

LETTER ON THE MASSACRE AT THESSALONICA

INTRODUCTION TO *EPISTULA EXTRA COLLECTIONEM* 11 (MAUR. 51)

This famous letter was written in 390,¹ after a large number of civilians had been massacred at Thessalonica in retaliation for the killing in a riot of the Gothic general Butheric. The retaliation was ordered some time after the killing, and an imperial letter revoking the order came too late. In the letter Ambrose tells the emperor that he will not be able to give him communion while remains in his present state of sin, and that he must show repentance, as David had done after the murder of Uriah. Theodosius duly complied, and came to church without his imperial robes until Christmas when Ambrose again admitted him to communion.² McLynn has for the first time explained how the penance of Theodosius was possible in terms of the political situation, and of the relations between bishop and emperor,³ by examining as a historical problem what, following the accounts of Paulinus and especially Theodoret,⁴ has been treated as an astonishing *exemplum* of an outspoken bishop courageously doing his duty of recalling a ruler to his moral obligations. McLynn brings out the extreme, one might say un-Ambrosian, tactfulness of the letter. He also shows that in the letter Ambrose advocates a course which will avoid precisely the kind of public humiliation of the emperor by the bishop which Theodoret has described in his dramatisation of the episode.

1 The generally accepted date of 390 is based on Theodoret and Rufinus. The other sources relate the incident to the defeat of Eugenius in 394. But it does not easily fit into the relations between Ambrose and Theodosius in 394 (cf. *Epp. ex.* 2 and 3 of 394). It has also been argued in favour of 390 that the arrest of a charioteer for homosexual assault, which provoked the riot at Thessalonica, was thought to have been a consequence of the law *Mos. et Rom. Leg. Coll.* 5.3 of 390, and that *CTh* 9.40.13, which we are told was issued as part of Theodosius' penance, was probably issued on 18 August in AD 390 (Seeck, *Regesten*, 92–93).

2 See Rufinus, *HE* 11.18; Sozomen, *HE* 7.25; Paulinus, *V. Ambr.* 24–25; Augustine, *Civ. Dei* 5.26.

3 McLynn 1994, 315–30.

4 Paulinus, *V. Ambr.* 24; Theodoret, *HE* 5.17.

or indeed the facing down of the emperor by the bishop which Ambrose, writing to his sister, suggests (perhaps slightly misleadingly) followed his sermon on the synagogue at Callinicum.¹ Even if McLynn's suggestion that Theodosius' penance for the massacre represented a consciously planned publicity triumph may be slightly anachronistic, he does give a plausible account of what actually happened, and an explanation of how this episode, seemingly so unprecedented, was possible in the conditions of the Roman empire in the fourth century. One may wonder why Ambrose did not include this letter in his *Collection*. He described Theodosius' penance for the massacre at Thessalonica in the *De obitu Theodosii* which he did include.²

TRANSLATION OF *EPISTULA EXTRA COLLECTIONEM* 11

Ambrose to the most august emperor Theodosius.

1. The memory of old friendship is sweet, and I remember the favour of benefits which you have with the utmost favour bestowed upon others in response to my numerous acts of intercession. Hence it can be surmised that it was not in a spirit of ingratitude that I had the temerity to decline to be present at your arrival, which previously I always most ardently longed for. But the reason why I did this I will briefly explain.³

2. I saw that I alone of all at your court had been stripped of the natural right⁴ of hearing, with the consequence that I had also been deprived of the power of speaking. For you have frequently been offended because I obtained knowledge of a number of decisions which had been taken in the consistory.⁵ As a result, I no longer enjoy what is available to all,⁶ even though

1 *Ep. ex. 1* (Maur. 41).

2 *De ob. Theod.* 34.

3 Ambrose found it tactful to approach his real theme, the massacre, indirectly. He first (cc. 2–3) explains that he could not attend at court because the embargo on information from the consistory being passed on to him meant that he could not speak his mind there without endangering his sources of information. It is only in c. 6 that we learn the reason why at this point it was so important to keep full freedom of speech: the massacre of Thessalonica.

4 *Ius naturae*.

5 The affair of the synagogue of Callinicum (*Ep.* 74; *Epp. ex.* 1 and 1a) and the senatorial embassy pleading for the return of the subsidy to the state cults of Rome (*Ep. ex.* 10.4) happened not long before this letter. Evidently the emperor resented Ambrose's initiatives and tried to prevent their recurrence.

6 The embargo on information about the business of the consistory being passed on to Ambrose cannot have been in force for very long, because c. 6 shows that Ambrose had been

the lord Jesus says: *nothing is hidden that shall not be made manifest*.¹ I nevertheless showed as much respect as I could to your imperial will, for I made sure that you would have no cause for anger by acting in such a way that it was impossible for any report relating to imperial decisions to reach me;² and I saved myself from being at court in the embarrassing position of either not hearing anything because everybody was afraid to speak, and so getting myself a reputation for turning a blind eye,³ or alternatively of having to listen with my ears open, but my mouth firmly closed, so that it would be impossible for me to report what I had heard, in case I endangered the people who would be suspected of having informed me.⁴

3. What in the circumstances was I to do? Hear nothing? But I could not have blocked my ears with the wax of the old myths.⁵ Disclose what I heard? But I was duty-bound to avoid my words having the consequence which I feared your commands would: the shedding of blood. Was I to hold my tongue? But that would have been the most miserable course of all, for my conscience would have been fettered, my voice silenced. And what about the text stating that if the priest will not admonish the wrongdoer, the wrongdoer will die in his guilt, but the priest will be liable to punishment because he did not warn the wrongdoer?⁶

4. Listen to this, august emperor. That you are zealous for the faith, I cannot deny. That you fear God, I do not dispute. But you have been born with a passionate nature. When there is somebody around to calm you, you quickly channel it into pity, but if somebody inflames it, you let your passion grow to such a pitch that you can scarcely control it. May nobody ever be there to inflame your passion, unless there is also somebody to allay it. Personally I am happy to leave it to you to deal with your passion. You are in control of yourself, and by striving to achieve piety, you are mastering your own nature.

able to intervene in earlier discussions of the punishment to be imposed for the murder of the general at Thessalonica.

¹ Lk. 8.17.

² As he was not at court he could not be told what had been decided there. Ambrose argues (with slight irony) that his absence, far from showing disrespect, was actually intended to assist implementation of the emperor's command that he should receive no information.

³ The reader of the letter does not yet know that 'what has been done' is the massacre of Thessalonica, though Theodosius might have guessed, because Ambrose had warned him before the massacre had taken place (c. 6).

⁴ I have translated this rather involved sentence quite freely.

⁵ Hom. *Od.* 12.173-77.

⁶ Simplified after Ezek. 3.18.

5. Rather than risk arousing that passionate nature in yours by any public act of mine, I preferred to leave it to you to deal with it in private.¹ And so I preferred to fall somewhat short in the performance of my office rather than in humility, and to have other men ask why I was not exercising my episcopal authority, rather than that you should find any lack of respect in me, who am so devoted to you. And I did this so that you should master your passion, and then be free to decide your policy yourself. My excuse was illness of the body,² which did indeed weigh me down, and which only men of merciful disposition could have lightened. In other circumstances I would have preferred to die rather than fail to wait two or three days for your arrival; but I had no option.

6. An act was committed at Thessalonica which is unprecedented in human memory, an act whose perpetration I could not prevent, an act which previously, in so many petitions, I had warned would be an atrocity, an act which you yourself condemned as brutal³ when you revoked it too late.⁴ That act I could not extenuate. When the news was first heard a synod had assembled because of the arrival of the Gallic bishops: no one was there who did not lament, nobody who took it lightly. Your being in communion with Ambrose was not seen as a ground for acquitting you. No, the indignation at your deed would swell still further, if no one was saying that you would need to be reconciled to God.⁵

7. Or are you ashamed, emperor, to do what was done by David, the king and prophet and according to the flesh, forefather of the family of Christ? David was told that a rich man, who had numerous flocks, on the arrival of

1 Ambrose explains why he has not protested in public against Theodosius' punitive order before it resulted in the massacre. Public protest would only have inflamed Theodosius' easily kindled anger further. Furthermore, if he had protested in public he would not have shown the respect he owed to the emperor to whom he remained devoted. In all Ambrose admits that he could have done more.

2 *Aegritudinem corporis gravem ... viris mitioribus ... levandam*. Ambrose is in a sense admitting that his 'illness' was diplomatic, but he qualifies this by saying that he did indeed suffer from severe physical depression at the prospect that in his anger Theodosius would order some violent punishment, a depression which could only be cured if the emperor showed mercy.

3 *Grave factum putasti*.

4 The sentence shows that between the killing of the general and the massacre, inflicted as a punishment, there had been an interval during which the punishment to be inflicted on the Thessalonians was discussed at court, and Ambrose had several opportunities to protest. We also learn that Theodosius had actually revoked the order, but too late to stop the massacre.

5 I.e. if Ambrose was not now making the stand, represented by this letter.

a guest seized the only sheep of a poor man and killed it, and he recognised that in this he was himself being accused because this was what he had done and he said: *I have sinned against the Lord.*¹ Don't therefore take it ill, emperor, if you are told: 'you have done what the prophet told king David that he had done'. For if you listen to this attentively, and say: *I have sinned against the Lord*, if you repeat that royal and prophetic saying: *O come, let us worship and fall down before him, and let us weep before the Lord our maker,*² you too will be told: 'Because you have repented, *the Lord will forgive your sin and you shall not die*'.³

8. On a second occasion when David had ordered the people to be numbered, his heart smote him and he said to the Lord: *I have sinned greatly in that I have done this word,*⁴ and now, Lord, take away the iniquity of your servant, because I have sinned⁵ exceedingly. And again Nathan⁶ was sent to him to let him choose which of three conditions he wanted: three years of famine upon the earth, or three months as a fugitive from his enemies, or three days of death on earth.⁷ And David answered: *All three cause me great distress. But let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercies are very many, and let me not fall into the hands of man.*⁸ But his offence was that he wished to know the number of all the people he had with him, knowledge which he ought to have reserved for God.

9. And when, as Scripture tells us, death had been let loose among the people of Israel, on the very first day, at dinner time⁹ when David saw the angel striking down the people, he said: *I have sinned, I the shepherd have done wrong, but this flock, what have they done? Let your hand be against me and against the house of my father.*¹⁰ So the Lord repented and ordered the angel to spare the people,¹¹ but David was to offer sacrifice. For in those

1 2 Sam. 12.1ff.

2 Ps. 95.6 (Vulg. 94.6).

3 2 Sam. 12.13.

4 1 Chron. 21.8. but where Ambrose has 'word' (*verbum*) Vulg. reads *hoc* (this), as does RSV.

5 *Deliqui vehementer*, but Vulg: *insipienter* (foolishly).

6 Vulg. and RSV have Gad.

7 1 Chron. 21.12.

8 1 Chron. 21.13, with some difference from both Vulg. and RSV.

9 The reference to 'dinner time' is neither in Vulg. nor in RSV.

10 1 Chron. 21.17.

11 In the biblical account God orders the angel to spare the people even before David had taken the guilt on himself.

days there were sacrifices for sin, but these have now become sacrifices of penance. And so by that act of humility David made himself more acceptable to the Lord. For it should not be a matter for surprise that a man sins, but it is reprehensible if he does not acknowledge that he has done wrong, if he does not humble himself before God.

10. Job, a holy man and one of power in the world, says: *I have not hidden my sin but declared it before all the people.*¹ To the barbaric king Saul Jonathan his own son said: *Do not sin against your servant David and why do you sin against innocent blood to slay David without a cause?*² For though he was king he would nevertheless sin if he slew an innocent man. Finally David himself, when he was already in possession of his kingdom, and heard that the innocent Abner had been slain by Joab the leader of his army, said: *I and my kingdom are now and for ever innocent of the blood of Abner son of Ner,* and he fasted in sorrow.³

11. I have written these things not to embarrass you but so that these examples involving kings may induce you to lift this burden of sin from your kingship; and you will lift it by humbling your soul before God. You are a man and temptation has come your way. Conquer it! Sin cannot be abolished otherwise than by tears and penitence. Neither an angel nor an archangel can do it. The Lord himself who alone can say *I am with you*⁴ does not forgive our sin if we have sinned, unless we show penitence.

12. I persuade, request, encourage, advise because I am filled with grief that you, who set an unprecedented example of piety, who occupied the summit of clemency, who would not allow individuals to be endangered even if they were guilty, do not mourn the destruction of so many innocent people. Although you have been highly successful in battles, although you merit praise in other respects also, nevertheless the crown of your achievements has always been your piety. The devil has envied you this, your most excellent possession. Conquer him while you still have the means to conquer. Do not add another sin to your sin to cling to something which has proved injurious to many who have clung to it.

13. I, certainly for my part, seeing that I am in all other things a debtor to your Piety, (a state of affairs) for which I cannot but be grateful, and that I used to consider that piety of yours superior to that of many emperors, and

1 This is a very free paraphrase of Job 31.33.

2 1 Sam. 19.4-5.

3 2 Sam. 3.28.

4 Mt. 28.20.

to have been equalled by only one.¹ I have, I can claim, no reason why I should display contumacy towards you, but I have reason to be afraid on your behalf. I dare not offer the sacrifice, if you intend to be there. Or is what is not allowed when the blood of one innocent victim has been shed, allowed when the blood has been shed of many?² I do not think so.

14. Lastly I am writing with my own hand what you alone are to read.³ As I hope that the Lord would free me from all tribulations, it has not been by a man, nor by mediation of a man, but by manifest divine intervention that I learnt that it was prohibited to me. For as I was worried, in the very night that I was about to set out,⁴ I dreamt that you had indeed come to the church, but that I was forbidden to offer the sacrifice. Other things I pass over and could have avoided, but I put up with them for love of you, as I think.⁵ May the Lord cause all these things to work out peacefully. Our God admonishes us by a variety of means: through heavenly signs, through the warnings of prophets, even through the visions of sinners he wishes us to learn that we are to pray to him to put an end to disorder, to preserve peace for you, our emperors, and to uphold the faith and tranquillity of the Church, for which it is a benefit that the emperors are Christian and pious.

15. You undoubtedly wish to be approved of by God. *There is a time for everything*,⁶ as it is written: *Lord, there is a time for doing*,⁷ and *a time for being accepted, O God*.⁸ You will make your offering, when you have received permission to sacrifice, when your offering has become acceptable to God. Don't you think that it would please me to keep the favour of the emperor, and to act according to your wishes, if only the case permitted it? Prayer on its own is also a sacrifice, one which obtains pardon, while the

1 Does Ambrose mean Gratian? Theodosius had recently married Galla, a daughter of Valentinian I and sister of Gratian. One might think that the reference is to Constantine, but Ambrose had strong reservations concerning the first Christian emperor. See above p. 175.

2 Seven thousand, according to Theodoret, *HE* 5.17.

3 I think this means that up to here the letter has been dictated, and that the rest is in Ambrose's hand. He wants to emphasise the personal nature of the communication; this is the priest's confidential counsel to a parishioner, if a very elevated one.

4 To go out to meet Theodosius as he was returning to Milan.

5 This is very obscure. But the following sentence suggests that Ambrose had witnessed some disturbances or demonstrations which he has interpreted as divine warnings? One might think of the death of baby Gratian (c. 16–17). But the context suggests some trouble affecting Ambrose himself.

6 Ec. 3.1.

7 Ps. 119.126 (Vulg. 118.126).

8 Ps. 69.13 (Vulg. 68.14).

offering would give offence, because the former expresses humility, the latter contempt. We have God's word that he considers it more important that his commandments are followed than that sacrifice is offered.¹ God proclaims this. Moses announces it to the people. Paul preaches it to the nations. Do that which you know is going to be more pleasing on the present occasion. It is written: *I want mercy, rather than sacrifice.*² Are we not therefore to consider true Christians those who condemn their sin, rather than those who insist on justifying it? *At the beginning of his speech the just man accuses himself.*³ The just man is one who accuses himself when he has sinned, not he who praises himself.

16. I wish, emperor that previously too I had trusted my instinct rather than your usual behaviour. While I was confident that you are quick to pardon, quick to revoke your sentence, as you have often done, you were forestalled,⁴ and I did not avert what I should have had no reason to fear.⁵ But thanks be to the Lord, who chooses to chastise⁶ his servants to avoid destroying them. This I share with the prophets and you will share with the saints.

17. And ought I not to value the father of Gratian⁷ more than my own eyes? Let your other holy offspring⁸ pardon me (for saying this). I have placed a name, which is dear to me, ahead of those whom I love with equal affection. I love, I cherish, I attend you with prayers. If you believe, me follow my advice, if you believe me, I repeat, acknowledge the truth of what I am saying. If you do not believe me, pardon what I am doing, namely that I am putting God first. May you, august emperor, together with your holy offspring, enjoy enduring peace, in the utmost happiness and prosperity.

1 Cf. Hos. 6.6.

2 Mt. 9.13.

3 A version of Pr. 18.17, differing from Vulg., but very much more from RSV.

4 Theodosius had revoked his order, but too late to prevent it being carried out, cf. c. 6.

5 Ambrose had criticised the imperial order while it was under discussion (c. 6). Here he suggests that he could have done more.

6 How has Theodosius been chastised? S. Rebenich, 'Gratian, a son of Theodosius, and the birth of Galla Placidia', *Historia* 34 (1985), 372–85, argues from *De ob. Theod.* 40 that Theodosius and Galla had a short-lived son, Gratian, as well as the daughter Pulcheria. Could it be that the baby son had died recently? This would make the parallel with 2 Sam. 11–12 (David and Nathan/Theodosius and Ambrose) even closer.

7 Theodosius' short-lived son.

8 I have translated *dent* rather than *debent*. The offspring are Arcadius and Honorius.