

With elements of Eastern philosophy, Christian mysticism, Spinozan pantheism, panpsychism, and quantum theory, *The Peasant and the King* reinvokes the ancient art of mythcraft as a contemplative exercise, with a time-binding modern twist.

The Peasant and the King

By Waldo Noesta

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THE
PEASANT
AND THE
KING

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Print ISBN: 979-8-88531-092-5

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-093-2

Cover and interior photographs by Jamie Reville. Photo editing by Griffin Kuhls.

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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Printed on acid-free paper.

ND Media

2022

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nce, upon the timeless arc of the circle of time, there was a peasant. He lived in a small village in the heart of the Kingdom, near the towering, cloud-obscured mountains where the King was said to dwell.

Ordinary in most ways, the young peasant was exceptionally passionate and devout in his worship of the King. His parents had instilled in him the deepest, most profound sense of love for the supreme Lord. Every moment of his life he sought to fulfill the Law, to abandon his will—the drive to be strong above all others and crave wealth and selfish pleasure—and subject his every action to the scrutiny of the King's Law.

Though his religious fervor caused him to act in a way that won the praise and respect of his teachers and fellow villagers, inwardly the peasant was deeply troubled. He knew there was something wrong in his practice of his people's religion, something displeasing to the King, but he knew not what.

When the peasant had reached the cusp of adulthood, he approached the senior priest of the village temple. A stern man with a gray countenance to match his long, coarse beard, the priest sat in silence as the peasant bowed before him. He was stationed behind a large mahogany desk on an elevated platform and flanked by three walls of bookshelves covered

with volumes of analysis and interpretation of the scriptures— all, in some way, attesting to his authority to analyze and interpret.

Directly behind and above the desk, as a merciful ceasefire in the onslaught of words, there was a gap between bookshelves about six feet wide and nine feet tall, more than half of which was occupied by an oil painting of a camel, dressed in a flowing white robe. It sat, however inexplicably for a quadruped, upon an ornate throne that in another place and era would be described as Baroque. An orb of bright light encircled the camel's head. With one front foot it held a golden scepter while the other extended and pointed the two portions of its cloven hoof straight up in a familiar pose (had they been human hands, the pointer and middle fingers would have done the same) that expressed his dual nature as both camel and King.

Below the painting on its gilded frame, there was an embossed nameplate on which was inscribed in the local dialect:

*We have such an high priest, fully animal and fully spirit,
who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in
the Palace.*

The priest and his books and his Holy Ungulate cast an imposing image over the peasant, who, in accord with custom, remained on his knees as he spoke.

"O Most Revered Teacher, I come to you with trouble in my mind and heaviness in my heart."

"So it is, Penitent. Tell me what burdens you." (This being the priest's response to all who came to him with trouble and heaviness.)

"Teacher, as I contemplate the right way to go forth with my life and my attempt to perfect the Law, I feel frozen in my steps. No matter how much I try to abandon my will and receive the guidance of the King, my will becomes bigger than my efforts. If I act selflessly, I fear that I do this because I desire the praise of others, not because I want their good above my own. I may follow the Law, but I fear that I do so because I want the reward of the King's favor, not because I have been made small before Him. In the end, only my behavior has changed and, if anything, my will has grown stronger. Can you tell me why I cannot help but reinforce my will instead of diminish it with my practice?"

"Yes, Penitent, your will is strong and your effort is small. This is not uncommon among young believers. The only answer is

to strive harder and persevere. The path is very difficult, but the reward is immeasurably great."

"Surely it is, my Excellent Teacher, but I feel there is a deeper aspect of my problem that is yet unaddressed. I see another hand in this picture, holding me back, and I am afraid it is my own. If I must use my will to suppress my own will, am I not my own enemy? This thought troubles me day and night, for recently I have been haunted by dreams in which I am a snake, eating its own body."

"Snakes are an omen of evil and greed, young Penitent. You are being tempted by the anti-king to forsake the Gospel and follow in the ways of the unbelievers, of the wealthy and privileged. You must not succumb to these manipulations, Penitent. You must cast out these thoughts and remain focused on denying yourself before the Law. To fail is to sentence yourself to everlasting desolation, for as you know, Penitent, the scriptures tell us that the wages of sin are eternal damnation."

At the risk of drawing his considerable wrath, the peasant actually seemed to stop listening halfway through the priest's rebuttal. His attention turned to a faded crimson splotch, roughly the size and shape of a human head, in front of the platform, an incongruous stain on an otherwise spotless floor.

"Well... I am not certain, Blessed Imparter of Great Wisdom. There is something about our worship that seems to defeat itself, though I cannot put a finger on what it is. I know the grave importance of the path ahead of me. I have studied, and I have listened to your excellent teachings. I feel the King Himself at the other end of my path, calling me to come home to Him. But I cannot take one step forward. Somehow I am standing in my own way, and nothing can move. I have searched the scriptures for answers, and I do not find relief from this oppression. Surely there are others in our congregation who have come to you with this quandary, Teacher?"

"Put these things out of your mind, young Penitent! The devil's snares are near!" He did not hide the consternation in his voice nor his impatience with the peasant's resistance to accepting his perfect responses. It was quite rare for penitents to question him in this manner, but as always he was ready with a counterpoint straight from the books on his shelves.

"You say that you have a problem for which the Camelite scriptures and the teachings of the Ancient Ones have no answer? Nonsense! The King Himself is the author of our holy scriptures, and He gave them to the Ancient Ones so that we might have understanding of His perfect will in all situations, and so that we would know how to be reconciled with our Creator after the trials and tribulations of the Kingdom.

“The teachings are very clear to those who search them with humility and reverence. We know, for instance, that upon death, your soul will be released from your body and will be brought before the King for judgment. The Ancient Ones taught us that anyone who had learned to obey the Law without fail would be found innocent and permitted to enter the Palace, where they would dwell with the King for all of time.

“But also by the scriptures we are told, 'It is hard to enter the Palace; again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.' For many generations our people believed it was impossible to obey the Law without fail, for a camel is larger than a man, and a man carrying the Law is bigger still! They turned away from the Law and followed the decadent ways of the privileged and the ambitious, as you so obviously are being tempted to do now.

"But the King is faithful to His devout subjects! For He sent the Camel King, praised be His name!"

The priest turned and motioned toward the serene visage of the Camel King, whose eyes gazed directly at the peasant. Somehow, be it a quality of the painting or the mindset of the penitents in this shepherd's flock, there was often the distinct impression among burdened and troubled students of the

temple that this gaze would follow them to any point in the room, and beyond.

“He showed His camels the miracle of navigating those massive bodies through the eye of the needle to be reunited with the soul in the Palace! He gave us His Gospel so that we would understand and have hope again!

“Consider the camel: insolent and stubborn, difficult to master; he will spit in your face before he learns to obey your command. But the King will send One from his own stock to redeem a creature such as this—are you not of more value to Him than they? If the Camel King's teachings are powerful enough to save such a brazen and savage beast as a camel, can He not do much greater things for a man whose faith is in Him, whose body and soul are given over to learning His way?

"The Kingdom is a treacherous place, young Penitent, and the anti-king has laid many snares for those who would follow the way of the Camel King. You must gird up the loins of your mind against these attacks with the truth of the Camel Gospel. Our hope resides in the King's word; therefore I say, redouble your efforts at study and contemplation of the Gospel. Read daily. Memorize verses. Prepare to go out and give testimony to the non-believers. And above all, stay conformed to the ways of the Ancient Ones who walked this path before you and imparted their knowledge so that you may more easily stay

the course and reach the Palace. All this will keep your mind focused on the way of the Camel King, and ultimately will help you perfect the Law.

“His way is to transform you gradually, Penitent, so be not troubled if you are unprepared for the eye of a needle as a neophyte believer. It took years of walking in the way of the Camel King to get where I am, for instance, where the King has equipped me to lead others like yourself. Just keep your faith strong, young Penitent. I sense that the King has many great things ahead for you.”

The peasant remained silent and perfectly still. A storm was brewing inside him, but it came nowhere near his face. The priest, highest authority on all matters of the spirit in the village, clearly intended for these to be the last words of their conversation. But the peasant had more to say. He felt his temperature rise and bring his thoughts to a boil. Passion from his heart stoked the flames and his thoughts became words. He heard himself say the words in his mind, and like a mad boiling torrent they spilled across his innermost ear:

“Yes, the Camel King reached out to people and touched the spirit within them; I cannot reach beyond my own skin! He lived, and He died, and His body was placed in a tomb; I live, yet I am already entombed! The Camel King rose from the dead; I cannot even rise from my own life!

“I spend my days in isolation from the people I would call my brothers and sisters, and you tell me that I must *die* before the King will release me from this dark chamber? I pass my life going from one pointless activity to the next, and you tell me that I must *die* before the King will reveal what the purpose had been all along?

“My soul wants to be free of this body *now*! It wants to reach out to my brothers and sisters with love as He did. It wants to know that we will *all* be spared this everlasting torment of which you speak. I feel a yearning to know that the soul in me is in them as well, and it will not let us stray from the King’s fold no matter how we resist. In my heart there is a strong notion that this is true, that there is peace and unity in our midst despite my fears and all appearances.

“Yet your teachings stuff my soul back into my body like it is just another possession to keep from my brothers and sisters. Then you tell me that it must all be forsaken, as if the self can somehow of its own choice stop being itself. You say it all must be surrendered to a faraway King so that I alone can finally live in harmony with Him, saving no one but myself?

“Your teachings have made denying myself into my life’s greatest worry and concern—talk about the snares of the devil!

“A soul confined to one body is not a soul at all, but a ghost. So I live, yet I am haunted by the ghost of myself, the keeper of the tomb. A soulless shell is what your religion has made me, unable to move in any direction except in selfishness. *And your answer is to try harder, and follow the lead of a freak of nature who is nothing at all like me?!?*”

“Forgive me my insolence, Teacher. There is nothing but madness here, and if my people’s most respected teacher can be of no help... maybe no one has the answer for me.”

But none of these words reached his mouth. For a penitent to speak this way to an Elder and a spiritual authority would be seen as the ultimate sign of anti-king possession, and an exorcism would be the next step in his religious education. He had everything to say, but he could say nothing.

The peasant rose to his feet and bowed deeply before the priest in the traditional gesture of gratitude. As he left the musty office and entered the temple, the peasant felt heavier and more troubled than ever before. He slumped onto one of the benches and stared at the big black "X" on the floor in the center of the room, hands held together and flat in a penitent's pose.

Then the vision returned, once again overwhelming his efforts to block it out—the same vision that had plagued him since his

early adolescence, when he began to take seriously the questions raised by the religion of his people. In his mind he pictured himself standing in a corridor, a gauntlet of covered lamps lining the dark stone walls, casting a muted light before him. At the far end of this corridor, he could see a giant wooden door. Brilliant beams of light poured out from the crack of space beneath it, but the door itself was closed, barred by a heavy iron crossbar, locked with a thick-linked chain. He glanced over his shoulder behind him, but there was only shadowy darkness, no sign of an exit. No way out. The walls would creep closer over time, he thought; the dim lights would eventually fade, and the corridor would become his coffin, where he would thenceforth lie in everlasting darkness.

At the deepest chasm of his despair, the peasant suddenly felt a presence in the temple, and a whisper of a message, the soft hush of something from somewhere else, sounded in his mind. Then, just like that, it was gone. But the image of the corridor was gone as well, and the peasant had a faint sense of what to do next, a sense that wasn't there before.

Quietly, with very little motion at first and then gradually more, the peasant's mouth formed the words of a prayer, a supplication, directly to the King. He continued for several minutes, stopping briefly a couple of times when he heard the teacher stir in his office (his attempt to speak directly to the

King in this manner, without the covering of his Elder and superior, would be further evidence of his yielding to the machinations of the anti-king), until he knew with perfect clarity what he was doing and what he was requesting. He rose from his seat, took leave of the temple, and returned to his family's farm. From that day forth his petition never ceased.

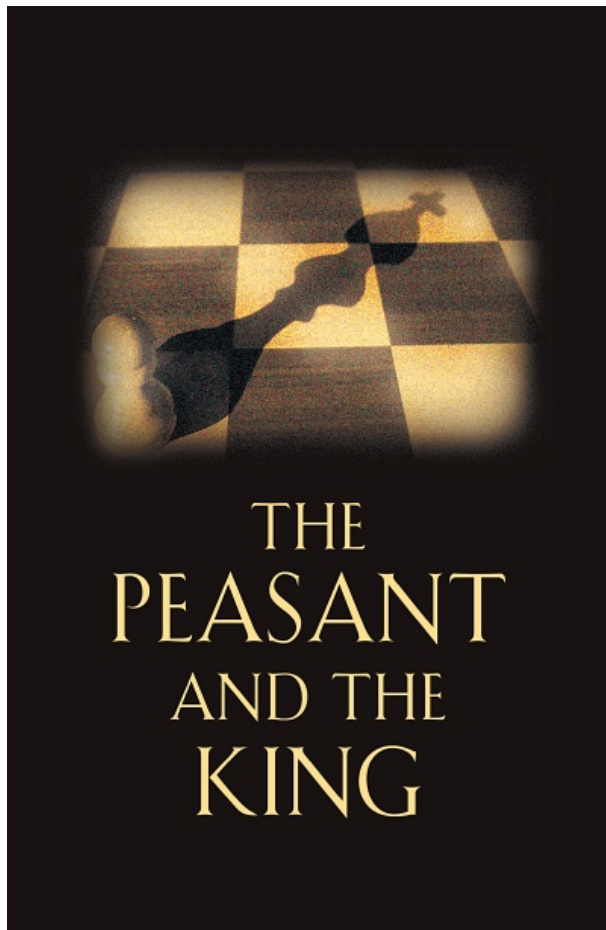
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