

EXCELSIOR NEWSLETTER

Excelsior Classical Covenantal Community

February 2008

www.excelsiorclassical.org

"Why Read Plutarch" by George Grant

"Plutarch's Lives is one of the most vital and consequential of all the ancient classics."

It was the primary textbook of the Greek and Roman world for generations of students throughout Christendom. It was the historical source for many of Shakespeare's finest plays. It forever set the pattern for the biographical arts. It was the inspiration for many of the ideas of the American political pioneers—evidenced by liberal quotations in the articles, speeches, and sermons of Samuel Adams, Peyton Randolph, Patrick Henry, Samuel Davies, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Henry Lee, John Jay, George Mason, Gouverneur Morris, and Thomas Jefferson. Indeed, after the Bible it was the most frequently referenced source during the Founding era. For these and a myriad of other reasons, Plutarch's Lives is one of the most vital and consequential of all the ancient classics.

Written sometime during the tumultuous days of the second century, it was organized as a series of parallel biographies—alternating between famous Greeks and Romans. A character from the Golden Age like Pericles, Alcibiades, Lycurgus, Alexander, and Solon is compared with one from the Splendorous Age like Cicero, Brutus, Cato, Anthony, and Caesar. Plutarch's aim was primarily didactic, and so the Lives abound with lessons about honor, valor, wisdom, temperance, and duty.

It was a paean to moral paganism. It was the original "Book of Virtues."

Interestingly, the various profiles are notorious for their mixture of fact and fiction, history and myth, verity and gossip. Plutarch was a lover of tradition, and his prime concern was both to memorialize past glories and to reassert them as living ideals. Thus, whether an event actually occurred was of little consequence to him—what mattered was how the lessons from those events had passed into the cultural consciousness. "When a story is so celebrated and is vouched for by so many authorities," he commented in his

Mom's Night In / Prayer

Monday, February 18th, 7:00 p.m.
at the Moeller's House

Older Student Library Trip

In order to help high school students with their research papers, we will be organizing a field trip to the library.

Cross Country Info:

Practices will be Monday – Friday
3:00-4:00pm at New Albany High School.

Heather has asked that students attend practice at least 2 out of the 5 days
—preferably Monday and Wednesday.



profile of Croesus, "I cannot agree that it should be rejected because of the so called rules of chronology." And again, in his biography of Theseus, he wrote, "May I therefore succeed in purifying fable, making her submit to reason and take on the semblance of history. But where she obstinately disdains to make herself credible and refuses to admit any element of probability I shall pray for kindly readers and such as receive with indulgence the tales of antiquity."

Thus did Plutarch become the father of that modern branch of the theological arts we oddly call "Political Science." And thus did he forge the cardinal model for all succeeding disciplines of the "Divinities" such as "Sociology," "Psychology," "History," and the "Social Sciences." Indeed, the tenured place of "Moral Philosophy" in Western thought owes more to Plutarch than almost any other single artisan—at least in form if not in substance.

Alas, this seminal work seems to have passed out of educational and literary fashion . . . but *The Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans* ought to find its way into every family's library—as it once did. Is it any wonder why we moderns

demonstrate such moral, political, and social substantivelessness? When our thinking is utterly cut off from our culture's historical roots and our intellectual diets are limited to imbecilic contemporary kitsch, who can wonder why we show few proclivities toward discernment.

If we are to comprehend the political discussions of the American founders—much less the vital discourses of the Protestant reformers, the social teachings of the Medieval scholastics, and the cultural innovations of the Enlightenment pioneers—it is essential that we reincorporate Plutarch's important work into our educational canon.

The Author of the Lives

The great biographer James Boswell once asserted that Plutarch was "the prince of the ancient biographers." Indeed, our conception of the heroic men of ancient Greece and Rome owes more to Plutarch than to any other writer or historian—perhaps more than all the others put together. Plutarch believed that the achievements of Rome were merely the extensions of those of Greece. All of his historical and literary work was aimed at showing the foundational role that Grecian greatness played in the Roman ascendancy. In fact, it was his thesis that there was direct continuity between the culture of Caesar, Brutus, and Antony with that of Pericles, Alcibiades, and Alexander. The entire parallel structure of the *Lives* was aimed at demonstrating this. And thus was created the notion of Greco-Roman culture.

In all his efforts, however scholarly, it is the ethical issues that remain paramount. Plutarch was thus acting as a moral apologist. He wanted Greeks and Romans alike to recognize the tremendous legacy which they had inherited from the great men of the past—and the great city-states of the past. His aim is therefore clearly didactic. There is a moral to his story. And that tells us more than almost anything else we know about him.

Plutarch's Parallel Lives

The works for which Plutarch is best remembered are his biographies of prominent Greek and Roman figures. . . . Although Plutarch wrote half a millenium after many of the

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Upcoming Events

TeenPact

Saturday (Feb. 2) is the deadline to register for TeenPact for anyone who is interested but has not yet registered.

National Latin Exam

This year the exam will be March 7 **(instead of March 14th)** at 8:00 a.m. The cost of the exam is \$6.00 per student.

DON'T BE LATE!

Pre-K thru Kindergarten Valentine's Party

February 15th

Details will be sent home soon!

events which he describes, his biographical essays are our best surviving sources for many historical figures, and they contribute important new information.

Plutarch's interest in history had a definite character. In the opening paragraph to his life of the Roman Aemilius Paulus, he describes his purpose at some length: "I began the writing of my 'Lives' for the sake of others, but I find that I am continuing the work and delighting in it now for my own sake also, using history as a mirror and endeavoring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein depicted. For the result is like nothing else than daily living and associating together, when I receive and welcome each subject of my history in turn as my guest, so to speak, and observe carefully 'how large he was and of what mien,' and select from his career what is most important and most beautiful to know. 'And oh! what greater joy than this can you obtain,' and more efficacious for moral improvement."

History, for Plutarch, is a theater of morals, in which great individuals rise and fall by their strengths and weaknesses. His Lives tend to be anecdotal and to focus on revealing stories. He sees history not as a set of vast and mechanistic processes (as, to a large degree, did Thucydides) but as a forum within which to study the natures of particularly great men and the influences which these natures exerted over events.

The Purpose of the Lives

Of all the distortions modernism has wrought in our culture, the transformation of the Liberal Arts into the Social Sciences is perhaps the most emblematic. It epitomizes the tragic reduction of Moral Philosophy to Mechanical Presumption that so marks our time. History is not a Science. True objectivity is utterly impossible. History inevitably involves a point of view, a frame of reference, a particular perspective, a set of presuppositions—in other words, a worldview.

In his landmark book *A Christian Manifesto*, Francis Schaeffer asserted that "the basic problem with Christians in this country" over the last two generations or more has been that "they have seen things in bits and pieces instead of totals." The result has been a kind of hesitant hit-or-miss approach to the dire dilemmas of our day: "They have very gradually become disturbed over permissiveness, pornography, the public schools, the breakdown of the family, and finally abortion. But they have not seen this as a totality—each thing being a part, a symptom, of a much larger problem."

He said that part of the reason for this was: "They failed to see that all of this has come about due to a shift in worldview—that is, through a fundamental change in the

overall way people think and view the world and life as a whole."

When the subject of worldview comes up, we generally think of philosophy. We think of intellectual niggling. We think of the brief and blinding oblivion of ivory tower speculation, of thickly obscure tomes, and of inscrutable logical complexities. In fact, a worldview is as practical as potatoes. It is less metaphysical than understanding marginal market buying at the stock exchange or legislative initiatives in congress. It is less esoteric than typing a book into a laptop computer or sending a fax across the continent. It is instead as down to earth as tilling the soil for a bed of zinnias.

The word itself is a poor English attempt at translating the German *weltanschauung*. It literally means a life perspective or a way of seeing. It is simply the way we look at the world.

You have a worldview. I have a worldview. Everyone does. It is our perspective. It is our frame of reference. It is the means by which we interpret the situations and circumstances around us. It is what enables us to integrate all the different aspects of our faith, and life, and experience.

Alvin Toffler, in his book *Future Shock*, said: "Every person carries in his head a mental model of the world, a subjective representation of external reality." This mental model is, he says, like a giant filing cabinet. It contains a slot for every item of information coming to us. It organizes our knowledge and gives us a grid from which to think. Our mind is not as Pelagius, Locke, Voltaire, or Rousseau would have had us suppose—a *tabula rasa*, a blank and impartial slate. None of us is completely open-minded or genuinely objective. "When we think," said economic philosopher E.F. Schumacher, "we can only do so because our mind is already filled with all sorts of ideas with which to think." These more or less fixed notions make up our mental model of the world, our frame of reference, our presuppositions—in other words, our worldview.

In his marvelous book, *How to Read Slowly*, James Sire writes: "A worldview is a map of reality; and like any map, it may fit what is actually there, or it may be grossly misleading. The map is not the world itself of course, only an image of it, more or less accurate in some place, distorted in others. Still, all of us carry around such a map in our mental makeup and we act upon it. All our thinking presupposes it. Most of our experience fits into it." A worldview is simply a way of viewing the world.

Though certainly not a Christian, Plutarch understood this issue. Thus there is no pretense of "scientific objectivity" in the Lives. Instead, there is a clear sense of mission. Plutarch did his homework, tried to be as accurate and honest as possible, and refrained from manipulating the data

for his own ends. Nevertheless, he writes with a clear purpose. The entire book is an apology for his peculiar bias—that Rome would not have been possible without Greece; that Pax Romana was the direct descendent of Hellenas Honorus.

The Lives is composed of 25 biographical parallels. Each of the parallels includes profiles of one Greek and one Roman hero—and in 18 of these a concluding comparison between the two is added. It is the comparisons and contrasts that make Plutarch's work so valuable. The American founders for instance, used the full range of his inquiries as the starting place for their own discussions of virtuous government. It was precisely the fact that he was not a disinterested observer that made his insights so appealing to men wrestling with the profound questions of social organization.

Plutarch surveys all manner of governments—from benevolent dictatorships to pagan democracies, from military tyrannies to patrician republics—but it is individual

character that concerns and interests him the most. Again, this emphasis was quite appealing to the American founders. Though under no illusions about his paganism, they respected his wide scope. With the corrective of the Bible, he became an excellent guide to the patterns of liberty and virtue. As Alexander Hamilton observed, "students of politics could do no better" than to have "Plutarch in one hand and Holy Writ in the other."

When later writers, thinkers, and social activists would appeal to the classical age for reforms in their own time, they would picture its ideals

as seen through Plutarch's rose colored glasses. This is why the American founders could remain so enamored with the ancients—despite their unhesitating commitment to Christian truth, their comprehension of the pagan essence of Greece and Rome was myopically obscured by Plutarch.

A Reading Plan

Plutarch organized his parallel lives in a very orderly fashion so that each pair really stands on its own. Thus, it is

possible to get much of the import and impact of the work by reading only a strategic sampling of them—the most important being those of Theseus and Romulus; Lycurgus and Numa, Solon and Popicola; Pericles and Fabius; Anthony and Demetrius, Alcibiades and Coriolanus; Caesar and Alexander; Brutus and Dion.

There are at least three different approaches to reading the Lives. The first is to read the lives chronologically. Although Plutarch did not imagine that his work would be used as an historical guide to the ancient world, it has ably served in that capacity for centuries. Second, the essential biographies and comparisons may be read first with the incidental ones read afterward. Or third, the profiles may be read section by section.

However the task is undertaken, the main aim of Plutarch should be kept in mind throughout. He was intent on presenting moral lessons. Though he gives attention to omens, auguries, portents, signs, and harbingers, his theme is always the character of man as the determiner of destiny. It is that human responsibility is the hinge upon which all of history turns.

A good reading plan might be to read each biography in a single sitting followed by a time of reflection and, if possible, discussion. The parallel biography and comparison should then be read. Thomas Jefferson always read Plutarch with a journal in hand. As he explained, "One never knows when a brilliant insight or a turn of the phrase may jump out of Plutarch's prose and thus capture the imagination. I therefore remain at the ready to record such bursts of perspicacity, lest it slip my remembrance and be lost."

The Value of Plutarch

Invariably "Books of Virtue" are the fruit of non-Christian thinking—regardless of whether those books were written by Benjamin Franklin, Julia Ward Howe, William Bennett, or Plutarch. This is essential for the Christian to keep in mind as he reads. These books are not Christian. And while they may borrow some elements of Christian worldview, we must never confuse their "Nice News" approach to life with the authentic "Good News" of the Gospel. We must always be on guard against this, the oldest trick in the book.

We normally think of the devil as an insidious destroyer. We are inclined to believe that his demonic plan has been, is now, and always will be to play fast and free with goodness, truth, and purity wherever they might be found, to possess individuals with destructive passions, to defile all honor, valor, and ethical seemliness.

"History, for Plutarch, is a theater of morals, in which great individuals rise and fall by their strengths and weaknesses."

In fact though, Satan does not so much want to tear down godly conventions and mores as to build up his own malevolent ones. He has always nurtured Babel-like aspirations to build a "New World Order" and usher in a "New Age." He is always striving to "make a name" for himself and fill the world with his "glory." In other words, it isn't that he wants to be a fiend but rather to be "like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:14). His purpose has always been to build some glorious, utopian future of his own grand glorious design—apart from God.

Otto Blumhardt, the pioneer Lutheran missionary to Africa in the 17th century, wrote: "The devil's conceit is merely that he might supplant God's providential rule with his own. He is driven by jealousy, not envy. Hence, his grand urge to misworship is but the engendering of fine traditions, magnificent achievements, and beneficent inclinations yet all apart from the gracious endowments of God's order. Satan is a despot not unlike those that human experience attests: entranced by the false beauties, the false majesties, and the false virtues of independence from the Almighty."

From the time of the temptation in the Garden to the present, the great Satanic conspiracy has always been first and foremost to offer some sane, attractive, and wholesome counterfeit to the Kingdom of God. It is to offer some measure of man engendered, man approved, and man sustained virtue.

It is crucial that we are clear on this matter: the consummation of evil is not best attained by getting us to drink blood from roiling cauldrons in debauched occultic rites. Rather it is as we are distracted from our providentially ordained callings—distracted by some upright, interesting, and enticing alternative.

Satan hopes to realize his ambition not merely by plunging individuals into bottomless pools of concupiscence but by gaining sway over the deepest affections and highest aspirations of this poor fallen world. He thus masquerades as an "angel of light" and even his demonic minions appear as "messengers of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

As Oswald Chambers has asserted: "This is his most cunning travesty. . . to counterfeit the Holy Spirit. . . to make men upright and individual-but seemingly self-governed and with no apparent need of God." Plutarch's *Lives* exalts the humanistic virtues of ancient paganism. So, why even bother reading it?

There are several reasons why the *Lives* is a vital part of the western canon of classics despite its obvious non-Christian orientation. Like so many of the classics -- from the works of Plato and Aristotle to those of Byron and Keats

—the *Lives* holds a tenured place in our intellectual tradition and is neglected only at our peril. But why is that?

First, a classic worth reading is one that has influenced our own day to some extraordinary degree. If we are to understand why people think as they do, act as they do, or feel as they do; if we are to comprehend the foundations of our institutions, the tenacity of our traditions, or the precariousness of our policies then we need to have substantive background information. Plutarch's *Lives* has been the primary lens through which western intellectuals, educators, artists, musicians, dramatists, and historians have viewed the Greco-Roman world. If for no other reason than to grasp the significance of that influence, the *Lives* is vitally important. But the influence goes even beyond that, extending to the form and function of all the "Social Sciences." Plutarch's *Lives* is seminal.

Second, good books should make us think. Great books are those that provoke us to think in great ways. The *Lives* certainly fills the bill in that regard. For hundreds of years, great minds have wrestled with Plutarch's ideas and ideals. And that wrestling has given rise to many of our greatest freedoms. It was only as the American founders for instance, struggled with the ideas of a benevolent dictatorship like that of Lycurgus, or of a military tyranny like that of Sulla, or of a fractious anarchy like that of Antony—all of which were presented in the pages of the *Lives*—that they were able to hammer out their peculiar notions of liberty.

Third, good books should be artistically beautiful. Great books should epitomize glorious art. As Leland Ryken has asserted, "Any encyclopedia can give us facts but art gives us truth." In other words, a book that gets its facts wrong—as Plutarch undoubtedly does—can nevertheless sometimes lead us to the truth. There is no question that Plutarch's prose styling and his literary construction are brilliantly artistic. We can learn much from his pioneering efforts.

To be sure we need to read Plutarch with discernment. To be sure we must never be lured into the trap that all "Books of Virtue" attempt to lead us—the trap of thinking that men may somehow manufacture for themselves moral excellence. When we read, we must read Christianly. But all that being said, we need to read. And Plutarch is a fine place to start.

Note: This article has been abridged to fit our newsletter. The complete article is available at <http://www.amblesideonline.org/WhyPlutarch.shtml>

For those interested in reading Plutarch you are welcome to borrow a copy from the Crampton family.

Preparing for February...

February Headmasters

February 1st - John Snyder

February 8th - Alan Becker

February 15th - Tom Thompson

February 22nd - *No Excelsior*

February 29th - Phillip Morris

February Clean-Up

February 1st - Chunn family

February 8th - Dye family

February 15th - Thompson family

February 22nd - *No Excelsior*

February 29th - Morris family

High School Career Discussion

We have had some strong interest in putting together a career night for the older Excelsior students. Our group has been blessed with some many families with diverse interests and talents. Many students are at a critical point in their education where they need to make some serious decision about their future and potential careers.

We are asking that you prayerfully consider participating in our discussion – dads and moms alike. This would be a wonderful opportunity to share with the students the choices (good and bad) that have led you to where you are today and how God directed your steps. It would be great for them to hear what you started out thinking was the direction you were going to take, and why you made any changes. Also, what changes you would have made in your choices in hindsight.

Please contact Derek Moeller by Feb. 15th if you would like to participate. We are hoping to schedule a Friday night or Saturday day in April, or possibly March 14th during spring break, that might be convenient for most families.

Lunch:

February 1st - Chick-fil-a

February 8th - Wendy's

February 15th - Pizza Dr.

February 22nd - *No Excelsior*

February 29th - Danver's

Please leave your completed order form and money in the box labeled "LUNCH" in the foyer of Bldg A. a week before the lunch you're

