The Tablet of Cebes

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History of The Tablet of Cebes

- Text seems to date from 3rd cent. BCE to 2nd cent. CE (probably 1st BCE to 1st CE)
- Earliest manuscripts from 11th cent. CE
- Gives an allegorical interpretation of a tablet set up in a temple of Kronos
- A mandala with characteristics of a labyrinth
- Presents way for living well and path of spiritual initiation
- Cebes is mentioned only in the title
Cebes of Thebes

- Lived 469–399 BCE
- Disciple of Socrates
- Pythagorean initiate
- Pronounced “KEH-base”
- Might have written original version of *The Tablet*, or set up the original tablet, or neither!
Hermeneutic Levels

- Anagogical
- Symbolical
- Allegorical
- Literal
Reconstructed Images
Drawing of Ancient Relief

- Depicts fragment of ancient marble relief
- Agrees with description in Cebes’ Tablet
- Two drawings made of relief in 16th century
- Original relief has been lost
H. Goltzius / J. Matham (1592)
M. Merian
1638
D. Kandel (1547)
Cornelio Pepoli (1771)
Hans Holbein the Younger
1497/8–1543
Border for a title page (1521)
Engraved by Knackfuss
The Tablet and its Interpretation
The Old Man in the Sanctuary of Kronos

While Kronos’ fane with solemn step we trod,
And viewed the votive honors of the God,
A pictured Tablet, o’er the portal raised,
Attached our eye; in wonder lost, we gazed.*

*verse translations after Thomas Scott, 1754.
A Foreigner, long since, whose noble mind

Learning’s best culture to strong genius joined,

Here lived, conversed, and showed th’ admiring age

Another Samian or Elean Sage.

He reared this dome to Kronos’ awful name,

And gave that portrait to eternal fame.

Such Wisdom flowing from a mouth but young

I heard astonished, and enjoyed it long.
The Riddle of the Sphinx

Father, if leisure with thy Will conspire,
Yield, yield that comment to our warm desire.

Free to bestow, I warn you first, beware:
Danger impends, which summons all your care.

Wise, virtuous, blessed, whose Heart our precepts gain,
Abandoned, blind, and wretched, who disdain.

For know, our purposed theme resembles best
The famed Enigma of the Theban pest.
Th’ Interpreter a plighted crown enjoyed,
The stupid perished, by the Sphinx destroyed.

Count folly as a Sphinx to all mankind,
Her Problem: How is Good and Ill defined?
With opposite effect, where thoughtful Skill
Discerns the boundaries of Good and Ill,
Folly must perish; and the’ illumined Breast
To Virtue saved, is like th’ Immortals blessed.
The First Ring
The Realm of Life, serving the Body
Behold Life’s penciled scene, the Natal Gate,
The numbers thronging into mortal state.
Which Danger’s Path, and which to Safety bears,
That ancient Daimon of Mankind declares.
See him aloft, benevolent he bends,
One hand is pointing, one a Roll extends,
Reason’s Imperial Code, by Heav’n impressed
In living letters on the human breast.
Delusion and her Potion

Her faithless hand presents a crystal bowl,
Whose poisonous Draught intoxicates the soul.
Error and ignorance infused, compose
The fatal beverage which her fraud bestows.

Is that the hard condition of our birth?
Must all drink error who appear on Earth?

All; yet in some their measure drowns the mind,
Others but taste, less erring and less blind.
Opinions,  
Desires,  
Pleasures

All promise joy, we rush to their embrace,
To bliss or ruin here begins our race.
Happy, thrice happy, who entrust their youth,
To Right Opinions, and ascend to Truth,
Whom Wisdom tutors, whom the Virtues hail,
And with their own substantial Feast regale.
Fortune

Fortune, blind, frantic, deaf, with restless wing
The World she ranges, and her favors flings:
Flings and resumes, and plunders and bestows,
Caprice divides the Blessings and the Woes.
The Unforeseeing

What mean those multitudes around her? Why
Such motley attitudes perplex the eye?
Some, in the act of wildest rapture, leap,
In agony some wring their hands, and weep.
The Second Ring
The Realm of Indulgence, serving the Lower Soul
Indulgence

There stationed to what end?

In watch for prey,

Fortune’s infatuate favorites of a day.

These they caress, they flatter, they entreat

To try the pleasures of their soft retreat,

Life disencumbered, frolicsome, and free,

All ease, all mirth, and high felicity.
Waste, Greed, and Flattery

A short illusion his imagined feast,
Himself the game, himself the slaughtered beast.
Now, raving for his squandered wealth in vain,
Slave to those tyrant frauds he drags their chain,
Compelled to suffer hard and hungry need,
Compelled to dare each foul and desperate deed.
Lack of Self-control

Seeing glitt’ring visions in succession rise,
He laughs at Socrates the chaste and wise.
Till, sobered by distress, awake, confused,
Amazed, he knows himself a wretch abused.
Punishment

High-brandishing her lash, with stern regard,
Stands Punishment, an ever-waking Ward;
While sullen Melancholy mopes behind,
Fixed, with her head upon her knees inclined;
And, frantic with remorseful fury, there
Fierce Anguish stamps, and rends her shaggy hair.
Repentance

Unless, rare Guest, Repentance o’er the gloom

Diffuse her radiance, and repeal his doom.

She comes! meek-eyed, arrayed in grave attire,

See Right Opinion, joined with Good Desire,

Handmaids of Truth; with those, an adverse pair

(False Wisdom’s minions, that deceiving fair)

Attend her solemn step; the Furies flee.
Come forth, she calls, come forth to liberty,

Guilt-harassed thrall, thy future lot decide,

And, pond’ring well, elect my future Guide.

Momentous option! choosing right, he’ll find

A sovereign Med’cine for his ulcered mind;

Led to True Wisdom, whose cathartic Bowl

Recovers and beautifies the soul.

Misguided else, a counterfeit he’ll gain,

Whose Art is only to amuse the brain;

From vice to studious folly now he flies,

From bliss still erring, still betrayed by lies.
The Third Ring
The Realm of False Wisdom, serving the Upper Soul
False Wisdom

Styled Wisdom by the crowd, the thinking few

Know her disguise, the phantom of the true,

Skilled in all learning, skilled in every art

To grace the Head, not meliorate the Heart.

The saved, who meditate their noble flight,

From a bad world, to Wisdom’s lofty height,

Just touching at this inn, for short repast,

Then speed their Journey forward to its last.
Lovers of False Wisdom

Fierce syllogistic tribes, a wrangling race,
Bards rapt beyond the Moon on fancy’s wings,
And mighty masters of the vocal strings,
Those who on labored speeches waste their oil,
Those who in crabbed calculations toil,
Who measure Earth, who climb the starry road,
And human fates by heav’nly signs forebode,
Pleasure’s philosophers. Lyceum’s pride
Disdainful soaring up to heights untried.
All who in learned trifles spin their wit,
Or comment on the works by triflers writ.
Lingering Effects of Delusion’s Potion

Still these ingenious heads alas! retain

Delusion’s Dose, still the vile dregs remain

Of ignorance with madding folly joined,

And a foul Heart pollutes th’ embellished Mind.

Nor will presumption from their souls recede

Nor will they from one vicious plague be freed,

Till, weary of these vanities, they’ve found

Th’ exalted Way to Truth’s enlightened ground,

Quaffed her Cathartic, and all cleansed within,

By that strong Energy, from pride and sin,

Are healed and saved. But loit’ring here they spend

Life’s precious hour in thinking to no end;

From science up to science let them rise,

And arrogate the swelling style of wise,

Their Wisdom’s folly, impotent and blind,

Which cures not one distemper of the Mind.
The Fourth Ring
The Realm of True Wisdom, serving the Nous
The Difficult Path

Survey this solitary waste, which rears
Nor bush nor herb, nor cottage there appears.

At distance see yon strait and lonely Gate
(No crowds at the forbidding entrance wait)

Its avenue a rugged rocky soil,

Travelled with painful step and tedious toil.

Beyond the wicket, tow’ring to the skies
See Difficulty’s cragged mountain rise,

Narrow and sharp th’ Ascent, each edge a brink

Whence to vast depth dire precipices sink.
Self-mastery and Perseverance

The pow’rs of Self-control and Patience, there

Stationed by Wisdom, her commission bear

To rouse the spirit of her fainting son

Thus far advanced, and urge and urge him on.

“Courage!” they call, “the coward’s sloth disdain,

Yet, yet awhile, and noble toil sustain.”
Revealing the Hidden Way

These generous Guides, who Virtue’s course befriend,
In succor of her Pilgrim, swift descend,
Draw up their trembling charge; then, smiling, greet
With kind command to rest his weary feet.
With their own Force his panting breast they arm,
And with their own intrepid spirit warm;
Next, plight their guidance in his future Way
To Wisdom, and in rapt’rous view display
The blissful Road (there it invites your eyes)
How smooth and easy to the foot it lies,
Through beauteous land, from all annoyance clear
Of thorny evil and perplexing fear.
The House of Happiness and the Virtues
Wisdom, Truth, and Persuasion

In station at th’ effulgent Portal, see
A beauteous form of mildest majesty.
Her eyes how piercing! how sedate her mien!
Mature in life her countenance serene:
Spirit and solid thought each feature shows,
And her plain robe with state unstudied
flows.
She stands upon a cube of marble, fixed
As the firm rock, two lovely Nymphs betwixt,
Her daughters, copies of her looks and air,
Here candid Truth, and sweet Persuasion there:
She, she is Wisdom.
Purification
The First Degree of Initiation

Certain her Way, and permanent
the Deed

Of gift substantial to her friends
decreed.

She gives the confidence erect and
clear,

She gives magnanimous contempt
of fear,

And bids th’ invulnerable Mind to
know

Her safety from the future shafts of
woe.

There standing, she presents her
potent Bowl,

Divine Cathartic, which restores
the Soul.
Illumination

The Second Degree of Initiation

So Wisdom, by her Rules, with healing Art

Expels Delusion’s mischiefs from the Heart;

Thus purged, her pupil through the Gate she brings,

The Virtues hail their Guest, the Guest enraptured sings.
Perfection: Crowning by Happiness

The Third Degree of Initiation

Now, with a Crown of wond’rous Pow’r, her hand

( Assistant, round her, all the Virtues stand)

Adorns her Hero, honorable meed

Of conquests won by many a valiant deed.

Lord of himself, the Victor now contains

Those hostile monsters in his pow’rful chains.
The Crown

But, say, what salutary Pow’r is shed
By the fair Crown, which decks the Hero’s head?
Most beatific. For possessing this
He lives, rich owner of man’s proper bliss:
Bliss independent or on wealth or pow’r,
Fame, birth, or beauty, or voluptuous hour.

His hope’s divorced from all exterior things,
Within himself the fount of pleasure springs,
Springs ever in the self-approving breast,
And his own honest Heart’s a constant feast.
Return to the Outer Rings
The *Virtues* lead him back to observe those left behind

All-pow’rless they to burst the galling band,

To spring aloft, and reach yon happy land,

Entangled, impotent the Way to find,

The clear Instruction blotted from their mind

Which the good Daimon gave; guilt’s gloomy fears

Becloud their suns and sadden all their years.
He sees his better state

Confounding good and evil, like the throng,
His life, like theirs, was action always wrong.
Enlightened now in the true bliss of man,
He shapes his altered course by Wisdom’s Plan;
And, blessed himself, beholds with weeping eyes
The madding world an hospital of sighs.
He is safe from evil

He fares where’er his wise volition leads.
Where’er it leads, Safety attends him still:

Nor safer, should he on Apollo’s Hill,
Among the Nymphs, among the vocal Pow’rs,
Dwell in the Sanctum of Corycian Bow’rs.
Honored by all, the friend of humankind,
Beloved Physician of the sin-sick mind;
Not Aesculapius more, whose power to save
Redeems his patient from the yawning grave.

But never more shall his old restless foes
Awake his fear, nor trouble his repose?
Never. In righteous habitude inured,
From passion’s baneful anarchy secured,
In each enticing scene, each instant hard,
That sovereign Antidote his mind will guard.
Those are th’ *Opinions*, who have guided right

The inexperienced to the Plain of Light;

Returning, new adventurers to bring,

The blessings of the last-arrived they sing.

*Opinion’s* foot is never found

Where *Knowledge* dwells, ’tis interdicted ground,

At *Wisdom’s* Gate th’ *Opinions* must resign

Their charge, those limits their employ confine.
The Charge of the Daimon

The Daimon bids those entering life to hold
A Spirit with erected courage bold.
Never (he calls) on Fortune’s faith rely,
Nor grasp her dubious gifts as property.
Let not her smile transport, her frown dismay,
Nor praise, nor blame, nor wonder at her sway
which reason never guides; tis fortune still,
Capricious chance and arbitrary will.
The Gifts of False Wisdom

So in the sciences, though, rudely taught,
We may attain the little that we ought;
Yet, accurately known they might convey
More Light not wholly useless in its Way.
But Virtue may be reached, through all her rules,
Without the curious subtleties of schools.
The Old Man Concludes

Strangers, these Lessons, oft revolving, hold

Fast to your hearts, and into habit mold;

To this high scope Life’s whole attention bend,

Despise ought else as erring from your end.

Do thus, or unavailing is my care,

And all th’ Instruction dies away in air.
The Book

- Teaches *practical* Neoplatonic spiritual path: How to live a more meaningful life
- Nine-month plan of study
- Progresses through “three degrees of wisdom”
- Numerous exercises
- WisdomOfHypatia.com