

6.1. Solon / The Rule of Law

Solon was as remarkable as his constitution, which while avoiding radical change eliminated the worst injustices of traditional Eurpatrid rule and moved Athens toward full citizen participation in government by all classes. He was that rare being, the nonviolent, civilian statesman who manages to be influential in a revolutionary time. To present his ideas to his fellow citizens he wrote poems—about statecraft, economic problems, current events (portions of which are presented below in prose translation).

Nothing is more characteristic of the man than the remark attributed to him when a friend proposed that he take advantage of the powers granted him and take over the state, making himself tyrant. Solon is said to have replied that indeed it was a sweet thing to be a tyrant, but that there was one flaw: it was so high that there was no place to go from it but down.

Solon, *Poems*. Source: Kathleen Freeman, *The Work and Life of Solon*. London: Milford, 1926.

If on our city ruin comes, it will never be by the dispensation of Zeus and I he purpose of the blessed immortal gods, so powerful is our great-hearted guardian, born of mighty sire, Pallas Athene, who holds over it her hands. It is the people themselves who in their folly seek to destroy our great city, prompted by desire for wealth; and their leaders, unjust of heart, for whom awaits the suffering of many woes, the fruit of their great arrogance, since they know not how to check their greed, and to enjoy with order and sobriety the pleasures set before them at the feast... They have wealth through their following of unjust works and ways... Neither the sacred treasure nor that of the state do they spare in any wise, but they steal, each in his own corner, like men pillaging. They take no heed of the holy foundations of Justice, who in silence marks what happens and what has been, and who in course of time comes without fail to exact the penalty. Behold, there is coming now upon the whole state an injury that cannot be avoided; she has fallen swiftly into the evil of servitude, which awakens civil strife and war from their sleep—war that destroys many men in the bloom of their youth. By the work of the disaffected, swiftly our city is being worn away, in those gatherings which are dear to unjust men.

Such are the ills that are rife within our state; while of the poor great numbers are journeying to foreign lands, sold into slavery, and bound with shameful fetters. They bear perforce the accursed yoke of slavery. Thus the public ill comes home to every single man, and no longer do his courtyard gates avail to hold it back; high though the wall be, it leaps over, and finds him out unflinching, even though in his flight he be hid in the farthest corner of his chamber.

These are the lessons which my heart bids me teach the Athenians, how that lawlessness brings innumerable ills to the state, but obedience to the law shows forth all things in order and harmony and at the same time sets shackles on the unjust. It smooths what is rough, checks greed, dims arrogance, withers the opening blooms of ruinous folly, makes straight the crooked

judgement, tames the deeds of insolence, puts a stop to the works of civil dissension, and ends the wrath of bitter strife. Under its rule all things among mankind are sane and wise.

To the people I have given just as much power as suffices, neither taking away from their due nor offering more; while for those who had power and were honoured for wealth I have taken thought likewise, that they should suffer nothing unseemly. I stand with strong shield flung around both parties, and have allowed neither to win an unjust victory.

The people will best follow its leaders if it be neither given undue liberty nor unduly oppressed; for excess bears arrogance, whenever great prosperity attends on men whose minds are not well balanced.

In great undertakings it is hard to please all.

From the cloud comes the violent snow- and hail-storm, and the thunder springs from the lightning-flash; so from the men of rank comes ruin to the state, and the people through their ignorance fall into the servitude of rule by one man. When a man has risen too high, it is not easy to check him after; now is the time to take heed of everything.

If you have grievous sufferings through your own wrong-headedness, charge not the gods with having assigned you this lot. You yourselves have raised up these men by giving means of protection, and it is through this that you have gained the evil of servitude. Each separate man of you walks with the tread of a fox, but in the mass you have the brain of an idiot; for you look to the tongue and the words of a wheedler, and never turn your eyes to the deed as it is being done.

Through the winds is the sea stirred to wrath; but if none disturb it, it is of all things the mildest.

It is very difficult to discern that hidden measure of wisdom which alone contains the ends of all things.

On every side the mind of the immortals is hidden from mankind.

Ever as I grow old I learn many things.

Happy is he who has dear children, horses with their unclown hooves, hunting-dogs, and a friend of another land.

No greater wealth has the man who possesses much silver and gold, expanses of wheat-bearing land, and horses and mules, than he who has these things only—stomach, lungs, and feet that afford him pleasant sensations, and the youthful beauty of a boy or a wife, when these joys also come; with every season of life come its appropriate gifts. These things are true wealth for mortals; for no man shall go to Hades carrying with him all his enormous wealth, nor by offer of a ransom shall he escape death and fell disease and the evil of approaching old age.

A boy, before he has reached adolescence, while still a child, grows and casts out his 'fence of teeth' within the first seven years. When the god brings to an end the next seven years, he puts forth the signs of adolescence. III the third period, while his limbs are still growing, the down of the beard appears, and his complexion loses its bloom. In the fourth hebdomad, every man is in the prime of his strength; this men have as a sign of their worth. In the fifth, it is seasonable for a man to take

thought on marriage, and to seek after a breed of sons to succeed him. In the sixth, the mind of a man is in all things fully trained, and he no longer feels the same impulse towards wild behaviour. In the seventh seven he is at his prime in mind and tongue, and in the eighth, the sum of the two being fourteen years. In the ninth, though he still has some strength, his tongue and his wisdom are too feeble for works of mighty worth. If he complete the tenth and reach its full measure, not untimely is it if he meet the fate of death....

If I spared my native land, and did not defile and dishonour my good repute by laying hands on a tyranny of cruel violence, I feel no shame at all; for in this way I believe that I shall win a greater triumph—over all mankind.

Those who came as pillagers had lavish hopes; every man of them believed he would light on a great fortune, and that I, though I coaxed so smoothly, would soon reveal a harsh purpose. Vain were their imaginings then, and now in their anger against me they all eye me askance as if I were an enemy. It is undeserved; for that which I promised I have fulfilled, by heaven's aid; and other things I undertook, not without success. To achieve aught by violence of tyranny is not to my mind; nor that the unworthy should have an equal share with the good in the rich soil of my native land.

... Whereas I, before the people had attained to any of the things for the sake of which they had drawn my chariot, brought it to a standstill. A witness I have who will support this claim full well in the tribunal of Time—the mighty mother of the Olympian deities, black Earth, from whose bosom once I drew out the pillars everywhere implanted; and she who was formerly enslaved is now free. Many men I restored to Athens, their native city divinely-founded, men who justly or unjustly had been sold abroad, and others who through pressure of need had gone into exile, and who through wanderings far and wide no longer spoke the Attic tongue. Those here at home who were reduced to shameful slavery, and trembled at the caprices of their masters, I made free. These things I wrought by main strength, fashioning that blend of force and justice that is law, and I went through to the close as I had promised. And ordinances for noble and base alike I wrote, fitting a rule of jurisdiction straight and true to every man. Had another, a villainous and covetous man, grasped the goad as I did, he would not have held the people back. Had I complied with the wishes of my opponents then, or at a later time with the designs of the other party against them, this city would have been bereaved of many sons. Wherefore I stood at bay, defending myself on every side, like a wolf among a pack of hounds.