

On Proverbs. From the Commentary of St. Hippolytus on Proverbs.<sup>1217</sup>

Proverbs, therefore, are words of exhortation serviceable for the whole path of life; for to those who seek their way to God, these serve as guides and signs to revive them when wearied with the length of the road. These, moreover, are the proverbs of “Solomon,” that is to say, the “peacemaker,” who, in truth, is Christ the Saviour. And since we understand the words of the Lord without offence, as being the words of the Lord, that no one may mislead us by likeness of name, he tells us who wrote these things, and of what people he was king, in order that the credit of the speaker may make the discourse acceptable and the hearers attentive; for they are the words of that Solomon to whom the Lord said: “I will give thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there has been none like thee upon the earth, and after thee there shall not arise any like unto thee,”<sup>1218</sup> and as follows in what is written of him. Now he was the wise son of a wise father; wherefore there is added the name of David, by whom Solomon was begotten. From a child he was instructed in the sacred Scriptures, and obtained his dominion not by lot, nor by force, but by the judgment of the Spirit and the decree of God.

“To know wisdom and instruction.” He who knows the wisdom of God, receives from Him also instruction, and learns by it the mysteries of the Word; and they who know the true heavenly wisdom will easily understand the words of these mysteries. Wherefore he says: “To understand the difficulties of words;”<sup>1219</sup> for things spoken in strange language by the Holy Spirit become intelligible to those who have their hearts right with God.

<sup>1220</sup>These things he understands of the people of the Jews, and their guilt in the blood of Christ; for they thought that He had His conversation (citizenship) on earth only.

<sup>1221</sup>They will not simply obtain, but inherit. The wicked, again, even though they are exalted, are exalted only so as to have greater dishonour. For as one does not honour an ugly and misshapen fellow, if he exalts him, but only dishonours him the more, by making his shame manifest to a larger number; so also God exalts the wicked, in order that He may make their disgrace patent. For Pharaoh was exalted, but only to have the world as his accuser.

<sup>1222</sup>It must be noted, that he names the law a good gift, on account of the man who takes gifts into his bosom unrighteously. And he forsakes the law who transgresses it; the law, namely, of which he speaks, or which he has kept.

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1217 Mai, *Bibliotheca nova Patrum*, vii. ii. 71, Rome, 1854.

1218 1 Kings iii. 12.

1219 Prov. i. 3.

1220 Ch. i. 11.

1221 Ch. iii. 35.

1222 Prov. iv. 2.

<sup>1223</sup>And what is meant by “exalt (fortify) her?” Surround her with holy thoughts; for you have need of large defence, since there are many things to imperil such a possession. But if it is in our power to fortify her, and if there are virtues in our power which exalt the knowledge of God, these will be her bulwarks,—as, for example, practice, study, and the whole chain of other virtues; and the man who observes these, honours wisdom; and the reward is, to be exalted to be with her, and to be embraced by her in the chamber of heaven.

<sup>1224</sup>The heterodox are the “wicked,” and the transgressors of the law are “evil men,” whose “ways”—that is to say, their deeds—he bids us not enter.

<sup>1225</sup>He “looks right on” who has thoughts free of passion; and he has true judgments, who is not in a state of excitement about external appearances. When he says, “Let thine eyes look right on,” he means the vision of the soul; and when he gives the exhortation, “Eat honey, my son, that it may be sweet to thy palate,” he uses “honey” figuratively, meaning divine doctrine, which restores the spiritual knowledge of the soul. But wisdom embraces the soul also; for, says he, “love her, that she may embrace thee.” And the soul, by her embrace being made one with wisdom, is filled with holiness and purity. Yea more, the fragrant ointments of Christ are laid hold of by the soul’s sense of smell.

<sup>1226</sup>Virtue occupies the middle position; whence also he says, that manly courage is the mean between boldness and cowardice. And now he mentions the “right,” not meaning thereby things which are right by nature, such as the virtues, but things which seem to thee to be right on account of their pleasures. Now pleasures are not simply sensual enjoyments, but also riches and luxury. And the “left” indicates envy, robberies, and the like. For “Boreas,” says he, “is a bitter wind, and yet is called by name right.”<sup>1227</sup> For, symbolically, under Boreas he designates the wicked devil by whom every flame of evil is kindled in the earth. And this has the name “right,” because an angel is called by a right (propitious) name. Do thou, says he, turn aside from evil, and God will take care of thine end; for He will go before thee, scattering thine enemies, that thou mayest go in peace.

<sup>1228</sup>He shows also, by the mention of the creature (the hind), the purity of that pleasure; and by the roe he intimates the quick responsive affection of the wife. And whereas he knows many things to excite, he secures them against these, and puts upon them the indissoluble bond of affection, setting constancy before them. And as for the rest, wisdom, figuratively speaking, like a stag, can repel and crush the snaky doctrines of the heterodox. Let her

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1223 [Ch. iv. 8.](#)

1224 [Ch. iv. 14.](#)

1225 [Ch. iv. 25.](#)

1226 [Ch. iv. 27.](#)

1227 This is the Septuagint translation of [ch. xxvii. 16.](#)

1228 [Prov. v. 19.](#)

therefore, says he, be with thee, like a roe, to keep all virtue fresh. And whereas a wife and wisdom are not in this respect the same, let her rather lead thee; for thus thou shalt conceive good thoughts.

<sup>1229</sup>That thou mayest not say, What harm is there in the eyes, when there is no necessity that he should be perverted who looks? he shows thee that desire is a fire, and the flesh is like a garment. The latter is an easy prey, and the former is a tyrant. And when anything harmful is not only taken within, but also held fast, it will not go forth again until it has made an exit for itself. For he who looks upon a woman, even though he escape the temptation, does not come away pure of all lust. And why should one have trouble, if he can be chaste and free of trouble? See what Job says: "I made a covenant with mine eyes, that I should not think of another's wife."<sup>1230</sup> Thus well does he know the power of abuse. And Paul for this reason kept "under his body, and brought it into subjection." And, figuratively speaking, he keeps a fire in his breast who permits an impure thought to dwell in his heart. And he walks upon coals who, by sinning in act, destroys his own soul.

The "cemphus"<sup>1231</sup> is a kind of wild sea-bird, which has so immoderate an impulse to sexual enjoyment, that its eyes seem to fill with blood in coition; and it often blindly falls into snares, or into the hands of men.<sup>1232</sup> To this, therefore, he compares the man who gives himself up to the harlot on account of his immoderate lust; or else on account of the insensate folly of the creature, for he, too, pursues his object like one senseless. And they say that this bird is so much pleased with foam, that if one should hold foam in his hand as he sails, it will sit upon his hand. And it also brings forth with pain.

<sup>1233</sup>You have seen her mischief. Wait not to admit the rising of lust; for her death is everlasting. And for the rest, by her words, her arguments in sooth, she wounds, and by her sins she kills those who yield to her. For many are the forms of wickedness that lead the foolish down to hell. And the chambers<sup>1234</sup> of death mean either its depths or its treasure. How, then, is escape possible?

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1229 Ch. vi. 27.

1230 Job xxxi. 1.

1231 Prov. vii. 22. The Hebrew word, rendered "straightway" in our version, is translated κερφοθείς in the Septuagint, i.e., "ensnared like a cepphus." [*Quasi agnus lasciviens*, according to the Vulgate.]

1232 [If the "cemphus" of the text equals "cepphus" of note, then "cepphus" equals "cebus" or "cepus," which equals κῆβος, a sort of monkey. The "Kophim" of 1 Kings x. 22 seems to supply the root of the word. The κέρφος, however, is said to be a sea-bird "driven about by every wind," so that it is equal to a fool. So used by Aristophanes.]

1233 Prov. vii. 26.

1234 ταμεῖα, "magazines."

<sup>1235</sup>He intends the new Jerusalem, or the sanctified flesh. By the seven pillars he means the sevenfold unity of the Holy Spirit resting upon it; as Isaiah testifies, saying, “She has slain” her “victims.”

<sup>1236</sup>Observe that the wise man must be useful to many; so that he who is useful only to himself cannot be wise. For great is the condemnation of wisdom if she reserves her power simply for the one possessing her. But as poison is not injurious to another body, but only to that one which takes it, so also the man who turns out wicked will injure himself, and not another. For no man of real virtue is injured by a wicked man.

<sup>1237</sup>The fruit of righteousness and the tree of life is Christ. He alone, as man, fulfilled all righteousness. And with His own underived life<sup>1238</sup> He has brought forth the fruits of knowledge and virtue like a tree, whereof they that eat shall receive eternal life, and shall enjoy the tree of life in paradise, with Adam and all the righteous. But the souls of the unrighteous meet an untimely expulsion from the presence of God, by whom they shall be left to remain in the flame of torment.

<sup>1239</sup>Not from men, but with the Lord, will he obtain favour.

<sup>1240</sup>He asks of wisdom, who seeks to know what is the will of God. And he will show himself prudent who is sparing of his words on that which he has come to learn. If one inquires about wisdom, desiring to learn something about wisdom, while another asks nothing of wisdom, as not only wishing to learn nothing about wisdom himself, but even keeping back his neighbours from so doing, the former certainly is deemed to be more prudent than the latter.

<sup>1241</sup>As to the horse-leech. There were three daughters fondly loved by sin—fornication, murder,<sup>1242</sup> and idolatry. These three did not satisfy her, for she is not to be satisfied. In destroying man by these actions, sin never varies, but only grows continually. For the fourth, he continues, is never content to say “enough,” meaning that it is universal lust. In naming the “fourth,” he intends lust in the universal. For as the body is one, and yet has many members; so also sin, being one, contains within it many various lusts by which it lays its snares for men. Wherefore, in order to teach us this, he uses the examples of Sheol (Hades), and the love of women, and hell<sup>1243</sup> (Tartarus), and the earth that is not filled with water.

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1235 [Ch. ix. 1.](#)

1236 [Ch. ix. 12.](#)

1237 [Ch. xi. 30.](#)

1238 [ὡς αὐτοζωή.](#)

1239 [Ch. xii. 2.](#)

1240 [Ch. xvii. 27.](#)

1241 [Ch. xxx. 15.](#)

1242 Other reading (φθόνος) = “envy.”

1243 [The place of torment ([2 Pet. ii. 4](#)). Vol. iv. 140.]

And water and fire, indeed, will never say, "It is enough." And the grave<sup>1244</sup> (Hades) in no wise ceases to receive the souls of unrighteous men; nor does the love of sin, in the instance of the love of women, cease to be given to fornication, and it becomes the betrayer of the soul. And as Tartarus, which is situated in a doleful and dark locality, is not touched by a ray of light, so is every one who is the slave of sin in all the passions of the flesh. Like the earth not filled with water he is never able to come to confession, and to the laver of regeneration, and like water and fire, never says, "It is enough."

<sup>1245</sup>For as a serpent cannot mark its track upon a rock, so the devil could not find sin in the body of Christ. For the Lord says, "Behold, the prince of this world cometh, and will find nothing in me."<sup>1246</sup>—For as a ship, sailing in the sea, leaves no traces of her way behind her, so neither does the Church, which is situate in the world as in a sea, leave her hope upon the earth, because she has her life reserved in heaven; and as she holds her way here only for a short time, it is not possible to trace out her course.—As the Church does not leave her hope behind in the world, her hope in the incarnation of Christ which bears us all good, she did not leave the track of death in Hades.—Of whom but of Him who is born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin?—who, in renewing the perfect man in the world, works miracles, beginning from the baptism of John, as the Evangelist also testifies: And Jesus was then beginning to be about thirty years of age. This, then, was the youthful and blooming period of the age of Him who, in journeying among the cities and districts, healed the diseases and infirmities of men.

<sup>1247</sup>"The eye that mocketh at his father, and dishonours the old age of his mother." That is to say, one that blasphemes God and despises the mother of Christ, the wisdom of God,—his eyes may ravens from the caves tear out, i.e., him may unclean and wicked spirits deprive of the clear eye of gladness; and may the young eagles devour him: and such shall be trodden under the feet of the saints.

<sup>1248</sup>"There be three things which I cannot understand, and the fourth I know not: the tracks of an eagle flying," i.e., Christ's ascension; "and the ways of a serpent upon a rock," i.e., that the devil did not find a trace of sin in the body of Christ; "and the ways of a ship crossing the sea," i.e., the ways of the Church, which is in this life as in a sea, and which is directed by her hope in Christ through the cross; "and the ways of a man in youth,"<sup>1249</sup>—the

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1244 [Sheol, rather,—the receptacle of departed spirits. See vol. iii. pp. 59 and 595; also vol. iv. p. 194.]

1245 [Prov. xxx. 19.](#)

1246 [John xiv. 30.](#)

1247 [Ch. xxx. 17.](#)

1248 [Prov. xxx. 18, 19.](#)

1249 [The Authorized Version reads very differently; but our author follows the Sept., with which agrees the Vulgate.]

ways of Him, namely, who is born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin. For behold, says the Scripture, a man whose name is the Rising.<sup>1250</sup>

<sup>1251</sup>“Such is the way of an adulterous woman, who, when she has done the deed of sin, wipeth herself, and will say that no wickedness has been done.” Such is the conduct of the Church that believes on Christ, when, after committing fornication with idols, she renounces these and the devil, and is cleansed of her sins and receives forgiveness, and then asserts that she has done no wickedness.

<sup>1252</sup>“By three things the earth is moved,” viz., by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. “And the fourth it cannot bear,” viz., the last appearing of Christ. “When a servant reigneth:” Israel was a slave in Egypt, and in the land of promise became a ruler. “And a fool when he is filled with meat:” i.e., getting the land in possession readily, and eating its fruit, and being filled, it (the people) kicked. “And a handmaid when she casts out her mistress:” i.e., the synagogue which took the life of the Lord, and crucified the flesh of Christ.

<sup>1253</sup>“There be four things which are least upon the earth, and these are wiser than the wise: The ants have no strength, yet they prepare their meat in the summer.” And in like manner, the Gentiles by faith in Christ prepare for themselves eternal life through good works. “And the conies,<sup>1254</sup> a feeble folk, have made their houses in the rocks.” The Gentiles, that is to say, are built upon Christ, the spiritual rock, which is become the head of the corner. “The spider,<sup>1255</sup> that supports itself upon its hands, and is easily caught, dwells in the strongholds of kings.” That is, the thief with his hands extended (on the cross), rests on the cross of Christ and dwells in Paradise, the stronghold of the three Kings—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

“The locust has no king, and yet marches out in array as by one command.” The Gentiles had no king, for they were ruled by sin; but now, believing God, they engage in the heavenly warfare.

<sup>1256</sup>“There be three things which go well,<sup>1257</sup> and the fourth which is comely in going;” that is, the angels in heaven, the saints upon earth, and the souls of the righteous under the earth. And the fourth, viz. God, the Word Incarnate, passed in honour through the Virgin’s



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1250 The reference probably is to [Zech. vi. 12](#), where the word is rendered “Branch.” The word in the text is ἀνατολή.

1251 [Ch. xxx. 20](#).

1252 [Ch. xxx. 21–23](#).

1253 [Ch. xxx. 24–28](#).

1254 χοιρογρύλλοι, i.e., “grunting hogs.”

1255 ἀσκαλαβώτης, i.e., a “lizard.”

1256 [Prov. xxx. 29](#), etc. [As in Vulgate.]

1257 [Prov. xxx. 29](#), etc. [As in Vulgate.]

womb; and creating our Adam anew, he passed through the gates of heaven, and became the first-fruits of the resurrection and of the ascension for all.

“The whelp of the lion is stronger than the beasts:” i.e., Christ as prophesied of by Jacob in the person of Judah. “A cock walking with high spirit among his dames:” such was Paul, when preaching boldly among the churches the word of the Christ of God. “A goat heading the herd:” such is He who was offered for the sins of the world. “And a king speaking among the people:” so Christ reigns over the nations, and speaks by prophets and apostles the word of truth.

<sup>1258</sup>That is one confirmed in wickedness.<sup>1259</sup> The apostle, too, says, “Them that sin, rebuke before all;”<sup>1260</sup> that is to say, all but reprobate. Who are meant by the “conies,”<sup>1261</sup> but we ourselves, who once were like hogs, walking in all the filthiness of the world; but now, believing in Christ, we build our houses upon the holy flesh of Christ as upon a rock?

<sup>1262</sup>The shaking (of the earth) signifies the change of things upon earth.—Sin, then, which in its own nature is a slave, has reigned in the mortal body of men: once, indeed, at the time of the flood; and again in the time of the Sodomites, who, not satisfied with what the land yielded, offered violence to strangers; and a third time in the case of hateful Egypt, which, though it obtained in Joseph a man who distributed food to all, that they might not perish of famine, yet did not take well with his prosperity, but persecuted the children of Israel. “The handmaid casting out her mistress:” i.e., the Church of the Gentiles, which, though itself a slave and a stranger to the promises, cast out the free-born and lordly synagogue, and became the wife and bride of Christ. By Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the whole earth is moved. The “fourth it cannot bear:” for He came first by lawgivers, and secondly by prophets, and thirdly by the Gospel, manifesting Himself openly; and in the fourth instance He shall come as the Judge of the living and the dead, whose glory the whole creation will not be able to endure.

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1258 Cf. xxvii. 22, the Septuagint rendering being: “Though thou shouldest disgrace and scourge a fool in the midst of the council, thou wilt not strip him of his folly.” [What version did our author use?]

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1260 1 Tim. v. 30.

1261 Literally, “grunting hogs.”

1262 Ch. xxx. 21, etc. [As to version, see Burgon, *Lett. from Rome*, p. 34.]

Another Fragment.<sup>1263</sup> St. Hippolytus<sup>1264</sup> on [Prov. ix. 1](#), "Wisdom Hath Builided Her House."

Christ, he means, the wisdom and power of God the Father, hath builided His house, i.e., His nature in the flesh derived from the Virgin, even as he (John) hath said beforetime, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us."<sup>1265</sup> As likewise the wise prophet<sup>1266</sup> testifies: Wisdom that was before the world, and is the source of life, the infinite "Wisdom of God, hath builided her house" by a mother who knew no man,—to wit, as He assumed the temple of the body. "And hath raised<sup>1267</sup> her seven pillars;" that is, the fragrant grace of the all-holy Spirit, as Isaiah says: "And the seven spirits of God shall rest upon Him."<sup>1268</sup> But others say that the seven pillars are the seven divine orders which sustain the creation by His holy and inspired teaching; to wit, the prophets, the apostles, the martyrs, the hierarchs, the hermits, the saints, and the righteous. And the phrase, "She hath killed her beasts," denotes the prophets and martyrs who in every city and country are slain like sheep every day by the unbelieving, in behalf of the truth, and cry aloud, "For thy sake we are killed all the day long, we were counted as sheep for the slaughter."<sup>1269</sup> And again, "She hath mingled her wine" in the bowl, by which is meant, that the Saviour, uniting his Godhead, like pure wine, with the flesh in the Virgin, was born of her at once God and man without confusion of the one in the other. "And she hath furnished her table:" that denotes the promised knowledge of the Holy Trinity; it also refers to His honoured and undefiled body and blood, which day by day are administered and offered sacrificially at the spiritual divine table, as a memorial of that first and ever-memorable table of the spiritual divine supper. And again, "She hath sent forth her servants:" Wisdom, that is to say, has done so—Christ, to wit—summoning them with lofty announcement. "Whoso is simple, Let him turn to me," she says, alluding manifestly to the holy apostles, who traversed the whole world, and called the nations to the knowledge of Him in truth, with their lofty and divine preaching. And again, "And to those that want understanding she said"—that is, to those who have not yet obtained the power of the Holy Ghost—"Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have



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1263 From Gallandi.

1264 [I omit here the suffix "Pope of Rome," for obvious reasons. He was *papa* of Portus at a time when all bishops were so called but this is a misleading absurdity, borrowed from the Galland ms., where it could hardly have been placed earlier. A mere mediaeval blunder.]

1265 [John i. 14](#).

1266 i.e., Solomon.

1267 Other reading, "hewn out."

1268 [Isa. xi. 2](#).

1269 [Ps. xlv. 2](#); [Rom. viii. 36](#).



mingled for you;" by which is meant, that He gave His divine flesh and honoured blood to us, to eat and to drink it for the remission of sins.

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