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Seclusion and Society in the Life of Alexander the Sleepless

The relationship between society and seclusion in the life of a Christian ascetic or monastic is often a vexed one. On one hand, one might have desire to gather disciples for one's religion. On the other hand, to adhere to an ascetic lifestyle, one may have to leave behind one's worldly possessions and societal ties to live a secluded life. The complex tension between and cohabitation of these values are featured in the life of Alexander the Sleepless. Regarding Alexander, we have three surviving sources¹. The third, an anonymous biography of Alexander the Sleepless, is the focus of my discussion.

This biography, entitled "The Life and Conduct of our Sainted Father Alexander," was preserved in a single manuscript from the tenth or eleventh century, provided detailed descriptions of Alexander and his disciples' practices from which we glean a rough chronology of Alexander's life (Caner 250). The narrative featured six dramatic episodes in which Alexander renounced his ties to a society he had until then been inhabiting. As he wandered, he sometimes settled where he saw rampant wickedness², and sometimes settled into complete seclusion³ ("The Life" 256; 264-265). Often, Alexander won over populaces initially hostile to him, having gained three to four hundred disciples who together spoke three to four languages. He established monasteries at these locations and organized his disciples into choruses which

¹ The first, a monastic named Callinicus, who may have been an eye witness to Alexander's final skirmish in Constantinople circa 420 (Caner 126). The second, the treatise *On Voluntary Poverty* by Nilus of Ancyra (ca. 390-430), who juxtaposed monastics such as Alexander and Adelphius to John the Baptist and the apostles, with the former symbolizing the perversion of the monastic tradition, of which the latter are the exemplars (Caner 127-128).

² such as when he settled in a location resembling Chalcis ("The Life" 256)

³ such as when he settled near the Euphrates river where he lived in "a storage jar set in the ground" for twenty years ("The Life" 264-265)

followed the regimen of sleepless hymn-singing and genuflection that he established for himself in seclusion. These choruses followed a strict schedule such that there would be ceaseless praise of the Lord at these monasteries (Caner 265; 274-275).

It is suspected that this biography was initially composed in Syriac by one author in the late fifth or early sixth century and then translated into Greek with significant revisions by another author (Caner 249-250). This source, in contrast to the first two sources, was hagiographic in nature and written from the perspective of Alexander's followers. As Caner the translator warned us, this feature of the biography ought to limit the credibility of this source, especially since this account left out and glossed over Alexander's key controversies (Caner 130; 137; 252). However, the biography did not claim objectivity. It, indeed, labeled itself as a "partial" or "selective" description of Alexander's life, although the reason it gave was that it is "impossible" describe Alexander's "noble" deeds "as thoroughly as they deserve" ("The Life" 252). Its partiality to Alexander is a potential asset of this source. Highly sympathetic to Alexander's struggles, this source preserved a richly nuanced characterization of the values that existed in Alexander's form of monasticism (Caner 130). One vignette in this biography that highlighted the tension between the values of seclusion and society is Alexander's conversion of the civic leader Rabbula.⁴ In this story, the masses represented society, and Alexander represented the virtues of ascetic seclusion. These two forces were portrayed to be at odds with one another. As a member of the city council, Rabbula was a political leader, and thus was

⁴ It is suspected that this entire vignette was a subsequent addition that was not part of the original fifth or sixth century manuscript (Caner 262). This consideration does not really trouble my discussion. Even if this episode was indeed an addition, its portrayal of the relationship between seclusion and society is highly consistent and compatible with the portrayal from the rest of the biography.

symbolic of the masses, whom he led. The conversion of Rabbula, a political leader, was thus also symbolic of the vexed process by which Alexander acquired followers and disciples.

This vignette was presumably set in Chalcis. Wandering, Alexander came upon this city and witnessed its citizens' wicked behavior, "constantly holding festivals for their idols and rejoicing in their lawless deeds." These citizens were ruled by Satan because they were ruled by the political leader Rabbula, who was "blinded by all the devil's meddling" ("The Life 256). As such, society was identified as the people of Chalcis, and Rabbula, as the leader of Chalcis, was symbolic of that society. This set-up, in which the society was identified with the masses and was allied *with* Satan and *against* Alexander, was common throughout the biography. For example, towards the end of his life, Alexander arrived in Constantinople and clashes with Theodotus, who controlled the city as its bishop and had come under the influence of Satan. Theodotus was described as having "summed the human populace to his alliance" in the form of "his whole demonic army" ("The Life 271; 277).

The values of society and seclusion were set against each other in Rabbula's conversion. After he was convinced by Alexander's miracles, he attempted to achieve freedom from possessions and freedom from care by relinquishing his property. Regarding this ascetic lifestyle, he objected, "if I do this, who will feed my multitude of domestic slaves?" ("The Life" 260). His question emphasized the tension between the responsibilities of being a master, leader, or overseer and the necessity of renunciation of such responsibilities in a truly ascetic life. This biography was unambiguous in its message that the duties of being a leader detracted from one's ability to be an observant Christian of the highest order. The narrator told us, because Rabbula "wished to be undisturbed in his contemplation of God," he ultimately gave away his property and freed his slaves ("The Life" 261). This juxtaposition of values was consistent with the rest of

the biography. When young Alexander left coenobitic monastery in Syria after only a few years, he cited as his reason for leaving the monastery's failure to promote a "way of life [that] was consonant with the divine Scriptures." Such a monastery failed to achieve freedom from possessions and freedom from care because "it [wa]s incumbent on the one placed in charge to anticipate and attend to his brothers' every need" ("The Life" 254). Likewise, in praising Alexander's extreme faithfulness to Scripture, the narrator emphasized that "although [Alexander] assumed oversight of so many brothers, he did not worry about any provisions for their needs" ("The Life" 265). The kind of leadership permissible in Alexander's asceticism was one that disavowed itself, or masked itself with a pretense of disavowal.

Often when faced with the prospect of leading or taking on disciples, Alexander responded with perfunctory, dramatic gestures of re-establishing his distance to society. At many of the cities to which he wandered, the narrative recounted the people developing an "excessive love" for Alexander, "employing every device to keep him among them, [...] demand[ing] him [to be] their shepherd." In the face of society's beckoning, Alexander staged elaborate ruses to secretly escape the cities, such as being lowered in a basket over city walls ("The Life" 263), disguising himself as a beggar ("The Life" 273), and making an excuse to take a short excursion—never to return ("The Life" 268).

The tension between society and seclusion came to a certain resolution in Rabbula's conversion. When Alexander first arrived in Chalcis, the Satan-possessed Rabbula accuses Alexander of wanting to convert Chalcis's citizens to Alexander's ways ("The Life" 257). Alexander neither directly confirmed nor denied this accusation. The highly-mediated process by which Rabbula was subsequently converted preserved the values both of engagement with society and of seclusion. Rabbula was successfully converted, but at no point did Alexander

explicitly set out to convert anyone. Instead, it was Rabbula who “request[ed] to receive enlightenment” from Alexander (“The Life” 258). As the biography emphasized, Rabbula’s conversion took place not because of Alexander’s words or arguments but because of Alexander’s deeds. Alexander told Rabbula that his proofs were “[f]or those who want[ed] to learn the truth” (“The Life” 257). The narrative maintains that Alexander did not actively gather his audience. Rather, his audience followed him out of their own desire. Thus, the narrative portrayed Alexander as garnering disciples without *trying* to, preserving Alexander’s status as a perfectly ascetic monk while still lauding and displaying his wide-spread influence.

In this discussion, I have emphasized that our understanding of the relationship between seclusion and society in the life of Alexander the Sleepless should be informed both by the *content* of the biography, as well as by its *form*, namely its narrative form. Thus, we must note the crucial role that the narrator served in making fully possible Alexander’s seemingly paradoxical roles as an ascetic and a leader. It was in writing this biography that the author(s) cemented Alexander’s renowned status and truly expand his influence. The narrator began and ended the biography by stating that he wrote this “for the edification and profit of those who wish to pursue [Alexander’s] way of life” (“The Life” 252; 280). Given the severe limitations that Alexander’s lifestyle imposed on his ability to spread his teachings, it was fitting that the action that most forthrightly spread his teachings was one undertaken by another.

Works Cited

- Caner, Daniel. *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. Print.
- "The Life and Conduct of our Sainted Father Alexander." *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*. Trans. Daniel Caner. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. Print.