight between a Hebrew and an Egyptian he sided with his countryman and killed the foreigner. <sup>36</sup> Then when two Hebrews fought with each other, he tried to restrain them, counseling them that because they were brothers they should make nature and not passion the arbiter of their disputes.

19. Having been rebuffed by the one in the wrong, he made this rejection the occasion for a greater philosophy. <sup>37</sup>Separating himself from association with the people, he thereafter lived alone. He became the son-in-law of one of the foreigners, a man with insight into what is noble, and perceptive in judging the habits and lives of men. This man saw in one act—the attack on the shepherds <sup>38</sup>—the virtue of the young man, how he fought on behalf of the right without looking for personal gain. Considering the right valuable in itself, Moses punished the wrong done by the shepherds, although they had done nothing against him. Honoring the young man Moses for these acts and judging his virtue in his manifest poverty more valuable than great riches, the man gave him his daughter in marriage and, in keeping with his authority, he permitted Moses to live as he wished. Moses lived alone in the mountains away from all the turmoil of the marketplace; there in the wilderness he cared for his sheep.

20. After he had passed some time in this kind of life, the history says an awe-inspiring theophany occurred. <sup>39</sup>At high noon a light brighter than the sunlight dazzled his eyes. <sup>40</sup>Astonished at the strange sight, he looked up at the mountain and saw a bush from which this light was flaming up like a fire. When he saw the branches of the bush sprouting up in flame as

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if they were in pure water, <sup>41</sup>he said to himself, "I will go and see this great sight." As soon as he said this, he no longer received the marvel of the light with his sight alone, but (which is most astounding of all) his hearing too was illuminated by the rays of light. The light's grace was distributed to both senses, illuminating the sight with flashing rays and lighting the way for the hearing with undefiled teachings. The voice from the light forbade Moses to approach the mountain burdened with lifeless sandals. <sup>42</sup>He removed the sandals from his feet, and so stood on that ground on which the divine light was shining.

21. I think that the discussion should not dwell extensively on the bare history of the man. We should give attention to the matters we have proposed. After he was empowered by the theophany which he had seen, he was commanded to release his countrymen from Egyptian bondage. In order that he might learn more fully the strength implanted in him by God he tested the divine command by the things in his hands. <sup>43</sup>This was the test. When the rod fell from his hand, it became alive, a living creature (in fact it was a serpent); when he took it up again in his hand, it became what it had been before becoming an animal. When he withdrew his hand from his bosom, it looked as white as snow, but when he put it back in his bosom, it returned to its natural color.

22. Moses went down to Egypt and he took with him his foreign wife and the children she had borne him. <sup>44</sup>Scripture says that an angel encountered him and threatened death. His wife appeased the angel by the blood of the child's circumcision. Then he met Aaron, who had himself been brought by God to this meeting.

23. Later, the people in Egypt were gathered by Moses and Aaron into a general assembly and their release from bondage was announced all around to those who were already distressed by the hardships of their labors. <sup>45</sup>Report of this came to the tyrant himself. When he heard it his anger at both

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the overseers of the work and the Israelites themselves was greater than ever. The levy of bricks to be made was increased <sup>46</sup>and a harsher command was sent down, not only to those slaving with the clay but also to those laboriously gathering chaff and straw.

24. Pharaoh (for this was the Egyptian tyrant's name) attempted to counter the divine signs performed by Moses and Aaron with magical tricks performed by his sorcerers. <sup>47</sup> When Moses again turned his own rod into an animal before the eyes of the Egyptians, they thought that the sorcery of the magicians could equally work miracles with their rods. This deceit was exposed when the serpent produced from the staff of Moses ate the sticks of sorcery—the snakes no less! The rods of the sorcerers had no means of defense nor any power of life, only the appearance which cleverly devised sorcery showed to the eyes of those easily deceived.

25. When Moses saw that all the subjects agreed with their leader in his evil, he laid a blow upon the whole Egyptian nation, sparing no one from the calamities. <sup>48</sup> Like an army under orders, the very elements of the universe—earth, water, air, and fire which are seen to be in everything—cooperated with him in this attack on the Egyptians, and changed their natural operations to serve human purposes. <sup>49</sup> For by the same power and at the same time and place the disorderly were punished and those free of wrong did not suffer.

26. At the command of Moses all the water in Egypt turned into blood. <sup>50</sup> The fish were destroyed because the water thickened, but to the Hebrews alone the blood was water when they drew it. Found among the Hebrews this water provided an occasion for the magicians to use their art in making the water appear bloody.

27. Similarly frogs covered Egypt in large numbers. <sup>51</sup> Their breeding in these numbers was not natural, but Moses' command changed the normal density of frogs. All the land

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was in a sorry state, for the Egyptians' houses were being overrun with these creatures, while the Hebrews were free of this hateful plague.

28. Likewise, there was no distinction between night and day to the Egyptians, who lived in unchanging gloom. <sup>52</sup> To the Hebrews, however, nothing was out of the ordinary. It was the same with all the other things—the hail, the fire, the boils, the gadflies, <sup>53</sup> the flies, the cloud of locusts: Each had its natural effect on the Egyptians. <sup>54</sup> The Hebrews learned of the misfortune of their neighbors by report, since they experienced no similar attack themselves.

Then the death of the firstborn made the distinction between Egyptians and Hebrews still sharper. <sup>55</sup> The Egyptians were dismayed, lamenting the loss of their dearest children, while the Hebrews continued to live in total serenity and safety. Salvation was assured to them by *the shedding of the blood*. <sup>56</sup> At every entrance both the doorposts and the lintel joining them were marked with blood.

29. While the Egyptians were downcast at the fate of their firstborn and each individual was lamenting his sufferings and those of everyone else, Moses led the exodus of the Israelites. <sup>57</sup> He had previously prepared them to take away with themselves the wealth of the Egyptians on the pretext that it was a loan. <sup>58</sup> The history goes on to say that when they were three days out of Egypt, the Egyptian was angry that Israel did not remain in slavery, and after mobilizing all his subjects for war, he pursued the people with his cavalry. <sup>59</sup>

When they saw the deployment of the cavalry and infantry, they were panic-stricken since they were inexperienced in war and untrained in such sights, and they rose up against Moses. Then the history tells the most marvellous thing about Moses. He did two distinctly separate things at once: By spoken word he

encouraged the Israelites and exhorted them not to abandon high hopes, but inwardly, in his thoughts, he pleaded with God on behalf of those who cowered in fear and

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he was directed by counsel from above how to escape the danger. God himself, the history says, gave ear to his voiceless cry. <sup>60</sup>

30. By divine power a cloud led the people. <sup>61</sup>This was no ordinary cloud, for it was not composed of the vapors or exhalations as normal clouds are. The winds did not press the vapors of the air into a misty composition; it was something beyond human comprehension. <sup>62</sup>Scripture testifies that there was something amazing about that cloud. When the rays of the noonday sun shone with great heat, the cloud was a shelter for the people, shadowing those below it and moistening with a light dew the fiery heat of the atmosphere. During the night it became a fire, leading the Israelites as in a procession with its own light from sunset to sunrise. <sup>63</sup>

31. Moses himself watched the cloud, and he taught the people to keep it in sight. <sup>64</sup>When the cloud had guided them along their course, they came to the Red Sea, where the Egyptians coming from behind with their whole army surrounded the people. No way of escape from their terrors was open to the Israelites in any direction, because they were trapped between their enemies and the water. It was then that Moses, urged on by divine power, performed the most incredible deed of all. He approached the bank and struck the sea with his rod. The sea split at the blow, just as a crack in glass runs straight across to the edge when a break occurs at any point. The whole sea was split like that from the top by the rod, and the break in the waters reached to the opposite bank. At the place where the sea parted, Moses went down into the deep with all the people and they were in the deep without getting wet and their bodies were still in the sunlight. As they crossed the depths by foot on dry bottom, they were not alarmed at the water piled up so close to them on both sides, for the sea had been fixed like a wall on each side of them. <sup>65</sup>

32. When Pharaoh and the Egyptians ran after them headlong into the sea along that newly cut path, the walls of

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water came together again and the sea rushed in upon itself to assume its previous form, becoming to the eye a single body of water. <sup>66</sup>By that time the Israelites were already resting on the opposite bank from the long and strenuous march through the sea. Then they sang a victory song to God for raising a monument <sup>67</sup>unstained with blood on their behalf since he destroyed in the water the whole army of the Egyptians—their horses, infantry, and chariots.

33. After that, Moses pushed on, but when he had traveled three days without water he was at a loss how to relieve the thirst of the army. <sup>68</sup>They pitched camp near a pool of salty water, more bitter than the sea itself. While they were resting close to the water and were parched with thirst, Moses, acting on the counsel of God, found a piece of wood near that place and threw it into the water. Immediately it became drinkable, for the wood by its own power changed the nature of the water from bitter to sweet.

34. As the cloud moved forward, the Israelites followed their guide closely. They always rested from their march wherever the cloud indicated by stopping, and they departed again whenever the cloud led the way on. <sup>69</sup>By following this guide, they arrived at a place irrigated with drinkable water. <sup>70</sup>It was watered all around by twelve bountiful springs and shaded by a grove of date palms. There were seventy date palms

by those who employed him to be powerful in such matters. His augury came from watching the flight of birds, <sup>116</sup> yet he was a hard man to deal with, for with the cooperation of demons <sup>117</sup> he could bring utter ruin on men through this magical power.

74. As he followed those who were leading him to the king of that nation, he learned by the voice of his ass that the way was not propitious for him. Having learned in a vision what was to be done, he found that any harm to be inflicted by working magic was impotent against those who have God as their ally. Moved by divine inspiration instead of by demonic power, he uttered such words as were a clear prophecy of better things which would later come to pass. What prevented his making use of his skill for evil also brought him an awareness of divine power. Leaving divination aside, he acted as an interpreter of the divine will. <sup>118</sup>

75. Then the foreign nation was destroyed. The Israelites had the upper hand in the battle, but they in turn were overcome by licentious passion for their female captives. <sup>119</sup> When Phineas then with one blow ran those through who were entangled in dishonor, the wrath of God against those raving for unlawful unions abated. Then the lawgiver, ascending a high mountain, surveyed from afar the land which was prepared for Israel by the divine promise made to the fathers. <sup>120</sup> He departed from this human life, leaving behind no sign on the earth nor any grave as a memorial of his departure. <sup>121</sup>

76. Time had not harmed his beauty, neither dimmed his brightness of eye nor diminished the graciousness of his appearance. <sup>122</sup> Always remaining the same, he preserved in the changeableness of nature an unchangeable beauty. <sup>123</sup>

77. Those things which we have learned from the literal history of the man we have retraced in summary for you,

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although we have of necessity so amplified the account as to bring out its intention. Now we must adapt the life which we have called to mind to the aim we have proposed for our study so that we might gain some benefit for the virtuous life from the things mentioned. Let us now begin the account of this life.

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## BOOK II

### Contemplation on the Life of Moses

#### Birth and Childhood

1. Moses was born at the time Pharaoh issued the decree for male offspring to be destroyed. <sup>1</sup> How shall we as a matter of choice imitate this fortuitous birth of Moses? Someone will rightly raise the objection that it does not lie within our power to imitate in our own birth that famous birth. But it is not hard to begin the imitation with this seeming difficulty.

2. Everyone knows that anything placed in a world of change never remains the same but is always passing from one state to another, the alteration always bringing about something better or worse. <sup>2</sup> The narrative is to be understood according to its real intention. For the material and passionate disposition to which human nature is carried when it falls is the female form of life, whose birth is favored by the tyrant. The austerity and intensity of virtue is the male birth, which is hostile to the tyrant and suspected of insurrection against his rule. <sup>3</sup>

3. Now, it is certainly required that what is subject to change be in a sense always coming to birth. <sup>4</sup>In mutable nature nothing can be observed which is always the same. Being born, in the sense of constantly experiencing change, does not come about as the result of external initiative, as is the case with the birth of the body, which takes place by chance. Such a birth occurs by choice. <sup>5</sup>We are in some manner our own parents,

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giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be, whether male or female, moulding ourselves to the teaching of virtue or vice. <sup>6</sup>

4. We can most certainly enter upon a better birth <sup>7</sup>into the realm of light, however much the unwilling tyrant is distressed, and we can be seen with pleasure and be given life by the parents of this goodly offspring, even though it is contrary to the design of the tyrant. (The rational faculties <sup>8</sup>are what become the "parents of ... virtue.")

5. When we lay bare the hidden meaning <sup>9</sup>of the history, Scripture is seen to teach that the birth which distresses the tyrant is the beginning of the virtuous life. I am speaking of that kind of birth in which free will serves as the midwife, delivering the child amid great pain. For no one causes grief to his antagonist unless he exhibits in himself those marks which give proof of his victory over the other.

6. It is the function of the free will both to beget this virtuous male offspring and to nourish it with proper food and to take forethought how to save it unharmed from the water. For there are those who present their children to the tyrant, delivering them naked and without forethought to the stream. I am speaking of life as a stream made turbulent by the successive waves of passion, which plunge what is in the stream under the water and drown it. <sup>10</sup>

7. Whenever life demands that the sober and provident rational thoughts which are the parents of the male child launch their good child on the billows of this life, they make him safe in an ark so that when he is given to the stream he will not be drowned. <sup>11</sup>The ark, constructed out of various boards, would be education in the different disciplines, which holds what it carries above the waves of life.

8. Although he is borne along by the rushing of the waves, the child is not carried far by the tossing of the waters where there is education. Instead he is washed to the side and the motion of the waters naturally thrusts him on the firm

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bank, that is to say, outside the turmoil of life.

9. Experience teaches us that the restless and heaving motion of life thrusts from itself those who do not totally submerge themselves in the deceits of human affairs and it reckons as a useless burden those whose virtue is annoying. He who escapes from these things must imitate Moses and not spare his tears, even though he should be safe in the ark, for tears are the unfailing guardian of those saved by virtue.

10. Since the daughter of the king, being childless and barren (I think she is rightly perceived as profane philosophy), arranged to be called his mother by adopting the youngster, <sup>12</sup>Scripture concedes that his relationship with her who was falsely called his mother <sup>13</sup>should not be rejected until he had recognized his own immaturity. But he who has already attained maturity, as we have learned about Moses, will be ashamed to be called the son of one who is barren by nature.

11. For truly barren is profane education, which is always in labor but never gives birth. <sup>14</sup>For what fruit worthy of such pangs does philosophy show for being so long in labor? Do not all who are full of wind and never come to term miscarry before they come to the light of the knowledge of God, <sup>15</sup>although they could as well become men if they were not altogether hidden in the womb of barren wisdom?

12. Now after living with the princess of the Egyptians for such a long time that he seemed to share in their honors, he must return to his natural mother. <sup>16</sup>Indeed he was not separated from her while he was being brought up by the princess but was nursed by his mother's milk, as the history states. <sup>17</sup>This teaches, it seems to me, that if we should be involved with profane teachings during our education, we should not separate ourselves from the nourishment of the Church's milk, <sup>18</sup>which would be her laws and customs. By these the soul is nourished and matured, thus being given the means of ascending the height.

13. It is true that he who looks to both the profane doc

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trines and to the doctrines of the fathers will find himself between two antagonists. <sup>19</sup>For the foreigner in worship is opposed to the Hebrew teaching, and contentiously strives to appear stronger than the Israelite. And so he seems to be to many of the more superficial who abandon the faith of their fathers and fight on the side of the enemy, becoming transgressors of the fathers' teaching. On the other hand, he who is great and noble in soul like Moses slays with his own hand the one who rises in opposition to true religion. <sup>20</sup>

14. One may, moreover, find this same conflict in us, for man is set before competitors as the prize of their contest. He makes the one with whom he sides the victor over the other. <sup>21</sup>The fight of the Egyptian against the Hebrew is like the fight of idolatry against true religion, of licentiousness against self-control, of injustice against righteousness, of arrogance against humility, and of everything against what is perceived by its opposite. <sup>22</sup>

15. Moses teaches us by his own example to take our stand with virtue as with a kinsman and to kill virtue's adversary. The victory of true religion is the death and destruction of idolatry. So also injustice is killed by righteousness and arrogance is slain by humility.

16. The dispute of the two Israelites with each other occurs also in us. There would be no occasion for wicked, heretical opinions to arise unless erroneous reasonings withstood the truth. If, therefore, we by ourselves are too weak to give the victory to what is righteous, since the bad is stronger in its attacks and rejects the rule of truth, we must flee as quickly as possible (in accordance with the historical example) from the conflict to the greater and higher teaching of the mysteries.

17. And if we must again live with a foreigner, that is to say, if need requires us to associate with profane wisdom, let us with determination scatter the wicked shepherds from their unjust use of the wells—which means let us reprove the teach

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ers of evil for their wicked use of instruction.

18. In the same way we shall live a solitary life, <sup>23</sup>no longer entangled with adversaries or mediating between them, but we shall live among those of like disposition and mind who are fed by us while all the movements of our soul are shepherded, like sheep, <sup>24</sup>by the will of guiding reason. <sup>25</sup>

## The Burning Bush

19. It is upon us who continue in this quiet and peaceful course of life that the truth will shine, illuminating the eyes of our soul with its own rays. This truth, which was then manifested by the ineffable and mysterious illumination which came to Moses, is God.

20. And if the flame by which the soul of the prophet was illuminated was kindled from a thorny bush, even this fact will not be useless for our inquiry. <sup>26</sup>For if truth is God and truth is light—the Gospel testifies by these sublime and divine names to the God who made himself visible to us in the flesh <sup>27</sup>—such guidance of virtue leads us to know that light which has reached down even to human nature. Lest one think that the radiance did not come from a material substance, this light did not shine from some luminary among the stars but came from an earthly bush and surpassed the heavenly luminaries in brilliance.

21. From this we learn also the mystery of the Virgin: The light of divinity which through birth shone from her into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth. <sup>28</sup>

22. That light teaches us what we must do to stand within the rays of the true light: Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul. <sup>29</sup>

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When we do this, the knowledge of the truth <sup>30</sup>will result and manifest itself. <sup>31</sup>The full knowledge of being comes about by purifying our opinion concerning nonbeing.

23. In my view the definition of truth is this: not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being. Falsehood is a kind of impression which arises in the understanding about nonbeing: as though what does not exist does, in fact, exist. But truth is the sure apprehension of real Being. <sup>32</sup>So, whoever applies himself in quietness to higher philosophical matters over a long period of time will barely apprehend what true Being is, that is, what possesses existence in its own nature, <sup>33</sup>and what nonbeing is, that is, what is existence only in appearance, with no self - subsisting nature. <sup>34</sup>

24. It seems to me that at the time the great Moses was instructed in the theophany he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists. <sup>35</sup>

25. For even if the understanding looks upon any other existing things, reason observes in absolutely none of them the self-sufficiency by which they could exist without participating in true Being. <sup>36</sup>On the other hand, that which is always the same, neither increasing nor diminishing, immutable to all change whether to better or to worse (for it is far removed from the inferior and it has no superior), standing in need of nothing else, alone desirable, participated in by all but not lessened by their participation—this is truly real Being. And the apprehension of it is the knowledge of truth. <sup>37</sup>

26. In the same way that Moses on that occasion attained to this knowledge, so now does everyone who, like him, divests himself of the earthly covering and looks to the light shining from the bramble bush, <sup>38</sup>

that is, to the Radiance which shines upon us through this thorny flesh and which is (as the Gospel says) the true light and the truth itself. <sup>39</sup>A person like this

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becomes able to help others to salvation, to destroy the tyranny which holds power wickedly, and to deliver to freedom everyone held in evil servitude. <sup>40</sup>

The transformation of the right hand and the rod's changing into a snake became the first of the miracles.

27. These seem to me to signify in a figure the mystery of the Lord's incarnation, a manifestation of deity to men which effects the death of the tyrant and sets free those under his power. <sup>41</sup>

28. What leads me to this understanding is the testimony of the Prophets and the Gospel. The Prophet declares: This is *the change of the right hand of the most High*, <sup>42</sup> indicating that, although the divine nature is contemplated in its immutability, by condescension to the weakness of human nature it was changed to our shape and form.

29. When the hand of the lawgiver was extended from his bosom it was changed to an unnatural complexion, and when placed again in his bosom, it returned to its own natural beauty. Again, *the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father* <sup>43</sup> *is he who is the right hand of the most High*. <sup>44</sup>

30. When he was manifested to us from the bosom of the Father, he was changed to be like us. After he wiped away our infirmities, he again returned to his own bosom the hand which had been among us and had received our complexion. (The Father is the bosom of the right hand.) What is impassible by nature did not change into what is passible, but what is mutable and subject to passions was transformed into impassibility through its participation in the immutable. <sup>45</sup>

31. The change from a rod into a snake should not trouble the lovers of Christ—as if we were adapting the doctrine of the incarnation to an unsuitable animal. <sup>46</sup> For the Truth himself through the voice of the Gospel does not refuse a comparison like this in saying: *And the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert*. <sup>47</sup>

32. The teaching is clear. For if the father of sin is called a

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serpent by Holy Scripture and what is born of the serpent is certainly a serpent, <sup>48</sup> it follows that sin is synonymous with the one who begot it. But the apostolic word testifies that the Lord was *made into sin for our sake* <sup>49</sup> by being invested with our sinful nature.

33. This figure therefore is rightly applied to the Lord. For if sin is a serpent and the Lord became sin, the logical conclusion should be evident to all: By becoming sin he became also a serpent, which is nothing other than sin. For our sake he became a serpent that he might devour and consume the Egyptian serpents produced by the sorcerers.

34. This done, the serpent was changed back into a rod by which sinners are brought to their senses, and those slackening on the upward and toilsome course of virtue are given rest, the rod of faith supporting them through their high hopes. *Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for*. <sup>50</sup>

35. He who has some insight <sup>51</sup>into these things right away becomes a god <sup>52</sup>to those who resist the truth, who have been distracted to a material and unsubstantial delusion. They disdain the discussion of Being as so much idle talk, <sup>53</sup>as Pharaoh says: *Who is Yahweh, that I should listen to him? I do not know Yahweh.* <sup>54</sup>He considered valuable only the material and fleshly things which characterize lives governed by the most irrational sense.

36. If, on the other hand, he had been strengthened by the illumination of the light and had received such strength and power against his enemies, then, as one who has developed as an athlete by strenuous practice under his trainer, he would boldly and confidently strip for the contest with his opponents. <sup>55</sup>With that rod, the word of faith, in his hand, he would prevail against the Egyptian serpents.

37. The foreign wife will follow him, for there are certain things derived from profane education which should not be rejected when we propose to give birth to virtue. <sup>56</sup>Indeed moral and natural philosophy may become at certain times a

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comrade, friend, and companion of life to the higher way, provided that the offspring of this union introduce nothing of a foreign defilement. <sup>57</sup>

38. Since his son had not been circumcised so as to cut off completely everything hurtful and impure, the angel who met them brought the fear of death. <sup>58</sup>His wife appeased the angel when she presented her offspring as pure by completely removing that mark by which the foreigner was known.

39. I think that if someone who has been initiated under the guidance of the history follow closely the order of the historical figures, the sequence <sup>59</sup>of the development in virtue marked out in our account will be clear. There is something fleshly and uncircumcised in what is taught by philosophy's generative faculty; <sup>60</sup>when that has been completely removed, there remains the pure Israelite race.

40. For example, pagan philosophy says that the soul is immortal. <sup>61</sup>This is a pious offspring. <sup>62</sup>But it also says that souls pass from bodies to bodies and are changed from a rational to an irrational nature. <sup>63</sup>This is a fleshly and alien foreskin. And there are many other such examples. It says there is a God, but it thinks of him as material. <sup>64</sup>It acknowledges him as Creator, but says he needed matter for creation. <sup>65</sup>It affirms that he is both good and powerful, but that in all things he submits to the necessity of fate. <sup>66</sup>

41. And one could describe in some detail how good doctrines are contaminated by profane philosophy's absurd additions. <sup>67</sup>When these are completely removed, the angel of God comes to us in mercy, as if rejoicing in the true offspring of these doctrines.

### **The Meeting with Aaron**

42. We must return to the sequence in Scripture so that brotherly assistance might come out to meet us as we draw near

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the conflict with the Egyptians. For we remember the incidents of fighting and quarreling which involved Moses at the beginning of the life of virtue, the Egyptian oppressing the Hebrew and on another occasion a Hebrew disputing with his countryman. <sup>68</sup>