

Marcus Aurelius and The Exodus Rites

by Gordon W. Brown

Introduction

Marcus Aurelius, 121-180, Roman Emperor 161–180. During his reign and virtual endless wars he wrote *Meditations*, which is “still revered as a literary monument...has been praised for its ‘exquisite accent and its infinite tenderness.’...[He was] one of the most important Stoic philosophers. [Stoicism] taught that destructive emotions resulted from errors in judgment... a person of ‘moral and intellectual perfection,’ would not suffer such emotions...and it is virtuous to maintain a will that is in accord with nature...the best indication of an individual's philosophy was not what a person said but how he behaved.” (Wikipedia)

I have lists of quotations including ancient philosophers. I’ve wanted to combine Marcus Aurelius’ ideas into an essay, for some time, that would help to illuminate Exodus Concepts. Each of his updated comments below are sourced from actual quotations. (GWB 6/20)

Marcus Aurelius and The Exodus Rites - A Dialogue

EM (Exodus Man): Welcome, Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus—

MARCUS: You may call me Marcus.

EM: Thank you, Marcus. We have a ritual in our meetings of reciting these Rites, usually in two sections, opening and closing our meetings. We spend a lot of time thinking about them and what they mean to us. As a Philosopher King we’d like to know how you might interpret them.

MARCUS: Carry on.

EM: The first is - Let us come to terms with life.

MARCUS: That is a good start to any meditation. I would advise that nothing has such power to broaden the mind as the ability to investigate systematically, and truly, all that comes under your observation in life.

EM: Then we recognize - Our life is in the human struggle.

MARCUS: So here is a rule to remember in future, when anything disappoints you or tempts you to feel bitter: don't think, "This is a misfortune," but rather "To worthily bear this is a good fortune."

EM: We take another step - The struggle is painful and deep

MARCUS: Indeed. Look well into yourself; there is a source of strength which will always spring up if you will always look there.

EM: And the next step is this - The struggle holds death and life.

MARCUS: Now we're getting serious, ok. Never consider anything to be an advantage to you that will make you break your word or lose your self-respect.

EM: Got it. Then we try to put our struggle in a different context - Out of the struggle of the now we will create the human world of the future.

MARCUS: That is an uplifting idea, and I do appreciate the context. For your experience tells you how much you have strayed: nowhere in so-called reasonings, wealth, reputation, enjoyment, nowhere do you find living well. So where is it? In doing those things which human nature seeks.

EM: These next three sometimes seem too broad. The first is - The past is approved.

MARCUS: No, I get this one. Look back over the past, with its changing empires that rose and fell, and you can foresee your future.

EM: And - The present is received.

MARCUS: Of course, we have have no choice, but attitude matters. When you arise in the morning think of what a privilege it is to be alive, to think, to enjoy, to love.

EM: Then we complete these Opening Rites with - The future is open.

MARCUS: Just as today is here the future will come. Never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason which today arm you against the present.

EM: Marcus this is really great. It is surprising that what we might think of as ancient thought is relevant today.

MARCUS: The state of the human condition is always relevant. The customs in my time and in yours may not be similar, but how we live in our times is uniquely human, always.

EM: We now move on to the second section, or the Closing Rites, starting with - We stand before the up-againstness in life.

MARCUS: That is an unusual term, up-againstness, let me think about that. Well, if someone is able to show me that what I think or do is not right, I will happily change, because I seek the truth, and no one was harmed. It is the person who continues in his self-deception and ignorance who is harmed. Is that helpful?

EM: Yes, Marcus, I think so. Then we acknowledge that - We stand before the possibility and hope in life.

MARCUS: Granted, The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it.

EM: Then we add - Our hope is in our decision to embrace all that is, as that out of which our life will come.

MARCUS: Hmm. Embrace all that is. Kind of a tall order, let's see. Human nature is satisfied with itself when all goes well, and the rational nature goes well when it aspires to nothing false or unclear among its impressions. It is satisfied when it generates desires and inclinations for only those things that are within its power, and when it only welcomes those things apportioned to it.

EM: The next rite is this claim - We decide if death is life, and if life is death.

MARCUS: I should hope so! It is not death a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live.

EM: Marcus, then we wrap up the rites with this - We will create a human world by deciding to live the life we have for the sake of humanity.

MARCUS: I like the sense that strength and support come from a community, the we. But I encourage you, waste no time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one.

EM: Marcus you are insightful and encouraging, and—

MARCUS: If I may, this all inspires me to add something. Sometimes people are concerned about our reason for living.

EM: Go on, please.

MARCUS: Live a good life. If there are gods and they are just, then they will not care how devout you have been, but will welcome you based on the virtues you have lived by. If there are gods, but unjust, then you should not want to worship them. If there are no gods, then you will be gone, but will have lived a noble life that will live on in the memories of your loved ones.

EM: Thank you, Marcus.