Admonitions to the monks

Rabbula of Edessa (d. AD 435)

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SOME EARLY RULES FOR SYRIAN MONKS.

The ancient city of Urhai, or Edessa, which in Roman times was capital of the Province of Osrhoene in northern Mesopotamia, had for its Bishop during the years 411-435 A.D. a remarkable man, by name Rabbula. Rabbula was the friend of St. Cyril of Alexandria, and, like him, a stout opponent of Nestorius. But he was a man of action rather than a theologian, an organizer and reformer rather than a great teacher; and during his episcopate he set himself sternly to the correction of abuses. He focussed his attention especially upon the clergy of all ranks, and upon the monks, and made them the subject of careful legislation. For each of these classes he drew up a set of "Admonitions," or reformatory canons, aimed at the characteristic abuses of the times. Nor did he confine his reforms to matters of personal conduct: there are good reasons for believing that it was he who finally banished from the Syriac-speaking Church the harmony of the Gospels made by Tatian, and known as the Diatessaron, which for more than two centuries was in constant use amongst the Syrians, and replaced it by a new translation of the four Gospels from the Greek----the same which, from the beginning of the fifth century to the present day, has been universally received by Syrian Christians.

It is not, however, the interesting personality of Rabbula that we are directly concerned with here, but the Syrian monks of whom he affords us a passing glimpse in the "Admonitions to Monks" which he drew up for their better guidance and control. As these rules have not, to my knowledge, been translated into English before, and as they represent one of the earliest extant documents dealing with Mesopotamian Monks, it may interest some readers of the Downside Review to know what is in them. The coming of the monks to Mesopotamia is an obscure chapter in the history of monasticism. It has been supposed that they were introduced from Egypt, early in the fourth century, by a certain Mar Awgin, or Eugenius. An extant Life of Mar Awgin states that he founded the first monastery in Mesopotamia about the year 325, not very far from the famous city of Nisibis. But it is probable that this statement is less than half true. It is not, indeed, unlikely that the first monks came either from Egypt or from Western Syria,but there are reasons for questioning the date assigned. The Life is a comparatively late one, and cannot be trusted very far in matters of detail, since there is traceable in it, as in some kindred documents, a definite "tendency" or purpose. This is to establish the greater antiquity of the Nestorian over the Monophysite

monks. The Nestorians claimed direct descent from the monks of what was held to be the most ancient Mesopotamian monastery.

The earliest Syriac Father, Aphraates, who wrote between the years 337 and 345, makes no mention of dayraye, or cenobite monks, at all; he has, however, a good deal to say about another class of ascetics, who appear to have been of very ancient origin in Mesopotamia and to have grown up quite independently of foreign influences. The members of this body were known as the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant. They were not cenobites. They did not live in a dayra or monastic enclosure, but, subject to certain restrictions, in their own homes and with their own relations. An important part of their work was to go about in the cities and villages visiting the sick and caring for the poor and destitute. Finally, they appear an a distinct and independent body long after the introduction of monasticism proper. They seem always to have been closely associated with the clergy; and so we find that Rabbula, in his "Commands and Admonitions to Priests and Sons of the Covenant," classes them with the clergy and not with the monks. It would appear, then, that there was no historical connection between them and the monks: monasticism in Mesopotamia, was not a development of this earlier form of asceticism----though the two institutions had much in common----but was introduced from without. The date of its introduction is uncertain, but it is probable that it reached the northern districts----those lying within the Roman Empire considerably earlier than the southern, or those which belonged to the Persian King. And so when Aphraates wrote, about the middle of the fourth century, the monks may very well have established themselves in Edessa and other northern cities, although he had not encountered them in the South.

With these remarks by way of clearing the ground we come to Rabbula's "Admonitions to Monks." It will be best to set forth first, the text of the document in full. We can then, by comparing very briefly what is known of Egyptian and later Syriac monks, attempt to read between the lines, and trace some of the general characteristics of early Mesopotamian monasticism. Points of minor interest it will be best to confine to foot-notes.

Admonitions concerning Monks, by Mar Rabbula, Bishop of Urhai

1. Before all things let the monks see to it that on no account women enter their monasteries. 2. Let not the brethren of the monastery enter the villages, except the Visitor of the monastery only, [and let him] observe the rules of decorum. 3. The Visitor who enters a village or a city shall not go about from house to house; and he shall not lodge with lay folk, but at the church, or at a monastery, if there be one at hand. 4. Let not the monks be drinking wine, lest they fall to blaspheming; rather let them avoid buying [wine] to drink. 5. Let not the monks grow their hair long; and let them not wear or hang iron [upon their persons], except only those who are recluses, and do not go abroad anywhere. 6. Visitors who go abroad on the business of the monastery shall not wear garments of hair: nor any of the monks, [when] outside the monastery, lest they bring their venerable [monastic] habit into contempt.

7. Let none of the monks perform the anointing (i.e. of the sick), especially for women. If, however, there is one who is held in general esteem, let him give the anointing to men. And if there are any women who are suffering, let it (i.e. the oil) be sent to them through their relations. 8. Let not the commemorations [of the martyrs] be celebrated with large gatherings of people, but by the monks of the monastery only. 9. Let not the monks have possessions of sheep and goats, or of horses and mules or of other cattle,----unless it be an ass, for those who require one, or a single yoke of oxen, for those who sow [the fields]. 10. Books, other than [those dealing with] the Faith of the Church shall not be kept in the monasteries. 11. Let there be no traffic of buying and selling in the monasteries; save only what is sufficient for their need, without avarice.

12. Let no one of the brethren who are in the monasteries acquire anything as his private property, apart from what is common to the brotherhood and under the control of the superior. 13. Let not the superiors of the monasteries allow the brethren to have interviews with their relations, or to go out and pay them visits, lest they become demoralised. 14. Let not the brethren, on the plea of sickness, leave their monasteries and wander about in the cities or villages; but let them bear their sufferings inside their monasteries for the love of God. 15. Let not the monks leave their own locality and, under an assumed personality, obtain judgments by bribery. And let them not go into the cities or to the judges. 16. The monks shall not, on the plea of [other] occupation or work, neglect the seasons fixed for [divine] service by day and night,

17. Let them receive strangers lovingly: and let them not shut the door in the face of any of the brethren. 18. No one of the brethren shall dwell as a solitary except such an one that has given proof of his manners for a considerable time. 19. Let no monk take an oracle out of a book for any one. 20. Let not any brother who is not a priest or a deacon dare to give the Sacrament (lit.,the Holy Thing). 21. Those who have been made priests and deacons in the monasteries, and have been entrusted with churches in the villages, shall appoint as superiors in the monasteries those who have shewn proof [of their capacity] and are able to rule the brotherhood; and they themselves shall remain in charge of their churches. 22. Let not any bones of the martyrs be found in the monasteries; but whosoever has any such, let him bring them before us, and if they are genuine they may be venerated in the chapel of the Martyrs; otherwise let them be buried.

23. Those of the monks who wish to make for themselves urns for the dead must bury them in the ground so that they cannot in any wise be seen. 24. If a brother, or a superior of one of the monasteries, departs this world, let only the brethren of the same monastery bury him, and that quietly. If they are not enough, let them invite with them the brethren of a neighbouring monastery; but let them not assemble to the funeral lay people from the villages. 25. If any one is buying corn for the use of the monastery, let him not receive anything over and above; but according to the current charge of the threshing-floor, so shall he buy, and not be acting avariciously in the name of the monastery. 26. Let no one receive

a brother who moves about from one monastery to another, without the permission of the superior with whom he was [before].

End of the Admonitions to Monks. This short, and purely occasional set of rules, terse and to the point, doubtless reflects the mind of the lawgiver; but the rules do not at first sight offer much material for a characterisation of Syrian Monasticism at the beginning of the fifth century. Still they contain one or two notices which may supply us with a basis of comparison with other, better known, embodiments of the monastic ideal. The forms with which it is natural to set out in instituting a comparison are the Antonian and Pachomian Egyptian types. As Dom Butler has pointed out in his Lausiac History (i. pp. 233 ff.), the Antonian type was not purely cenobitic. Many of the monks, doubtless after a due course of probation, retired to separate cells, out of earshot of one another, and lived a semi-eremitic life. They had, besides, no fixed rule of life, but, in the matter of spiritual exercises, every man did that which was good in his own eyes. The Pachomian monks, on the other hand, were real cenobites, and lived a life of carefully organised discipline. The institute assumed almost from the beginning "the shape of a fully organised congregation or order, with a superior-general and a system of visitation and general chapters."

No. 18 of our "Admonitions" clearly contemplates a system which, on broad lines, more closely resembles that of the Antonian monks. For the Syrian monk life in a monastery is not the goal of his aspirations, but only a stepping stone to the more austere life of a recluse. Those who have shewn themselves capable of the hermit's life are to be allowed to embrace it. Again, No. 11, forbidding all sorts of buying and selling in the monastery except what was required for the bare support of the monks, seems to point to a state of things quite different from that which prevailed in the Pachomian monasteries, where every monk was taught to ply some special craft. The Syrian monks of Rabbula's time further resembled the Antonian monks in that they appear to have had no formal or written rule of life. A century and a half later a modification of the Pachomian rule was introduced among the Nestorian monks of Mesopotamia. But even so they continued the semi-eremitic life. In the great monastery of Beth Abhe, founded about the end of the sixth century, the monks retired, after a noviciate of three years spent in the monastery, to separate cells at some distance from the monastic church. A point on which the Syrian monks differed from all their Egyptian brethren was the greater length and frequency of their offices. Rabbula in No. 16 implies that there was a considerable number of night and day offices. Among the Egyptians there were only two, evensong and nocturns.

The abuses which Rabbula had to deal with were evidently the outcome of a large amount of individual liberty enjoyed by the monks, and especially by the solitaries; and he strove to cope with the situation by limiting the number of these recluses. Those, again, who were allowed to undertake the solitary life were to confine their more eccentric practices of austerity to the privacy of their cells. Rabbula would not have the gaunt ascetic with matted hair, loaded with chains, and sackcloth about his loins, to become a familiar figure in the streets of the great cities: the role of a Christian fakir was one that lent itself too

readily as a mask for trickery and fraud. Isaac of Antioch tells us how, half a century later, these possibilities came to be realised in fact. Writing on the capture of Beth Hor by the Arabs, which took place in 457 A.D., and detailing the crimes of the inhabitants which drew that visitation upon them, he turns with bitter sarcasm to the impostures practised upon the simple under cover of the monastic habit.

"And now," he says, "let us come to the modest conversation of the Nazirs (i.e. ascetics), who are had in honour for their flowing locks, and revered for their monastic garb. And observe how far the genuine members of that class are out-numbered by ruffians and impostors----runaway slaves who have swindled their masters, and sons who have thrown off the obedience due to their fathers. And they cultivate their hair,----contrary to the Gospel rule----and think with their shaggy locks to cover the infamy of their lives. They stroll about the cities collecting alms, and for the, sake of gain put up with insults at the doors of the rich. Ridiculed by citizens and taunted by slaves, they nevertheless put on a bold face and brazen it out in order to till their pockets. And to carry on their ungodly trade they have recourse to every imaginable deceit. . . . One gives himself out for a beneficent person engaged in the redemption of ill-used slaves; another declares that the brethren of his monastery have been carried off captives. And [these stories] they affirm on oath, the better to deceive the simple..... They are supposed to model themselves upon Elijah and John [the Baptist] and Samuel; but while they copy their dress, they are far from imitating their works. They make not the smallest, advance towards the austerity or John, while the righteousness of Samuel they never even saw in a dream."

It would be a mistake to suppose that Isaac bore any ill-will towards the monks; like Rabbula he was a monk himself, and only resented the shame brought upon his venerable calling by charlatans who made it a cloak for deception and avarice. There were giants in those days also among the Syrian monks, even greater than were to be found in Egypt ----but this is only a peep, and it must not be prolonged. The age was one of extremes, of utter self-annihilation on the one hand, and of the wildest licence on the other; and in Mesopotamia of all countries on the earth----for centuries the battlefield of hostile empires, and the hunting ground of wild marauders----we must not took for the types of Christian life which are accustomed to grow amid the blessings of order, prosperity and peace. Monasticism in our days is, we may hope, a highly respectable institution; but we hardly look to find monks living upon pillars, or weighed down with iron chains. The times have changed: now we look outside of Christianity for "all that sort of thing," and are not always edified, when we find it. Yet that was the way of our fathers; and who shall say that the old was not good?

R. CONNOLLY. [Footnotes moved to the end]

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.