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SOURCES OF AUTHORITY IN THE KOINONIA

*Alex Rolfe**

Bishop Ammon, in his *Letter Concerning the Conduct and Life of Pachomius and Theodore*, relates what he saw during his three years at Pabau, a Pachomian monastery. In the process, he gives a vivid depiction of Theodore's authority. In fact, the authority that the superior had over the monks is a theme that dominates the letter. From the first, Theodore's "ability to read hearts" is strikingly affirmed.¹ More common than his prophecies and healings were his divinations of the secret sins of the monks.² Theodore followed up each discovery of sin with discipline, sometimes even expulsion; violence is used twice.³ One wonders how he was able to wield such control. From the *Letter*, it is difficult to identify the sources of this authority. Ammon writes, "whenever I heard the voice of the holy Theodore even from afar, I was filled with either joy, or grief, or fear"; was it then simply a matter of Theodore's charisma or personal attributes?⁴ The *Bohairic Life of Pachomius* presents a fuller picture, and it becomes clear that the main source of Pachomius and Theodore's authority was not their charisma, nor even Pachomius's status as founder. The greatest sources of their authority over their fellow monks were their *ascesis*, scriptural teaching, and care for the monks' souls.

When Pachomius began his pursuit of holiness, ascetic practices were the hallmark of the life of a monk. God's first words to him were "Struggle and settle down here," which he immediately did.⁵ His *ascesis* began in earnest, however, when he apprenticed himself to the old anchorite Palamon a few years later. Palamon's life consisted of self-denial and tests of endurance; he aptly concluded his description of the monastic life to Pachomius with "it is by doing violence to

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1 *Letter*, 3, 16.

2 *Letter*, 3, 17, 19-24.

3 *Letter*, 20, 24.

4 *Letter*, 8.

yourself that you shall enter the kingdom of heaven.”⁶ Palamon’s violence consisted of fasting, staying awake, avoiding comfort, ignoring sickness, and performing manual labor. Even the extended bouts of prayer were conceived of as a means of doing violence to the body; Palamon received Pachomius “to try him with prayers, vigils, and fasting.”⁷ The violence the two men did to themselves was impressive. Certainly it impressed the author of the *Life*, for the passage covering Pachomius’s life with Palamon revolves around their asceticism. It impressed Pachomius too. Not only did he pass the same ascetic practices on to his monks, and continue to perform them himself, but he never forgot what he had learned from Palamon.

Pachomius continued to exercise himself as an “athlete of Christ,” with all the competition implied by that phrase.⁸ The *Life* abounds with instances of his outstanding asceticism, not all of which can be considered here. From the first, Pachomius held himself to a higher standard than his followers, and he enjoined those he placed in charge of others to do the same.⁹ One occasion is a particularly good illustration of Pachomius’s customary superiority in *ascesis*: on a visit to Thmousons, Pachomius showed himself capable of staying awake half the night and then rowing to Thmousons the next day, which neither of the monks accompanying him could accomplish without falling asleep. Upon their arrival, Apa Cornelios chided the monks for having let the older Pachomius outdo them. That night Pachomius, who was already exhausted, proved to Cornelios that “a feeble old man” (one sensitive about his age, perhaps) could outdo him as well.¹⁰ If Apa Cornelios and the other fathers in charge of monasteries were greater ascetics than the monks in their care, Pachomius was a greater ascetic than them all.

Pachomius and Theodore’s authority also stemmed from their teaching and explanation of scripture. Pachomius’s monastic routine heavily emphasized scripture. “When...Pachomius assembled the brothers for the instruction, he spoke to them first on the Scriptures, because they are the main thing and the breath of God.”¹¹ The monks recited scripture constantly, Pachomius gave three instructions a week to the community, after which the monks of each house discussed his words among themselves, and in addition housemasters were invited to preach to their houses twice a week.¹²

5 *Bohairic Life (SBo)* 8.

6 *SBo* 10.

7 *SBo* 10.

8 *GI*, 22,84.

9 *SBo* 23, 90.

10 *SBo*, 59.

11 *SBo*, 88; does this have anything to do with Pachomius dispelling a demon with his breath (*SBo* 113)?

12 *SBo*, 26,

It was Pachomius's scriptural insight that attracted Theodore. After hearing Pachomius's explanation of the Tabernacle through a visiting monk, Theodore "had a heart kindled as if with fire by what he had heard."¹³ After he became head of Tabennesi, Theodore made a daily trip to Phbow to hear Pachomius, returning each night to repeat what he heard to the monks of Tabennesi, and "he did so for a very long time."¹⁴

The prominence of Pachomius's scriptural exegesis in the *Life* also argues for its importance. The author not only refers to it, but often repeats it. The sermon that so affected Theodore is summarized, and the teachings of Theodore and Pachomius and even Horsiesios are given at length.¹⁵

The fact that visions are more frequent in the *Life* than healings also reflects the greater importance placed on understanding scripture. Healing is important, but it does not dominate the *Life of Pachomius* as it does the *Life of Hilarion*. It was not uncommon for Pachomius to fail at healing, an unusual admission in hagiography; untroubled by it, he taught his monks that the spiritual gift of "seeing plainly" was a much greater healing.¹⁶ On the other hand, Pachomius and Theodore had a great number of visions, and they often resulted in their teaching the monks what they had learned.¹⁷ In explanation of Pachomius's choosing Petronios as his successor, the author writes, "Indeed, because of his purity of heart, [Petronios] used to have revelations often and was qualified in every respect."¹⁸ At one point an angel even appeared to Theodore and questioned him about a verse in Micah, apparently to impress on him the need to understand scripture literally as well as figuratively; perhaps in their enthusiasm for explaining scripture, the superiors' interpretations were getting a little out of control.¹⁹

The most important source of Pachomius and Theodore's authority, however, was their intense and obvious concern for the souls of their monks. The monks were there precisely for this care, and sought it out, asking their superior at the end of each day how they had been at fault.²⁰ Any monk who did not care sufficiently about his own soul could expect expulsion. Pachomius explained to a monk who was critical of his rigorous screening of new monks that he would not admit those whom he could not correct.²¹ He told another monk that no amount of *asceticism* would rid him of his demon, if he continued to lack faith in Pachomius's words, and in spite of heavy fasting the demon stayed with him until the day he died.²² Pachomius would expend any amount of prayer and effort on a struggling sinner, but a negligent monk was hopeless.²³

13 *SBo*, 29.

14 *SBo*, 73.

15 *SBo*, 29, 105-107, 141-142, 186-187, 209.

16 *SBo*, 45, 111.

17 *SBo*, 82, 103, 106.

18 *SBo*, 121.

19 *SBo*, 155.

20 *SBo*, 87.

21 *SBo*, 107.

22 *SBo*, 102.

23 *SBo*, 103.

Pachomius, and Theodore after him, cared about each individual monk, and agonized over when to be harsh and when to be merciful. In dealing with one sinful monk, Pachomius had to resort to asking God directly for guidance; an angel appeared and ordered that the monk be expelled.²⁴ Such severity was not uncommon. In a year in which the whole community contained three hundred and sixty monks, Pachomius had expelled a hundred monks.²⁵ On one occasion he refused psalmody to a monk who had died.²⁶ It did not always take so much to be severe. Theodore once rebuked a monk for eating too many leeks, and immediately feared that he had been too harsh. When he saw that the monk never touched a leek again, he ceased eating them as well, lest God “condemn him for not having himself abstained from a thing he had made the subject of reproach to another.”²⁷

Although the superior proved his care for souls by his severity, and was sometimes criticized for being too lenient, he also proved it by his mercy.²⁸ If severity set the tone of Bishop Ammon’s letter, mercy set the tone for the *Life*, especially in the case of Theodore. The *Life* often describes the superiors taking care of the monks “as a nurse comforts her children,” and they pray for their monks heroically.²⁹ Pachomius forgave a monk caught stealing with no more than a kind word, he rebuked those who refused to give a sick brother meat, even though no monk was to eat meat, and he reserved his harshest words for those who accused him of taking excessive pains with bad monks instead of simply driving them out.³⁰ Theodore drew criticism from Pachomius for not being strict enough with the monks in his bakery, but on the whole Pachomius had the highest regard for Theodore’s skill with souls.³¹ Soon after his arrival, Theodore “became the comforter of many, raising up by his soothing words whoever had fallen,” and “Pachomius would tell [the monks] to go and find [Theodore] and to get from him consolation in their temptations and tribulations.”³² It is small wonder that the monks asked Pachomius to name Theodore as his successor.³³

Although Pachomius preferred mercy to severity, each was merely a means to an end, as he made clear to Theodore in his parable of extracting a thorn from the foot. The important thing is to remove the thorn: that is, bring the sinner to repentance and to the reform of his soul.³⁴ It is therefore not surprising to find Theodore resorting to deceit, with Pachomius’s approval, to reform troubled monks. Theodore promised to run away with a monk who was feeling persecuted by too-

24 *SBo*, 108.

25 *SBo*, 107.

26 *SBo*, 93.

27 *SBo*, 79.

28 *SBo*, 102.

29 *SBo*, 58, 89, 91, 118.

30 *SBo*, 68, 48, 102.

31 *SBo*, 74, 77.

32 *SBo*, 32, see also 191.

33 *SBo*, 94.

34 *SBo*, 90.

frequent correction, unless Pachomius should apologize. Pachomius, apprized of the plan, did so, thereby winning the brother back.³⁵ To save a monk who was too attached to his family, Theodore accompanied him home, ate with him there in violation of the monastic rule, and finally staged his own departure from Tabennesi, ostensibly because the monk did not take the gospel injunction against loving family seriously. This scheme had the desired effect.³⁶

Pachomius's willingness to back down is an even stronger indication of his great desire to keep the monks on the path to salvation. One monk who wanted a certain rank was denied it. His superior pretended he did so on the basis of Pachomius's report. The furious monk marched up to the unsuspecting Pachomius and denounced him in the harshest terms. Pachomius calmed him by saying "I have sinned, forgive me," and then won him back to goodness by appointing him to the position he wanted.³⁷ Such an incident gives credence to his claim on his deathbed that he "never corrected any one of [the monks]...except for the sake of his soul's salvation."³⁸

Pachomius and Theodore's concern for the souls under their care was obvious to their monks, as was their heroic *ascesis* and their superior ability to interpret scripture. In this sense Pachomius could claim his authority was of God, for it was by fulfilling his vocation to "struggle" in *ascesis*, recite scripture, and "minister to the race of men and unite them to [God]" that he attained his authority.³⁹

35 *SBo*, 62.

36 *SBo*, 63.

37 *SBo*, 42.

38 *SBo*, 118.