



75 AD

THE COMPARISON OF NUMA WITH LYCURGUS

by Plutarch

translated by John Dryden

HAVING thus finished the lives of Lycurgus and Numa, we shall now, though the work be difficult, put together their points of difference as they lie here before our view. Their points of likeness are obvious; their moderation, their religion, their capacity of government and discipline, their both deriving their laws and constitutions from the gods. Yet in their common glories there are circumstances of diversity; for first Numa accepted and Lycurgus resigned a kingdom; Numa received without desiring it, Lycurgus had it and gave it up; the one from a private person and a stranger was raised by others to be their king; the other from the condition of a prince voluntarily descended to the state of privacy. It was glorious to acquire a throne by justice, yet more glorious to prefer justice before a throne; the same virtue which made the one appear worthy of regal power exalted the other to the disregard of it. Lastly, as the musicians tune their harps, so the one let down the high-flown spirits of the people at Rome to a lower key, as the other screwed them up at Sparta to a higher note, when they were sunken low by dissoluteness and riot. The harder task was that of Lycurgus; for it was not so much his business to persuade his citizens to put off their armour or ungird their swords, as to cast away their gold or silver, and abandon costly furniture and rich tables; nor was it necessary to preach to them, that, laying aside their arms, they should observe the festivals, and sacrifice to the gods, but rather, that, giving up feasting and drinking, they should employ their time in laborious and martial exercises; so that while the one effected all by persuasions and his people's love for him, the other, with danger and hazard of his person, scarcely in the end succeeded. Numa's muse was a gentle and loving inspiration, fitting him well to turn and soothe his people into peace and justice out of their violent and fiery tempers; whereas, if we must admit the treatment of the Helots to be a part of Lycurgus's legislation, a most cruel and iniquitous proceeding, we must own that Numa was by a great deal the more humane and Greek-like legislator, granting even to actual slaves a licence to sit at meat with their masters at the feast of Saturn, that they also might have some taste and relish of the sweets of liberty. For this custom, too, is ascribed to Numa, whose wish was, they conceive, to give a place in the enjoyment of the yearly fruits of the soil to those who had helped to produce them. Others will have it to be in remembrance of the age of Saturn, when there was no distinction between master and slave, but all lived as brothers and as equals in a condition of equality.

In general, it seems that both aimed at the same design and intent, which was to bring their people to moderation and frugality; but of other virtues, the one set his affection most on fortitude, and the other on justice; unless we will attribute their different ways to the different habits and temperaments which they had to work upon by their enactments; for Numa did not out of cowardice or fear affect peace, but because he would not be guilty of injustice; nor did Lycurgus promote a spirit of war in his people that they might do injustice to others, but that they might protect themselves by it.

In bringing the habits they formed in their people to a just and happy mean, mitigating them where they exceeded, and strengthening

them where they were deficient, both were compelled to make great innovations. The frame of government which Numa formed was democratic and popular to the last extreme, goldsmiths and flute-players and shoemakers constituting his promiscuous, many-coloured commonalty. Lycurgus was rigid and aristocratical, banishing all the base and mechanic arts to the company of servants and strangers, and allowing the true citizens no implements but the spear and shield, the trade of war only, and the service of Mars, and no other knowledge or study, but that of obedience to their commanding officers, and victory over their enemies. Every sort of money-making was forbid them as freemen; and to make them thoroughly so and keep them so through their whole lives, every conceivable concern with money was handed over, with the cooking and the waiting at table, to slaves and helots. But Numa made none of these distinctions; he only suppressed military rapacity, allowing free scope to every other means of obtaining wealth; nor did he endeavour to do away with inequality in this respect, but permitted riches to be amassed to any extent, and paid no attention to the gradual and continual augmentation and influx of poverty; which it was his business at the outset, whilst there was no great disparity in the estates of men, and whilst people still lived much in one manner, to obviate, as Lycurgus did, and take measures of precaution against the mischiefs of avarice, mischiefs not of small importance, but the real seed and first beginning of all the great and extensive evils of after-times. The re-division of estates, Lycurgus is not, it seems to me, to be blamed for making, nor Numa for omitting; this equality was the basis and foundation of the one commonwealth; but at Rome, where the lands had been lately divided, there was nothing to urge any re-division or any disturbance of the first arrangement, which was probably still in existence.

With respect to wives and children, and that community which both, with a sound policy, appointed, to prevent all jealousy, their methods, however were different. For when a Roman thought himself to have a sufficient number of children, in case his neighbour who had none should come and request his wife of him, he had a lawful power to give her up to him who desired her, either for a certain time, or for good. The Lacedaemonian husband, on the other hand, might allow the use of his wife to any other that desired to have children by her, and yet still keep her in his house, the original marriage obligation still subsisting as at first. Nay, many husbands, as we have said, would invite men whom they thought likely to procure them fine and good-looking children into their houses. What is the difference, then, between the two customs? Shall we say that the Lacedaemonian system is one of an extreme and entire unconcern about their wives, and would cause most people endless disquiet and annoyance with pangs and jealousies? the Roman course wears an air of a more delicate acquiescence, draws the veil of a new contract over the change, and concedes the general insupportableness of mere community? Numa's directions, too, for the care of young women, are better adapted to the female sex and to propriety; Lycurgus's are altogether unreserved and unfeminine, and have given a great handle to the poets, who call them (Ibycus, for example) Phoenomerides, bare-thighed; and give them the character (as does Euripides) of being wild after husbands-

"These with the young men from the house go out,  
With thighs that show, and robes that fly about."

For in fact the skirts of the frock worn by unmarried girls were not sewn together at the lower part, but used to fly back and show the

whole thigh bare as they walked. The thing is most distinctly given by Sophocles-

"-She, also, the young maid,  
Whose frock, no robe yet o'er it laid,  
Folding back, leaves her bare thigh free,  
Hermione."

And so their women, it is said, were bold and masculine, overbearing to their husbands in the first place, absolute mistresses in their houses, giving their opinions about public matters freely, and speaking openly even on the most important subjects. But the matrons, under the government of Numa, still indeed received from their husbands all that high respect and honour which had been paid them under Romulus as a sort of atonement for the violence done to them; nevertheless, great modesty was enjoined upon them; all busy intermeddling forbidden, sobriety insisted on, and silence made habitual. Wine they were not to touch at all, nor to speak, except in their husband's company, even on the most ordinary subjects. So that once when a woman had the confidence to plead her own cause in a court of judicature, the senate, it is said, sent to inquire of the oracle what the prodigy did portend; and, indeed, their general good behaviour and submissiveness is justly proved by the record of those that were otherwise; for as the Greek historians record in their annals the names of those who first unsheathed the sword of civil war, or murdered their brothers, or were parricides, or killed their mothers, so the Roman writers report it as the first example, that Spurius Carvilius divorced his wife, being a case that never before happened, in the space of two hundred and thirty years from the foundation of the city; and that one Thalaea, the wife of Pinarius, had a quarrel (the first instance of the kind) with her mother-in-law, Gegania, in the reign of Tarquinius Superbus; so successful was the legislator in securing order and good conduct in the marriage relation. Their respective regulations for marrying the young women are in accordance with those for their education. Lycurgus made them brides when they were of full age and inclination for it. Intercourse, where nature was thus consulted, would produce, he thought, love and tenderness, instead of the dislike and fear attending an unnatural compulsion; and their bodies, also, would be better able to bear the trials of breeding and of bearing children, in his judgment the one end of marriage.

The Romans, on the other hand, gave their daughters in marriage as early as twelve years old, or even under; thus the thought their bodies alike and minds would be delivered to the future husband pure and undefiled. The way of Lycurgus seems the more natural with a view to the birth of children; the other, looking to a life to be spent together, is more moral. However, the rules which Lycurgus drew up for superintendence of children, their collection into companies, their discipline and association, as also his exact regulations for their meals, exercises, and sports, argue Numa no more than an ordinary lawgiver. Numa left the whole matter simply to be decided by the parent's wishes or necessities; he might, if he pleased, make his son a husbandman or carpenter, coppersmith or musician; as if it were of no importance for them to be directed and trained up from the beginning to one and the same common end, or as though it would do for them to be like passengers on shipboard, brought thither each for his own ends and by his own choice, uniting to act for the common good only in time of danger upon occasion of their private fears, in general looking simply to their own interest.

We may forbear, indeed, to blame common legislators, who may be

deficient in power or knowledge. But when a wise man like Numa had received the sovereignty over a new and docile people, was there anything that would better deserve his attention than the education of children, and the training up of the young, not to contrariety and discordance of character, but to the unity of the common model of virtue, to which from their cradle they should have been formed and moulded? One benefit among many that Lycurgus obtained by his course was the permanence which it secured to his laws. The obligation of oaths to preserve them would have availed but little, if he had not, by discipline and education, infused them into the children's characters, and imbued their whole early life with a love of his government. The result was that the main points and fundamentals of his legislation continued for above five hundred years, like some deep and thoroughly ingrained tincture, retaining their hold upon the nation. But Numa's whole design and aim, the continuance of peace and goodwill, on his death vanished with him; no sooner did he expire his last breath than the gates of Janus's temple flew wide open, and, as if war had, indeed, been kept and caged up within those walls, it rushed forth to fill all Italy with blood and slaughter; and thus that best and justest fabric of things was of no long continuance, because it wanted that cement which should have kept all together, education. What, then, some may say, has not Rome been advanced and bettered by her wars? A question that will need a long answer, if it is to be one to satisfy men who take the better to consist in riches, luxury, and dominion, rather than in security, gentleness, and that independence which is accompanied by justice. However, it makes much for Lycurgus, that, after the Romans had deserted the doctrine and discipline of Numa, their empire grew and their power increased so much; whereas so soon as the Lacedaemonians fell from the institutions of Lycurgus, they sank from the highest to the lowest state, and, after forfeiting their supremacy over the rest of Greece, were themselves in danger of absolute extirpation. Thus much, meantime, was peculiarly signal and almost divine in the circumstances of Numa, that he was an alien, and yet courted to come and accept a kingdom, the frame of which though he entirely altered, yet he performed it by mere persuasion, and ruled a city that as yet had scarce become one city, without recurring to arms or any violence (such as Lycurgus used, supporting himself by the aid of the nobler citizens against the commonalty), but, by mere force of wisdom and justice, established union and harmony amongst all.

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