Letters of Besa, from the Sahidic Coptic

Besa of Atripe (c. AD 390–474)

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Contents

Exhortations **1**

On Lack of Food **2**

On Vigilance **3**

To Aphthonia **5**

To Thieving Nuns **7**

Exhortations

world, as we walk in defilement and drunkenness and reveling and drinking and defiled idol worship. (1 Pet 4:3) As we walk in wickedness and envy, becoming hated as we hate each other. As we become disobedient and stray. (Titus 3:3) As we walk in the vanity of our heart and become dark in our thoughts. As we become alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is inside us because of our obstinacy. As we have given over to defilement and doing every impure thing. But now it is not in this way that we were taught. (Eph 4:17-20) But rather what was taught to us is to do something for our salvation in fear and trembling. For God is the one who enacts the will and the fulfillment of the will. (Phil 2:12-13) And indeed the children of Israel, Moses saw them at that time in the way that they hastened to forget the commandments of God. He commanded them to make fringes at the wings of their garments so that they might see them and think of the commandments of God and not forget them. (cf. Num 15:38-39) Now let us too place the fear of God in our heart instead of the fringes, so that we do not forget the commandments that our fathers entrusted to us. Therefore brothers let us turn around and repent while the opportunity is not yet lost for us, and while the light is still with us, which is the teachings of our fathers.

In the way that the Lord said: 'Walk as long as you have the light so that the darkness does not overtake you.' (Jn 12:35) And: 'As we are in the day, let us walk while we are in propriety.' (Rom 13:13) And: 'Those that sleep, it's at night that they sleep. And those that are drunk, it is at night that they are drunk. But we are of the day, let us be sober as we don the armor of faith.' (1 Thess 5:7-8)

On Lack of Food

It is by those who are bound and suffering that you are troubled, in the manner that they live on the herb of the field, because they did not find what they shall eat, and in the manner that we hear and those who see agree about their difficulty. Hence, let us all pray, everyone who fears God, that Christ may put his blessing and that it may remain in his congregations and that he may not let his monasteries (lit. places) lack anything.

On Vigilance

[Why] do you subject [yourselves] to laws in the world as the living do: 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not approach.' This means: we have escaped the sins of the world by leaving them behind us. Why do we now turn around and entangle us in them? And he has also said, at that time you were dark, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light. For the fruit of the light consists purely in good things, in justice and truth. Examine what pleases the Lord and do not take part in the fruitless deeds of darkness, which bear no fruit, but expose them instead. For what they do in secret is shameful to even mention. But each filthy work is exposed by the light. For everything which is manifest is light. Therefore, let us denounce our foolish notions and all inspirations by the devil, unbelief and hatred, as they inspire us to devise evil against each other, which will cause there to be no true connection among us. And we blame each other and not ourselves, as if our struggle were to be against each other and not against the principalities and powers, against the world rulers of darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil that are under heaven – our fight should be against them, but not against flesh and blood.

As the Apostle said: Reach for the armor of God, so that you can resist the crafty snares of the devil, because not against flesh and blood is our fight. Therefore, be vigilant and let us hold onto the good, because although many are together in the flesh, they are far apart in the heart and in terms of love. Many, however, who are not together in the flesh, they are together in the love of Christ and the Spirit and the desire for Jesus. But you, brethren, pay attention to yourselves and do not deviate from what we have learned. Then many will learn and profit from you, as he has said, your good works shall be seen, and your Father in heaven be praised. For just as you have modeled yourself after all the saints through your Christian way of life, as he said: But you, you have followed my teaching, my example, my purpose, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, my suffering, continue to imitate them by preserving for yourselves the fruits of your efforts. After all, who has imperishable riches in Christ, must also assure themselves of this wealth. If already those who have earthly goods, gold, silver and other possessions, are vigilant so that robbers do not carry them off in secret, then we must watch all the more so that the enemy does not secretly carry off our merits: our prayers, our fasting practices, our chastity and our steadfastness.

The theft of silver and gold is not quite comparable to this, but the more respected virginity and the monastic life are, the more the enemy strives also to capture them unnoticed. Who has obtained pearls or gold, stands guard. If even the enemy remains awake at night to commit a villainy, then the owner of the wealth will watch all the more so that they don't fall victim to any attack. We want to remind ourselves of what our father said, brothers according to our way of life fast and pray and hold vigils, but they also lie, argue, are defiant, grumble and slander, hate, are hostile, fornicate and are devious: they commit every imaginable evil. Such people toil for nothing, and nothing good will happen to them. Their steadfastness is of no benefit to them. As has been said: He is not a full sheaf that he could give flour. In this regard has also been said: Sow wheat, and reap thorns. Their fields will bring them no harvest. Therefore keep watch and do not let the enemy destroy our merit while we make it. Instead, we want to adamantly preserve our minds from any impure thought from the devil to become worthy to hear this with satisfaction (p 3): 'From now on, they will no longer work on an agency basis, but they will work for the Lord, their God.

Because thieves do not break into a house or anywhere else where there are no valuables, but only where they would find valuables. They also do not break into a place guarded against thieves, but where they know that no one watches, but everyone is asleep, it is there that they break in and rob, whatever they find, In the same way the devil does not rob the one who is vigilant and preserves the fruits of his effort, but the one whom he finds careless and without fear of God, not considering, in which state he will come into the hands of God, driven back and forth by every wind, this is the one whose fruits he robs ruthlessly. Therefore now take courage and be vigilant, brothers, everyone who is of one mind with God and our fathers, and also with us, whether man or woman, young or old, here with us or with you! We will not allow our eyes sleep and our eyelids slumber until the Lord saves us from any temptation by the enemy. Because there are many who envy us. And give no heed to brothers, who are often involved in strife and rebellion, and disown their steadfastness. Do not let them become a stumbling block to you! God shall never be able to say that they are a stumbling block to the righteous, those who have complete faith in Christ and wait for the Spirit of God.

But woe to you sinners who disown your steadfastness and throw the communities into turmoil through cowardice, envy, hatred, strife, rebellion and intrigue! What are you going to do on the day of your visitation? For your trouble comes from afar. Or is it no judgment for us that we - after we have left behind what we have left behind, and have entered into a contract with whom which we have entered into a contract, affirming under oath, 'We will not steal, lie, commit sexual misconduct, bear false witness, commit fraud secretly ', and all the points that come hereafter - that we then do these again [... 2 sheets ...]

To Aphthonia

You have given glory to God indeed. It's to you that I speak, you Aphthonia, daughter of the Comes Alexander. Have you not honoured the place you were nourished in according to God and according to the world , in your words and your deeds? If your heart hadn't corrupted, you would not despise the place you are in, or shame the sisters who are in the place with you. They call you by your name "Aphthonia", but you revile yourself alone. And you are a slanderer to you yourself, what you wish is to destroy your soul, which the whole world isn't worthy of. and to lead astray in your sufferings for no reason. For you have left room for Satan inside you to transform your heart, and daze you like those sheep that become (spoiled) by moths. You stupid and foolish one in which there isn't wisdom. For if there had been knowledge in you, even if they truly fought with you, then you ought to let a man know how they are inside your place. Most of all when you sent to your father and your mother: "they fought with me," or "they abused me". It's you lying, as they didn't fight with you nor did they abuse you. That they "fought with you" was that you were given knowledge in your transgressing the law by your receiving something from your parents without asking.

What is it that you asked for or needed and were rejected, or you weren't given it? If you told your father and your mother, are we to be afraid? All the more so as you lie. So you don't want us to tell them about your foolish actions which you do and your stealing and your quarrels. Oh you truly blind one who gropes in daylight like those who are in midnight and like those blind ones, who have no eyes. Where is it that your parents from the world will hear of your action inside this place, without us knowing in the monastery? So if they truly did violence to you or grieved or pained you, you should have told us of your pain. I tell you we'll know if it's the truth you're telling or not. Or you should have told your mother in this place with you. If you don't call her only with your mouth "mother". But it's that your heart is distant far away from her. As it is written: "this people honours me with their lips, but their heart is distant far away from me." For if your stupid heart hadn't darkened on you, would you have scorned your parents who are in the community with you, or despised the sisters that you dwell with in your pride and your boastfulness? Or if you hadn't left behind you the teaching and the wisdom.

And as you loved what is evil, instead of what is good. Would you have practiced things which are evil, and said with your mouth that is full of curses upon bitterness: "I'll go to

another monastery". In what was it that this place did you violence? Or what is the weight that they put on you, except that they told you "don't violate the command of God," because you gave perfume and mesouaphi to a maiden while she was in the house with you so that you'll become an obstacle and a scandal to each other. For this thing, I promise you that if you don't give your admission and take away this disobedience of yours and those quarrels in vain, I will make your heart suffer. And I will make them treat you like what came out of your mouth. Indeed I am concerned, for you (Aphthonia) and for you (the congregation). What I'm afraid of is that, in the way that the serpent deceived Eve in his treachery, your hearts waste away from the simplicity and the purity which bring to Christ. If he didn't leave the one who is there in paradise, is it you (Aphthonia) that he will spare? Or you (the congregation), in your leaving room for him inside yourselves. As you also indulge in his plans of guile and his wicked deeds. For he will not have power over those who fear God inside. Those for whom Christ is an aid and a protector.

As it is written: 'the one who fights on your behalf is your aid, and the sword of your pride and the glory of your foundation' Whoever will love that which is evil, he is the one who will perish. And he is the one that the devil will have power over in his deeds of soul killing. But the wise one who loves the teaching, he will receive the commandment. And the intelligent one who fears God inside will acquire guidance for himself. But let me hear that you have pleased your parents who are in the place with you. And that you obey them in every action. And our heart shall be at ease. And as for you, you will be filled with satisfaction. But if you still have something to say, here are the elders, our parents and our brothers, they have come to you. Proclaim it to them, and all of you. So you have words there, or any deed in your place. Don't continue to want to tell them As you do not hide anything from them So that all our hearts may be at ease together, we and you. And God will be pleased with us too.

To Thieving Nuns

Oh you guilty on your part who allow Satan to come in, defiling the holy places of God. And you defile his temple which is you yourselves. Didn't you remember the prohibition of the apostle, "he who will defile the temple of God, that one God will destroy." Nor still did you remember all the curses which our father said as he gave all of us into the hand of God saying: "he is cursed, he who will defile his body in any form, or steal anything, from a string to a lace." Most of all clothes and robes and hoods. And down to the least of things of eating. Whether out of the service of God or out of the shares of those next to them I actually thought to come to you in good faith, but the sorrow of those who have enraged God and pained his holy ghost, is what has hindered our joy. I know that every suffering is my fate, but if God with our Lord Jesus is doing his will, I come to you in a rage. And I will do to these unwise ones and these foolish virgins, who have no oil in their vessels all those things that are in my heart. That still again you return back to these provocations of God you fall down by the sword of the wicked one who has destroyed all of civilization in his sins and acts of lawlessness.

For you have loved defilement rather than purification, and you have chosen death for you rather than life. For you have angered him who has created you, and who has nourished you, God who is forever. And you have also given suffering to her who has nursed you, Jerusalem, which is the congregation. And you have fallen in daylight like those who are in midnight. As it is written: "she has stumbled, she has fallen, that is the virgin of Israel and so she won't get up again. For "those who sleep," he said, "it's at night that they sleep. And those who are drunk, it's at night that they're drunk". But as for you, you've drunk in day like those of whom it is said: "those who are drunk without wine ". And you have slept in daylight like those who sleep in the night. For you have left the fear of God behind you; as you have loved darkness instead of light; and as you have also thought what's bitter to be sweet, and what's sweet to be bitter. Because of this, woe to you evil ones that you did not think of all the toil that our father has endured with all of you. As you have left behind his teachings of life and those of the petitions of your fathers.

Furthermore, behold the elders go with their brothers they came to you another time. As we live in a great grief and much heart ache. To have them done one by one by you according to their worth. Since you have left the flow of the water of life behind you. While you dug

yourselves pits that are broken in making your hearts of foolishness do wrong to you. While you say: 'we are clever'. You have been foolish. While you have changed the honor of God in your actions which are unworthy. For this reason, God has laid you down to torments, which are written, that is stealing and defilement and every kind of evil. Those things which every vengence will happen to those that commit them. Not just in this world but in the other one.

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