On Leprosy

Methodius of Olympus (d. c. AD 311)

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The following excerpt was commissioned commercially from the edition by G. Bonwetsch in the GCS series. This consisted of a German rendering of the Old Slavonic text, interspersed with Greek fragments (untranslated). The translator began at the start of Bonwetsch's text, but proved unable to handle the ecclesiastical vocabulary or the Greek. The commission was terminated at the end of p.456 of Bonwetsch. What follows is the material that was successfully translated. Roger Pearse December 2011 The holy Methodius, bishop of Olympus, to Sistelius, about leprosy. I. [1] From where, o Eubulius? Apparently not from trying to understand how divine scripture should be interpreted? For in the early morning someone belonging to Sistelius knocked on the door and when a boy opened it, he reported that Sistelius was summoning us to him. [2] And after I arose, I immediately departed. And when we were close to the dwelling, Sistelius walked towards me, embraced me and said: Having temporarily departed from us, you robbed us of the understanding of the scripture. For as a cloud that covers the sun prevents us from seeing the sun clearly, so as well, when good instruction goes away, the soul becomes dark and the meaning eclipsed. - And I answered him: You said (reported) this well.

And after we entered the house, we sat down. [3] And Sistelius said: Now then, let us see in the scripture truth itself! With a healing herb we remove this bad leprosy, with words and with medications reducing the damage, saying: "Stand up, you, who are sleeping, and stand up from the dead, and Christ will illuminate (enlighten) you." [4] Now then is the time, he said, to raise your voice, that is to say explaining about the leprosy that is in the law, wherein the Lord commands us to interpret much in the law allegorically, to inform the one thirsting for the gift of God of . . . an ungrudging gift.

II. [1] <Eubulius.> At the same time, do not think that I will rebuff one who wishes to receive this gift of mercy, even if I am weak in deed and word; but he, who plants the words (thoughts (?)) into the soul of each of us, will pull the bad roots out of our hearts and plant all virtues into our souls. [2] For when the nettle-like weed has dried out, then the flower of virtue blossoms. Which Christ now also compares allegorically to the "grain of mustard seed", saying that it will bring a large stock to the <birds> of heaven. [3] For to begin with, descending to our weaknesses the divine seed of faith becomes small; once it falls into the furrows of the soul, it grows to greatness, it proceeds to the height of piety by spiritual

contemplation. [4] And the Lord justifiably calls his father the planter of such a planting, for ”every single plant”, he says, ”which my father did not plant, will be (pulled out?)”. For understand, that he speaks not because of the plurality of souls, as some thought, but of the proper teachings and of god-fearing thoughts (words), which the industrious planter planted invisibly into our hearts, weeding out the improper plantings from our hearts, i.e., the bad thoughts and deeds. [5] For if we do not believe such, then we become the successors of the very lawless Marcion, who says that another is the good one instead of the true God, and therefore the souls of the creator of the world could not receive the promised good life, they were without the planting of the good. However, we do not want to take that into consideration now, for it is not time for this proceeding now.

III. [1] For you are right to say, that one shouldn’t hesitate and, now that the spiritual estate is being prepared by God, one should have strong fruits of wisdom, according to the words of the Apostle who says: ”We are God’s field.” [2] For in order to keep the disease from spreading and to reveal it to everyone, we ought ”to heal” through the songs of the gospel and see ”if there is someone, who lacks God’s mercy, whether there is an upward growing root causing damage and whether many are becoming defiled”, the Apostle says, writing to the Jews. [3] However, the law also teaches us: ”And the Lord spoke unto Moses and Aaron, saying: When a person shall have on the skin a sign of leprosy, then he should come before Aaron the priest, or one of his sons. And the priest shall examine the sore on his skin, to see if it is a sign of leprosy; and to check whether the leprosy is more than skin deep.” And soon thereafter: [4] ”On the seventh day, the priest is to examine him; and if he sees that the sore is unchanged and has not spread in the skin, the priest is to keep him in isolation for seven days for a second time.

(On the seventh day the priest is to examine him for the second time), and if he sees that the sore has not changed, the priest cleans him, for it is a sign; and he should wash his clothes.” And soon thereafter: [5] ”If any clothing is contaminated with a sign of leprosy, in a woolen or linen clothing or anything made of leather and the leprosy becomes scarlet red or green”; furthermore in the following . . . IV.[1] . . having said little, you reprimand. But now, O Sistelius, the truth itself, namely the law, <is> to be stated. We should now attempt to understand these insights spiritually, so that we may understand the spirit of the law and not just the word. [2] But continuing in the proceedings he adds: ”If it has spread” after the removal of the ”mildew in the clothing or the leather or the attire or the weft, then the remaining mildew is leprosy, it is unclean, and he must burn the clothing or attire or the weft” etc., shown to the priest.

However, this is now the explanation for the leprosy in the law. [3] For I, myself, believe, that the prophet used these words as specific cloaks and shadows, whereby God wanted to lead us to the light of truth this way. [4] This is why, I think, the holy Paul said: ”And even if our gospel is veiled, it is still hidden among the lost, in whom the God of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that in them cannot shine the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of the invisible,” by clearly stating, that the gospel

is revealed to the believers and the ”to be saved”, but ”veiled” to the ”ones being lost” as if attached with iron clamps. [5] For one, who understands the scripture from the outside, goes forward without spiritual understanding, like someone who has seen empty walls built from stones. However, one who has fought vigorously”, who has torn the spiritual veil, who, after having risen like a bird inspired by God’s spirit, [has] reached the inner understanding of the scripture, which is the most holy; and arrives at the bright light, will be nourished by the lightning of true beauty. [6] For as the trees are stripped of the ornament of fruit in winter, but regain their ornaments in the spring with the sprouting of the leaves, - so I think, the words of the prophets too seem barren without meaning if taken at their word, but if interpreted with wisdom, if viewed as laden with fruit and leaves, have blossoms of a multitude of senses.

Therefore, O Sistelius, refusing to take them literally, let us carefully interpret the scriptures spiritually!

V.[1] However, we now say, as Christ instructs us:
<Greek fragment> Thus the scripture <recounts> that Moses’s sister had leprosy, because she spoke ill of her brother. [5] However, the prophet, the holy Jeremiah, also says: ”Sow not among thorns, but circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the uncircumcision of your hearts,” [Jer. 4:3-4] saying: Circumcise the evil passions, so that we deliver the [soul] unstained to God. [6] For I think, the Lord also gave these commandments to his disciples, to walk ”without a staff and without two tunics <and without shoes>.” For the evangelists have to, by [The translation work was ended here at the foot of p.456, but Bonwetsch continues.]

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