

Methodius of Olympus
On the Leech
(De sanguisuga ad Eustochium)

CPG 1816

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¹ This translation was commissioned and edited by Roger Pearse, Ipswich, and is released by him into the public domain.

The same Methodius on the Leech that is in the Proverbs,² and on “The Heavens declare the Glory of God”³

[I.1]⁴ I weave a flowery garland for Christ, not [made out] of such things as the Jews did, for they thought to propitiate God by the blood of animals. But we, having received reasonable sacrifices, know that we should not offer lambs and calves. But like the bee when it has found a source of honey, and flies among the dewy flowers and receives the fragrance, [it] now brings us similar fruit from the flowers of the meadow, let us too fly upon the light wings of wisdom, and, as it says in the gospels and the prophets, having woven the measures of songs of many words, let us incline God to mercy by this reasonable worship.

[2] This passage⁵ will be hard and arduous, and I fear that I will be inadequate to the task that you have set me, O Eustochius, to interpret [it] spiritually. And it is hard to speak about God in truth. However, the Lord himself commands that we should not be lazy, nor turn back, as he says of the study of the scriptures, “Search the scriptures, for in them you have eternal life.”⁶ [3] For someone in the gospels wanted to build a tower, but did not succeed; and by this parable Christ teaches us not to attempt impossible speculations (that is, higher than our own intellect), but measuring our own strength first to speak and teach of what is intelligible.

[4] However, trusting in the Lord that he is strong to beget the word in me, I set myself to work, and

² This is the title in the manuscript, which contains a number of pieces by Methodius of Olympus. The manuscript used for this translation is number 40 on the Holy Trinity-St Sergius Lavra website (<http://stsl.ru>), but it doesn't belong to them: it is held in the Russian State Library (=RGB) in the collection of the old Moscow Spiritual Academy. The shelfmark of the manuscript is ф. 173.I, №40, and *De Cibis* appears on folios ff. 129v–136. Also consulted were G. Bonwetsch, “Methodius”, in: *Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller* 27 (1917), 477-489, who gives the Old Slavonic in German translation; and the Russian translation by M. Chub, in: *Богословские труды* (= *Bogoslovskie Trudy*) 2 (1961) 2 (1961), 184-190. All this material including the manuscript, is online.

The reference in the title is to Proverbs 30:15. In the Hebrew text (NIV version) this reads:

15 “The leech has two daughters.
‘Give! Give!’ they cry.
“There are three things that are never satisfied,
four that never say, ‘Enough!’:
16 the grave, the barren womb,
land, which is never satisfied with water,
and fire, which never says, ‘Enough!’

In the Septuagint (LXX) text (NETS) this reads:

15 The leech has three lovingly beloved daughters,
but these three did not satisfy her,
and the fourth was not pleased to say, “It is enough.”
16 Hades and love of a woman
and Tartarus and earth not filled with water,
water and fire also will never say, “It suffices.”

³ Psalm 18 (19):1. In the NIV this reads: 1. The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.

⁴ The chapter and verse numbers are Bonwetsch's.

⁵ Literally “word”.

⁶ John 5:39.

I dare to say, “My heart is considering a good subject.”⁷ For though the prophet spoke about the Father and the Son, in pleasing and pure things the Holy Spirit is the parent of the good word and divine understandings. [5] Therefore, O soul, place your trust in God, and sanctify yourself with the light of the vision, study the law of the Lord night and day, and give no place to the spirit of deceit, and all other virtues. Imitate him who said, “We have conceived, O Lord, because of your fear, and have been in pain, and have brought forth the breath of your salvation,” etc.⁸ [6] Make the things of the flesh barren, for they resist the spirit. Conform yourself to the image of Christ, who is within you, so you also may dare to say, “My heart is considering a good subject.” [II.1] And the beginning of our homily shall be up to this point, so that we don’t appear to stop at a word, but we shall press on with our intention, and give our interpretation of the passage.

[2] Let us begin here, and speak first from the name of the book, for it is called Παροιμία.⁹ For this reason they speak in parables according to the measure of something else, and to show what they are speaking of under another form. And lest I should seem to speak without evidence, I shall speak with evidence. [3] In the book of Judges,¹⁰ after the killing of the sons of Jerubbaal, his youngest son fled, and climbed Mount Gerizim, and cried out, denouncing the men of Shechem that they had forgotten Jerubbaal, a valiant man, and many times prepared to die for his people (for they had chosen his murderer as king in his place). And he said that the trees went out to make a king for themselves, and said to the olive tree, “Reign over us.” But it would not. Then they asked the fig tree, but it resolutely refused. And they urged the vine, but it too would not. Then they said to the bramble, “Reign over us.” And the bramble said, “If you truly make me king over you, come, and put your trust in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and burn up the cedars of Lebanon.” And so on.

[4] These things which he said thus are by no means to be understood of trees, but he speaks of other things in this parable. But these words are capable of being understood by a spirit which is apart from fleshly things and purified by the light of God. [5] Therefore let us too pray to God, the great Giver, through Jesus Christ, for the Holy Spirit, who raises up the poor man from the dunghill, that he would instruct us in true reason. For it is now time to say, [III.1] “The leech had three dearly beloved daughters and these three did not satisfy her, and the fourth was not contented to say, Enough. Hell, and the love of women, and Tartarus (that is, the infernal regions), and the earth, which is not satisfied [with water], and water, and fire will not say, Enough”¹¹ [2] But the leech is a small creature that lives in the water, and lies in wait that it may enter into those who drink the water. But when someone is thirsty for water, it goes up into the water that he draws, so that the drinker does not notice it, and when it goes in, it sticks at the base of his throat, whence his voice comes and where also the water is swallowed, doing harm to both.

[3] But what is the true bloodsucking leech, whose beloved daughters could not be satisfied? Is the prophet’s word about this visible leech, and not rather about the inimical power which is never satisfied with evil? For it lives in the waters of the intellect, of which the prophet said in the psalms, “There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number—living things both large and small. There the ships go to and fro, and Leviathan,¹² which you formed to frolic there.”¹³ But whose children are hell and the infernal regions? [4] For I shall seem to set a snare for those who understand it literally, and are unable to understand the profundities of scripture

⁷ Psalm 44 (45):1.

⁸ Isaiah 26:18 (LXX).

⁹ Proverbs; but the Greek word also means “parables”.

¹⁰ What follows is a paraphrase of Judges 9:5–15.

¹¹ Proverbs 30:15-16 (LXX). The Septuagint reading refers to three leeches, rather than the two of the Hebrew: τῆ βδέλλη τρεῖς θυγατέρες ἦσαν ἀγαπήσει ἀγαπώμεναι καὶ αἱ τρεῖς αὐταὶ οὐκ ἐνεπίμπλασαν αὐτήν καὶ ἡ τετάρτη οὐκ ἠρκέσθη εἰπεῖν ἰκανόν. The Slavonic follows this faithfully.

¹² Slavonic “this serpent” (following the Greek δράκων οὐτος).

¹³ Psalm 103 (104):25–26.

according to the truth. Let us, however, also ask this: with what food did those daughters bring and not satisfy her? [5] See whether the word spoken by Ecclesiastes is not similar to this one, “All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.”¹⁴ I think the prophet speaks of those powers which have fallen to earth like streams of waters, and have changed from sweetness to bitterness. And when he says that the sea is never full, evil is never satisfied with the souls that come to it. [IV.1] For there are many other serpents in the waters, over whom the great and dread serpent reigns. Of him God said to the longsuffering Job, “he is king of all that are in the waters,”¹⁵ and God, says the prophet, shall crush their heads¹⁶ – and not their heads only, but also the head of the great one, on whose hide nothing that swims can inflict a single bruise. [2] As it says in the seventh-third psalm: “You broke to pieces the head of the dragon; you gave him for food to the Ethiopians.”¹⁷ And it appears that the Ethiopians are sunk in wickedness by the fact that the great serpent is food for them. For those that eat the flesh of the Lord, and drink his blood, are blessed. But those that eat the flesh of the symbolic serpent are enemies of the symbolic light which enlightens pure souls [3] which, having left the land of Ethiopia, do not come to freedom and peace until they have passed through the waters of ignorance and have seen the head of the symbolic Pharaoh broken, and have seen the enemy slain and his forces cast down, and have taken up the song of victory. And what is that? “If it had not been that the Lord was among us, [...] when men rose up against us, they would have swallowed us up alive,” and later on, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us for a prey to their teeth.”¹⁸ [4] This passage is to show that dreadful and intolerable water, the symbolic sea, which spiritually swallows up that soul which does not have the mind for its guide. Christ rebuked the wind and the sea,¹⁹ [so] that they would not drown those who were sailing with him to feed the creatures that were in it. Blessed is the Lord our God, who not only has not given us to be food for their teeth, but has given us the power to trample them down! [5] For I think that as the blessed Peter was walking on the sea, and was about to sink, and the Lord stretched out to him the hand of salvation, and led him out of the storm too, he gave words of praise to God and the Father: “If your Word and Son had not been among us, the intolerable waters would have swallowed us up.” [6] This also Paul thought to show when he said, “May God soon crush Satan under your feet.”²⁰ [V.1] And in the psalms again, declaring this word, “They that go down to the sea in ships, doing business in many waters, these have seen the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep.”²¹

For who is so blind²² in his spiritual eyes as to think that this means fishers for murex snails, or sponge divers, or those who do their business upon the waters of the sea, and for this reason go down into the deeps? Can these go down into the great depths, or see his wonders in the deep? [2] What is wonderful in the deep compared with what is in the heavens, the sun, the moon and the stars? As Moses wondered, and thought that because of their exceeding beauty the people might call them gods, looked up to heaven and said, “I saw the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and all the heavenly bodies. Do not go astray and worship them, and serve them, which God has given to the nations. But it is not so for you.”²³ There being such wonders in the heavens, therefore he said, “They that go down to the sea in ships, doing business in many waters, to see the works of the Lord.”

¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 1:7.

¹⁵ Job 41:26 (LXX).

¹⁶ Psalm 73 (74):13 (LXX).

¹⁷ Psalm 73 (74):14 (LXX).

¹⁸ Psalm 123 (124):1–3, 6 (LXX).

¹⁹ Cf. Matthew 14:24–33.

²⁰ Romans 16:20 (variant reading).

²¹ Psalm 106 (107) 23–24.

²² Following Bonwetsch in reading невьстьнь for не бысть но.

²³ Deuteronomy 4:19, paraphrased.

[3] But understand, according to a certain referential²⁴ meaning, whether it is about Christ's disciples, who went out from their old mother, Jerusalem, and voyaged in their bodies, as in ships, and saw the most wonderful miracles of Christ. They shall do business in many waters, being fishers of men into the faith of Christ, so that they may snatch people out of the depths of deception. [4] For truly they caught us out of idolatry when the Lord had tested the depths of death, and had taken the enemy captive, and had opened the dark treasure-houses, which his disciples saw, and wondered. For to them it was said, "Many prophets [...] longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it," etc.²⁵ [5] Not only has it been given to you to see wonders, but to do the works of many men. Therefore he commands us to flee that deceit, and not to return to it again.

[VI.1] This is the water where the serpent lives, and anyone who loves it will sink. This is the water that appears to be calm, but is full of all disorder. This water raises fiery waves against anyone who comes to it. This is the turbid water in which the leech lives, the bloodsucker that is the companion of the serpent. [2] It is wondrous in nature, for at first it is small, and is placed upon the earth. Therefore trample it, let us not taste of it, [having] the power to trample the strength of the enemy.²⁶ For if it is trampled, it is powerless; but if it is drunk, it is very dangerous. For having entered and established itself in the throat of the inner man, it will not let a voice of praise escape, [3] preventing the natural stirrings of the soul. For whatever impulses the soul has about itself, as being immortal, or thinking about heavenly things, or contemplating the things that are to come, it replaces them with unseemly thoughts, as though defiling the faith with blood, and even the thoughts of a very wise man wander to and fro.

[4] Therefore let us flee it, for its wounds are hard to heal. For it has not enough of evil, or death, or pleasure – ten thousand will not satisfy it. Do you see the insatiable power? "Hell," he says, "and the love of women, and Tartarus, and the earth, which is not satisfied, and water, and fire will not say, Enough." [5] Hell is constantly receiving souls, and is not satisfied; the love of women inflames sin, and causes people to turn away from God for the sake of pleasure; Tartarus is a dark place; and the earth never has enough of dead bodies; and fire and water – the fire burnt up the Sodomites, and the water flooded the whole earth, and was not satisfied.

[VII.1] But we have now said enough in this homily about the leech, so let us leave it.²⁷ It is time for another question: to interpret "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands," etc., and "their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."²⁸

[2] The prophet, speaking in the name of the Holy Spirit, says that the heavens declare the glory of God. It is right to ask, since God has many glories, which one they declare. Is it that glory, of which it is written plainly in the Wisdom of Solomon, "For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty"?²⁹ [3] We understand that no one can be his wisdom and glory but Christ, by whom all things were made, as the apostle Paul also witnesses to him, calling him the radiance of glory. He is higher than the glory of all creation, and higher than the whole world, and greater than all nature, and receives glory and honour from no one, save from the Father alone. He is ineffable and sinless, and no fault enters into his glory, and it was not fitting that anyone should be the herald of his coming, but "the heavens", that is, the angels

²⁴ Вознесеному, probably ἀναφορικός.

²⁵ Matthew 13:17.

²⁶ *Or*, let us not taste of the power to receive the strength of the enemy.

²⁷ There is an error in the manuscript 40 at this point - славы for слово. The latter is the reading of MS 41, and is used here.

²⁸ Psalm 18 (19):1, 4.

²⁹ Wisdom 7:25.

and other powers. Therefore it seems to me very subtle that the angels should be called “the heavens”; [5] for the Father sent the angels to proclaim the coming of Christ. And if an angel gave the law to Moses, the law proclaimed Christ, as the Lord himself declared, saying “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.”³⁰ And because Christ is the radiance of the glory of the Father, so the angels who declared the law to Moses declared the glory of God. And it was an angel who declared deep things to Daniel and Ezekiel, and also to Zechariah and all the prophets. But I shall show you another heaven which declares the glory of God, which is Gabriel saying to the Most Pure Virgin “Hail, you who are greatly favoured,” and so on.

[6] And what else shall I tell you, showing that the order of the old and new mysteries is served by the angels? [7] If it is fitting, and to our edification to say it, the soul of a wise man is a little heaven, having in itself everywhere bright thoughts and true understandings and shining works, so that God may be glorified by them. [8] And if anyone can find a more orthodox interpretation than this, let him tell it. [9] But I think that when he said “the work of his hands,” he declared that the church is the “foundation”, for it is called the foundation, and it is not founded in corruption, as Saint Paul says, writing to Timothy, “so that you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.”³¹ [10] For if the heavens declare the glory of God, these are the powers on high which declare the glory of God, that is, before the coming of saving grace to us. It is necessary that the church should be considered the foundation, which proclaims the work of his hands, so that we say that the angels proclaimed his coming from heaven in the flesh, but the church tells of his walking in his humanity and all his works.

[VIII.1] But it can also be understood another way, of the intellect and the senses: that “the heavens” are pure and high [reason] engaged in elevated theology and proclaiming the glory of God, and the foundation is the senses unspoilt by pleasures, but a fortress against them. [2] Thus John the Theologian says: “Every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge that Christ Jesus has come in the flesh is not from God,”³² forbidding us to receive the gospel by halves, which is, to acknowledge the incarnation of the Son of God by the holy Virgin, but not to confess likewise that he has come perfectly in his flesh in the church. [3] For it is fitting that each of us should acknowledge his coming, not only in that holy flesh that was of the most pure Virgin, but also likewise in the spirit of each of us. But if there are some who think that the one who only confesses Christ is from God, let them answer, whether sin is not also from God, so that they are to confess Christ and to sin in their other works. [4] Therefore neither those who confess that Christ has come in the flesh, but who sin, are praiseworthy, nor are those who do not sin, but do not confess that Christ has come in the flesh. But they are praiseworthy who both adorn the inner man with right belief, and the outer man with good works. The one is like the heavens (for it thinks heavenly thoughts), and the other [is] like the foundation, for it does not give in to pleasures.[5] Thus the scriptural order is preserved, for their flesh is pure of the passions, and they have nailed it with Christ to the tree of life. No longer is it flesh, but the dwelling place of God. For it is called the flesh because of its weakness, but the righteous man shall never be moved, for he is not carnal, but spiritual.

[IX.1] Are there not here also deep and spiritual meanings for one who searches the scriptures? For the scriptures speak in many different ways: sometimes it calls the saints³³ “days”, sometimes “stars”, sometimes “good earth”, sometimes “ears of wheat”, or “trees”, or “gods”. [2] It calls the

³⁰ John 5:46.

³¹ 1 Timothy 3:15.

³² 1 John 4:2-3 (variant reading).

³³ The word used here is σῆμα, which can hardly be anything but τοῦς ἁγίους, which should be understood in its New Testament sense.

saints “days” when it says “Day unto day utters speech,”³⁴ “stars”, when it says “star differs from star in splendour,”³⁵ and “good earth”, when the Lord says “you shall be a delightful land,”³⁶ ears of wheat, as in the great harvest,³⁷ and trees, as “a tree is recognised by its fruit”³⁸, and gods when “I said, ‘You are gods.’”³⁹ [3] Understand that those “days” are the souls upon whom the Sun of Righteousness has shone, and who thirst for his words. The order of the apostles is made up according to the hours of the day.⁴⁰ It is called the day of understanding, that is, of the church, which Solomon saw like the rising dawn: “Who is this that appears like the dawn?”⁴¹ He desired the mysteries of Christ, rather always desiring them through the scriptures.

[4] And that “night declares it to night”,⁴² he likens “night” to prophetic speech, not because of any wickedness, but because of its great profundity. Understand, he says, wisdom, and “a parable, and a dark speech; the saying of the wise also, and riddles.”⁴³ It is the night also for this reason, because Christ’s incarnation was declared in shadows. For the law, because of the obscurity of its words, and its imagery, is called “the night”. [5] And the Jews, because of their spiritual ignorance and turning away from greater things, have called it thus. And the apostle Paul bears witness, saying, “Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.”⁴⁴ But before the Lord came down, everybody sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, according to which that which had overcome them was called “night”.⁴⁵ But after the great day of resurrection, the light of the Holy Spirit was poured out over all the earth, proclaiming the word of truth to the whole world. [6] For the prophets spoke only of the inheritance, that is, among the Jews, so that those who were outside could not understand or approach. But the preaching of the apostles, shining like the sun, enlightened all dark hearts. The Wisdom of the Father came down like the dew, and quenched the flaming weapon of the serpent. [7] So “their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”⁴⁶ Likewise “a sower went out to sow his seed.”⁴⁷ Well did the Spirit prophesy here, calling the voice and the words of the gospel by other words, for by these words the grace of God comes to us.

[X.1] After this, let us consider another question. “I myself also am a mortal man, like to all, and the offspring of him that was first made of the earth, and in my mother’s womb was fashioned to be flesh in the time of ten months, being compacted in blood, of the seed of man, and the pleasure that came with sleep,” etc.⁴⁸

[2] Marvelling at the wisdom of God, the prophet said “I myself also am a mortal man,” like the other prophets and kings, but using wisdom, and having its coming in his hearing. But, however, I myself am not wisdom, but he that is to come, and takes away the sin of the world. [3] For I was born of the seed of man, but he from the Virgin. John too declared the power of God in this, “I baptise you with water, [...] he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”⁴⁹

³⁴ Psalm 18 (19) 2.

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:41.

³⁶ Malachi 3:12.

³⁷ Cf. Mark 4:28.

³⁸ Matthew 12:23.

³⁹ Psalm 85 (86):6.

⁴⁰ I.e. there are 12 apostles and 12 hours.

⁴¹ Song 6:10.

⁴² Ps.19:2. “And night unto night reveals knowledge”.

⁴³ Proverbs 1:6 (LXX).

⁴⁴ 2 Corinthians 3:15.

⁴⁵ The passage is probably slightly corrupt. Bonwetsch renders "wonach es auch überaus Nacht genannt ward", with a note indicating that what he has translated as "überaus" is literally "übertraf".

⁴⁶ Psalm 18 (19):4.

⁴⁷ Luke 8:5.

⁴⁸ Wisdom 7:1–2.

⁴⁹ Matthew 3:11.

[4] But let this be enough about these things, for this chapter has much candour,⁵⁰ teaching that Solomon did not say this about the Christ, but about himself, so that he should not seem to be the Christ. But other insights about Jesus Christ are, by the Holy Spirit, in another writing about the Body.⁵¹

But you, O Lord, who have sent your Wisdom to become incarnate, I pray through the Lord Jesus for the Holy Spirit, for a pure heart which may be the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, now and for ever and unto ages of ages, Amen.

⁵⁰ Literally “whiteness”

⁵¹ Possibly a reference to another work by Methodius, the *Aglaophon*, or *On the Resurrection*.