

of riches. The only glory to be found in blindness and poverty is that blindness does not see what it lacks and poverty has no way of getting it.

You say that your women wear no ornaments, and that there is no fornication or adultery among you. It would be cause for amazement if you were to practise this restraint voluntarily; but in fact you do it because you find no pleasure in the appearance of your women, unadorned as they are; you remain chaste because of the absence of any stimulus to be otherwise. You say that you have no interest in study and that you require no pity nor pity others. All these are things you have in common with the beasts, which, because they are unable to recognise what is good, take no pleasure in anything good. But we rational men, who have free will, have been provided by nature with many comforts to improve our lives. It would be impossible for this great world not to have something to temper and moderate it, for there to be no happiness to offset grief. If human inclinations are diverse, and alter under different skies, so also the mind of man has many facets, and when the day is darkened then men become sad. Likewise, the sensibilities of men change with the seasons. In infancy he rejoices in simple things, while the youth is impetuous and the old man is sluggish and indecisive. Who looks for wisdom in a little boy, or constancy in a young man, or swift-footedness in an old man? There are many pleasant things of which we can make use, whether they appeal to our sight, or our hearing, or to smell, taste or touch. Sometimes we enjoy dancing, sometimes singing; at other times we like to enjoy pleasant odours or sweet tastes or a gentle touch. Given that we have all the good fruits of the earth, and the abundance of the fish of the sea, and the delicacies of the birds that fly, your wish that we should abstain from all things will lead to your being judged either over-proud, for despising all these gifts, or envious, because you think I have been endowed with better gifts than you.

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Alexander the Great's Journey to Paradise

So Alexander, loaded up with all kinds of fine booty, stole away from Indian territory, accompanied by his troops. He had with him plenty of supplies, and halted the army at the next suitable quarters, on a promontory between the river and the nearby sea. He wanted to allow the army some rest to recover their strength after the trials and dangers they had undergone. Wherever he travelled, he was received with warmth and honour. Everyone offered him their service, impressed alike by his generosity and kindness and because he restrained his troops from pillaging their possessions. They regarded it as a sign of superiority in a prince that his companions should turn out to be peaceful and well-disposed, when they had expected them to come as enemies and thieves.

In due course Alexander came to a very wide river, on the bank of which he came upon a ship of considerable size, complete with sails and oars, as well as a multitude of weapons and tackle of all kinds, and in good sailing order. He inquired the name of the river and was told that it was the Ganges, also known as *Physon*, whose source is in the paradise of earthly bliss.¹ He also saw houses roofed with immense leaves, which float down the river and are brought to shore by the inhabitants with long poles; they dry them in the sun and pound them to a powder, thus producing a spice of wonderful savour.

When Alexander had learnt all this, and had also investigated the origins and location of the place, he sighed and said, 'I have achieved nothing so far in this world, and I shall regard all my ambitious quest as vain if I do not manage to win a share of this bliss.'

Immediately, having ensured that his troops were safely

positioned, he selected 500 foot soldiers in peak condition – energetic, undeterred by any danger and willing to endure unrelenting toil – loaded the ship with sufficient supplies for the whole summer, and set sail, entrusting his fate to the prosperous winds. Their intention was, if it should be permitted, to reach the source of the river. They sailed for a month, proceeding with considerable difficulty against the strong current. But at this time the strength of the men began to fail, despite their constant mutual exhortations and their efforts to outdo each other at the work. Pretty soon it was clear that it would be impossible to go further: they were worn out with the beating of the waves that washed over them and nearly deaf from the incredible roar of the breakers, so that none of them could hear the voice of his companion unless he yelled loudly. Then at length, on the thirty-fourth day, they saw in the distance what appeared to be a walled city of remarkable height and extent. They approached it with great difficulty. Near the shore, the river ran somewhat less fiercely and the noise of the waves was a little less; but the narrowness of the shore and the muddy ground prevented them from advancing on foot to the wall. They therefore continued to sail for almost three days, with great difficulty, along the side of the city where it stretched from its northern extremity towards the south, looking for a way in.

The wall was very smooth, with no towers or ramparts in its circuit. The entire surface was covered with ancient moss, so that the stones and their joins were completely invisible. On the third day they caught sight of a tiny window shuttered on the inside, a sight which instantly relieved the spirits and strength of the tired travellers with hope.

Alexander immediately had some of his men embark in a boat to see if anyone might answer when they knocked, and gave them a message for the inhabitants. As soon as they reached the wall they knocked loudly and shouted to those inside to open up. After a time they heard someone slide the bolt, and a gentle voice inquired of them who they were and where they had come from, and asked them to explain their unusual and unheard-of demand.

'We are messengers of no ordinary king', they replied, 'but of the king of kings, Alexander the unconquered, to whom all the world pays homage, before whom every power trembles. This is the message his majesty sends you, after consultation with his chief nobles: "What kind of people live in this place, and what laws do they follow? How numerous are they? What are their defences? Who is their king and by what hope does he live? What faith does he profess? What forces can he rely on?" Our lord also orders you: "If you wish to continue to enjoy your hope of life, your bodily safety, and quiet times, do not puff yourselves up with insolence but pay me tribute according to the custom of all other peoples of the world."'

The listener was not troubled by their words but replied with a cheerful expression and a gentle voice, 'Do not wear yourselves out with multiplying threats and piling up demands; wait patiently and I shall be with you shortly.'

So saying, he closed the window. After about two hours, he opened it again and showed himself to the waiting sailors. He held out a jewel of unusual colour and remarkable brilliance, which in size and shape much resembled a human eye. He handed it to the men and said, 'The inhabitants of this place send this message to your king: "Call it whatever you like, a gift or a tribute owed, but accept a memento in the gift of this remarkable stone, which we send to you as a kind of charitable alms. It has the power to take away all your longings. When you have learnt its nature and its virtue, you will cease from all ambition. You will know also that it is not expedient for you and your companions to remain longer here, since if the river should be stirred by even a moderate storm, your ship will without doubt be wrecked and all your lives will be lost. Therefore, return to your companions, and try not to be ungrateful to the god of gods for the benefits conferred on you."'

He ceased speaking, closed up the aperture and withdrew.

The men quickly returned to the ship, bringing Alexander the jewel and the message. He, being a wise man, reflected on the event and weighed the man's words, and returned with all speed

to familiar shores and his own encampment. His men were delighted at his return, which they had been anxiously anticipating. Indeed for some time they had been doubtful whether he would ever return alive. When they heard what had occurred they poured out their congratulations and their gratitude at his safe return. They heard all about the manifold dangers of the fast-flowing river, the men's deafness and the frequent inundations of the waters, the speed and violence of the current and the intolerable roar of the waves; and they rejoiced that their leader, though he had despaired of his strength many times, had overcome all these perils successfully.

Thence they advanced to the wealthy city of Susa,² where they were received with full royal honours and the oldest men were particularly richly honoured. Many of the tallest men honoured the imperial nobility with splendid gifts and they withdrew no less laden with royal rewards.

On the next day Alexander summoned secretly several of the wisest men of the Jews and gentiles, from whom he knew he could expect a reliable answer. He told them the tale of his adventure and the mysterious meeting at the window, and then brought out the jewel and asked them to explain its nature and virtue. They, however, could offer no certain opinion on the mystery; all they could do was praise the man's good fortune, rejoice in the outcome and extol his power. They asked for time to study the puzzle. Alexander was displeased at this but concealed his frustration. He showed no scorn for the ignorance and simplicity of the men, but presented them with royal gifts.

There was in that place a very aged Jew by the name of Papas,³ who was so frail as a result of his length of years that he could only go from place to place in a litter carried by two men. When he heard from his friends about the king's adventure, and that he was troubled with anxiety about the mystery of the stone, he begged to be brought into the king's presence. When Alexander saw him, he displayed his customary respect to the man's grey hairs, and seated the old gentleman comfortably beside him. He congratulated him on his long life and on his handsome and distinguished appearance, and, as was his pleas-

ant custom with the elderly, began to discuss the events of olden times. The old man's satisfactory answers indicated to Alexander that he was seated next to a veritable ocean of wisdom, and so he began to relate the story of his expedition, its many hardships and its eventual successful outcome.

But the Jew, when he heard of the successful voyage and its fortunate outcome, so far beyond what one might have expected, raised up his hands and cried out before everyone present, 'Your majesty, do not neglect to consider at all times how much you are indebted to the God of Heaven! To no mortal has he allowed such a privilege. The success of the venture is not due to fate, but to the generosity of God. I remember when I was a boy that some young men of great strength and intelligence undertook this voyage, but they were in no way able to approach the walls of that city, and even so they almost all came back incapacitated. Some of them were exhausted by the excessive toil and were washed overboard by the waves; others went blind, or deaf, or were permanently disabled by a trembling of the limbs. After that, various others made the attempt at various times, but their labour was in vain, for they were all disabled in various ways and scarcely escaped with their lives. It is a long time since that people gave up this vain attempt. By what dispensation of the fates, then, have you and your companions overcome the ferocity of the waves, reached that city which until now was innocent of all visitors, and received a response allowed to no other mortal? In truth, the explanation must lie in the permission or dispensation of God, or it is thanks to a great wonder.'

These remarks brought Alexander out of his former disconsolate puzzlement. He replied cheerfully, 'What the Scripture says is true, that there is wisdom in the old. Your statement agrees with the spiritual mystery which was conveyed to me in a prophetic utterance by the inhabitants of that city. I have wasted a great deal of time with the wise men of this place in trying to elucidate that wonder whose existence you have divined.' Then he opened his hand to display the jewel. 'Here,' he said, 'is the very object of your conjecture.'

The Jew took the jewel and looked at it for a long time. 'This is indeed a wonder', he said, 'and a memento which is not unworthy of the royal dignity.'

'Since your opinion is just that of him who gave it to me', said Alexander, 'do not torture me with suspense. If you know anything about it, explain it to me, and release me from my ignorance of its riddle.'

'Although much reliability attaches to prophetic utterances', replied the Jew, 'the sense of sight is often more susceptible of persuasion concerning some new thing than that of hearing. This stone is of moderate size, but of immense weight; in fact nothing could equal its mass. Bring me a pair of scales and a pound of gold.'

This was done immediately, and the old man placed the stone in one pan and a gold coin in the other: the stone outweighed it and the pan with the coin shot up. He added the rest of the coins one by one, until the whole pound was in the pan, and then as much gold as the pan would hold, without being able to budge the stone in the slightest from its lower position. Then they sent for the largest pair of scales in the place, attached it to a beam and loaded it with many hundreds of gold coins; but the stone, just as it had done with the first coin, lifted the whole lot swiftly into the air, as if it had been not a load of gold but a tiny feather in the pan.

When Alexander saw this, which was so far beyond what he would have believed possible, he said in astonishment, 'I am really amazed that this little jewel, which seems when held in the hand to weigh almost nothing, appears so heavy as soon as it is placed on the scales. Now, however, that seeing this sight has persuaded me of what I should never have believed had it been told me, please explain in words this novel mystery.'

'Wait patiently, your majesty', replied the Jew, 'until the demonstration is completed in proper form, and then I will explain the puzzle to your satisfaction.'

He took again the smaller pair of scales, in which they had piled so much weight, and on the one side he placed the stone, this time covering it with a light film of dust, while on the other

side he placed one gold coin. Immediately the coin sank and pulled the stone upwards with no trouble at all. The Jew took out the coin and replaced it with a feather; but still it exceeded the stone in weight.

Alexander was practically fainting with amazement. 'Never', he said, 'anywhere in the world have I heard of such a thing, nor seen such a thing, nor even dreamt of it.'

'The demonstration is now complete', stated the Jew, 'and now follows the verbal explanation of the mystery concealed herein.'

'Please', said Alexander, 'since I am very disturbed by the riddle attaching to the city I saw, and its inhabitants, explain it to me in every detail.'

Having thus whetted their curiosity, the Jew turned to face the whole crowd and broke his silence as follows: 'What you have seen, your majesty, is not a city and should not be called one. It is a solid wall, impenetrable to all mortal flesh, which the Creator of all things placed there to bar all further progress, for the benefit of the spirits of the just now freed from the flesh and awaiting the resurrection of the body. There they enjoy a dim repose, which God has decreed for them – but not for ever, because after the Judgement they will receive their flesh again and reign with the Creator for eternity. These spirits, who are enthusiastic for human salvation, sent you this stone as a memento of your blessed fortune, both to protect you and to constrain the inordinate and inappropriate urgings of your ambition. If you think about it, what advantage is there in insatiable longing, which consumes the mind with constant anxiety and tortures it with suspicion and distrust? It leads a rational man to use up all his quietness, makes him the ignoble slave of his own slave, and compels him to join night to day in the contemplation of his worries.'

'However, if you will be content to stay in your own home and enjoy the sufficiency of your inheritance, your royal state will never come to an end: you will be at peace and divested of all care, while the wealth and riches of your kingdom will be your servants and the abundance of every treasury will pour

itself into your coffers. At the moment, however, you are content neither with your own wealth nor with that of others; in the midst of your treasure-houses you are oppressed with want, nothing is enough for you, and, at great peril to your life and to that of those around you, you weigh yourself down with the ill-gotten burden of others' riches.

'This advice forms the essence of the mystery which is contained in this wondrous stone. As far as its shape and colour are concerned, it is indeed a human eye, which, for as long as it has access to the light of life, is constantly agitated with the heat of desire; it grazes on the multiplicity of novelties and, even as gold ministers to its ever-renewing hunger, it never reaches any kind of satiety.⁴ The more it manages to increase its holdings, so much the more diligently does it devote itself to piling up more. That is the meaning of the magical effect of the stone's weight. But as soon as its vital motion is removed, and it is commended to the keeping of the earth from which it was born, it is beyond the use of any useful thing, it enjoys nothing, it desires nothing, it is unmoved by any external stimulus, because it is without feeling. Thus even a light feather, be it never so small, so long as it is useful for something, is able to outweigh the stone once it is covered with dust.

'This stone is you, your majesty, you – the master of all wisdom, the conqueror of kings, the possessor of kingdoms, the lord of the world; the stone is your counsellor, your castigator; its little substance shall keep you from the yearnings of shoddy ambition. This is what I have to say, saving your grace, my lord and king, and if it seems that I have exceeded the bounds of the honour due to a king in my cautionary speech, it is because I yielded in my unwisdom to your imperial command.'

Alexander delayed not a moment but rushed to embrace the old man. He sent him home laden with royal gifts, praying for his prosperity and safety. At once he put an end to his own desires and ambitions and made room for the exercise of generosity and noble behaviour. He became the most liberal-handed of kings, as befitted his royal glory, both towards his intimates and to everyone else.

He departed from there and travelled through the extent of the lands which were under his rule. Here and there he was detained by the necessity of dispensing justice, but after a circuit of another half a year he reached Babylon. Here, as if he had returned home after his many adventures and trials, he gave himself up to a quiet and peaceful life, allowing the companions of his journey to go into retirement, and endowing each of them according to the quality of his service with quantities of gold and silver.

All malicious envy had been dispelled. He flourished in magnificence and rejoiced in his royal glory. But one day he was killed by a poisoned cup, administered by one of his domestic servants, whom he least suspected – just as he had been told in India by the oracular trees of the Sun and Moon. As the poison penetrated into his veins and he felt death coming on, he summoned the young men who had been his pages and school companions, and divided the administration of his kingdom among them. He established the limits of his empire. He confirmed the duties of the army in the regular increase of peace and concord. He impressed on all the need to pursue truth, nobility and generosity and instructed them in the imitation of his own model of virtue. Then, saying farewell to each one in turn, he brought to an end his last day. Alleluia.

The end of the life of King Alexander the Great.