

JUSTINIAN'S WORLD: THE MEDITERRANEAN BEFORE ISLAM

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PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

1. Boethius [c. 480-524 CE], *The Consolation of Philosophy*

This meditation on the meaning of life was written while Boethius, a Roman senator charged with treason by Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, was languishing in prison and awaiting his execution. Boethius' thoughts are expressed in the form of a dialogue between himself [B] and a personified Philosophy [P].

[B]: "And now you see the outcome of my innocence—instead of reward for true goodness, punishment for a crime I did not commit. ... If I had been charged with planning to burn down churches, or plotting the sacrilegious murder of priests, or aiming to murder all men of worth, I would still have been brought into court and either have confessed or been convicted before the sentence was carried out. But here I am, nearly five-hundred miles away [from Rome], condemned to death and to have my property confiscated, silenced and with no opportunity to offer a defence—all because of the too willing support of the Senate. ...

I who once composed with eager zest
am driven by grief to shelter in sad songs"

[P]: "It is because you don't know the end and purpose of things that you think that the wicked and the criminal have power and happiness. And because you have forgotten the means by which the world is governed you believe these ups and downs of Fortune occur haphazardly. ...

If you desire to look on truth
and follow the path with unswerving course,
rid yourself of joy and fear,
put hope to flight and banish grief.
The mind is clouded and bound in chains
where these hold sway. ..."

[B]: "Philosophy, you are the greatest comfort for exhausted spirits. By the weight of your tenets and the delight of your verses you have so consoled me that I now think that I can face the blows of Fortune."

2. Agathias [c. 532-c. 580 CE], *Histories* 2.30

"Damascius of Syria, Priscian of Lydia ... and Isidore of Gaza, the philosophers of our age, had come to the conclusion, since the official religion of the Roman empire was not to their liking, that the Persian state was much superior. So they gave a ready hearing to the stories in general circulation according to which Persia was the land of Plato's 'philosopher king,' where justice reigned supreme. Apparently, the king's subjects too were models of decency and good behavior, and there was no such thing as theft, brigandage or any other sort of crime.... Elated by these reports, which they accepted as true, and also because they were forbidden by law to take part in public life ... because they did not conform to the established religion, they left immediately and set off for a strange land. But, in the first place, they discovered that those in authority were overbearing and vainglorious; that there were large numbers of housebreakers and robbers; and that every form of crime was committed. But the most extraordinary thing of all was that even though a man could have any number of wives, people still had the effrontery to commit adultery.... Finally, the vicious promiscuity that characterized Persian society was more than the philosophers could stand.... Despite the king's affection for them ... they felt that merely to set foot on Roman territory, even if it meant death, was preferable to a life of distinction in Persia. Accordingly, they resolved to see the last of barbarian hospitality, and all returned home."

3. Anon., *Life of the younger S. Symeon the Stylite* [521-592 CE]

“Before coming to the city of Antioch, [an official named Amantius] destroyed many of the unrighteous found en route, so that men shuddered with fear at his countenance. For everywhere he suppressed all evil-doing, whether in word or deed, inflicting punishment, including death, on those who had gone astray, so that from then on even those leading a blameless life feared his presence. ... [He] found that the majority of the leaders of the city and many of its inhabitants were preoccupied with paganism [*hellenismos*], Manichaeism, astrology ... and other hateful heresies. He arrested them and put them in prison, and after gathering together all of their books—a huge number—he burned them in the middle of the stadium. He brought out their idols with their polluted accoutrements and hung them along the streets of the city Then [he] took his seat on the tribunal ... some he ordered to do services in the hospices, while others, who called themselves clerics, he sent to receive instruction in monasteries; still others he sent into exile, while some he condemned to death. But by imperial command, the majority of them, who pleaded ignorance as an excuse and promised to repent, he released without further investigation. ...”

4. Martin, bishop of Braga [c. 520-580 CE]. *On the Correction of Peasants*

“Bishop Martin to the most blessed lord and brother in Christ, Bishop Polemius. You write me to send you some things written on the origins of idols and on their crimes for the chastisement of peasants who, still constrained by the former superstition of pagans, pay more honor to demons than to God.... After the flood, when a growing multitude began to fill the earth, men forgot God, the creator of the world, and began to worship creatures. Some adored the sun, others the moon or the stars, others fire, others deep seas or streams of water. Then the devil, with his ministers the demons, who were cast down from heaven, saw that ignorant men were erring. They began to show themselves to men in diverse forms and to ask that they offer sacrifices on the high mountains or in thick forests. They took the names of wicked men: thus, one said he was Jupiter, who was so unchaste that he took as wife his own sister; another called himself Mars and was a perpetrator of arguments and discord; still another called himself Mercury, and he was the crafty inventor of all fraud. The demons also persuaded men to make temples for them and to place therein pictures and statues of reprobate men.

When God saw that miserable men were so deceived, he sent down his Son, his Wisdom and his Word, to lead them back from the error of the devil. Therefore, you faithful people, consider what agreement you made with God in baptism. You promised to renounce the devil and all his evil works. But how is it that some of you light candles before rooks and trees, observe divinations, watch your step, place bread upon the stream and observe for marriage the day of Venus? Is this anything else but the worship of the devil?”

5. John of Ephesus [c. 507 - c. 586 CE], *Ecclesiastical History* [quoted in the 8th c. CE *Chronicle of Zuqin*]

“After the death of the Empress Theodora ... who cared about and supported the party of the Believers [i.e., the Monophysite Christians] ... officials counseling Justinian gathered and said: ‘The empress, who is now among the saints, cared for those who did not agree with you, and because of her they became haughty and did not esteem you. Now that she is dead, if you ... bring them together, all of them will submit to you and accept the Council [of Chalcedon] because they have grown fearful and weak.’

When the emperor heard this ... he got excited and firmly resolved that this must be done When he ... urged me [John of Ephesus] by order and with great promises and considerable monetary allowances, to travel to the Syrian territories ..., we asked him ... why he had decided to ... disturb people of considerable old age and [compel them] to leave their monasteries and be troubled and harmed by the long distance, especially when they lived in regions of persecution. After he answered these questions at length, ... we declined to serve as an intermediary ...; as a pretext we said that we feared the indignation and curses of such holy and unblemished people Vexed by our declining ..., he dismissed us and left.

Then he summoned another person diligent about these matters and dispatched him. [As a consequence] a crowd of about 400 men of advanced age ... came [to Constantinople]. Most of the city flocked to see them and be blessed by them. Thus they went to the emperor, who was stunned upon seeing them. He started to dispute with them and realized that they were sound in faith and firm in mind; he did not find them as weak as they were thought to be and as he had been told. After they... had debated for a whole year or more ..., [the Believers] were released upon their request. They left and nothing was achieved.”

6. Evagrius [c. 536- c. 594 CE], *Ecclesiastical History* 1.13

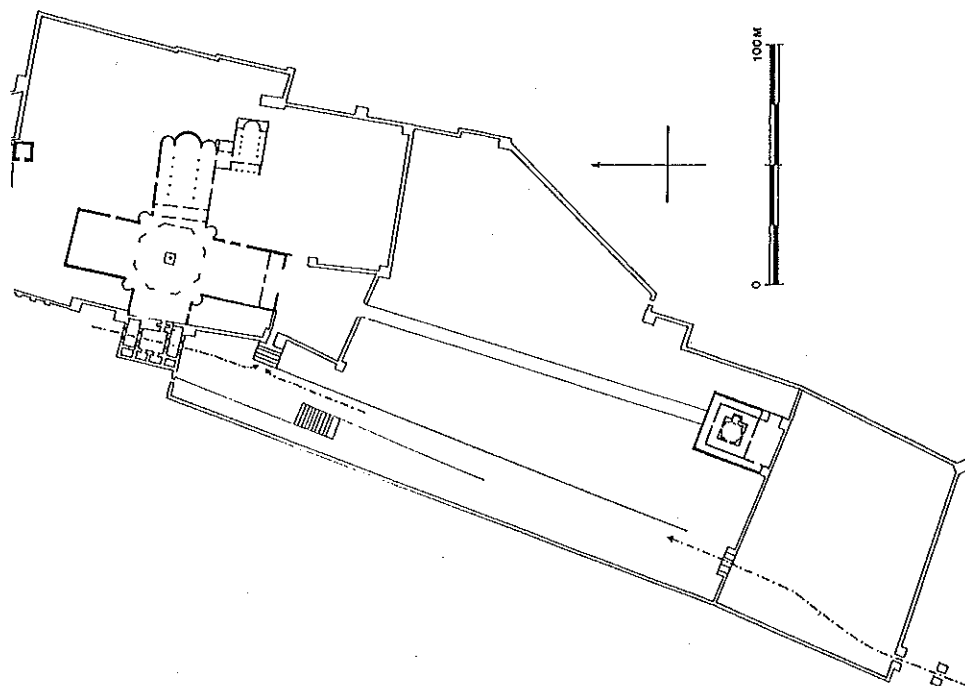
“In these times [about 440 CE] flourished and became illustrious, Simeon, of holy and famous memory, who originated the contrivance of stationing himself on the top of a column, thereby occupying a space of scarce two cubits in circumference. This man, endeavoring to realize in the flesh the existence of the heavenly hosts, lifts himself above the concerns of earth, and overpowering the downward tendency of man's nature, is intent on things above. He was adored by all the countryside, wrought many miracles, and the Emperor Theodosius II listened to his advice and sought his benediction.

“Simeon prolonged his endurance of this mode of life through fifty-six years; nine of which he spent in the first monastery where he was instructed in divine knowledge, and forty-seven in the "Mandra" as it was called; namely, ten in a certain nook; on shorter columns, seven; and thirty upon one of forty cubits. After his departure [from this life] his holy body was conveyed to Antioch, escorted by the garrison, and a great concourse guarding the venerable body, lest the inhabitants of the neighboring cities should gather and carry it off. In this manner it was conveyed to Antioch, and attended, during its progress, with extraordinary prodigies.

“The body has been preserved nearly entire until my time [about 580 CE]; and in company with many priests, I enjoyed a sight of his sacred head, in the episcopate of the famous Gregory, when Philippicus had requested that precious relic of the saints might be sent him for the protection of the Eastern armies. The head was well preserved save for the teeth some of which had been violently removed by the hands of the pious [for relics].

“According to another writer, Theodoret, in Simeon's lifetime, he was visited by pilgrims from near and far; Persia, Ethiopia, Spain, and even Britain. To these at times he delivered sermons. He wore on his body a heavy iron chain. In praying, ‘he bent his body so that his forehead almost touched his feet.’ A spectator once counted 1244 repetitions of this movement, and fasted through the season of Lent. It is alleged that the devil having afflicted him with an ulcer in his thigh as reward for a little self-righteousness, Simeon, as penance, never touched the afflicted leg upon the pillar again, and stood for the remaining year of his life upon one leg.”

7. Plan of Qal'at Siman [S. Simeon Stylites' pilgrimage shrine]



8. Anon., *The Life of S. Theodore of Sykeon* [early 7th c. CE] 23-24, 37-38, 45, 52 and 82

“...Theodore, the most holy servant of God, was deemed worthy of the priesthood by our Savior God at the age of eighteen, and with godly wisdom he strove to show himself like unto a prudent man in accordance with the Lord’s appointment. ... Thus he left his parental home, which was built upon sand, and all the earthly things therein ... and in full assurance of faith he devoted himself body and soul and with a sincere heart to God.

“He founded his dwelling on the hallowed spot which was literally and figuratively made of rock, where there stood the revered oratory of the holy and glorious martyr George, in order easily to repel the attacks of alien winds and to ward off the uprising of the flood that came ... in their wake. ... [He] spent his time on all the God-inspired Scriptures, deeming them to be the sources of eternal life. Most often did he ponder over the holy Gospel, and his heart was touched especially when he considered the descent from heaven of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ Through marveling and wondering that these things should have taken place on earth, he was seized with the desire to travel and worship at the holy places where Christ’s immaculate feet had trodden When he reached Jerusalem ... he adored the Holy Cross, the place of the life-giving Resurrection, the sacred manger ... and all the other holy spots He further visited all the monasteries and the various fathers confined in cells around about the city and the hermits in the inner desert. ... After receiving their approval he ... returned to his own country, Galatia There he dwelt with great joy... and built himself up by fasting and sleeping on the ground, by vigils and by psalm-singing. In consequence he received from God an inflow of still greater gifts of grace to strengthen him in his fight against unclean spirits and all kinds of diseases.

“A skilled sorcerer, thoroughly versed in wickedness, dwelt in the same village as Theodore. He had seen the miracle of the locusts performed by the holy man and also remembered how the demon that served him had been cast out of a woman. ... Inflamed by the malice of his attendant demon, [the sorcerer] sent his envoys to attack the holy man and, if possible, injure him fatally. ... But the divine power that guarded [Theodore] routed them Greatly vexed by his defeat, ... [the sorcerer] inserted a

deadly poison into a fish and charged some other agents of his to insure that the holy man eat it. But when Theodore, through the grace of God and through the blessing that he said over the fish, came to no harm, then the sorcerer was ashamed at the failure of his murderous designs and reflected on the weakness of demons and the power of God

“In a village called Reake a threatening cloud would periodically appear ... and pour down hailstones upon the vineyards when the fruit was ripe. The men of the village were distressed because they had been unable to enjoy the fruits of their husbandry for several years. Accordingly they came to the monastery and entreated the holy man and brought him back to their village. He formed a procession of supplication that went round the vineyard and the fields, and, after offering prayer, he placed four wooden crosses at the corners of the boundary-line. ...Trough his holy prayer that cloud never threatened the village agai ... and from that time to the present day the villagers bring to the monastery a fixed measure of wine and grapes ...

“About that time the holy man received letters from the Christ-loving emperor Maurice [582-602 CE] and from the blessed patriarch and from the magnates urging him to come to Constantinople and give them his blessing. Being thus compelled, he traveled to the divinely protected city and, after greeting the most blessed patriarch and the emperor and the senate and pronouncing a suitable blessing in each cse, sat down to table with them. The emperor and empress and all the officers of the bedchamber showed a tender regard for him and accorded him much honor. Further, by their sacred decree they bestowed upon his monasteries the right of sanctuary and transferred the appointments of abbots in them to the patriarch ... During the short time that Theodore stayed in the capital, God through him performed great miracles in the city.”

9. S. Benedict of Nursia [c. 480-c. 550 CE], *Rule* [for the monks at Monte Cassino]

“Concerning daily manual labor:

1. Idleness is the enemy of the soul, and for this reason the brethren ought to be occupied at certain times with manual labor, and at other times again with reading about holy matters.
2. This is why we think times for both should be organized according to the following arrangement—
3. Namely that from Easter until the kalends [first] of October they should go out in the morning and from the first hour [6 am] until about the fourth [10 am] do the wor that needs doing.
4. From the fourth [10 am] to about the sixth [noon] they should devote themselves to reading.
5. After the sixth hour [noon], when they have finished eating, they should rest on their beds in absolute silence; if anyone wishes to read by themselves let them read so that they disturb no one else.
6. Prayer at the ninth hour [3 pm] should be said earlier than usual, at half past eight [2:30 pm]. Then once again they should work at what needs doing until evening prayer.
7. If necessity or poverty means that they must work at gathering the harvest themselves, they should not be despondent—
8. Because then they are truly monks, if they live by the work of their own hands, like our fathers and the apostles.
9. But let everything be done in moderation, out of consideration for those who are weak.