

Excerpt from Belmarch:

[pp 186-189]

It will be said later that the sun did not move in the sky during the slaughtering of the Jews; so that for nearly two hours, while the eastward windows and walls of the castle cooked, it was eight-fifteen in the morning.

Rothard moves from chamber to chamber, accompanied by two clerks. Though he does not feel the need to be carried in a chair this morning, his pulse is irregular; he is constantly experimenting with it, going about with two fingers of his right hand fixed to the translucent blue-veined inner wrist of the left. When the pulse disappears, as it does occasionally, he offers it a pale ironic smile until it returns; then he retains the smile for a moment so that God, observing, may not be certain of its purpose.

From time to time sounds of fighting reach him, and when they do he abandons the room he is in and moves sedately to the next. The two clerks follow close behind. They are reciting passages from the dialogue between martyred Saint Justin and the Rabbi Trypho. In the fashionable manner, the clerk who plays Trypho assumes a thick voice, walks with cast-down eyes, and strokes an invisible beard.

"Do you say then that philosophy confers happiness?"

asks the clerk-rabbi.

"Indeed I do," says the other in a light, alert voice, glancing at him. "Nothing else."

"Can you tell me what philosophy is, in that case, and the nature of the happiness it bestows?"

"Philosophy," says Saint Justin, "is knowledge of that which exists, as well as discernment of the truth--"

"Ah," says Rothard.

"Happiness is the reward of such knowledge, and of wisdom."

"How do you define God?" asks the learned Jew.

"That which is the cause of life to all creatures, and is ever the same and always singular," replies the saint.

They have turned off a corridor and entered the upper banqueting room. Its tables are dismantled and hidden under plain hangings against the walls. At the farther end of the room is a gilded throne and footstool on a carpeted dais. Suspended from the ceiling behind the dais is an elaborately woven rug, which Rothard now approaches and inspects.

Its border shows swollen, monster-infested seas, within which are trees that pour blood from wounds and drip blood from their paw-like leaves; fiery bolts of lightning show above, and a city of armed towers is seen to be falling, as water falls, flowingly, from upper left to lower right;

while in the upper right, rising, is glowingly domed Jerusalem with the sky chalk-blue behind it. Beneath, in the central part, madmen stab each other with spears simultaneously, each thrust ensuring a thrust in return, so that murder and suicide are interchangeably the same; then, in a manipulation of time, the same men are depicted as skeletons tumbling out of their tombs, shrouds unwinding. Stars are seen to fall from the heavens; volcanoes erupt; the earth splits, swallowing rivers; the moon is corruptly red; all is consumed.

Rothard gazes at this for a time, then turns and seats himself on the throne.

He hears a sound from far off, one that is difficult to define: a sword being ground against a stone wheel, a woman screaming. His dying man's pallor is seen to intensify. He does not take his fingers from his pulse.

"How can our minds," asks the rabbi-clerk, "apprehend that which our senses cannot? How, if it be not instructed by the Holy Spirit, shall the mind of man ever apprehend God?"

The other says in a light, clear voice, "We are instructed by Plato that there is an eye belonging to the mind, the nature of which permits us to perceive the Being Who awarded us the eye--provided the eye is of a purity--Who has Himself neither color, nor shape, nor size, nor anything

perceivable by the ordinary eye, and Who is above all essence, and Who is unutterably sacred, and Who is the only beautiful and good, and Who is immediately fixed in those souls that are naturally well born because of their relationship to Him and because they desire to see Him."

The clerk's voice has grown increasingly nervous during this recitation; both young men shift nearer the Archbishop, glancing downward. Rothard wags his fingers to calm them.

The main courtyard is crowded with riderless war horses. Belmarch stands guard there. The place is not yet the room in his mind where he has pursued his thoughts; he has seen without seeing the fountain under the gallery. He keeps his attention fixed on the scaling patch of wall before him; humping velvet moss fills a crack just there. He is waiting to do his job, which will be to serve as escort to the Jews who signify their assent to the divinity of Christ and their shame at having denied Him and caused His death, guiding them to the priests who stand waiting outside the palace walls, and then, when a good number is gathered, to accompany priests and Jews together to a nearby chapel, which is beyond the sound of battle, to see them baptized. If a convert attempts an escape en route, Belmarch must somehow stop him.