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# Christianity in Late Antiquity

300–450 C.E.

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**A READER**

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New York      Oxford  
Oxford University Press  
2004

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai  
Dares Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai  
Nairobi São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York. 10016  
<http://www.oup-usa.org>

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Christianity in late antiquity, 300–450 C.E. : a reader / [compiled by] Bart D. Ehrman,  
Andrew S. Jacobs.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-19-515460-6 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-19-515461-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Christian literature, Early. I. Ehrman, Bart D. II. Jacobs, Andrew S., 1973–  
BR63.C47 2004  
270.2—dc21

2003042905

Printing number: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

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## 40. Antony: Letters

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The image of Antony that emerges from his *Letters* differs dramatically from his portrayal in both Athanasius's *Life of Antony* (Text 46) and the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Text 39). The Antony of the *Life* and *Sayings* was a simple illiterate monk whose ability to combat earthly and demonic opponents sprang from his spiritual talents, not his intellect. The Antony of the *Letters*, however, is philosophically sophisticated, viewing the monastic endeavor in light of complex conceptions of creation and salvation derived from the teachings of the third-century speculative theologian Origen.

Origen had theorized that all rational creatures had existed in a primordial unity with God, but that these preexistent minds at some point were distracted and fell away from God. The degree to which souls fell determined their place in a new created order: angels, powers, humans, demons, and the devil. God provided a material world and bodies (the "coats of skin" of Genesis 3:21) within which humans could discipline their rebellious souls and find a way back to that original unity with God.

Antony, along with other desert monastics (most famously, Evagrius of Pontus), transformed this Origenist cosmology and soteriology into monastic systems of ascetic withdrawal and discipline. The mortification of body and spirit that characterized the ascetic movement were embedded in a rich philosophical framework that has been obscured by subsequent hagiography and heretical controversy. The Origenist monks of Lower Egypt were accused of heresy by some of their fellow monks and Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria and were driven out of the desert at the end of the fourth century (see Text 27). This theological purge has left us with the image of monastic simplicity and anti-intellectualism that survives in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Of the seven letters of Antony recently reconstructed from a variety of sources, three are reproduced here; they give a sense of the deep intellectual traditions—both philosophical and scriptural—that existed in the early fourth-century desert.

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### LETTER ONE

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First of all, I greet you in the Lord.

I believe that the souls, whether male or female, whom God in his mercy has assembled by his own Word, are of three kinds.

Some were reached by the Word of God through the law of promise and the discernment of the good inherent in them from their first formation. They did not hesitate but followed it readily as did Abraham, our father. Since he offered himself in love through the law of promise, God appeared to him, saying: *Go*

*from your country and your kindred and from your father's house to the land that I will show you* (Gen 12:1). And he went without hesitating at all, but being ready for his calling. This is the model for the beginning of this way of life. It still persists in those who follow this pattern. Wherever and whenever souls endure and bow to it, they easily attain the virtues, since their hearts are ready to be guided by the Spirit of God. This is the first kind.

The second kind we find in those who hear the written law testify of all pain and punishment prepared for the wicked and announce the blessed prom-

ises for those who progress. Through the testimonies of the written law, their thoughts are aroused, and they try to enter into their calling. David, too, testifies of this, saying: *The law of the Lord is without blemish and vivifies the soul* (Ps 19:8), and elsewhere he says: *The revelation of your words gives light and makes children wise* (Ps 119:130), and of the same more than we are able to recount.

The third kind we find in those whose hearts are hard from the beginning and who persist in the works of sin. God the merciful sends afflictions and chastisement upon them, until through their afflictions they are made aware and repent and return. And if they repent with all their heart, they enter into the calling and attain the virtues, like the others about whom I have already written.

These are the three gates for the souls who come to repent until they obtain grace and the calling of the Son of God.

But I believe that those who have entered with all their heart and have prepared themselves to endure all the trials of the enemy until they prevail are first called by the Spirit, who alleviates everything for them so that the work of repentance becomes sweet for them. He sets for them a rule for how to repent in their bodies and souls until he has taught them the way to return to God, their own Creator. He also gives them control over their souls and bodies in order that both may be sanctified and inherit together:

First the body through many fasts and vigils, through the exertion and the exercises of the body, cutting of all the fruits of the flesh. In this the Spirit of repentance is his guide, testing him through them, so that the enmity does not bring him back again. Then the guiding Spirit begins to open the eyes of the soul, to show it the way of repentance that it, too, may be purified.

The mind also starts to discriminate between them and begins to learn from the Spirit how to purify the body and the soul through repentance. The mind is taught by the Spirit and guides us in the actions of the body and soul, purifying both of them, separating the fruits of the flesh from what is natural to the body in which they were mingled and through which the transgression came to be, and leads each member of the body back to its original condition, free from

everything alien that belongs to the spirit of the enemy.

The body is thus brought under the authority of the mind and is taught by the Spirit, as the words of Paul testify: *I castigate my body and bring it into subjection* (1 Cor 9:27). Then mind sanctifies it in food and drink and sleep and, in one word, in all its movements, even separating itself from the natural union through its own sanctity.

I believe that there are three movements in the body. There is a natural, inherent movement, which does not operate unless the soul consents, otherwise it remains still. Then there is another movement as a result of stuffing the body with a multitude of food and drink. The heat of the blood, caused by excessive eating, stirs up the body, which is now moved by gluttony. Because of this the apostle says: *Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess* (Eph 5:18). And the Lord enjoined his disciples in the Gospel saying: *Take heed lest at anytime your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness* (Luke 31:34) and pleasures. Especially since they seek the level of sanctity, they should say: *I castigate my body and bring it into subjection* (1 Cor 9:27). The third movement comes from the evil spirits, tempting us out of envy and seeking to divert those who attempt to sanctify themselves.

If the soul perseveres in these three ways and keeps to what the Spirit has taught the mind, it purifies both from the three types of affliction. But if the mind spurns the testimonies that the Spirit has given it, then evil spirits override the [natural] constitution of the body and stir up these movements, until the soul grows weary and asks from where it can receive help and converts and adheres to the testimony of the Spirit and is healed. Then it believes that this is its rest: to abide with God, who is its peace.

This I have said about repentance in the body and the soul and how they are sanctified. And when the mind accepts this struggle, then it prays in the Spirit and begins to expel the afflictions of the soul, which have come upon it through its own greed. The soul is then in communion with the Spirit, since it keeps the commandments it has received. And the Spirit teaches it how to heal all its afflictions and how to expel them one by one, from head to foot, those min-

gled with what is natural to the body as well as those that are independent of the body, but have been mingled with it through the will.

It sets a rule for the eyes that they may see rightly and purely and never again have anything alien in them and for the ears that they may hear in peace and never again wish to hear anything evil or any slandering of men, but rather all kinds of benevolence and mercy toward all creation, for in [both of] them it was once sick.

It also teaches the tongue its own purity, since its affliction is great. For the one who speaks is sick and gives to the tongue his own works. Thus the afflictions are made abundant through this member, which is the tongue. This is confirmed by James, the apostle, who says: *If someone thinks that he serves God and does not control his tongue but deceives his own heart, his worship is vain* (Jas 1:26). Somewhere else he says that *the tongue is a small member, but it defiles the whole body* (Jas 3:5). And there is more like this than we can quote. But if the mind is strengthened by the Spirit, it is first purified itself; then it examines the words and gives them to the tongue, so that they are free from hypocrisy and self-will. Thus the words of Solomon are fulfilled: *My words are spoken by God. There is nothing twisted or perverse in them* (Prov 8:8), and somewhere else he says, *The tongue of the wise heals* (Prov 12:18), and so on.

And also the movements of the hand, if they were moved disorderly by the will of the soul, are now made firm by the Spirit and destined to move toward purity by prayers and acts of mercy. And on them the word about prayer is fulfilled, stating, *Let the lifting up of my hands be as the evening sacrifice* (Ps 141:2), and also, *The hands of the diligent make rich* (Prov 10:4).

Also the belly is purified in its eating and drinking, although it used to be insatiable in these matters, once it had been moved toward them by the will of the soul. Through desire and greed for food and drink, not a few have fallen in with the demons, and of them it is said by David, *I do not dine with one who has a high look and an insatiable heart* (Ps 101:5).

To those, however, who seek purity, the Spirit assigns this rule of purification: moderation after the

power of the body, devoid of any greed or desire. On them this word of Paul is fulfilled saying: *Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God* (1 Cor 10:31).

Then, in regard to the sexual thoughts moved from below the belly, the mind is again taught by the Spirit how to distinguish between the three types of movements mentioned above and how to strive for purification having the help of the Spirit. All the movements are then quenched by the power of the Spirit, pacifying the entire body and extinguishing the movements. This is the word given by Paul: *Mortify your members that are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, and evil desires* (Col 3:5), and so forth.

And then also the feet, which formerly did not walk soundly according to the will of God; the mind, being united under the authority of the Spirit, makes them walk according to the will of the Spirit, that they may minister in good works so that the whole body may be changed and placed under the authority of the Spirit. And I think that [even] now this dwelling has taken on something of that other spiritual body that will be taken on at the resurrection of the just.

This I have said concerning the afflictions of the soul that have become mingled with what is natural to the body, in which the soul moves, so that it has become a guide to the evil spirits working in its members.

But I also say that the soul has some [movements] proper to it alone, which we will now examine: Pride is an affliction apart from the body, self-glorification another, as well as insolence, hatred, envy, wrath, pusillanimity, impatience, and the rest. But if it gives itself to God wholeheartedly, God the merciful gives to it the Spirit of repentance and shows it how to repent in the case of each affliction and also how the enemies prevent her and try to possess her, not allowing her to repent.

If the soul endures and obeys what the Spirit has taught it about repentance, then the Creator has mercy on the weariness of its repentance through the labors of the body, such as prolonged fasts, vigils, much study of the Word of God, and many prayers, as well as the renunciation of the world and human

things, humility, and contrition. And if it endures in all this, then God the merciful sees its patience in the temptations and has mercy and helps it.

### LETTER FIVE

Antony greets his beloved children, holy Israelite children, in their spiritual essence. I do not need to call you by your names in the flesh, which are passing away, for you are Israelite children. Truly, my sons, the love I have for you is not the love of the flesh, but the love of godliness. Therefore I do not tire of praying for you day and night that you may come to know the grace he has granted you, that God did not visit his creatures just once, but from the beginning of the world God looks after his creatures and he raises up the generations one by one through occasions and gifts of grace.

Now, my children, do not neglect to cry out day and night to God, entreating by the benevolence of the Father, to grant you help from above, and teach you what befits you. Truly, my children, we dwell in our death and stay in the house of the robber, bound by the fetters of death. Therefore, *do not give sleep to your eyes or slumber to your eyelids* (Ps 132:4), that you may in all sanctity *offer yourselves as a sacrifice to God* (cf. Rom 12:1), whom no one can inherit without sanctity.

Truly, my beloved in the Lord, let this word be manifest to you, that you may do good and so give rest to all the saints and readiness to the ministry of the angels and rejoice at the coining of Jesus, for because of us none of them has yet found rest (cf. Heb 11:39–40). Even to my miserable self, dwelling in this house of clay, you will thus bring happiness to my soul.

Truly, my children, this affliction and humiliation of ours gives distress to all the saints. For our sake they weep and moan before the Creator of all. Thus, because of the moaning of the saints, the God of all is angry with all our evil deeds. But our progress and justification stir up the assembly of the saints, and they pray devoutly and make joyful exultation before our Creator, and he himself, the Creator of all, re-

joices in our good deeds on the testimony of his saints, and so he grants us great gifts of grace.

That you may know that God always loves his creatures, their essence being immortal, not to be dissolved with the body: Having seen that the spiritual essence had descended into the abyss, being completely dead, and that the law of promise had grown cold, God in his benevolence visited them through Moses. Moses truly founded the house of truth and wanted to heal the great wound and bring them back to their original unity, but he could not, and left them. Then, too, the council of the prophets built upon the foundation of Moses, but they were unable to heal the great wound of their members and realized that their power ceased. Thus the communion of all the saints assembled in unity and offered prayers before their Creator, saying: *Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered? O Lord, we would have healed Babylon, and she is not healed. Now let us forsake her and flee from her* (Jer 8:22, 51:9).

And all prayed by the benevolence of the Father for his only begotten, because unless he himself would come, none of the creatures would be able to heal the great wound. For this reason the Father in his benevolence spoke and said: *Son of man, make to yourself vessels of captivity* (Ezek 12:3). For the salvation of us all, the Father *did not spare his Only begotten, but delivered him up for our sins* (Rom 8:32). *Our iniquities humbled him, and by his stripes we were healed* (Isa 53:5), and he gathered us from all lands, from one end of the earth to the other, resurrecting our minds from the earth and teaching us that we are members of one another.

Take heed, children, that the word of Paul may not be accomplished upon us, that: *We have the form of godliness, but deny its power* (2 Tim 3:5). Let each one of you rend his heart and weep before him and say: *What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits towards me?* (Ps 116:12). But I tremble, my children, lest the word be accomplished upon us: *What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to corruption?* (Ps 29:10 [LXX]).

Truly, my children, I talk to you *as to wise men* (cf. 1 Cor 10:15), so that you understand what I tell

you: Unless each one of you hates all earthly possessions and renounces them and all their workings by all his heart and stretches out the hands of his heart to heaven and to the Father of all, he cannot be saved. But if he does this, God will have mercy because of his labor and grant him the invisible fire that burns up all impurity from him and purifies his mind. Then the Holy Spirit will dwell in us, and Jesus will stay with us, and thus we will be able to worship God as is proper. But as long as we have peace with the natures of this world, we remain enemies of God and of his angels and all his saints.

Now therefore, I beseech you, my beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, not to neglect your true life, and not to confound the brevity of this time with time eternal, nor mistake the skin of the corruptible flesh with the reign of ineffable light, and not to let this place of damnation squander the angelic thrones of judgment.

Truly, my children, my heart wonders and my soul is terrified that we are all engulfed as if by a flood and carried away as if drunk by wine. Each one of us has sold himself by his own will, and we are dominated by it. We do not want to lift our eyes to seek the glory of heaven and the works of all the saints and to walk in their footsteps.

Now, therefore, understand that whether it be the holy heavens or angels or archangels or thrones or dominions or cherubim or seraphim or sun or moon or stars or patriarchs or prophets or apostles or devil or Satan or evil spirits or the powers of the air, or (to say no more) whether it be man or woman, in the beginning of their formation they all derive from one, except the perfect and blessed Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because of the evil conduct of some, it was necessary that God should set names upon them after their works. And those who made the best progress, he gave more abundant glory.

## LETTER SIX

Antony greets all his dear brothers, who are at Arsinoe and its neighborhood and those who are with you in the Lord. All of you who have prepared yourselves

to come to God, I greet you in the Lord, my beloved, the young and the old. men and women, Israelite children, saints in your spiritual essence.

Truly, my beloved, you are greatly blessed, for great gifts of grace have been given to your generation. Thus, for the sake of him who has visited you, you should not weary in the struggle until you have offered yourselves as a sacrifice to God in all sanctity, without which none can inherit God.

Truly, my beloved, it is great for you to attempt to understand the spiritual essence, in which there is neither man nor woman; rather it is an immortal essence, which has a beginning but no end. You ought to know how it is utterly fallen into this humiliation and great confusion, which has come upon all of us. But since it is an immortal essence that is not destroyed with the body, God, seeing this incurable wound and seeing that it had become grave, visited them in his mercy. and after a time he, in his benevolence, granted them the law as an assistance through Moses, who gave the law. And Moses founded the house of truth and wanted to heal the great wound, but could not complete the building of the house. Then all the host of the saints assembled in unity and prayed by the benevolence of God for our salvation, that he would come to us to save us all, he, who is the great and true high priest and true physician, who is able to heal the great wound. For this reason he, following the will of the Father, divested himself of his glory; *being God, he took the form of a servant and gave himself for our sins, and our iniquities humbled him and through his stripes we were all healed* (Phil 2:6–7; Gal 1:4; Isa 53:5).

Therefore, my beloved in the Lord, I want you to know that it was for our foolishness that he choose to become a fool, for our weakness he accepted the form of weakness, for our poverty he became poor, and for our death he assumed death, and that he endured all this for our sake (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–28, 3:18–19, 4:10; 2 Cor 8:19). Truly, my beloved in the Lord, we ought not to give sleep to our eyes or slumber to our eyelids (Ps 132:4), but pray and beseech the benevolence of the Father until he comes to our help and we thus may find rest at the coming of Jesus and strength so that we are able to follow the saints, who

are eager to support us in the time of our negligence, making them zealous so that they may help us in the time of our tribulations. Then *he that sows and he that reaps rejoice together* (John 4:36).

I want you to know, my children, the great distress that I have for you, for I see the great disgrace that comes upon us all and contemplate the struggle of the saints and their tears, which they shed at all times before God for our sake, when they see all the labor of their Creator and the evil devices of the devils and their disciples, which they always plan for our perdition, since their part is in the hell to come. Therefore they want us to be lost with them, so that we shall be with the multitude.

Truly, my beloved, *as to wise men I talk to you* (cf. 1 Cor 10:15), that you may know all the dispensations of our Creator, which he made for us, that he has payed visits to us through manifest and secret revelations. Yes, we are called sensible, but have put on an irrational mind, so that we are ignorant of how the secret contrivances and manifold crafts of the devil work and how they might be known. For they know that we have tried to know our disgrace and sought for a way to escape their acts, which they effect in us. And not only do we not obey the evil counsels that they sow in our hearts, but many of us even laugh at their contrivances. They know the indulgence of our Creator, that he died because of them in this world and prepared for them to inherit Gehenna as a result of their own negligence.

I want you to know, my children, that I do not cease to pray to God for you, day and night, that he may open the eyes of your hearts that you may see all the secret evils that they pour upon us every day in this present time. I ask God to give you a heart of knowledge and a spirit of discernment, that you may be able to lift you hearts before the Father as a pure sacrifice in all sanctity, without blemish.

Truly, my children, they are jealous of us at all times with their evil counsel, their secret persecution, their subtle malice, their spirits of seduction, their fraudulent thoughts, their faithlessness that they sow in our hearts every day, their hardness of heart and their numbness, the many sufferings they bring upon us at every hour, the weariness that causes our hearts

to be weary at all times, all their wrath, the mutual slander that they teach us, our self-justifications in our deeds, and the condemnations that they sow in our hearts so that we, when we are alone, condemn our fellows, though they are not with us, the contempt they send into our hearts through pride so that we become hard-hearted and despise one another, becoming bitter against each other with hard words, and troubled every hour accusing each other and not ourselves, thinking that our struggle comes from our fellows, judging what is outside while the robbers are all inside our house, and [furthermore, with] the disputes and divisions we have with each other until we have established our own words so that they seem justified in the face of the other, and they incite us to do things that we are unable to do (and whose time it is not) and make us weary of things we do and that are good for us.

Therefore they make us laugh when it is time for weeping and weep when it is time for laughter, simply turning us aside every time from the straight way. Through many other deceits, they make us their slaves, but there is no time now to reveal all of them. But when they fill our hearts with all these and we feed on them and they become our food, then God is wroth with us.

Therefore, do not fail to beseech the goodness of the Father that perchance a helper will come to you so that you may teach yourselves to know what is truly right. Truly, I tell you, my children, that this our vessel in which we dwell is our destruction and a house full of war. In truth, my children, I tell you that every man who delights in his own desires and who is subdued to his own thoughts and sticks to what is sown in his own heart and rejoices in it and thinks in his heart that it is some great chosen mystery, and through it justifies himself in what he does, the soul of such a man is the breath of evil spirits and his counsel toward evil, and his body a store of evil mysteries that it hides in itself: and over such a one the demons have great power, because he has not dishonored them before all men.

Do you to know that they have not one single method of hunting, that we should know it and escape it? And if you seek, you will not find their sins

and iniquities revealed bodily, for they are not visible bodily. But you should know that we are their bodies and that our soul receives their wickedness, and when it has received them, then it reveals them through the body in which we dwell. Now, then, my children, let us not give them any place; otherwise we shall stir up the wrath of God against us, and they will move freely [as if] in their home and laugh at us, since they know that our destruction is of our neighbor, and also our life is of our neighbor. For, who has ever seen God and rejoiced with him and kept him within himself, so that he would not leave him, but help him while he dwells in this heaviness? Or, who ever saw a demon fighting against us and preventing us from doing good, or opposing us, standing somewhere in the body, so that we should become afraid and flee from him? No, they are all hidden, and we reveal them by our deeds. They are, moreover, all from one (source) in their spiritual essence, but through their flight from God, great diversity has arisen between them since their deeds are varying.

Therefore all these names have been imposed on them after the deeds of each one. Some of them are called archangels, some thrones and dominions, principalities, powers, and cherubim. These names were given to them since they kept the will of their Creator. But due to the wickedness of the conduct of others, it was necessary to name them devil and Satan, after their own evil conduct. Others are called demons, evil and impure spirits, spirits of seduction and powers of this world, and there are many other varieties among them. But there are also those who have opposed them in this heavy body in which we dwell—some of them are called patriarchs, and some prophets and kings and priests and judges and apostles, and there are many others chosen after their good conduct. All these names are given to them, whether male or female, for the sake of the variety of their deeds and in conformity with their own minds, but they are all from one (source).

Therefore, whoever sins against his neighbor sins against himself, and whoever does evil to his neighbor does evil to himself. Likewise, whoever does good to his neighbor does good to himself. For truly, who would there be who could do evil to God, or who

exists who can hurt him, or who is there who can give him rest, or who can ever serve him, or who exists who could ever bless him, as if he would need his blessing, or who could honor him so that he [really] is honored, or who could exalt him so that he [really] is elevated? Therefore, let us raise up God in ourselves by spurring one another and deliver ourselves to death for our [own] souls and for one another, and doing this we shall reveal the essence of our own mercy. Not that we should become self-lovers, lest we come under the power of inconstancy. For he who knows himself knows all, and thus it is written: *who called everything into being out of nothingness* (2 Macc 7:28). Saying this, they speak about their spiritual essence, which is hidden in this corruptible body, which it did not have from the beginning, and which it will be called away from. But he who is able to love himself, loves all.

My dear children, I pray that this will not be a burden to you, nor that you should tire of loving one another. Lift up your body in which you are clothed and make it an altar and lay upon it all your thoughts and leave all evil counsels before God, and lift up the hands of your heart to him, that is to the Creator of the mind, and pray to God that he gives you the great invisible fire, that it may descend from above and consume the altar and all upon it, as well as all the priests of Baal, who are the hostile works of the enemy, that they may fear and flee before you as before the prophet Elijah (cf. 1 Kings 18:38–40). Then you will see as it were the track of a man over the sea, who will bring you the spiritual rain, which is the comfort of the Spirit of comfort.

My dear children in the Lord, Israelite children, there is no need to bless or to mention your transient names in the flesh, for you are not ignorant of the love I have for you, that it is not the love of the flesh, but the love of godliness. Therefore I am confident that it is for you a great blessing that you have tried to know your own shame and to make firm the invisible essence, which does not pass away with the body. Thus I think that your blessing has begun (even) in our time. Let this word be manifest to you, that you should not regard your progress and entry into the service of God as your own work; rather a divine

power supports you always. Be eager *to offer yourselves as a sacrifice to God always* (cf. Rom 12:1) and arouse the power that supports you and give rest to the coming of God and to all the host of the saints and to my miserable self, which dwells in this house of dust and darkness.

This is why I speak to you and give you rest and pray: We are all created from one invisible essence, having a beginning but no end; thus, they who know themselves know that the essence of unity is immortal.

I want you to know that our Lord Jesus Christ is the true mind of the Father, by whom all the fullness of every rational nature is made to the likeness of his image, he himself being the head of all creatures and the body of the Church (cf. Col 1:18). *Therefore we are all members of one another and the body of Christ. The head cannot say to the feet, "I do not need you," and if a member suffers the whole body is moved and suffers* (1 Cor 12:21, 26–27). But if a member is estranged from the body, having no contact with the head, but delighting in the passions of the flesh, it has contracted an incurable wound and has forgotten its beginning and its end.

For this reason the Father of creation had mercy upon us for the sake of this wound that none of the creatures could heal, but only the goodness of the Father. And he sent us his Only begotten, who for the sake of our servitude *accepted the form of a servant* (Phil 2:7), and *gave himself up for our sins, and our iniquities humbled him, but through his stripes we were all healed* (Rom 8:32; Gal 1:4; Isa 53:5). And he gathered us from all lands, until he resurrected our hearts from the earth and taught us that we are of one essence and members of one another. Therefore we ought to love one another warmly, for he who loves his neighbor loves God, and he who loves God loves his own soul.

Let this word be manifest to you, my dear children in the Lord, holy Israelite children, and prepare yourselves to go and *offer yourselves as a sacrifice unto God* (Rom 12:1) in all sanctity, for no one can inherit him without sanctity. Do you not know, my dear, that the enemy of virtue always contemplates evil against the truth? Therefore, my dear, take heed, and *do not*

*give sleep to your eyes or slumber to your eyelids* (Ps 132:4), but cry out to you Creator day and night that he may send you a helper from above, who may encompass your hearts and thoughts in Christ.

Truly, my children, we dwell in a house of robbers and are bound by the bonds of death. Truly, I tell you that this our negligence, humiliation, and outward confusion is not only harmful for us, but it is also labor to the angels and all the holy of Christ, since for our sake they have not yet found peace. Truly, my beloved, our humiliation gives pain to all of them, as our salvation and pride give joy and rest to all of them.

And you should know that the goodness of the Father does not cease to do good to us always, from when it was first moved until this day, so as not to make us guilty of our own death, for we are created with a free will, and thus the demons watch out for us always. But for that reason it is written, *the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them* (Ps 34:7).

Now, my children, I want you to know that from the first movement until now, all who have become estranged from virtue and fulfilled their wickedness are counted as children of the devil, and those who are of them, know it, and so they try to fashion each one of us after his own will. Knowing that the devil has fallen from above because of [his] pride, they, cunning as they are, attack through pride and contempt for one another, first those who have attained a high level. They know that thus they can cut us off from God, knowing that he who loves his neighbor loves God. For this reason the enemies of virtue sow the seed of division in our hearts, so that we become great adversaries of one another and do not at all, even from a distance, speak with our neighbor. Truly, my children, I also want you to know that there are many who have endured great struggle in this way of life, but have been killed by lack of discernment. Truly, my children, I consider it not strange at all that if you neglect yourselves and do not discern your works, you fall into the hands of the devil, and while you think you are close to God, and while you are expecting light, darkness overtakes you.

Why did Jesus gird himself with a towel and wash the feet of his disciples, if not to make this an exam-

ple and teach those who turn back to their first beginning, since pride is the origin of that movement that was in the beginning. Therefore, if you do not have great humility throughout your heart and in all your mind, in all your soul and in all your body, you cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Truly, my children in the Lord, I pray day and night to my Creator, who has entrusted me with his spirit, to open for you the eyes of your hearts that you may know this my love that I have for you and open the ears of your hearts that you may perceive your disgrace. For he who knows his disgrace seeks again his chosen glory, and he who knows his death also knows his eternal life.

*As to wise men I write to you (1 Cor 10:15), my children, for truly I fear that hunger may overtake you on the way and in the place where we need to be made rich. I wanted to see you face to face in the body, but I now look forward to the time, which is near, in which we will be able to see for ourselves the faces of one another, when distress and pain and tears shall have passed away, when joy will be among all. There is much more I would have liked to tell, but if one gives occasion to a wise man he will be yet wiser (Prov 9:9). I greet you all by name, my beloved children.*

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## 41. Aphrahat: Demonstration 6: On Covenanters

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The Persian Christian known as Aphrahat (see Text 19) seems to have been a member of a group known as the *bnay qyama*, or “covenanters” (literally, “sons of the covenant”). The *bnay qyama* (and *bnat qyama*, “daughters of the covenant”) practiced ascetic renunciation as active members of their Christian communities. They did not withdraw to the desert, nor did they partake in some of the more extreme forms of ascetic display found in the Syriac world (see Text 47). They served their churches and communities and were, in turn, supported in their ascetic vocations. The covenanters emerged early in the Syriac churches, perhaps by the third century, and were incorporated in various ways into the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Aphrahat’s concerns resonate with ascetic discourse throughout the Christian world. Like Jerome (see Text 37), he emphasizes spiritual as well as physical purity and particularly decries cohabitating monks and virgins. Aphrahat’s condemnation of the role of women in the moral fall of humanity is also widespread among ascetic theorists of the fourth century (even as women achieved prominence for their asceticism). Like Victricius of Rouen (see Text 44), Aphrahat provides philosophical explanations of the distributive and omnipresent quality of God in the holy bodies of ascetics. The distinctive terminology preserved in this translation gives nuance to the theological particularities of Syriac asceticism. The *bnay* and *bnat qyama* are also called *ihidaye*, or “solitaries,” a term related to the Greek *monachos* (monk), but also used to describe the “Only-begotten,” Christ (the *Ihidaya*). This “singleness” (*ihidayuta*) thus represents not only the solitary life of renunciation, but also imitation of God’s “Only-begotten” Son. The renunciants are also called *qaddiše*, or “holy ones”; in seeking *qaddiṣuta*, or sanctification, through renunciation, the covenanters pursue the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that will fortify them in their battle against evil and guarantee their honored placed at the end of time.