

Evantius of Toledo, Letter

Translated by Kenneth Baxter Wolf and the students of his Medieval Latin Translation tutorial (Spring, 2021)—Tommy Burke, Madison Hesse, Eugene Kwon, Millie Mince, and Catherine Phillips—from the Latin text found in Juan Gil, ed., Scriptores Muzarabici Saeculi VIII-XI, Corpus Christianorum, continuatio Mediaevalis LXVA (Brepols, 2020), I:201—204.

Very little is known about the author of this letter. The anonymous Christian author of the Chronicle of 754 (section 70), identified “Archdeacon Evantius” [of Toledo] as one of three outstanding Iberian churchmen in terms of their “teaching, wisdom, and sanctity” around the year 720. Later in the same text (section 83) the chronicler reported Evantius’ death around 740. His name also appears in Cixilo’s Life of Ildephonsus (line 97). It is noteworthy that, in the very wake of the Muslim takeover of Zaragoza, a Christian cleric would be so concerned about the possibility of Judaizing Christians in the area..

An outstanding letter of the Lord Archdeacon Evantius, [assembled] from the divine scriptures, against those who think that blood is unclean

1. Because an opportune occasion has presented itself, my wretchedness has undertaken to offer a little page from my own meagerness, which is to be proffered for your contemplation, by means which I eagerly spread the duties of salvation and commit myself to be protected by your prayers. Having dispensed with these [introductory] matters, it has come to the knowledge of your servant that you claim to have discovered in certain parts of Zaragoza Christians following those, not yet learned in the sacred pages, who, in a certain Judaic manner, observe the letter that kills and disregard the spirit that gives life,¹ who say men eating the blood of any animal are made unclean, neither knowing nor not understanding the ancient precepts, thus demonstrating the customs of humans more than those things that are to be observed according to nature of animals. For if these things are so, I do not know why they do not openly observe, along with the Jews, other things forbidden, according to the precepts of the ancient law. Why do they not reject meat from strangled animals² or rabbit meat?³ Why not reject the flesh of fish that lack fins?⁴ Why not sacrifice the burnt offerings of old?⁵ Why not assume the responsibility of raising up the seed of the wife of a married brother who has died without sons?⁶ Why do they reject for the priesthood people who are weak in body or who have some defect of the body who otherwise are seen as worthy in spirit?⁷ Why not carry paddles in their belts for covering up their excrement with soil?⁸ Why, if they are able, do they keep the bird that is found with its chicks, and not, according to the precept, permit the

¹ Based on II Corinthians 3:6.

² The Latin reads *carnes sugillinas*, that is, “meats [or animals that were] strangled” (*sugillo-are: bruised, strangled*); Acts 15:20: “But that we write unto them, that they refrain themselves from the pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.” (see also: Acts 15:29, 21:25). “Strangled” (*suffocatus*), meaning killed without being ritually drained of blood. For proscriptions against consuming blood, see: Deuteronomy 12:16, 12:23.

³ Leviticus 11:5: “The hare also [is unclean]: for that too cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof.” The principle is based on Leviticus 11:3: “Whatsoever hath the hoof divided, and cheweth the cud among the beasts, you shall eat.”

⁴ Leviticus 11:9-11: “These are the things that breed in the waters, and which it is lawful to eat. All that hath fins, and scales, as well in the sea, as in the rivers, and the pools, you shall eat. But whatsoever hath not fins and scales, of those things that move and live in the waters, shall be an abomination to you, And detestable: their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall avoid.”

⁵ For details about burnt offerings, see: Leviticus 1; 6:8-13. “The Israelites brought a bull, sheep, or goat, a male with no defect, and killed it at the entrance to the tabernacle. The animal’s blood was drained, and the priest sprinkled blood around the altar. The animal was skinned and cut it into pieces, the intestines and legs washed, and the priest burned the pieces over the altar all night.” <https://www.gotquestions.org/burnt-offering.html>

⁶ Deuteronomy 25:5: “When brethren dwell together, and one of them dieth without children, the wife of the deceased shall not marry to another: but his brother shall take her, and raise up seed for his brother.”

⁷ Leviticus 21:17: “Whosoever of thy seed throughout their families, hath a blemish, he shall not offer bread to his God.”

⁸ Deuteronomy 23:12-14: “Thou shalt have a place without the camp, to which thou mayst go for the necessities of nature, Carrying a paddle at thy girdle. And when thou sittest down, thou shalt dig round about, and with the earth that is dug up thou shalt cover that which thou art eased of.”

mother to go while keeping the chicks?⁹ Why do they not observe the leisure of the sabbath along with the Jews and reject the new grace of the gospel, thus stripping away the vigor of Christianity? For we are openly of the Christian faith, and, in the name of Christ, we openly teach Christians that blood is to be eaten while we exhort everyone to turn away from shedding blood. We permit the eating of strangled meats¹⁰ while we choose to recede from the sty of vices. We permit the eating of the flesh of fish lacking fins while we opt to fly, as if with wings, to heaven. With regard to sacerdotal weaknesses in the body or those bodies bearing a defect, let them read the *Book of Pastoral Care* of St. Gregory, because the many things to be elucidated on this matter would take us a long time. The covering of excrement with soil using a paddle refers to those who, struggling to perform good deeds, cover the bad deeds they have committed, that is, the stenches of the flesh, about whom It is written: "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered."¹¹ We allow the mother hen found with her chicks to go as a mother because we elevate the testimonies from the law for the sake of refuting of heretics and Jews;¹² we do not observe the law in a carnal manner. We neglect the leisure of the sabbath because, on account of that future rest, which this Sabbath prefigures, we advise exerting ourselves day and night in doing good works. There are many other examples that you know to be contained in the Old Law.

2. If perchance they object that these [restrictions] are contained in the canons, I myself am not ignorant of these things, but in the books or canons of the ancients, when a new¹³ prepuce was recommended to someone coming [to the faith] from circumcision,¹⁴ he was still being fed with milk, not with solid food. They will be aware of the fact that the Apostle said such a thing to the Corinthians and they find these things done in the Acts of the Apostles. But now the church of God stands strengthened in the faith with solid food so that it can now fight in a manly way against the attacks of the heretics, and not succumb to them, enervated with the softness of children. But lest [my] epistolary execution, protracted over extensive periods, foster contempt in agreeable readers, I will come to that place where the apostle says: "All things are clean to the clean: but to them that are defiled, and to the unclean, nothing is clean,"¹⁵ etc. And "nothing [is] to be rejected that is received with thanksgiving."¹⁶ And according to the Savior in the gospel: "Nothing outside a man entering into a man defiles [him]...,"¹⁷ and again the Apostle [Paul]: "All things are lawful to me, but all things are not expedient. All things are lawful to me, but all things do not

⁹ Deuteronomy 22:6-7: "If thou find as thou walkest by the way, a bird's nest in a tree, or on the ground, and the dam sitting upon the young or upon the eggs: thou shalt not take her with her young: But shalt let her go, keeping the young which thou hast caught: that it may be well with thee, and thou mayst live a long time."

¹⁰ As noted previously, the Latin reads *carnes sugillas*, which means "bruised" or "strangled" meats, but here, given the context, it would make more sense if it were a synonym for pork.

¹¹ Psalm 31:1.

¹² Evantius seems to be interpreting the hen as the Old Law of the Jews, that is to be let go, and the chicks as the New Law of the Christians. I suspect there is a patristic commentary to which he is alluding and that he expected his readers to know.

¹³ The text has *nova* rather than *novum*, making it seem like the circumcision is "new," but it makes more sense to think of the prepuce as new.

¹⁴ Evantius seems to be referring to Paul's advice in I Corinthians 7:18-19: "Is any man called, being circumcised? let him not procure uncircumcision. Is any man called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing: but the observance of the commandments of God." The Latin for "let him not procure uncircumcision is *non adducat praeputium*. The corresponding Latin phrase in Evantius is *preputium suadebatur*. See also Galatians 6:15. See also: I Corinthians 3:2: "I gave you milk to drink, not meat; for you were not able as yet."

¹⁵ Titus 1:15: "All things are clean to the clean: but to them that are defiled, and to *unbelievers*, nothing is clean."

¹⁶ I Timothy 4:4.

¹⁷ A shortened form of Mark 7:15: "There is nothing from without a man that entering into him, can defile him. But the things which come from a man, those are they that defile a man." (*Nihil est extra hominem introiens in eum, quod possit eum coinquare, sed quae de homine procedunt illa sunt quae communicant hominem*). Evantius used *communicad* for *communicant*. The editor of the Latin text was confused by this, thinking Evantius was relying on the analogous passage in Matthew (15:11), where *coninquat* is used twice. Hence Gil's note, calling this a "barbarous" abbreviation.

edify. All things are lawful to me, but I do not put [myself] under the power of any."¹⁸ And because whatever "goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the privy,"¹⁹ but what "proceeds from the heart,"²⁰ that is, adulteries, murders, and things similar to these. The apostles of the primitive church command us to abstain from fornication and from suffocated meat and from blood, because at that time the faithful were gathered together from among both the circumcised and the gentiles, lest they be divided over discrimination with regard to foods. Therefore they were suckled with milk, not fed with solid food; they, that is, to whom [Paul] afterwards wrote: "I could not speak to you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal. As unto little ones in Christ, I gave you milk to drink, not meat; for you were not able as yet. But neither indeed are you yet able; for you are yet carnal."²¹ For if wherever they read blood, they interpret it according to the letter and appreciate no spiritual [meanings]. Why is it that the prophet says "I have made thee a watchman to the house of Israel,"²² if you will not preach it to the impious one so that he may guard himself from his iniquity; for "that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but I will require his blood at thy hand"?²³ What is this "blood" if not acts of bloodshed? What is the meaning of the Psalm that says "Liberate me from bloody men,"²⁴ if not from the doers of iniquity? What is the meaning of what the other prophet says "If blood hath touched blood, therefore shall the land mourn and everyone that dwelleth in it shall languish,"²⁵ if not that sin is joined to sin?"

3. Because they boast that they hold these three commands [against fornication, the meat of suffocated animals, and blood(?)], let them explain if the first is joined to the second along with the third: if they do not fornicate, but they do not make use of the services of bird-catchers;²⁶ if they hear the Apostle: "that they also who have wives, be as if they had none;"²⁷ if they obey his precepts: "It is good not to eat flesh, and not to drink wine;"²⁸ if they understand what he ordered: "be ye followers of me, as I also am of Christ;"²⁹ if they imitate what he says: "I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway;"³⁰ if they do what he intones: "Exhibit yourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in chastity, in vigils, in fastings," in alms, and many things similar to these, whence they might not incur sin.³¹ Instead, as if being obedient to the apostle, they refuse to take up "with thanksgiving"³² the good things that "God hath created," and they feebly

¹⁸ I Corinthians 6:12: "All things are lawful to me, but all things are not expedient. All things are lawful to me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (*Omnia mihi licent, sed non omnia expediunt : omnia mihi licent, sed ego sub nullis redigar potestate*). The second sentence of Evantius' version is his own addition.

¹⁹ Matthew 15:17: "Do you not understand, that whatsoever entereth into the mouth, goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the privy?"

²⁰ Matthew 15:18: "But the things which proceed out of the mouth, come forth from the heart, and those things defile a man."

²¹ I Corinthians 3:1-2.

²² Ezekiel 33:7.

²³ Ezekiel 33:8.

²⁴ Psalm 58:3: "Deliver me from them that work iniquity, and save me from bloody men."

²⁵ Hosea 4:2-3: "Cursing, and lying, and killing, and theft, and adultery have overflowed, and blood hath touched blood. Therefore shall the land mourn, and every one that dwelleth in it shall languish with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of the air: yea, the fishes of the sea also shall be gathered together."

²⁶ The word used here is *aucupum*, the plural first-person genitive form of *auceps*, *aucupis*, meaning either a bird-catcher or an eavesdropper. Evantius' meaning is unclear and the biblical reference is not as obvious as the others.

²⁷ I Corinthians 7:29.

²⁸ Romans 14:21.

²⁹ I Corinthian 4:16.

³⁰ I Corinthians 9:27.

³¹ Based on II Corinthians 6:4-6: "let us exhibit ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in tribulation, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in prisons, in seditions, in labours, in watchings, in fastings, In chastity, in knowledge, in longsuffering, in sweetness, in the Holy Ghost, in charity unfeigned..."

³² I Timothy 4:3.

shudder to fulfill the celestial commands. Concerning such as these, the Savior says in the gospel: “Woe to you, hypocrites; because you tithe mint and anise and you disdain the weightier things of the law,”³³ and that which follows. Let those who did and said the things done by these ones read many things about these matters in the books of the doctors. Let them especially read St. *Augustine’s Against Faustus the Manichaean*, and let them blush along with those previously vanquished ones. Furthermore, let them read the book of St. Jerome *Against Jovinianus*; may they find their salvation there. For it is ridiculous to devour *ad nauseam* the clean meats that God created and reject the blood of those same meats as if it were unclean; as if God would have created clean meats and unclean blood of those meats, when in fact the Creator, who is clean, created both clean meat and the clean blood of that meat. I ought to write more, but if these few things do not suffice to convince the ones in question, more would not be expedient.

³³ Matthew 23:23: “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; because you tithe mint, and anise, and cumin, and have left the weightier things of the law.”