Writings and fragments

Theonas of Alexandria (d. c. AD 300)

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Translator's Biographical Notice

Theonas of Alexandria. Translator's Biographical Notice. [a.d. 300.] Of this Theonas we know extremely little. Eusebius tells us that Maximus, who had held the episcopal office at Alexandria for eighteen years after the death of Dionysius, was succeeded by Theonas. That bishopric, we also learn, he held for nineteen years. His date is fixed as from about 282 to 300 a.d. The only thing of his that has come down to our time is his letter to Lucianus, the chief chamberlain, and a person in high favour with the emperor. This epistle, which is a letter of advice to that individual on the duties of his office, was first published in the Spicilegium of Dacherius, and again in Gallandi's Bibliotheca. The name of the emperor is not given, neither does the letter itself tell us who the Bishop Theonas was who wrote it. Hence some have, without much reason, supposed another Theonas, bishop of Cyzicus, as the author. And some, such as Cave, have thought the emperor in question was Constantius Chlorus. But the whole circumstances suit Diocletian best. Some infer from the diction of the epistle, as we have it, that it is a translation from a Greek original.

Epistle of Theonas

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Chapter I Chapter II Chapter III Chapter IV Chapter V Chapter VI Chapter VII Chapter VIII Chapter IX The Epistle of Theonas, Bishop of Alexandria, to Lucianus, the Chief Chamberlain. Bishop Theonas to Lucianus, the Chief Chamberlain of Our Most Invincible Emperor. I. I give thanks to Almighty God and our Lord Jesus Christ, who has not given over the manifesting of His faith throughout the whole world, as the sole specific for our salvation, and the extending of it even in the course of the persecutions of despots. Yea, like gold reduced in the furnace, it has only been made to shine the more under the storms of persecution, and its truth and grandeur have only become always the more and more illustrious, so that now, peace being granted to the churches by our gracious prince, the works of Christians are shining even in sight of the unbelieving, and God your Father, who is in heaven, is glorified thereby; a thing which, if we desire to be Christians in deed rather than in word, we ought to seek and aspire after as our first object on account of our salvation. For if we seek our own glory, we set our desire upon a vain and perishing object, and one which leads ourselves on to death. But the glory of the Father and of the Son, who for our salvation was nailed to the cross, makes us safe for the everlasting redemption; and that is the greatest hope of Christians.

Wherefore, my Lucianus, I neither suppose nor desire that you should make it a matter of boasting, that by your means many persons belonging to the palace of the emperor have been brought to the knowledge of the truth; but rather does it become us to give the thanks to our God who has made thee a good instrument for a good work, and has raised thee to great honour with the emperor, that you might diffuse the sweet savour of the Christian name to His own glory and to the salvation of many. For just the more completely that the emperor himself, though not yet attached to the Christian religion, has entrusted the care of his life and person to these same Christians as his more faithful servants, so much the more careful ought ye to be, and the more diligent and watchful in seeing to his safety and in attending upon him, so that the name of Christ may be greatly glorified thereby, and His faith extended daily through you who wait upon the emperor. For in old times some former princes thought us malevolent and filled with all manner of crime; but now, seeing your good works, they should not be able to avoid glorifying Christ Himself.

II. Therefore you ought to strive to the utmost of your power not to fall into a base or dishonourable, not to say an absolutely flagitious way of thinking, lest the name of Christ be thus blasphemed even by you. Be it far from you that you should sell the privilege of access to the emperor to any one for money, or that you should by any means place a dishonest account of any affair before your prince, won over either by prayers or by bribes. Let all the lust of avarice be put from you, which serves the cause of idolatry rather than the religion of Christ. No filthy lucre, no duplicity, can befit the Christian who embraces the simple and unadorned Christ. Let no scurrilous or base talk have place among you. Let all things be done with modesty, courteousness, affability, and uprightness, so that the name of our God and Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in all.

Discharge the official duties to which you are severally appointed with the utmost fear of God and affection to your prince, and perfect carefulness. Consider that every command of the emperor which does not offend God has proceeded from God Himself; and execute it in love as well as in fear, and with all cheerfulness. For there is nothing which so well refreshes a man who is wearied out with weighty cares as the seasonable cheerfulness and benign patience of an intimate servant; nor, again, on the other hand, does anything so much annoy and vex him as the moroseness and impatience and grumbling of his servant. Be such things far from you Christians, whose walk is in zeal for the faith. But in order that God may be honoured in yourselves, suppress ye and tread down all your vices of mind and body. Be clothed with patience and courtesy; be replenished with the virtues and the hope of Christ. Bear all things for the sake of your Creator Himself; endure all things; overcome and get above all things, that ye may win Christ the Lord. Great are these duties, and full of painstaking. But he that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things; and they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible.

III. But because, as I apprehend it, ye are assigned to different offices, and you, Lucianus, are styled the head of them all, whom, also, by the grace of Christ given you, you are able to direct and dispose in their different spheres, I am certain that it will not displease you if I also bring before your notice, in a particular and summary manner, some of my sentiments on the subject of these offices. For I hear that one of you keeps the private moneys of the emperor; another the imperial robes and ornaments; another the precious vessels; another the books, who, I understand, does not as yet belong to the believers; and others the different parts of the household goods. And in what manner, therefore, these charges ought, in my judgment, to be executed, I shall indicate in a few words. IV.

He who has charge of the private moneys of the emperor ought to keep every thing in an exact reckoning. He should be ready at any time to give an accurate account of all things. He should note down every thing in writing, if it is at all possible, before giving money to another. He should never trust such things to his memory, which, being drawn off day by day to other matters, readily fails us, so that, without writing, we sometimes honestly certify things which have never existed; neither should this kind of writing be of a commonplace order, but such as easily and clearly unfolds all things, and leaves the mind of the inquirer

without any scruple or doubt on the subject; a thing which will easily be effected if a distinct and separate account is kept in writing of all receipts, and of the time when, and the person by whom, and the place at which they were made. And, in like manner, all that is paid out to others, or expended by order of the emperor, should be entered in its own place by itself in the reckoning; and that servant should be faithful and prudent, so that his lord may rejoice that he has set him over his goods, and may glorify Christ in him.

V. Nor will the diligence and care of that servant be less who has the custody of the robes and imperial ornaments. All these he should enter in a most exact catalogue, and he should keep a note of what they are and of what sort, and in what places stored, and when he received them, and from whom, and whether they are soiled or unsoiled. All these things he should keep in his diligence; he should often review again, and he should often go over them that they may be the more readily known again. All these he should have at hand, and all in readiness; and he should always give the clearest information on every matter on which it is sought, to his prince or his superior, whenever they ask about any thing; and all this at the same time in such wise that every thing may be done in humility and cheerful patience, and that the name of Christ may be praised even in a small matter.

VI. In a similar manner should he conduct himself to whose fidelity are entrusted the vessels of silver and gold, and crystal or murrha, for eating or for drinking. All these he should arrange suitably, of them all he should keep an account, and with all diligence he should make an inventory of how many and which sort of precious stones are in them. He should examine them all with great prudence; he should produce them in their proper places and on their proper occasions. And he should observe most carefully to whom he gives them, and at what time, and from whom he receives them again, lest there should occur any mistake or injurious suspicion, or perhaps some considerable loss in things of value. VII.

The most responsible person, however, among you, and also the most careful, will be he who may be entrusted by the emperor with the custody of his library. He will himself select for this office a person of proved knowledge, a man grave and adapted to great affairs, and ready to reply to all applications for information, such a one as Philadelphus chose for this charge, and appointed to the superintendence of his most noble library—I mean Aristeus, his confidential chamberlain, whom he sent also as his legate to Eleazar, with most magnificent gifts, in recognition of the translation of the Sacred Scriptures; and this person also wrote the full history of the Seventy Interpreters. If, therefore, it should happen that a believer in Christ is called to this same office, he should not despise that secular literature and those Gentile intellects which please the emperor. To be praised are the poets for the greatness of their genius, the acuteness of their inventions, the aptness and lofty eloquence of their style. To be praised are the orators; to be praised also are the philosophers in their own class. To be praised, too, are the historians, who unfold to us the order of exploits, and the manners and institutions of our ancestors, and show us the rule of life from the proceedings of the ancients. On occasion also he will endeavour to laud the divine Scriptures, which, with marvellous care and most liberal expenditure, Ptolemy Philadelphus caused

to be translated into our language; and sometimes, too, the Gospel and the Apostle will be lauded for their divine oracles; and there will be an opportunity for introducing the mention of Christ; and, little by little, His exclusive divinity will be explained; and all these things may happily come to pass by the help of Christ.

He ought, therefore, to know all the books which the emperor possesses; he should often turn them over, and arrange them neatly in their proper order by catalogue; if, however, he shall have to get new books, or old ones transcribed, he should be careful to obtain the most accurate copyists; and if that cannot be done, he should appoint learned men to the work of correction, and recompense them justly for their labours. He should also cause all manuscripts to be restored according to their need, and should embellish them, not so much with mere superstitious extravagance, as with useful adornment; and therefore he should not aim at having the whole manuscripts written on purple skins and in letters of gold, unless the emperor has specially required that. With the utmost submission, however, he should do every thing that is agreeable to Cæsar. As he is able, he should, with all modesty, suggest to the emperor that he should read, or hear read, those books which suit his rank and honour, and minister to good use rather than to mere pleasure. He should himself first be thoroughly familiar with those books, and he should often commend them in presence of the emperor, and set forth, in an appropriate fashion, the testimony and the weight of those who approve them, that he may not seem to lean to his own understanding only.

VIII. Those, moreover, who have the care of the emperor's person should be in all things as prompt as possible; always, as we have said, cheerful in countenance, sometimes merry, but ever with such perfect modesty as that he may commend it above all else in you all, and perceive that it is the true product of the religion of Christ. You should also all be elegant and tidy in person and attire, yet, at the same time, not in such wise as to attract notice by extravagance or affectation, lest Christian modesty be scandalised. Let every thing be ready at its proper time, and disposed as well as possible in its own order. There should also be due arrangement among you, and carefulness that no confusion appear in your work, nor any loss of property in any way; and appropriate places should be settled and suitably prepared, in accordance with the capacity (captu) and importance of the places.

Besides this, your servants should be the most thoroughly honest, and circumspect, and modest, and as serviceable to you as possible. And see that you instruct and teach them in true doctrine with all the patience and charity of Christ; but if they despise and lightly esteem your instructions, then dismiss them, lest their wickedness by any hap recoil upon yourselves. For sometimes we have seen, and often we have heard, how masters have been held in ill-repute in consequence of the wickedness of their servants. If the emperor visits her imperial majesty, or she him, then should ye also be most circumspect in eye and demeanour, and in all your words. Let her mark your mastery of yourselves and your modesty; and let her followers and attendants mark your demeanour; let them mark it and admire it, and by reason thereof praise Jesus Christ our Lord in you. Let your conversation always be temperate and modest, and seasoned with religion as with salt. And, further, let there be no

jealousy among you or contentiousness, which might bring you into all manner of confusion and division, and thus also make you objects of aversion to Christ and to the emperor, and lead you into the deepest abomination, so that not one stone of your building could stand upon another.

IX. And do thou, my dearest Lucianus, since thou art wise, bear with good-will the unwise; and they too may perchance become wise. Do no one an injury at any time, and provoke no one to anger. If an injury is done to you, look to Jesus Christ; and even as ye desire that He may remit your transgressions, do ye also forgive them theirs; and then also shall ye do away with all ill-will, and bruise the head of that ancient serpent, who is ever on the watch with all subtlety to undo your good works and your prosperous attainments. Let no day pass by without reading some portion of the Sacred Scriptures, at such convenient hour as offers, and giving some space to meditation. And never cast off the habit of reading in the Holy Scriptures; for nothing feeds the soul and enriches the mind so well as those sacred studies do. But look to this as the chief gain you are to make by them, that, in all due patience, ye may discharge the duties of your office religiously and piously—that is, in the love of Christ—and despise all transitory objects for the sake of His eternal promises, which in truth surpass all human comprehension and understanding, and shall conduct you into everlasting felicity.

A happy adieu to you in Christ, my Lord Lucianus.

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