Letter to Shenouda concerning an Origenist monk

Dioscorus of Alexandria (d. AD 454)

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Letter to Shenouda concerning an Origenist monk

[Translated by Herbert Thompson] These are the letters of the Archbishop of Alexandria, which he wrote to our aged Father, and these are their answers which our holy Father wrote to him,

Dioscorus writes to Sinuthius the priest, the father of the monks, my beloved and him whom I desire in the Lord, greeting We have praised the admirable zeal of Psenthaesius the priest and the monks who are with him; for they have put on them the shield of the faith and they have hated those who hate God , they have accounted it as nothing to fight with enemies; moreover having done this gladly they have received a stone of victory , and they were elect the more (in proportion? as they were so. And further they will be (elect) as we believe, especially because they have removed the offence from the midst, I mean Helias who was a priest indeed for a time, but who was revealed as a destroyer of souls and on this account we degraded him; on this account we appointed and ordained that he should not be found, nor should he live from this time forth either in the diocese of Shmin [Panopolis] or in any other city of the Eparchy of the Thebais, or in the monasteries, or in the caves in the desert; we being anxious lest he should contaminate others so as to become zealots and partakers of his heresy or his evil teachings. Hence the matter rests on your affection to watch that the regulations which shall be ordained be not broken, those which the most pious bishops will ordain [and which Sabinus] with Gennadius and Hermogenes will prescribe for the monasteries of Panopolis.

And do thou moreover inquire earnestly also concerning the cities and monasteries of that diocese and convene them, and further do thy best not to let any insolence assail the beloved priest Psenthaesius and the worthy monks who are with him. For we will also care specially for those convents, searching into everything. Meanwhile the presence of your Reverence and the care which you will exercise daily for them will greatly benefit the business. It is on this account that I have written to you. I pray that you may keep well, my loved one and worthy of love. May your Reverence make speed to have the entire Memorandum translated into the Egyptian tongue, so that it may be read in that form and none may be ignorant of the authority of the things that are written therein.

The Memorandum of the Archbishop to the most pious Bishops Sabinus, Gennadius and Hermogenes.

The reasons indeed for which we degraded Helias the ex-priest it is superfluous for me to write to you, especially as the bishop of the church of Shmin was with us here in Rakote [Alexandria], he knowing everything that took place among us, and he having been the first of all to give a decision with regard to him, as he was under his authority at that time. It is necessary however that we should instruct you that first of all it is meet that you should summon the entire congregation in the great church of Shmin and that a service should be held at which all the clergy and the whole body of monks in all that diocese should be present and you should read out to them the memoranda which were drawn up here among us; so that they may all he made acquainted with the degradation of Helias, as to whom we have therefore prescribed that he shall not be seen from henceforth either in Shmin or in the other cities of the entire eparchy of the Thebais, nor in the monasteries, nor in the caves and that neighbourhood. Let this matter then be enforced, and do you execute it, and let your Reverences seek after him and take care that he is not seen from henceforth not only in the diocese of Shmin but also in all the other cities of the Thebais and also their dioceses whether in the south country or the north.

For it is no trifling matter that we are in fear of; but they are matters of prime importance; and if any one were [merely] to assert that Helias is a soul-destroying corrupter he would not be able to alter him by what he says; therefore we fear greatly that many may be polluted by him. The matter therefore rests with you, if he be seen anywhere or you hear where he is, to write to the bishop of that diocese and pursue him and expel him as a heretic. But if he persist, or resolve to conceal himself, it is lawful for you to apply to the judges and inform them and hand him over and let them condemn him as an offender, seeing that, having anathematized Origen and his doctrines for a time he turned to him again; and the word of the true proverb applied to him ”a dog who has turned again to his vomit” ; and moreover as to the convent which is called the Parembole he is not to enter its door henceforth nor to remove anything from, it either by himself or by another, nor is he to administer anything nor to remove anything among the things that appertain to the monastery. For if any such thing happen, we shall know, and nothing will be hidden from us. For we shall search into everything carefully, and more especially whatever is done in Shmin from henceforth.

And let this too be made clear in order that he may not dare to face any monk whatever from this time, especially those of the Parembole, nor is anyone among those who live in it to he allowed to speak to him or to communicate with him, or on the other hand to let him communicate with them, nor shall they associate with him at all to the ruin of the monastery and its property. And whoever shall be found associating with him, let him be expelled from the holy places, the saying being applied to him ”You shall be pure with the pure, you shall avoid sin with him that avoids sin and you shall err with him who errs” , and further ”These evil words corrupt hearts that are good” . These then together with all those who wish to be of one mind with us must be strict regarding Helias; and let the memoranda which have

been issued regarding him be placed in that church. But since I have heard moreover that there are books and numerous treatises of the pest named Origen and other heretics in that convent and in the former temple of Shmin and elsewhere, let your Reverences inquire after them carefully and collect them and write their κάθεμα (? and send them to us; for it God has given us power to bind.....

[Selected footnotes]

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.