

# The Early Stoics

## Reading 5 – Cleanthes of Assos in Diogenes' *Lives* and Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus, Ruler of the Cosmos

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### Reading 5

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The primary source for the following text is

Book 7 of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*.

All section numbers are part of Book 7. For example, section 169, or [169], is 7.169.

The Hymn to Zeus comes from the *Anthology* of Johannes Stobaeus.

This reading comes from the Cave's

*The Best of the Early Stoics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Early Stoics*.

## Cleanthes of Assos in Diogenes' *Lives* and Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus, Ruler of the Cosmos

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### Cleanthes of Assos in Diogenes' *Lives*

**C**LEANTHES, THE SON of Phantias, was from Assos. This man, says Antisthenes in his *Successions of Philosophers*, was at first a boxer. According to what some say, he arrived in Athens with just four drachmas. And approaching Zeno, he intensely studied

philosophy, sticking with those same teachings from that time on.

Cleanthes was renowned for his love of hard work. In fact, he was spurred on to work for a living thanks to his poverty. So it was that by night he used

to draw water for gardens, and by day he exercised himself in arguments—hence the nickname “Phreantlēs” or “The-One-Who-Draws-from-a-Well” was given him.

It is said that he was brought into court to answer the inquiry how so sturdy and well-conditioned a man as he was supported himself. He was acquitted when he introduced as his witnesses the gardener in whose garden he drew water [169] and the woman who sold the barley meal he used to crush. The Areopagites were satisfied and voted him a donation of ten minas, which Zeno forbade him to accept. We are also told that Antigonus made him a present of three thousand drachmas.

Once, when Cleanthes was conducting some youths to a public spectacle, the wind blew his cloak aside and disclosed the fact that he wore no undershirt.<sup>1</sup> Seeing this, the Athenians applauded him—as Demetrius of Magnesia<sup>2</sup> declares in his work on *Men of the Same Name*. This bit, then, also increased the admiration felt for him.

There is another story that when Antigonus was attending his lectures, he asked Cleanthes why he drew water. In reply, Cleanthes said to him, “Is drawing water all I do? What?—do I not dig?—and do I not water the garden?—or undertake any other labor for the love of philosophy?”

Zeno used to exercise Cleanthes in this manner of working and told him to bring him an obol from his wages. [170] One day he brought his distinguished acquaintance a collection of small coins and said, “If he wished, Cleanthes could even support a second Cleanthes, whereas there are those who possess the means to keep themselves yet seek to live at the expense of others even though they have plenty of time to spare from their study of philosophy.” For this reason Cleanthes was called a second Heracles.

Cleanthes was hard-working, but he had no natural aptitude for natural philosophy and was extraordinarily slow. Because of this, Timon describes him this way: “Who is this docile man inspecting the ranks of men, the one who sits with things, simmering, a lover of epic poetry, from Assos, cautious?”

Whenever his fellow students teased him,

Cleanthes rose up to it. And when he heard them calling him “the ass,” he accepted it, telling them that he alone was strong enough to carry Zeno’s load.

[171] Once, when he was reproached for being a coward, he replied, “That is why I so rarely miss the mark.”

Again, when extolling his own manner of life above that of the wealthy, he used to say that, while they were playing at ball, he was at work digging hard and barren ground.

Cleanthes would often rebuke himself. When Ariston heard him doing this, he said, “Who are you rebuking?” And laughing, Cleanthes said, “A gray old man with no sense.”

To someone who declared that Arcesilaus did not do what he should, Cleanthes reply was, “Stop—and don’t say this. For if he tears down what is to be done with his speech, he at least sets it up by his deeds.” And Arcesilaus said, “I’m not open to flattery.” “Very true,” Cleanthes said to him, “but I flatter you by saying that your speaking is different from your doing.”

[172] When someone asked what advice he should give his son, Cleanthes said, “That of the *Electra*—‘Silent, silent, may your step be slight.’”<sup>3</sup>

When a Lacedaemonian declared that hard work was good, he was delighted and said, “You come from a noble family, dear child.”

According to Hecaton in his *Anecdotes and Sayings*, when a good looking boy declared, “If when a man strikes his belly he is ‘belly-striking,’ then when he strikes his thighs he is ‘thigh-striking,’” Cleanthes said, “Indeed, boy, but you are separating your thighs. Analogous acts do not always indicate analogous sounds.”

Once, in conversation with a youth, he put the question, “Do you see?” When the youth nodded, he said, “Why, then, don’t I see that you see?”

[173] When he was present in the theater and the poet Sositheus said about him, “Cleanthes urges men on by his folly,” he remained unmoved, having the same expression and manner. Those in the audience were so astonished that they applauded him and drove Sositheus off the stage. Later, when the poet

apologized for the insult, Cleanthes accepted the apology, saying that it would be absurd for him to be upset by any chance slander when Dionysus and Heracles were ridiculed by the poets without getting angry.

Cleanthes used to say that the Peripatetics<sup>4</sup> were in the same condition as lyres—although they sound beautiful, they do not hear themselves.

They say that when Cleanthes asserted that according to Zeno a man's character could be grasped from his looks, certain witty young men brought before him a catamite, who was nevertheless strong and tough looking from working in the field, and requested that he give an account of his character. Cleanthes was puzzled and ordered the man to go away. But then, just as he was leaving, the man sneezed. "I have it," Cleanthes said. "He is effeminate."

[174] To the solitary man who talked to himself, he remarked, "You are not talking to a base man."

When someone reproached him for his old age, he said, "As for me, I also wish to depart. But whenever I consider that I am healthy in every way and that I can still write and publish, I wait."

We are told that since he lacked the few coins it cost to purchase paper, Cleanthes wrote down Zeno's sayings on oyster shells and the shoulder blades of oxen.

Such he was. And even though Zeno had many other remarkable students, Cleanthes was the sort of man that he was able to succeed him in leading the Stoic school.

Cleanthes has left some very fine writings, which are as follows: *On Time*; *On the Natural Philosophy of Zeno*—in two books; *Interpretations of Heraclitus*—in

four books; *On Sensation*; *On Art*; *To Democritus*; *To Aristarchus*; *To Herillus*; *On Impulse*—in two books; [175] *Ancient History*; *On Gods*; *On Giants*; *On the Bridal Song*; *On the Poet*; *On Duty*—in three books; *On Good Counsel*; *On Gratitude*; *An Exhortation*; *On Virtues*; *On a Good Disposition*; *On Gorgippus*; *On Envy*; *On Desire or On Love*; *On Freedom*; *The Art of Love*; *On Honor*; *On Reputation or On Glory*; *The Statesman*; *On Counsel*; *On Laws*; *On Giving Judgment*; *On Leadership*; *On Reason*—in three books; *On the Goal of Human Life*; *On Beautiful Things*; *On Actions*; *On Knowledge*; *On Kingship*; *On Friendship*; *On the Drinking Party*; *On the Notion that Virtue Is the Same for Men and Women*; *On the Wise Man Employing Sophisms*; *On Anecdotes and Sayings*; *Lectures*—in two books; *On Pleasure*; *On Private Interests*; *On Difficulties*; *On Dialectic*; *On Style in Speaking or Writing*; *On Predicates*. These, then, are his books.

[176] Cleanthes' end was as follows. He had severe inflammation of the gums, and by the advice of his doctors he abstained from food for two days. As it happened, this treatment worked, so his doctors gave him permission to resume his usual diet. To this, however, he would not consent. Rather, declaring that he had already gone too far down the road, he went on fasting for the remainder of his life until he died.

According to some, he died at the same age as Zeno. He had lived and studied with Zeno for nineteen years.

My lighter verse about him goes like this: "I praise Cleanthes, but I praise even more Hades, who could not bear to see him old, so at last he gave him rest among the dead, the one who had drawn so much water while alive."

### CLEANTHES' HYMN TO ZEUS, RULER OF THE COSMOS

#### The early Stoic Cleanthes of Assos hymns Zeus, saying:

Most glorious of immortals, you of many names, all-powerful and everlasting Zeus, the origin and leader of nature, guiding all things with law—greetings! For it is right that all mortals should speak to you. For we are your offspring, having received your voice-image, we alone of all mortals who live and

move on earth.  
And so I will hymn you and always sing of your strength.  
The whole cosmos, wheeling around the earth, obeys you, wherever you take it, readily ruled by you.  
Such is the servant you carry in your unconquered

hands, the two-edged, fiery, ever-living thunderbolt.

For under its blows the whole of nature shudders.

By it you direct the universal rational principle that moves through all things, mixing with the greater and lesser lights.

By it you have become so great, highest king over all and forever.

Nor does any work upon earth take place apart from you, god, nor in the divine aethereal vault of heaven, nor in the sea—none but what is done by bad men in their own folly.

But you put a stop to what is excessive and set up what is suitable, ordering what is disordered; for you what is unpleasant is pleasant.

In this manner you have joined together all noble things with things ignoble, so that there is one everlasting rational principle in all things.

This is what wicked mortals flee from and leave alone—ill-fated ones, those always yearning for the property of good men.

They neither see the universal law of God, nor do they hear it.

If they wisely obeyed it, they would have a noble life.

But unrefined, these same ones rush off, going one way or another—some bearing miserable, strife-ridden zeal for a glorious reputation, some turning toward immoderate gain, and others toward relaxation and the pleasures of the body.

Pressing on, the very opposite of these things happens.

But Zeus, giver of all, shrouded in dark clouds, ruler of the thunderbolt, deliver human beings from mournful ignorance, scatter it from their souls.

And grant that they may encounter the purpose you rely on to guide all things with justice, so that being so honored, we may in turn favor you with honor, hymning your works from beginning to end as is fitting for mortals, considering there is no greater honor-prize, neither for mortals nor for gods, than to hymn rightly and always the universal law.

So ends Reading 5. See you in **another Cave reading or item.**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One would typically wear a *chiton* (a tunic or undergarment—clothing worn next to the skin) beneath a *himation* (an outer garment or cloak). When the wind blew, it was discovered that Cleanthes was *achiton*, “without a tunic or undershirt.”

<sup>2</sup> Demetrius of Magnesia was a first century BC biographer.

<sup>3</sup> See Euripides, *Electra* 140.

<sup>4</sup> The school of philosophy founded by Aristotle.



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