Fragments of Letters

Gildas the Wise (c. AD 500–570)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

Introduction

FRAGMENTS FROM LOST LETTERS OF GILDAS.

I. OF EXCOMMUNICATION GILDAS SAYS: Noah did not wish to exclude his son Ham, the teacher of the magic art, from the ark or the communion of his table. Abraham did not shrink back from Aner and Eschol in the fight with the five kings. Lot cursed not the banquets of the Sodomites. Isaac did not refuse to share his table with Abimelech, and Acarath, and Phicol, the captain of the soldiers; but, after eating and drinking, they sware to one another. Jacob had no fear to hold communion with his sons, whom he knew to worship idols. Joseph did not refuse to share the table and cup of Pharaoh. Aaron did not cast away the table of the priest of the idols of Midian. Moses also entered into hospitality and peaceful entertainment with Jethro. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not avoid the feasts of publicans, so that he might save all sinners and harlots.

II. RESPECTING ABSTINENCE FROM FOODS GILDAS SAYS: Abstinence from fleshly foods without love is profitless. Better therefore are those who fast without great display, and do not beyond measure abstain from what God has created, but anxiously preserve a clean heart within (from which they know is the issue of life), than those who refuse to eat flesh or delight themselves in worldly foods, who ride not in vehicles and on horseback, and because of these things regard themselves as superior to others. To these men death enters by the windows of pride.

III. RESPECTING THE LAST DAYS GILDAS SAYS IN HIS EPISTLES: Excessively evil times shall come, and men shall be lovers of self, covetous, boastful, haughty, railers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, impure, without natural affection, without peace, slanderers, without self-control, fierce, holding the good in hate, traitors, headstrong, puffed up, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of godliness, but denying the power thereof. Many shall perish doing evil, as the Apostle says having a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge, being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they do not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. They find fault with all brethren who have not, along with them, carried out their inventions and presumptions. These, whilst they eat bread by measure, glory on that account beyond measure: whilst they use water, they drink at the same time of the cup of hatred: they take their enjoyment simultaneously of dry dishes and back-biting; as they lengthen their vigils, they neverthe-

less brand certain men while soundly sleeping, saying as if to the feet and other members: "If thou be not head, as I am, I shall count thee as nothing. This assurance is given, not so much out of love as of contempt, at the time when they are musing on their leading principles; they prefer servants to lords, the common herd to kings, lead to gold, iron to silver, the prop (to the vine).

In this way they give preference to fasting over love, to vigils over righteousness, to their own imagination over harmony; they prefer the cell to the church, severity to humility, in fine, man to God. They are bent not on what the Gospel, but on what their own will commands; not what the Apostle, but what pride teaches; without observing that the position of stars in heaven is unequal, and that the offices of angels are unequal. These are men that fast, which, unless they follow after other virtues, profits nothing. The others, taught of God, with full purpose follow after love, which is the highest fulness of the law, since the harps of the Holy Spirit say All our righteousnesses are as a polluted garment. But these bellows of the devil say, perhaps to better men whose angels see the face of the Father, Hold aloof from us, for ye are unclean. To this the Lord makes answer, These will be smoke in my wrath and fire burning continually. Not those that despise brethren: the Lord calls the poor blessed, not the haughty poor but the meek; neither the envious, but those that weep for either their own or others' sins; those who hunger and thirst, not for water with scorn of other men, but for righteousness; nor those who hold others in contempt, but the merciful; those not of a proud but of a pure heart; not those severe to others, but the peace-makers;

not those who bring wars, but those who suffer persecution for righteousness' sake, are certainly the men who possess the kingdom of heaven.

IV. OF MONKS, GILDAS SAYS: Those who come from a meaner monastery to a more perfect----from one whose abbot has so far degenerated from God's work that he deserves not to be received to the table of saints, but to be accused of the crime of fornication, not as a matter of suspicion but of patent evil----such monks receive to you, without scruple, as men fleeing from the flame of hell, holding no consultation whatever with their abbot. Those, however, whose abbot we do not exclude from the table of the saints because of evil report, we ought not to receive against his will. How much more ought we not to receive those coming from abbots that are holy, and in no other way suspect except that they possess cattle and carriages, either because of the custom of their country or their own weakness, things which do less injury to their owners, if it be with humility and patience, than to those who hold ploughs and fix mattocks in earth with prejudice and pride.

ITEM.----When the ship is wrecked, who can swim, let him swim. But whatever superabundance there be of worldly things to a monk, must be referred to luxury and wealth; and what he is driven to possess by necessity, not by choice, so that he shall not fall into want, will not be counted to him for evil. For the principal ornaments of the body, belonging to the head, ought not to scorn the inferior ones, and it is not right for the constant utilities of the. hands to be haughty towards the higher things. Is it not the case, that neither these nor those (the head), can say to each other, We have no need of you, being things which appertain to the

common benefit of the same body? I have said these things, so that bishops may know, that, just as the inferior clergy ought not to despise them, so also ought not they to despise the clergy, as the head ought not the other members.

V. GILDAS SAYS: An abbot of the stricter rule should not admit a monk of another abbot somewhat more lax. Also, the more lax should not detain his monk when inclined to stricter ways.

Priests and bishops have in truth an awful judge, to whom, not to us, it appertains to judge of them in both worlds. VI. GILDAS.----Cursed is he that moves boundaries, certainly those of his neighbour. Let each abide wherein he was called with God, so that neither be the chief changed, except by the will of those subject to him, nor the one that is subject obtain the place of a superior, except with the advice of an older. What things are honourable with us, we surround these with fuller honour. It is therefore salutary for bishops and abbots to judge those subject to them, whose blood, if they rule them not well, the Lord will ask at their hands: let those that are disobedient to fathers be as the gentiles and the publicans; and to all men, both good and bad, besides those subject to them, that word of the apostle applies, counting all men, etc. That judgment about the uncertain issue of life has come to pass when we read in scripture of an apostle lost by covetousness, and a thief, by confession, carried to heaven.

VII. ITEM.----It is better for co-bishops and co-abbots, as well as fellow-subjects, not to judge. As to men of evil odour in anything bad, let men, however, in no way make fully clear that they think of them by report, but gently rebuke them with patience. These men, as far as they can conscientiously do it, they ought to avoid as men suspected (but without excommunicating them as really guilty and excluding them from their table, or from church communion) when some cause, arising from necessity, or agreement, or public speaking, demands it. Let them reprove those men that they do not act rightly, because we cannot pass condemnation upon them for this. While they communicate unworthily, it may be that

we, by our evil thoughts, arc communicating with demons. But those whom we know without any doubt to be fornicators, unless they do penance in the regular way, we exclude from communion and table, to whatever order they have belonged by rule. As that saying is, If any man is named a brother and is a fornicator, etc. It is on account of well-proved cases of great sins, for no other reason, that we ought to exclude brethren from the communion of the altar and of our table, when the time demands it.

IX. GILDAS.----Miriam is condemned with leprosy, because she agreed with Aaron in blaming Moses on account of his Ethiopian wife. This we should fear who disparage good princes because of indifferent faults.

DOUBTFUL FRAGMENTS. X. GILDAS SAYS: The Britons are contrary to the whole world [enemies to Roman usages not only in the mass, but also in tonsure, because, along with the Jews, they serve the shadows of things to come rather than the truth]. XI. THE ROMANS SAY: The tradition is that the tonsure of the British took its origin from Simon Magus, whose tonsure reached only from ear to ear, following the very excellence of the tonsure of sorcerers, by which only the fore part of the forehead was wont to be covered. But that the first originator of this tonsure in Ireland was a swine-herd of King Loegaire mac Neill, is made evident by the word of Patrick. From him nearly all the Irish assumed this tonsure. [Selected footnotes renumbered and placed at the end]

Introduction

Appendices.
APPENDIX A.----EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS (AND PROBABLY SHORT SERMONS) OF GILDAS. APPENDIX B.----A BRITISH PENITENTIAL BEARING THE NAME OF GILDAS. APPENDIX C.----THE "LORICA" OF GILDAS.

APPENDICES.
AN attempt is made in the Introduction to give an account of the pieces printed in the three following appendices.----This contains (a) the history of the Fragments, which are here printed from the text found in Haddan and Stubbs' Councils, i, 108, and Wasserschleben's Irische Kanonensammlung, 2nd edition, 1885; (b) a survey of the place occupied by Penitentials, as to origin and purpose, in the life of the Western Church, and their probable rise among the Churches of Britain and Ireland; (c) a comparison of other ancient Loricae with the one that has been preserved bearing the name of Gildas, together with a statement of grounds upon which its authority has been favourably maintained.

APPENDIX A.
THE text printed here is that found in Haddan and Stubbs' Councils, i, 108, which is based upon a MS. preserved at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, written in the ninth or tenth century. The second part of the MS. (pp. 11-109) contains a collection of Canons, consisting chiefly of extracts from the writings of the leading ancient church writers, but among them extracts from writings of Patricius and Gildas. These latter are introduced by the simple praefatory note, dicit Gildas or Gildas ait. But the same words of Gildas, though in briefer compass, are also found in a collection of Irish Canons, made at the end of the seventh or beginning of the eighth century, consisting of sixty-two Books with capitula or sub-sections, which Wasserschleben has twice edited. I use the second edition (1885). We shall call the Cambridge and the Irish collections C. and H. respectively. Now it may be gathered that the compiler of these Irish Canons, about A.D. 700, and the writer of the Cambridge MS., about A.D. 900, had both used an older collection first made in Ireland. At that time certain writings of Gildas, besides the De Excidio, were well known among the Irish, and, presumably, among his own countrymen. From H. we have the title affixed to three, Gildas in his letters respecting the last days, that is, his own days: Gildas was writing of what to

him were modern times, when startling developments were taking place, with the usual accompaniment of anxiety and sober joy.

There were thus extant Letters of Gildas that held a high place in the estimation of the Churches of Britain and Ireland early in the seventh century. Of this we have confirmatory evidence in a letter of Columbanus, written about A.D. 595-600, to Pope Gregory the Great. (See the letter in full before Vita I. In that letter, while requesting the opinion of Gregory on three points, he mentions the interesting fact that Gildas, or Giltas as he calls him, had written of those bishops that were irregularly ordained, because guilty of Simony. These words may be regarded as describing the second main part of Gildas' De Excidio (cc. 62-110). But Columbanus further mentions a correspondence between Vennianus and Gildas, respecting the monks who were abandoning their monasteries for the better seclusion of desert places. Seebass, in Zeitschrift f. Kirchengeschichte, xiv, 437, concludes that Vennianus must be, not Finnian, the founder of Clonard, who died about 549, but Finnian of Maghbile (Moville), whose death is placed by some in 588, by others in 610. The question is an exceedingly difficult one, as the evidence seems conflicting and confused; yet one is certainly safe in the assertion that a considerable time must have intervened between the writing of the De Excidio and the penning of letters that would supply such extracts as these. The whole perspective is changed. Further, if Finnian, the founder of Clonard, died about 549, then it is natural that we should find Gildas' correspondent in the later Finnian of Moville.

One is almost tempted to seek the sources of some of these extracts in writings of a different kind: there were published at Louvain, in 1667, a collection of the writings of Columbanus made some five years previously by Fleming, and these contain short sermons or addresses to monks, called Instructions. They have been lately edited separately by Seebass, in the Zeitschrift fur Kirchengeschichte, xiv, 76-92. We know how faithfully Columbanus clung in Gaul to the usages of his native Ireland; so that in these very Instructiones, we may discern a usage which originally came from Wales, whence the newer monastic institutions of Ireland had been, directly or indirectly, inspired. Such addresses by Gildas, if preserved might furnish matter for quotation to a writer who was drawing up a collection of Canons.

One is particularly impressed by two features in these extracts. In the first place, there breathes through all a strong spirit of moderation that is quite unlike the character in which Gildas has been clothed by the imagination of many writers; in the second place, they show that Monasticism and the Church, in its regular organization, are drawing closer together than could have been the case at the time when Gildas wrote his indignant appeal to bishops, and to clergy generally, in the De Excidio.

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.