

THE EXTANT WRITINGS OF ASTERIUS URBANUS

by Asterius Urbanus

Asterius's polemical work against Montanist heresy, defending apostolic faith against false prophecy and demonstrating how genuine prophecy differs from ecstatic frenzy.

4 Chapters

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The Extant Writings Of Asterius Urbanus

Introductory Notice

[Circa a.d.232] Finding these fragments relegated, by the Edinburgh editors, to a place (unaccountably chosen) among the spurious Decretals [2153] and dismissed as of dubious character, it looked as if modern light had been shed upon this author, and as if he had better, perhaps, be classed with the apocryphal works of our concluding volume. But, after considerable inquiry, I see no reason to dismiss Asterius from the respectable position assigned him by Lardner; [2154] and I now wish I had appended these fragments to those of the Roman presbyter Caius, to which the reader is referred. [2155] It is true, Lardner is quite undecided as to this author, though he accepts Tillemont's conjecture as probable; viz., that the Asterius Urbanus mentioned by Eusebius is the author of the fragments, and that his work against the Montanists was written in the eleventh year of the Emperor Alexander, circa 232. It is doubtful whether the author was a presbyter or a bishop. On some occasions he seems to have been at Ancyra in Galatia, where he reluctantly consented to write his treatise at the solicitation of the presbytery there, and particularly of Abercius [2156] Marcellus, to whom it is inscribed. The translator is not named, but here follows the very unsatisfactory preface of the Edinburgh edition: -- Nothing is known of Asterius Urbanus. The name occurs in Fragment IV.; [2157] and from the allusion made to him there, some have inferred that he was the author of the work against Montanists, from which Eusebius has made these extracts. The inference is unfounded. There is no clue to the authorship. It has been attributed by different critics to Apollinaris, Apollonius, and Rhodon.

i. the exordium.

Having now for a very long and surely a very sufficient period had the charge pressed upon me by thee, my dear Avircius [2159] Marcellus, to write some sort of treatise against the heresy that bears the name of Miltiades, [2160] I have somehow been very doubtfully disposed toward the task up till now; not that I felt any difficulty in refuting the falsehood, and in bearing my testimony to the truth, but that I was apprehensive and fearful lest I should appear to any to be adding some new word or precept [2161] to the doctrine of the Gospel of the New Testament, with respect to which indeed it is not possible for one who has chosen to have his manner of life in accordance with the Gospel itself, either to add anything to it or to take away anything from it. Being recently, however, at Ancyra, a town of Galatia, and finding the church in Pontus [2162] greatly agitated [2163] by this new prophecy, as they call it, but which should rather be called this false prophecy, as shall be shown presently, I discoursed to the best of my ability, with the help of God, for many days in the church, both on these subjects and on various others [2164] which were brought under my notice by them. And this I did in such manner that the church rejoiced and was strengthened in the truth, while the adversaries [2165] were forthwith routed, and the opponents put to grief. And the presbyters of the place accordingly requested us to leave behind us some memorandum of the things which we alleged in opposition to the adversaries of the truth, there being present also our fellow-presbyter Zoticus Otrenus. [2166] This, however, we did not; but we promised, if the Lord gave us opportunity, to write down the matters here, and send them to them with all speed.ii. from book i. Now the attitude of opposition [2167] which they have assumed, and this new heresy of theirs which puts them in a position of separation from the Church, had their origin in the following manner. There is said to be a certain village called Ardaba [2168] in the Mysia, which touches Phrygia. [2169] There, they say, one of those who had been but recently converted to the faith, a person of the name of Montanus, when Gratus was proconsul of Asia, gave the adversary entrance against himself by the excessive lust of his soul after taking the lead. And this person was carried away in spirit; [2170] and suddenly being seized with a kind of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to speak and to utter strange things, and to prophesy in a manner contrary to the custom of the Church, as handed down from early times and preserved thenceforward in a continuous succession. And among those who were present on that occasion, and heard those spurious utterances, there were some who were indignant, and rebuked him as one frenzied, and under the power of demons, and possessed by the spirit of delusion, and agitating the multitude, and debarred him from speaking any more; for they were mindful of the Lord's distinction [2171] and threatening, whereby He warned them to be on their guard vigilantly against the coming of the false prophets. But there were others too, who, as if elated by the Holy Spirit and the prophetic gift, and not a little puffed up, and forgetting entirely the Lord's distinction, challenged the maddening and insidious and seductive spirit, being themselves cajoled and misled by him, so that there was no longer any checking him to silence. [2172] And thus by a kind of artifice, or rather by such a process of craft, the devil having devised destruction against those who were disobedient to the Lord's warning, and being unworthily honoured by them, secretly excited and inflamed their minds that had already left the faith which is according to truth, in order to play the harlot with error.

[2173] For he stirred up two others also, women, and filled them with the spurious spirit, so that they too spoke in a frenzy and unseasonably, and in a strange manner, like the person already mentioned, while the spirit called them happy as they rejoiced and exulted proudly at his working, and puffed them up by the magnitude of his promises; while, on the other hand, at times also he condemned them skilfully and plausibly, in order that he might seem to them also to have the power of reproof. [2174] And those few who were thus deluded were Phrygians. But the same arrogant spirit taught them to revile the Church universal under heaven, because that false spirit of prophecy found neither honour from it nor entrance into it. For when the faithful throughout Asia met together often and in many places of Asia for deliberation on this subject, and subjected those novel doctrines to examination, and declared them to be spurious, and rejected them as heretical, they were in consequence of that expelled from the Church and debarred from communion. [2175]iii. from book ii. Wherefore, since they stigmatized us as slayers of the prophets [2176] because we did not receive their loquacious [2177] prophets, -- for they say that these are they whom the Lord promised to send to the people, -- let them answer us in the name of God, and tell us, O friends, whether there is any one among those who began to speak from Montanus and the women onward that was persecuted by the Jews or put to death by the wicked? There is not one. Not even one of them is there who was seized and crucified for the name [2178] of Christ. No; certainly not. Neither assuredly was there one of these women who was ever scourged in the synagogues of the Jews, or stoned. No; never anywhere. It is indeed by another kind of death that Montanus and Maximilla are said to have met their end. For the report is, that by the instigation of that maddening spirit both of them hung themselves; not together indeed, but at the particular time of the death of each [2179] as the common story goes. And thus they died, and finished their life like the traitor Judas. Thus, also, the general report gives it that Theodotus -- that astonishing person who was, so to speak, the first procurator [2180] of their so-called prophecy, and who, as if he were sometime taken up and received into the heavens, fell into spurious ecstasies, [2181] and gave himself wholly over to the spirit of delusion -- was at last tossed by him [2182] into the air, and met his end miserably. People say then that this took place in the way we have stated. But as we did not see [2183] them ourselves, we do not presume to think that we know any of these things with certainty. And it may therefore have been in this way perhaps, and perhaps in some other way, that Montanus and Theodotus and the woman mentioned above perished. iv. And let not the spirit of Maximilla say (as it is found in the same book of Asterius Urbanus [2184]), "I am chased like a wolf from the sheep; I am no wolf. I am word, and spirit, and power." But let him clearly exhibit and prove the power in the spirit. And by the spirit let him constrain to a confession those who were present at that time for the very purpose of trying and holding converse with the talkative spirit -- those men so highly reputed as men and bishops -- namely, Zoticus of the village of Comana [2185] , and Julian of Apamea, whose mouths Themison [2186] and his followers bridled, and prevented the false and seductive spirit from being confuted by them.v. And has not the falsity of this also been made manifest already? For it is now upwards of thirteen years since the woman died, and there has arisen neither a partial nor a universal war in the world. Nay, rather there has been steady and continued peace to the Christians by the mercy of God.vi. from book iii. But as they have been refuted in all their allegations, and are thus at a loss what to say, they try to take refuge in their martyrs. For they say that they have many martyrs, and that this is a sure proof of the power of their so-called prophetic spirit. But this allegation, as it seems, carries not a whit more truth with it than the others. For indeed some of the other heresies have also a great

multitude of martyrs; but yet certainly we shall not on that account agree with them, neither shall we acknowledge that they have truth in them. And those first heretics, who from the heresy of Marcion are called Marcionites, allege that they have a great multitude of martyrs for Christ. But yet they do not confess Christ Himself according to truth.vii.Hence, also, whenever those who have been called to martyrdom for the true faith by the Church happen to fall in with any of those so-called martyrs of the Phrygian heresy, they always separate from them, and die without having fellowship with them, because they do not choose to give their assent to the spirit of Montanus and the women. And that this is truly the case, and that it has actually taken place in our own times at Apamea, a town on the Mæander, in the case of those who suffered martyrdom with Caius [2187] and Alexander, natives of Eumenia, is clear to all.viii.As I found these things in a certain writing of theirs directed against the writing of our brother Alcibiades, [2188] in which he proves the impropriety of a prophet's speaking in ecstasy, I made an abridgment of that work.ix.But the false prophet falls into a spurious ecstasy, which is accompanied by a want of all shame and fear. For beginning with a voluntary (designed) rudeness, he ends with an involuntary madness of soul, as has been already stated. But they will never be able to show that any one of the Old Testament prophets, or any one of the New, was carried away in spirit after this fashion. Nor will they be able to boast that Agabus, or Judas, or Silas, or the daughters of Philip, or the woman Ammia in Philadelphia, or Quadratus, or indeed any of the others who do not in any respect belong to them, were moved in this way.x.For if, after Quadratus and the woman Ammia in Philadelphia, as they say, the women who attached themselves to Montanus succeeded to the gift of prophecy, let them show us which of them thus succeeded Montanus and his women. For the apostle deems that the gift of prophecy should abide in all the Church up to the time of the final advent. But they will not be able to show the gift to be in their possession even at the present time, which is the fourteenth year only from the death of Maximilla. [2189]general note.The reader will do well to turn back to my Introductory Notice to the Epistle of Hermas, [2190] and also to the elucidations [2191] which are appended to that Epistle. If any value attaches to this fragment, it must be found in its illustrations of Hermas and Tertullian. These, in turn, shed light on it.

Elucidation.

(Aviricius Marcellus, [202]p.335, supra) Like his great predecessor in Patristic research (Bishop Pearson), the learned and indefatigable Bishop Lightfoot will leave us gold-dust in the mere sweepings of his literary work. His recent voluminous edition of the Apostolic Fathers [2192] is encyclopedic in its treatment of the subject; and I had hardly corrected the last proofs of the fragments ascribed to Asterius Urbanus when I discovered, in one of his notes on Polycarp, a most brilliant elucidation of a matter which I had supposed involved in twofold obscurity. Asterius is a mere name embedded in Eusebius, and in his fragments there preserved is embedded the yet obscurer name of Aviricius Marcellus, which the reader will find, with its various spellings, in one of the translator's notes. [2193] Who could have supposed that even the learning and ingenuity of Lightfoot could fish out of very dark waters such shining booty as fills the network about "Abercius of Hierapolis?" While he does not even name Asterius, the mere *nominis umbra* of Aviricius Marcellus is material for a truly remarkable dissertation covering nine pages of fine print, and enabling us to conclude that this Aviricius is none other than the same "bishop of Hierapolis" about whom there is such a long story in the Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum* [2194] The story is a silly legend, but Lightfoot understands the art *ex fumo dare lucem*; and any one who enjoys following up such elaborations will find most curious and delightful reading in the pages to which I have referred. Our Aviricius, then, was bishop of "Hierapolis of Lesser Phrygia," not of Hierapolis on the Mæander, and flourished about a.d.163, during the reign of M. Aurelius. This date, therefore, must correct the conjecture of Tillemont and the date which I had accepted from him on the authority of Dr. Lardner. [2195]

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