

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
79 (2), pp. 91-102, 2019

Monks, Bishops, and the Spiritual Guidance in Gazan Monasticism

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Abstract

In this paper we will examine the theme of spiritual authority in Gazan monasticism. More exactly, we talk about the relationship between ascetic authority (assumed by monks) and spiritual authority (assumed by bishops and priests). In this sense, we make two general arguments. First, the body played a key role in defining holiness of the monk because it was viewed as a vehicle for spiritual progress. Second, there is a strong connection between *askesis*, *theosis*, and spiritual authority. In other words, if the ascetic life generated the holiness then the holiness generated the spiritual authority. Our conclusion is that monks and bishops were great examples of holiness, and this perspective they played the fundamental role of spiritual guides in Gazan monasticism.

Keywords

Monks, Bishops, Ascetic authority, Spiritual guidance, Gazan monasticism

I. Introduction

This paper explores the close relationship between holiness and spiritual authority as it appears in Gazan monasticism. The need for ascetic training of the body is a fundamental theme throughout the *Letters* of Barsanuphius

and John. From this perspective, the body played a central role in the ascetic tradition because through a strict ascetic regime the monk acquires a lot of inner qualities.

In the first section, we will point out that both ascetics and bishops held spiritual authority in Late Antiquity. From this perspective, they represented two models of spiritual authority.

In the second section we examine the issue of spiritual guidance in Gazan monasticism. Barsanuphius and John of Gaza belonged of a well-known tradition of spiritual guidance, which had appeared in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria since the fourth century. And indeed, the *Correspondence* offers a lot of spiritual advices for monks, clergy, and lay people. But, as Jennifer Hevelone-Harper has remarked Barsanuphius and John expanded the practice of spiritual guidance represented in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* in two modes, namely through their method of communication and the status of their disciple¹.

Gazan monasticism is a comprehensive way of life, governing the monk's behavior, prayer, worship, manual work, and diet. In this sense, the monks develop a number of spiritual exercises. Drawing upon the methods of education prevalent in early monasticism, one of the most important of these was imitation. Imitation and education were inseparable in monastic context, and the ascetics used this method as they developed a distinctly Christian approach to teaching. From this perspective, the monastic way is a great model for living. In this paper, we will explore this ascetic model of living in Late Antiquity.

II. The Function of Spiritual Authority in Gazan monasticism

This section examines the relationship between ascetic authority and ecclesiastical authority in Gazan monasticism. There is two different paradigms for locating spiritual authority within the church. As we will see, ascetic literature presents monks and bishops as distinct – and sometimes opposed – spheres. Thus, as a source of spiritual authority

¹ Cf. Jennifer HEVELONE-HARPER, "Barsanuphius and John of Gaza: Spiritual Direction by the Letter", in: Cristiana SOGNO, Bradley K. STORIN, and Edward J. WATTS (eds.), *Late Antique Letter Collections: A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide*, University of California Press, 2017, pp. 418-432.

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distinct from institutional authority, monks could uphold or undermine the agenda of a bishop. From this perspective, the monks “could use their spiritual authority to support or undermine local bishops. In other cases, bishops were recruited directly from monasteries and continued to live abstemiously following ordination, surrounded by their clergy in quasi-monastic communities”².

First of all, we can say that the spiritual authority played a great role in early monasticism. This expression points out the complex relation between the holiness of the monk and the possession of charisms. For analysis this concept of spiritual authority we recall Claudia Rapp’s tripartite model of authority in early monasticism: ascetic authority, institutional or ecclesiastical authority and pragmatic authority³. Spiritual and ascetic authority can be recognized in charismatic monks, because appointment as a guide was a sign of spiritual maturity. From this perspective,

“the fluid boundary between monastery, village, and city enabled lay Christians to have monks as spiritual directors. The Old Men were concerned, however, that lay Christians not challenge the established hierarchy of spiritual authority by assuming the outward characteristics of monastic life without the inward commitment to obedience”⁴.

This section points out the function of ascetic and spiritual authority in *Letters*⁵, examining the source on which it is based, and how it is

² Jennifer L. HEVELONE-HARPER, “Ecclesiastics and Ascetics: Finding Spiritual Authority in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Palestine”, in: *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, vol. 9.1, pp. 37-55, here pp. 38-39. For more details on this subject, see Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, University of California Press, 2005, pp. 137-152, and Andrea STERK, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church. The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity*, Harvard University Press, 2003.

³ See Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, and Daniel CANER, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*, University of California Press, 2002.

⁴ Jennifer HEVELONE-HARPER, *Disciples of the Desert: Monks, Laity, and Spiritual Authority in Sixth-Century Gaza*, The John Hopkins University Press, 2005, p. 105.

⁵ In exegetical literature there is a great debate on the relationship between ascetic authority and ecclesiastical authority. As we know, spiritual authority in Late Antiquity was exercised essentially by bishops and monks. Therefore, monks illustrate power-

attained. As we will see, the Old Men's correspondence can be understood as a ascetic *paideia*, a new "school" of Christianity. And indeed, in the *Correspondence* the theme of spiritual authority is correlated with the issue of the teaching. From this perspective, the *Letters* transmit a peculiar ascetic *paideia*⁶.

Generally, monastic education is characterized essentially by the cutting of the will, and the construction of a new self through personal prayer and repentance:

"The concept of repentance allows us to see at least part of the development of Christian self-identity, and particularly of Christian ascetic theology and practice, in a new way, from the perspective of building a science or school of repentance, rich in its variety, but relatively stable in its broad outline as relevant to the beginning, the living out, and the end or goal of Christian life"⁷.

We want to start with a brief description of the spiritual and ascetic authority. The spiritual authority is a inner quality ascribed holy men, who can mediate between God and men through prayer:

"Spiritual authority indicates that its bearer has received the *pneuma*, the Spirit from God. Spiritual authority has its source outside the individual. It is given by God, as a gift. Spiritual authority is personal. It is given directly to a specific individual, without personal participation or preparation by its recipient. Finally, spiritual authority is self-sufficient. It

fully an independent source of spiritual authority outside the institutional church. The theme of spiritual authority in *Correspondence* has been well analyzed by Jennifer HEVELONE-HARPER, *Disciples of the Desert...*, 2005.

⁶ On this subject, see LORENZO PERRONE, "The Necessity of Advice: Spiritual Direction as a School of Christianity in the *Correspondence* of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza", in: Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY, Aryeh KOFSKY (eds.), *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity*, Brill, 2004, pp. 131-149, and Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY, "The Necessity of Penitence, Bear One Another's Burden (Gal 6, 2)", in: Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY and Aryeh KOFSKY (eds.), *The Monastic School of Gaza*, Brill, 2006, pp. 145-156.

⁷ Alexis TORRANCE, *Repentance in Late Antiquity: Eastern Asceticism and the Framing of the Christian Life c. 400-650 CE*, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 156-157.

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can exist in the individual independent of its recognition by others”⁸.

A special form of spiritual authority is represented by bishops because he is a true “Spirit-bearer” who is reputed for his spiritual wisdom and holiness. As we know, the fundamental task of the bishop was to give spiritual instruction to the Christians from his diocese. In this case, as Renate Dekker has remarked “moral instruction was aimed at educating the faithful on proper Christian conduct, in order that they would repent their sins and avoid making new ones, and be pious, faithful and charitable”⁹, so that “a bishop or priest who is considered as a true Spirit-bearer has both personal and professional spiritual authority”¹⁰.

If ascetism is a precondition of spiritual authority, in this context we stress that physical effort of the monk is a major characteristic of ascetic authority. Generally, the monks were characterized by a huge spiritual wisdom, so that they have been seen as teachers in spiritual life:

“The general attainability of virtues through ascetic living was one of the distinctive advantages of the monastic profession... Asceticism was a path to personal perfection open to all. It was also highly visible. Those who embarked on it adopted a distinct physical appearance that signaled their profession”¹¹.

Therefore, ascetic authority derives from the personal efforts of the monk because it is achieved by training the body and by practising ascetic virtuous (fasting, prayer, vigils, manual labor and so on). This type of authority is accessible to everyone because anyone can choose to live a monastic life. Briefly, ascetic authority of the monk was a visible marker of his spiritual gifts and his moral status:

“Ascetic authority implies the public recognition of an individual’s spiritual abilities as a result of his personal efforts, for instance

⁸ Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, p. 16.

⁹ Renate DEKKER, *Episcopal Networks and Authority in Late Antique Egypt: Bishops of the Theban Region at Work*, Peeters, 2018, p. 51.

¹⁰ Renate DEKKER, *Episcopal Networks and Authority in Late Antique Egypt...*, p. 45.

¹¹ Claudia RAPP, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity...*, p. 101.

the subjection of his body to a strict regime and a high ethical standard in imitation of Christ. Strict ascetics are recognizable by a frail body and a piercing gaze, resulting from a lack of food and sleep, a neglect of the body, a preference for modest clothing and a simple dwelling, an inner state of detachment from the world and a firm control over their emotions”¹².

Having all this in mind, we can say that Barsanuphius and John assumed both ascetic and spiritual authority. Not coincidentally, the Old Men used their own ascetic authority both to correct and to support the episcopal power of the bishops¹³. In other words, Barsanuphius and John exercised their own ascetic authority over bishops, because they offered spiritual advices about how to accomplish their episcopal duties:

“Response by the Other Old Man to the bishop, who asked about the same matter concerning the governor, but kept silent. Pay attention to yourself. For neither governor nor emperor will redeem you on the day of judgment. Therefore, do not relax in this, so that you may have boldness to find mercy before God. Moreover, do not be afraid; for you are not the ones bearing the weight of this matter; rather, God and the Old Man (are in fact bearing the burden). Therefore, if you do your best, you will share the reward. Otherwise, you shall later bear the judgment”¹⁴.

In this section we tried to understand how defined the spiritual authority in the ascetic literature. As we will see in the next section, Barsanuphius and his colleague, John of Gaza “assumed spiritual oversight of bishops and patriarchs, but used their own spiritual authority to augment power of those in ecclesiastical office”¹⁵.

Thus, for the study of spiritual authority we have an extraordinary abundance of textual evidence from late monasticism/Late Antiquity. Many texts from this period deal evidently with the issue of spiritual authority,

¹² Renate DEKKER, *Episcopal Networks and Authority in Late Antique Egypt...*, p. 46.

¹³ See *Letters* 793, 795, and 825.

¹⁴ “Letter 833”, in: BARSANUPHIUS and JOHN, *Letters*, Vol. II, trans. by John Chryssavgis, The Catholic University of America Press, 2007, p. 316.

¹⁵ Jennifer L. HEVELONE-HARPER, “Ecclesiastics and Ascetics...”, p. 41.

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from *The Life of Antony* or *Apophthegmata Patrum* to the *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John. These works represent the background for understanding monks-bishops interaction.

From a cursory reading of these texts, in conclusion we can say that “in response to competing views on the proper relationship between ascetic and ecclesiastic leaders, monastic writers depicted both holy men and bishops as acting out divinely ordained roles”¹⁶.

III. Spiritual Guidance in Barsanuphius and John of Gaza’s *Letters*

Spiritual guidance is a central theme of late antique monasticism because much of the spiritual elevation of the monk was conditioned by personal relationship with elders. As a reflection of the fundamental role of the spiritual guide in Late Antiquity we return to an extraordinary collection of letters, namely the *Letters*¹⁷ of Barsanuphius and John.

First of all, the *Correspondence* illustrates how a monastic language translated the rules of ascetic community into practices with a universal relevance. Barsanuphius and John instructed a great monastic community at Tawatha through letters. Generally, the spiritual statements from these letters describe the care of the soul – often understood as spiritual guidance – on the part of the Old Men in Gazan monasticism¹⁸. These letters reveal a fascinating way of understanding spiritual direction in Late Antiquity. Perhaps the most powerful statement for this understanding comes from Aelianus: in a letter Aelianus requests to Barsanuphius to “fulfill your mercy with your servant, entreating God our Master for the salvation of my soul, that I may be delivered from passions and wicked forgetfulness, that I may find mercy through your holy hands in the present age and in

¹⁶ Jennifer L. HEVELONE-HARPER, “Ecclesiastics and Ascetics...”, p. 39.

¹⁷ For this extraordinary collection of letters, see Francois NEYT, Paula de ANGELIS-NOAH, and Lucien REGNAULT, *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza: Correspondence*, vol.1, vol. 2, and vol. 3, Sources Chrétiennes, Paris 1997, 1998, 2000, 2002). For an English translation of the complete corpus, see John CHRYSAVGIS, *Barsanuphius and John: Questions and Responses*, 2 vols., Catholic University of America Press, 2018.

¹⁸ For some books on Gazan monasticism, see especially Jennifer HEVELONE-HARPER, *Disciples of the Desert...*; Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY, Aryeh KOFKY, *The Monastic School of Gaza...* Also, the theme of spiritual guidance in Gaza, see Lorenzo PERRONE, “The Necessity of Advice: Spiritual Direction as a School of Christianity in the Correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza”, in Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY, Aryeh KOFKY (eds.), *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity...*, pp. 131-149.

the age to come”, and the Old man responded that God “assured me that he considers you a genuine spiritual son. I have confided in you mysteries that I have not confided in many, as evidence of your adoption as a son”. But Barsanuphius warns to Aelianus to remain “careful, and to keep my words in mind constantly, and do not be negligent in applying them”¹⁹.

This passage points out the spiritual relationship between Barsanuphius and Aelianus, because through adopting the layman Aelianus as his spiritual son, the Old Man becomes his spiritual guide. Moreover, this example shows, as Edward Watts has remarked that “spiritual discipleships like this blurred the line between monk and layman by binding an individual who lived outside of the monastery to the personal authority and teachings of a monastic superior”²⁰. And indeed, the Old Men invested an important part of their energies in forming laymen, so that

“despite their own choice of seclusion, they were ready to help lay people manage the day-to-day concerns of worldly life. They counseled moderation in relating to Jewish and pagan neighbors, caution in dealing with heretics, and compassion in serving the poor. They urged their disciples to uphold justice but to flee from legal entanglements. Obligation to family and the state needed to be balanced by an unswerving dedication to biblical fathers. The anchorites held lay Christians to high standards of behavior, believing that the monk and lay person pursued the same goal: the imitation of Christ”²¹.

The ascetic life assumes that monks improve themselves by spiritual exercises²², and with the elder aid can even cultivate extraordinary

¹⁹ “Letter” 573, in: *The Fathers of the Church: Barsanuphius and John, Letters*, vol. II, trans. by John Chryssavgis, The Catholic University of America Press, 2007, pp. 155-156.

²⁰ Edward J. WATTS, *Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities*, University of California Press, 2010, p. 118.

²¹ Jennifer HEVELONE-HARPER, *Disciples of the Desert...*, pp. 104-105.

²² This expression evokes Pierre Hadot’s category of spiritual exercises. Christian monasticism assumed and transformed this category of spiritual exercises. For example, fasting, prayer, vigils are primary exercises for spiritual development. For a good discussion on this theme, see Arnold DAVIDSON, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Blackwell, 1995. Inbar GRAIVER, *Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasti-*

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charisms²³ and a new form of existence. The spiritual exercises have always been regarded as fundamental way to monastic formation²⁴. Only a living teacher in a personal relationship with the younger monk can give the kind of spiritual direction necessary for a fulfilled life.

For the monks, spiritual guidance was the central means of acquiring elevated moral status, a status understood sometimes as healing. From this perspective, ascetic life is conceived as a therapy, as a rehabilitation and restoration of humanity's health²⁵. In other words, the *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John present a closely linking between the health of the body and the health of the soul.

And indeed, as Kyle A. Schenkewitz has pointed out the role of virtue in living the healthy life in the monastic school of Gaza:

“The monastic pursuit was living the virtuous life in the present; ascetic activity and virtue were interrelated. Practicing a virtue entailed the belief that one was not virtuous as well as the rejection of praise as an ascetic. Asceticism conditioned the body and soul to respond appropriately to any circumstance and dissolve potential disruption. This positive role of the body

cism, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2018; Lillian LARSEN, Samuel RUBENSON (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, and Paul C. DILLEY, *Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity: Cognition and Discipline*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

²³ This charisma is manifested in a lot of inner qualities and spiritual features which late antique monks' lives display. Also, these moral qualities, acquired through years of monastic training, are crucial to the monk's success as a true spiritual guide. For more details on this subject, see Susanna ELM and Naomi JANOWITZ (eds.), “Charisma and Society: The 25th Anniversary of Peter Brown's Analysis of the Late Antique Holy Man”, in: *Journal of early Christian Studies* 6 (1997), pp. 343-539, and Alberto CAMPANI, Giovanni FILORAMO (eds.), *Foundations of Power and Conflicts of Authority in Late-Antique Monasticism*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 157, Leuven, 2007.

²⁴ See Columba STEWART, “Evagrius Ponticus on Monastic Pedagogy,” in: *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West, Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Dio-kleia*, ed. John Behr et al, Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 241.

²⁵ See Kyle A. SCHENKEWITZ, *Dorotheos of Gaza and the Discourse of Healing in Gazan Monasticism*, Peter Lang, 2016; Andrew CRISLIP, *Thorns in the Flesh: Illness and Sanctity in Late Ancient Christianity*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013 and Andrew CRISLIP, *From Monastery to Hospital: Christian Monasticism and the Transformation of Health Care in Late Antiquity*, University of Michigan Press, 2005.

emphasized a distinct vision of the ascetic body in the monastic school of Gaza²⁶.

Also, another peculiar feature of Gazan monasticism was personal affection between elders and their disciples, both ascetics and layman. According to Edward J. Watts

“the surviving correspondence that the ascetics Barsanuphius and John sent to their disciples shows the great personal affection that monks and monastic affiliates had for their spiritual fathers. Their intimate relationships grew out of a specifically Christian understanding of the immediate and eternal benefits that came from the complete subordination of one’s life to a holy man. The promise of these rewards caused many followers to try to order their lives according to the models of ascetic practice put forth by their spiritual fathers²⁷.”

Barsanuphius and John were monks, who lived in two different cells attached to the monastery from Tawatha. Although they never left their cells, the two Old Men were powerfully involved in the civic and ecclesiastical issues, so that they assumed the role of the spiritual guide. As we saw, this idea transpires from their *Correspondence*.

We understand that the ascetic authority of the Old men outweighed harder that of bishops. And indeed, the letters of Barsanuphius and John addressed to lay people are very important for the understanding of spiritual guidance in Gazan monasticism. As we know, lay people addressed to the Old Men about many issues, and their questions show the intention of lay people to live an intense spiritual life in the late antique society. However, the *Correspondence* points out the close relationship between the ascetic community and the lay people. Barsanuphius’ letters are longer and more consecrated on spiritual matters, while John’s letters are shorter and more concrete and pragmatic. This flexible model reveals the dynamic process of spiritual direction as practiced in Gazan monasticism.

²⁶ Kyle A. SCHENKEWITZ, *Dorotheos of Gaza and the Discourse of Healing...*, p. 132.

²⁷ Edward J. WATTS, *Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan...*, p. 121.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to offer a conceptualization of the relationships between holiness and spiritual authority in Gazan monasticism. In conclusion we would like to make a few points about the significance of holiness in the Correspondence of Barsanuphius and John.

First, the ascetic practice is central to achieve the holiness. This holiness is characterized by some spiritual gifts, a major sign of the ascetic authority. Briefly, asceticism and spiritual authority went hand in hand in the Gazan monasticism.

One clear conclusion may be drawn: the holiness is closely correlated to the ascesis, or vice versa, so that the one is the goal of the other. Briefly, bodily *askesis* remain a privileged *topos* for this close relationship between ascetic holiness (*theosis*) and spiritual authority.

Briefly, the Correspondence emphasized fertile cooperation between bishops and monks. In other words, Barsanuphius and John felt a need to reconcile ecclesiastical and monastic authority. As Jennifer Hevelone-Harper has remarked

”the Correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza introduced bishops as the disciples of monks. It assumed that the spiritual authority of anchorites outweighed even the office of patriarch. With this ranking taken as fundamental, the compiler of the text could afford to show the anchorites supporting the legitimate power of bishops, even when they might favor different christological paradigms. The anchorites preferred to keep a middle course in ongoing doctrinal controversies while focusing on personal piety, rather than allowing their disciples to become distracted by heated polemics. Because there was no challenge to their own authority from the clergy, Barsanuphius and John were generous advocates of episcopal authority with a clearly defined hierarchy that recognized the authority of monks over bishops, competition between sources of spiritual authority was minimized, allowing for productive cooperation”²⁸.

²⁸ Jennifer L. HEVELONE-HARPER, “Ecclesiastics and Ascetics...”, p. 52.

The correspondence between Barsanuphius and John of Gaza and monks represents an important document for understanding the process of spiritual guidance in Palestinian monasticism. The *Letters* of the Old Men describe the fundamental role played by monks in the practice of spiritual guidance. Briefly, Barsanuphius and John underscore this spiritual meaning of this practice.