

On the Cherubim, the Flaming Sword, and the First Born of Man: Cain

(§ 1) **“And he (God) cast out Adam and settled (him) facing the garden of pleasure, and he stationed the Cherubim and the flaming sword that turns itself to guard the way of the tree of life”** (Gen 3:24). He (Moses) says here “he cast out” but earlier he had said “he sent out,” (ib. 23) not putting down the words randomly but fully aware to which things he applies them in a proper and accurate sense.

(§2) He who is sent away is not prevented from eventually returning, but he who is cast out by God undergoes eternal exile. For the former, who is not yet firmly in the grasp of evil, is allowed, if he repents, to return to virtue as to a homeland from which he was driven; but the latter, oppressed and constrained by a violent and incurable disease, is forced to carry the undying sufferings forever, contemptuously dismissed to the place of the impious to endure a full dose of unremitting misery.

(§3) In this way we also see Hagar, or ‘intermediate’ education, which plays its role in the general cycle of studies, departing twice from Sarah, or the authoritative virtue, but retracing her steps once; after she ran away the first time, although not banished, she returns to her master’s house after an angel who stands for divine reason met her (cf. Gen 16:6f.), but the second time she is thrown out definitively, never to return (cf. Gen 21:14).

(§4) We must speak about the reasons for both the earlier flight and the everlasting exile thereafter. As long as their names had not yet been changed, which meant remodeled by improving the character of their soul, Abram was still the ‘father on high’, pursuing the high philosophy of things that happen in the air and the sublime philosophy of things that exist in heaven, which mathematics defines as the most excellent form of the study of nature.

(§5) Sara in turn, a symbol of my authority – for she is called ‘authority of me’ – had not yet changed to become generic virtue – for everything generic is imperishable. She was counted among individual and specific virtues; she was prudence in me and equally temperance, courage, and justice; they are perishable, since also the terrain that receives them, namely me, is perishable.

(§6) Hagar, the ‘intermediate’ and general cycle of studies, even though she was eager to escape from the austere and gloomy life of the lovers of virtue, was to return to the same life again, not yet able to hold onto the generic and imperishable heights but still clinging to individual and specific ranges, where the middle is preferred to the highest.

(§7) “When Abram, instead of studying natural phenomena, becomes wise and God-loving, his name is changed to Abraham, which means ‘chosen father of sound’ – for the word when pronounced makes a sound, and its father is the mind that seized the one who takes virtue seriously; when Sara instead of ‘authority of me’ becomes Sarah, her name equals ‘she who rules with authority’; this meant that instead of a specific and perishable virtue she became generic and imperishable;”

(§8) when Isaac in turn shines forth his light, Isaac, who represents the generic form of happiness, of joy and good cheer of those who left behind the ways of women and died to the passions, he seriously engages in games, not those of children but those that are divine; then the preparatory studies named after Hagar will be cast out, and their son the sophist named Ismael will be cast out as well.

(§9) They will enter into eternal exile, for God confirms their expulsion when he urges the wise man to give heed to the words of Sarah, who says explicitly “to cast out the slave girl and her son” (Gen 21:10). Obeying virtue is a noble thing, especially when it leads to such a belief that the most perfect natures stand far apart from the intermediate conditions and that wisdom is alien to sophistry; for the latter works hard at finding persuasive arguments to establish a false opinion, which damages the soul, but wisdom through practice of the truth provides the great profit for the mind, knowledge of right reason.

(§10) Why are we then surprised if God cast out forever from the space of the virtues Adam, the mind that contracted the incurable disease of folly without allowing him to return any longer? Since he also drives out and banishes the child sophist and his mother, the teaching of preparatory learning, from wisdom and the wise man, on whom he bestows the names of Abraham and Sarah.