Writings and fragments

Phileas of Thmuis (d. AD 306)

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Translator's Biographical Notice

Phileas. Translator's Biographical Notice.

[a.d. 307. From Jerome we learn that this Phileas belonged to Thmuis, a town of Lower Egypt, the modern Tmai, which was situated between the Tanite and Mendesian branches of the Nile, an episcopal seat, and in the time of Valentinian and Theodosius the Great a place of considerable consequence, enjoying a separate government of its own. Eusebius speaks of him as a man not less distinguished for his services to his country than for his eminence in philosophical studies and his proficiency in foreign literature and science. He tells us further, that, along with another person of considerable importance, by name Philoromus, being brought to trial for his faith, he withstood the threats and insults of the judge, and all the entreaties of relatives and friends, to compromise his Christian belief, and was condemned to lose his head. Jerome also, in the passage already referred to, names him a true philosopher, and, at the same time, a godly martyr; and states, that on assuming the bishopric of his native district, he wrote a very, elegant book in praise of the martyrs. Of this book certain fragments are preserved for us in Eusebius. In addition to these we have also an epistle which the same Phileas seems to have written in the name of three other bishops, as well as himself, to Meletius, the bishop of Lycopolis, and founder of the Meletian schism. This epistle appears to have been written in Greek;

but we possess only a Latin version, which, however, from its abrupt style, is believed to be very ancient. The four bishops whose names stand at the head of the Epistle—viz., Hesychius, Pachomius, Theodorus, and Phileas, are also mentioned by Eusebius (Hist. Eccl., viii. 13) as distinguished martyrs. This epistle was written evidently when those bishops were in prison, and its date is determined by the mention of Peter as the then bishop of Alexandria. The martyrdom of Phileas is fixed with much probability as happening at Alexandria, under Maximus, about the year 307 a.d. [But see Neale, Patriarchate of Alex., i. pp. 97–101, for his view of two bearing this name.]

Epistle of Phileas 1

Fragments of the Epistle of Phileas to the People of Thmuis.

Contents
Part I Part II Part III I. Having before them all these examples and signs and illustrious tokens which are given us in the divine and holy Scriptures, the blessed martyrs who lived with us did not hesitate, but, directing the eye of their soul in sincerity to that God who is over all, and embracing with willing mind the death which their piety cost them, they adhered steadfastly to their vocation. For they learned that our Lord Jesus Christ endured man's estate on our behalf, that He might destroy all sin, and furnish us with the provision needful for our entrance into eternal life. "For He thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, taking upon Him the form of a servant: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself unto death, even the death of the cross." For which reason also these Christ-bearing martyrs sought zealously the greater gifts, and endured, some of them, every kind of pain and all the varied contrivances of torture not merely once, but once and again; and though the guards showed their fury against them not only by threatenings in word, but also by deeds of violence, they did not swerve from their resolution, because perfect love casteth out fear.

II.

And to narrate their virtue and their manly endurance under every torment, what language would suffice? For as every one who chose was at liberty to abuse them, some beat them with wooden clubs, and others with rods, and others with scourges, and others again with thongs, and others with ropes. And the spectacle of these modes of torture had great variety in it, and exhibited vast malignity. For some had their hands bound behind them, and were suspended on the rack and had every limb in their body stretched with a certain kind of pulleys. Then after all this the torturers, according to their orders, lacerated with the sharp iron claws the whole body, not merely, as in the case of murderers, the sides only, but also the stomach and the knees and the cheeks. And others were hung up in mid-air, suspended by one hand from the portico, and their sufferings were fiercer than any other kind of agony by reason of the distention of their joints and limbs. And others were bound to pillars, face to face, not touching the ground with their feet, but hanging with all the weight of the body, so that their chains were drawn all the more tightly by reason of the tension. And this they

endured not simply as long as the governor spoke with them, or had leisure to hear them, but well-nigh through the whole day.

For when he passed on to others he left some of those under his authority to keep watch over these former, and to observe whether any of them, being overcome by the torture, seemed likely to yield. But he gave them orders at the same time to cast them into chains without sparing, and thereafter, when they were expiring, to throw them on the ground and drag them along. For they said that they would not give themselves the slightest concern about us, but would look upon us and deal with us as if we were nothing at all. This second mode of torture our enemies devised then over and above the scourging.

III. And there were also some who, after the tortures, were placed upon the stocks and had both their feet stretched through all the four holes, so that they were compelled to lie on their back on the stocks, as they were unable (to stand) in consequence of the fresh wounds they had over the whole body from the scourging. And others being thrown upon the ground lay prostrated there by the excessively frequent application of the tortures; in which condition they exhibited to the onlookers a still more dreadful spectacle than they did when actually undergoing their torments, bearing, as they did, on their bodies the varied and manifold tokens of the cruel ingenuity of their tortures. While this state of matters went on, some died under their tortures, putting the adversary to shame by their constancy. And others were thrust half-dead into the prison, where in a few days, worn out with their agonies, they met their end. But the rest, getting sure recovery under the application of remedies, through time and their lengthened detention in prison, became more confident. And thus then, when they were commanded to make their choice between these alternatives, namely, either to put their hand to the unholy sacrifice and thus secure exemption from further trouble, and obtain from them their abominable sentence of absolution and liberation, or else to refuse to sacrifice, and thus expect the judgment of death to be executed on them, they never hesitated, but went cheerfully to death. For they knew the sentence declared for us of old by the Holy Scriptures: “He that sacrificeth to other gods,” it is said, “shall be utterly destroyed.” And again “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.”

The Epistle of the Same Phileas of Thmuis to Meletius, Bishop of Lycopolis

Epistle of Phileas 2

Contents
Beginning Conclusion The Beginning of the Epistle of the Bishops.

Hesychius, Pachomius, Theodorus, and Phileas, to Meletius, our friend and fellow-minister in the Lord, greeting. Some reports having reached us concerning thee, which, on the testimony of certain individuals who came to us, spake of certain things foreign to divine order and ecclesiastical rule which are being attempted, yea, rather which are being done by thee, we, in an ingenuous manner held them to be untrustworthy, regarding them to be such as we would not willingly credit, when we thought of the audacity implied in their magnitude and their uncertain attempts. But since many who are visiting us at the present time have lent some credibility to these reports, and have not hesitated to attest them as facts, we, to our exceeding surprise, have been compelled to indite this letter to thee. And what agitation and sadness have been caused to us all in common and to each of us individually by (the report of) the ordination carried through by thee in parishes having no manner of connection with thee, we are unable sufficiently to express. We have not delayed, however, by a short statement to prove your practice wrong. There is the law of our fathers and forefathers, of which neither art thou thyself ignorant, established according to divine and ecclesiastical order; for it is all for the good pleasure of God and the zealous regard of better things. By them it has been established and settled that it is not lawful for any bishop to celebrate ordinations in other parishes than his own;

a law which is exceedingly important and wisely devised. For, in the first place, it is but right that the conversation and life of those who are ordained should be examined with great care; and in the second place, that all confusion and turbulence should be done away with. For every one shall have enough to do in managing his own parish, and in finding with great care and many anxieties suitable subordinates among these with whom he has passed

his whole life, and who have been trained under his hands. But thou, neither making any account of these things, nor regarding the future, nor considering the law of our sainted fathers and those who have been taken to Christ time after time, nor the honour of our great bishop and father, Peter, on whom we all depend in the hope which we have in the Lord Jesus Christ, nor softened by our imprisonments and trials, and daily and multiplied reproach, hast ventured on subverting all things at once. And what means will be left thee for justifying thyself with respect to these things? But perhaps thou wilt say: I did this to prevent many being drawn away with the unbelief of many, because the flocks were in need and forsaken, there being no pastor with them. Well, but it is most certain that they are not in such destitution: in the first place, because there are many going about them and in a position to act as visitors;

and in the second place, even if there was some measure of neglect on their side, then the proper way would have been for the representation to be made promptly by the people, and for us to take account of them according to their desert. But they knew that they were in no want of ministers, and therefore they did not come to seek them. They knew that we were wont to discharge them with an admonition from such inquisition for matter of complaint, or that everything was done with all carefulness which seemed to be for their profit; for all was done under correction, and all was considered with well-approved honesty. Thou, however, giving such strenuous attention to the deceits of certain parties and their vain words, hast made a stealthy leap to the celebrating of ordinations. For if, indeed, those with thee were constraining thee to this, and in their ignorance were doing violence to ecclesiastical order, thou oughtest to have followed the common rule and have informed us by letter; and in that way what seemed expedient would have been done. And if perchance some persuaded you to credit their story that it was all over with us,—a thing of which thou couldest not have been ignorant, because there were many passing and repassing by us who might visit you,—even although, I say, this had been the case, yet thou oughtest to have waited for the judgment of the superior father and for his allowance of this practice.

But without giving any heed to these matters, but indulging a different expectation, yea rather, indeed, denying all respect to us, thou hast provided certain rulers for the people. For now we have learned, too, that there were also divisions, because thy unwarrantable exercise of the right of ordination displeased many. And thou wert not persuaded to delay such procedure or restrain thy purpose readily even by the word of the Apostle Paul, the most blessed seer, and the man who put on Christ, who is the Christ of all of us no less; for he, in writing to his dearly-beloved son Timothy, says: “Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men’s sins. And thus he at once shows his own anxious consideration for him, and gives him his example and exhibits the law according to which, with all carefulness and caution, parties are to be chosen for the honour of ordination. We make this declaration to thee, that in future thou mayest study to keep within the safe and salutary limits of the law.

The Conclusion of the Epistle of the Bishops. After receiving and perusing this epistle, he neither wrote any reply nor repaired to them in the prison, nor went to the blessed Peter. But when all these bishops and presbyters and deacons had suffered martyrdom in the prison at Alexandria, he at once entered Alexandria. Now in that city there was a certain person, by name Isidorus, turbulent in character, and possessed with the ambition of being a teacher. And there was also a certain Arius, who wore the habit of piety, and was in like manner possessed with the ambition to be a teacher. And when they discovered the object of Meletius's passion and what it was that he sought, hastening to him, and looking with an evil eye on the episcopal authority of the blessed Peter, that the aim and desire of Meletius might be made patent, they discovered to Meletius certain presbyters, then in hiding, to whom the blessed Peter had given power to act as parish-visitors. And Meletius recommending them to improve the opportunity given them for rectifying their error, suspended them for the time, and by his own authority ordained two persons in their place, namely, one in prison and another in the mines. On learning these things the blessed Peter, with much endurance, wrote to the people of Alexandria an epistle in the following terms.

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