

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3486>



- Persian Letters - Letters -

Publication date: mercredi 15 avril 2020

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

Usbek to Mirza in Isfahan

You are renouncing your reason in order to test mine ; you condescend to consult me, and think I am able to instruct you. My dear Mirza, there is one thing that flatters me even more than the good opinion you have conceived of me, and that is your friendship, to which I owe it.

To fulfill what you are prescribing, I did not think I should use very abstract reasoning : there are some truths of which persuasion does not suffice, but which one must also be made to feel ; and moral truths are such. Perhaps this bit of history will affect you more than a subtle philosophy.

There was in Arabia a short people called Troglodytes, [1] who were descendants of those ancient Troglodytes who, if we are to believe the historians, were more like animals than men. These were not so misshapen ; they were not furry like bears ; they did not whistle [2] ; they had two eyes. But they were so mean and ornery that there was among them no principle of equity nor of justice.

They had a king of foreign origin, who intending to correct their natural meanness, treated them harshly ; but they conspired against him, killed him, and exterminated the entire royal family.

When the revolt was over, they assembled to chose a government, and after much dissension, they created magistrates : but scarce had they elected them than they found them unbearable ; and once more they slaughtered them.

That people, freed from that new yoke, no longer took anything into account but its savage nature : everyone agreed that they would no longer obey anyone, and that everyone would look out solely for his own interest, taking no account of those of others. [3]

This unanimous resolution was exactly what they all wanted. They said : Why should I work myself to the bone for people I care nothing about ? I shall think only of myself ; I shall live happily ; what do I care whether the others are happy ? I shall supply all my needs ; and if I can, it is nothing to me if all the other Troglodytes are impoverished.

It was the month when the sowing is done. Each individual said : I shall till my field only to furnish me the grain I need for my table. A larger quantity would be of no use to me ; I shall not take pains for nothing.

The lands of this small realm were not all alike : some were arid and rocky, and others, which were in low country, were watered by several streams. It was a very dry year, such that the fields which were in high places were completely barren, whereas those that could receive water were very fertile : and so it was that the mountain people nearly all died of hunger because of the pitilessness of the others, who refused so share their harvest with them.

The following year was very rainy : the higher places were extraordinarily productive, while the lowlands were submerged. Half the people again cried famine : but these wretches found people as unfeeling as they themselves had been.

On of the principal inhabitants had a very lovely wife ; his neighbor fell in love with her and abducted her. A huge quarrel ensued ; and after many insults and blows, they agreed to leave the decision to a Troglodyte who, in the time of the republic, had enjoyed some reputation. They went to him, and tried to lay out their claims : What difference does it make to me, the man said, whether this woman is yours, or yours ? I have my field to plow ; I am not about to spend my time resolving your disputes, and tending to your business while neglecting my own. Please leave me alone, and do not bother me again with your quarrels ; and thereupon he left them, and went to till his fields. The abductor, who was the stronger, swore he would sooner die than give this woman back ; and the other, appalled at his neighbor's injustice and the judge's insensitivity, was returned home brokenhearted, when along the way he found a young and fair woman who was returning home from the spring. He no longer had a wife ; he like this one, he liked her even more when he learned she was the wife of the man he had wanted to be his judge, and who had been so uninterested in his plight : he abducted her, and took her home with him.

There was a man who owned a rather fertile field, which he tended with great care. Two of his neighbors got together, threw him out of his house, and occupied his field. They united to defend themselves against all who might wish to usurp it ; and indeed they maintained themselves in this way for some months. But one of them, weary of sharing what he could have all to himself, killed the other, and became sole master of the field. His possession did not last long : two other Troglodytes came and attacked him ; he was too weak to defend himself, and was slaughtered.

A nearly naked Troglodyte saw some wool for sale ; he asked its price. The merchant said to himself : really I ought to expect from my wool only as much money as it will take to buy two measures of grain ; but I am going to sell it four times higher, so I can have eight measures. There was no way around paying the asking price. I am very pleased, said the merchant, now I will have some grain. Did you say, replied the stranger, that you need some grain ? I have some to sell ; only the price will perhaps surprise you : for you will find that grain is extremely expensive, and there is famine almost everywhere. But give me my money back, and I will give you one measure of grain ; for I will not let it go for less, were you to die of hunger.

Meanwhile a cruel disease was ravaging the territory. An able doctor came from the next country over, and distributed his remedies so skillfully that he cured all those who put themselves in his hands. When the disease was past, he went to all those he had treated to collect his fee ; but he met nothing but refusals. He returned to his own country, and reached home exhausted by the fatigues of such a long journey. But soon afterwards he learned that the same disease was again rampant, and causing more suffering than ever in that thankless land. This time they went to him, and did not wait for him to come to them : Go away, he said to them, unjust men ; you have a poison in your soul more fatal than the one you want to be cured of ; you do not deserve to occupy a spot on earth, because you have no humanity, and know nothing of the rules of equity. I would think I was offending the gods, who are punishing you, if I opposed the justice of their wrath.

Erzerum this 3rd day of the moon of Gemmadi II, 1711

[1] They were cave dwellers on the shores of the Red Sea.

[2] An echo of an assertion in Herodotus and Pomponius Mela that the ancient Troglodytes whistled when they spoke.

[3] The corruption and anarchy of the Hebrew people are summarized in the refrain : "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6).