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3. Encountering the Saracen Other

Anastasios of Sinai and the Arab Conquest

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Abstract

Anastasios of Sinai wrote in the midst of the Arab conquest of Egypt and Palestine in the seventh century. He shared his monastic wisdom with various Christian correspondents in a series of replies to questions from the surrounding area. In his letters, Anastasios described the Arab conquerors as a divinely sanctioned other punishing Christians for unfaithfulness. At the same time, he called on Christians to repent from theological corruption and moral evil, while remaining steadfast in their faith during this time of oppression. Anastasios drew upon a common Byzantine motif of “Saracens” as distinct others to communicate to his Christian community God’s activity amid the Arab conquest.

Keywords: Christianity, monasticism, Islam, Palestine, Sinai, Saracen

Introduction

Responding to a fellow Christian under Arab rule in the seventh century, Anastasios of Sinai noted that “the race of the Saracens” had conquered and then ruled the Byzantine lands of Palestine and Egypt (Anastasios 2011: 177 q. 65). At first glance this seems an odd way to refer to the armies that gathered in Arabia under the Prophet Muhammad and moved north and east across southern Byzantium beginning in 630 CE. Anastasios corresponded with many fellow Christians under Arab rule. In his collected letters, the *Questions and Answers*, he sought to provide a theological assessment of the conquest and offer pastoral care for those seeking his guidance. The questions to which he replied were wide-ranging and often very concrete responses to living as a conquered people. In his correspondence Anastasios taught his recipients to view the collective Christian community as the cause for their own suffering. For Anastasios, the Arabs were the divinely ordained, external people chosen to serve as chastisement for the sin of the Christian community. In response to the Arab conquest, Christians should take the opportunity to practice renewed faithfulness to God despite the hardships of living under Arab occupation. I will survey the letters directly related to the Arab conquest and argue that a key aspect of his interpretation of the conquest was his use of the term “Saracens” to conceptualize the Arab conquerors as external to and distinct from Byzantine Christians. This motif was evident in his correspondence on the Arab conquest and elucidated the guidance he offered his inquirers.

Anastasios of Sinai flourished in the second half of the seventh century as a monk on Mount Sinai and died sometime after 700. As evident in his writings, he was a staunch defender of pro-Chalcedonian Christianity and traveled from Jerusalem to Alexandria debating, preaching, and defending his theological position. All of his writings were composed during the Arab rule of Palestine and Egypt. Situating Anastasios within his historical and political context is vital for understanding his writing, his audience, and his impact on fellow Christians, especially in the collection of his *Questions and Answers* (Howard-Johnston). The monastery, now known as St. Catherine’s, was a sixth-century church and fort in the Roman province of *Palestina tertia* or Third Palestine (Caner: 2, 32). Anastasios came to Sinai after the Arab capture of Cyprus in 649 to become a monk and gained notoriety in the region becoming, as Karl-Heinz Uthemann posits, “the most famous monk of St. Catherine’s monastery” (313). The presence of pilgrims and the popularity of the site due to connection with biblical narratives may offer some clues as to the origins of the questions posed to Anastasios (Papadogiannakis 2016: 250). The monastery at Mount Sinai still displays a copy of an important firman granting protection to the monks and pilgrims of the monastery that was claimed to be dictated and signed by Mohammad and penned by his son-in-law ‘Ali in 623 (Hobbs: 159-62).

The literary genre of Anastasios’s *Questions and Answers* (or *erotapokriseis*) was a collection of correspondences cultivated as a means for addressing contemporary concerns and situational interpretations (Papadogiannakis 2006: 101). There is no reason to doubt that his one hundred and three responses are records of actual letters between Anastasios and recipients (Munitiz 1999: 51). It is probable that these were individuals and churches he met amid his travels in defense of pro-Chalcedonian theology, pilgrims who had visited Mount Sinai, or others seeking wisdom from the monastic community (Haldon 1992: 125). At least one of his letters was intended to be read aloud in a congregation (Anastasios 2011: 196 q. 81).

Thus, these letters offer a window into both the questions and concerns of Christians, presumably also pro-Chalcedonian or Melkite, directly after the initial conquest of Palestine and Egypt as well as the responses of Anastasios to these direct and very concrete queries (Haldon 1992: 124).

Living amid the Arab Conquest in the *Questions and Answers*

Many of Anastasios's *Questions and Answers* were matters directly related to a conquered people facing a new political reality and new challenges as a result (on the groupings of questions, see Munitiz 2006: 1-li; 2011: 26-38). Alan Guenther characterized Anastasios's *Questions and Answers* as describing "the plight of the ordinary Christian subject under Muslim rule" (370). In Question 75, a petitioner wanted to know whether or not running away at a time of persecution was a sin. Anastasios replied that in the event one's life is in danger it is not a sin, but not to flee from "bodily penalties" (2011: 190-91). Question 76 asked about women who "go astray" while in captivity, to which Anastasios responded that it depended on the motivation of the sin and that sins committed in captivity out of need are less grievous than those committed without duress (2011: 191; 2006: 127; on the treatment and exchange of captives, see Friedman: 33-54). Anastasios recognized the tenuous circumstances of his correspondents and replied with care and compassion for their collective situation. In Question 90, he was asked about discerning the source of corrections and trials. He explained that sometimes our own carelessness produces trials, but God and the devil are also responsible for human trials. Trials from the devil come about with God's permission and produce anger and hopelessness. Trials from God, however, come upon someone, as in the case of Job, "for that person's good [and] never eradicate good hope from the soul" (2011: 216). Further, in response to a question about being prohibited from prayer or church attendance due to enslavement or imprisonment, Anastasios instructed his recipient that, "Any slavery, imprisonment and state of wretchedness clearly has been brought into the world for the remission of your sins" (2011: 212 q. 87). This reply assured the individual that humility and thankfulness for enslavement will be counted as fasting and worship. These questions and their answers illumine the reaction and response to Christians facing new complex realities under Arab rule (Papadogiannakis 2016: 251).

The *Questions and Answers* also addressed questions concerning the Arab rulers themselves and distinctions between the Arabs and the Christian communities now under their rule. Some of these questions were concerned with the very concrete issues of daily life like illness and fertility. Anastasios drew upon his knowledge of the Arabs to respond to these queries. In Question 26, he was asked why Christians seemed to suffer more maiming, leprosy, and gout, among other things, than surrounding people (2011: 106-7; 2006: 52). These questions might arise in any context, let alone a conquered people making meaning of their circumstances. In this letter, Anastasios actually offered a positive perspective of Arabs who "keep to a much drier diet, and are moreover a race (γένος) from a desert and dry climate, [and] do not have so many invalids, sufferers from gout, or lame people, or lepers or possessed" (2011: 107 q. 26; 2006: 52-53 q. 26; he further distinguishes Christians from Jews and Arabs in 2011: 162 q. 49). In Question 81, Anastasios referred to some of the "destitute and impoverished" nomads of the region as "desert-wandering Arabs (ἐρημίται Ἀραβες), who barely have enough bread, but who have a superabundance of children" (2011: 196-97; 2006: 133). Whether or not this was

an accurate representation of the people with whom Anastasios interacted is unclear. This letter was in response to a question about why some people are unable to bear children while others have many and indicated that a luxurious and settled life was not an indicator of fertility. Anastasios displayed a familiarity with the culture and habits of Arabs and highlighted their distinctive habits of eating and family structures to distinguish his Christian audience from their Arab rulers.

Interpreting the Conquest in the *Questions and Answers*

As expected, many of the questions sent to Anastasios revolved around the nature of the conquest itself and attempted to derive some meaning behind why God would allow it to happen and how Christians should respond to this new situation. These inquiries were direct testimony to how Christians in Egypt and Palestine experienced and expressed their questions about the conquest (Papadogiannakis 2016: 257). Anastasios's responses encouraged endurance and perseverance to his correspondents alongside his scripturally-grounded theological analysis of the situation. A central tenet of the correspondence was that the Arab conquest was divinely ordained and the proper Christian response must accede to this perspective. Four of Anastasios's *Questions and Answers* bring his perspective clearly into view.

Prayers for the Arab Rulers

In *Question 60*, Anastasios was asked, "If our rulers are Jews or unbelievers or heretics (Ἰουδαῖοι ἢ ἀπίστοι ἢ αἰετικοί), should we pray for them in church or not?" His response clarified that Christians should pray for all rulers, even the Arabs, because the Apostle Paul's exhortation to Timothy was during pagan rule (2011: 173; 2006: 110). Paul, therefore, thought it appropriate to pray for anyone in power even if they are not Christian. For Anastasios, the prayers offered for all of humanity in the divine liturgy included the rulers and kings of the day, regardless of their religious or political affiliation. The liturgical context of the priestly prayers for all the rulers in the world served as a reminder that continuing to participate in Christian worship was the Christian response to being ruled by outsiders.

Divine Favor of the Orthodox

In *Question 69*, Anastasios was asked about confuting heretics (αἰρετικῶν) concerning the Christian faith. Against these Christian heretics, Anastasios encouraged his correspondent to follow the "right-thinking" Christians (ὀρθόδοξος) because, though occupied by barbarians (βαρβάρων), orthodox Christians still had divine favor illustrated by having control of all the holy places (πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους τόπους) (2011: 185; 2006: 122). To Anastasios's knowledge and in his own experience at St. Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai, Christian communities still had access to and were in possession of the holy sites of Palestine. Here, in the midst of intra-Christian theological debate, Anastasios utilized the foreignness of the Arab conquerors as a way to further emphasize remaining true to one's Christian tradition. Even amid the rule of these barbarians, God had still allowed Anastasios's theological party to retain the holy places of Palestine and Egypt, and for seven hundred years at that. The imperial forces of previous Arian bishops and emperors, like Emperor Valens (364-368), attempted to wrest these places from the true church by expelling pro-Nicene bishops and installing Arian bishops (see Sozomen: 377). The machinations of the unorthodox, in Anastasios's recounting, could not overcome God's restoration of the orthodox (2011: 185-86). Anastasios utilized the otherness

of the conquerors to convey to his recipients that the Arab conquests were well within God's divine will and were the medium for divine punishment and discipline while, at the same time, encourage them to endure these trials faithfully.

Cruelty of the Arab Conquerors

In Question 101 Anastasios was asked, "Is it true of all the evil things (πάντα τὰ κακὰ) done by the Arabs against the lands and nations of the Christians, that they have done them against us completely at God's command and with his approval?" (2011: 230-31; 2006: 161). This questioner was concerned with hostile acts against Christians. For this questioner, it was specifically Christian lands and nations that bore the brunt of the "evil deeds" of this military activity. Even if the conquest were understood to be divine discipline or punishment, individual and direct actions against Christian persons was the issue in the question and not the conquest itself (Louth 2000: 68).

Anastasios responded with strong language reminiscent of Romans 6:1-2 where Paul responds to questions concerning sinning more to attain more grace. For Paul and for Anastasios the answer was "Certainly not! (μὴ γένοιτο)" (2011: 230-31; 2006: 161). Anastasios then continued to list the atrocities committed against Christians in the conquered lands that cannot be said to be God's wishes, trampling upon the "holy body and blood, or on the relics of his holy Apostles and martyrs" as well as persecuting Christians, shedding innocent blood, defiling churches and holy places, and forcing religious women into marriage (2011: 230-31). These were just a few of the many things that the Arabs are doing that displease God and for these things Anastasios decreed that they "will certainly pay with an eternal punishment (τὴν αἰώνιον κόλλασιν ἀντικομίσονται)" (2011: 231; 2006: 162).

Anastasios argued that there was a distinction between the conquest itself and the horrific actions against Christians and churches based upon his understanding of particular passages of scripture. He was sympathetic to his correspondent noting that "whatever has been happening must seem strange to many and perhaps even difficult to accept with faith" and offered an explanation based upon Israel's capture and exile by the Assyrians (2011: 231). Then, too, God used a foreign nation to chastise God's people, but the Assyrians misused their power. Based upon a citation from Zechariah 1:14-15, Anastasios asserted that the Assyrians "judged that God had handed the Jews (τοὺς Ἰουδαίους) over to them to be destroyed, so they dealt with them savagely and remorselessly" (2011: 231). Because the Assyrians dealt too harshly with the Jews, God later wiped them out. This explanation was intended to offer a defense of the divine punishment his reader was experiencing and at the same time to condemn the actions of the Arabs that went beyond the pale. Anastasios explained to his reader that "It is necessary for us to be aware of these things, so that when you see these lawless (τοὺς ἀνόμους) men closing the churches, shedding blood, persecuting some people unjustly and mercilessly, and committing other crimes, you will not be angry with God, but realize clearly that they are acting thus because of their own godlessness (ἀσεβείας), and that they await the worst possible punishment (τὴν ἐσχάτην κόλλασιν)" (2011: 231; 2006: 162-63). It is impossible to tell what effect this response had on the reader since the questions are anonymous, but it is clear that Anastasios was developing a theological apology for the Arab conquest in which horrific acts of war could be accounted to the impiety of the conquerors and assure his reader that these acts would not go unpunished.

Divine Institution of the Arab Rulers

Finally, Question 65 was concerned with the powers of the world and how to regard their rule in the light of scripture. Anastasios was asked, “The Apostle says that *the powers* that are in the world *are instituted by God* (Rom 13:1). Does it follow that every governor (ἄρχων) and emperor is appointed by God?” (2011: 177-78; 2006: 115). In the context of the Arab conquest, this correspondent was concerned with whether God had allowed or condoned conquest of the land by the Arabs. Does God support the conquerors and their actions against the inhabitants of Palestine and Sinai?

Anastasios’s lengthy reply was first grounded in scripture followed by an interpretation of the passage in Romans, stating, “God says in the Law (ἐν τῷ Νόμῳ), *I will give you rulers after your own hearts* (Jer 3:15), and so we say that some governors and emperors are appointed by God as worthy of such an honor, while others who are unworthy are appointed by God’s permission or will (κατὰ Θεοῦ συγχώρησιν ἢ βούλησιν) with a view to the people who are worthy of such unworthiness” (2011: 177-78; 2006: 115). For Anastasios, the character of a ruler was, at times, a reflection of the character of those being ruled. Anastasios illustrated the implications of his interpretation by pointing out the recent actions of the Danube army of the Byzantine empire, which mutinied in 602, massacred emperor Maurice and his family, and set up the centurion Phokas as emperor (602-610), and the series of massacres that followed in the empire (Haldon 2000: 26). To make sense of these vile actions against the empire, Anastasios further related the prayers of an anchorite, “a holy and very simple man who had great confidence with God,” in response to these actions. This anchorite “used to complain to God in all simplicity, ‘Lord, why have you made such a man emperor?’ After several days had gone by and he repeated the same thing to God, ‘Why have you made such a man emperor?’ a voice came to him from God saying, ‘Because I have not found anybody worse!’” (2011: 177). The implication here was that the empire had somehow deserved Phokas as ruler: Phokas and the massacres that followed were reflective of the people of the empire itself. Haldon remarked that there was an underlying assumption in the Byzantine world that “emperors were appointed by God, but emperors could be overthrown, and a successful usurper must, it was reasoned, have the support of God – even if men were unable at first to grasp the logic of His choice – otherwise [the usurper] could not have met with success” (2009: 209). Anastasios appeared to have held the common assumption of divine appointment of rulers, even Arab rulers. The twist here was that it was the poor character of the people that are matched by the poor ruler. The one appointed by God to rule over the people was similarly as flawed as the populace.

But Anastasios did not stop there, his focus shifted to church leaders as well. He told of a city in the Thebaid “that was very wicked and where all sorts of evil and irregular deeds were performed (πολλὰ μισὰ καὶ ἄτοπα διαπραττομένη)” (2011: 177; 2006: 116). A member of the city, “one of the most abominable (τις ἐξωλέστατος),” was tonsured and took up the habit only to later become bishop without ever truly being converted. The specific nature of this bishop’s unfaithfulness is uncertain but was probably linked to non-Chalcedonian theology as the Thebaid was the location of both Nestorius’s exile and Peter the Iberian’s refuge in 455 (Horn: 93-97). Anastasios recorded that an angel of the Lord met this bishop and told him that “It is certain that you have not become bishop because you were worthy of the priesthood, but

because this particular city deserves to have this sort of bishop!” (2011: 166). Again, it was the character of the people that was reflected in their church leadership.

Anastasios’s illustrations were not an indictment against his letter’s recipient, but against the actions and activities of all those in conquered lands. He ended his letter with sympathy for his and his correspondent’s situation, saying, “So, dear friend, when you see that some unworthy and wicked person is either emperor or governor or bishop, do not be surprised, but learn and believe with complete certainty that it is because of our crimes that we are handed over to such tyrants, and not even then do we desist from evil things, but although we are in the middle of such hardships, we continue to practice wicked deeds” (2011: 177). Anastasios implicated himself alongside his recipient and all those under the rule of unworthy rulers as participating in collective crimes and evil deeds. He himself had suffered under wicked rulers and was himself part of the collective evil, even amid his call for repentance.

The backdrop of the Arab conquest came into focus as he concluded his letter stating, “Believe me when I tell you that if the race of the Saracens (τὸ ἔθνος τῶν Σαρακηνῶν) were to depart from us today, at once the Green and Blue factions would rise up once more and begin killing one another, and [the same with] the Eastern Administrative Area (ἡ Ἀνατολή), Arabia, Palestine and many other countries” (2011: 177; 2006: 117). Anastasios’s invocation of “the race of the Saracens” in reference to the Arab conquest stood in contrast to his reference to the Green and Blue factions of the Byzantine empire. The Green and Blues were political factions of the Byzantine empire whose famous Nika riots at the chariot races in 532 almost overwhelmed Emperor Justinian himself. If this final section of his letter follows the logic of the previous sections, the Saracens as an external entity are the appropriate and harshest punishment for the evil committed. This was not an internal disruption like Phokas rising to power from within the army or a citizen rising to the bishopric from within the city, but an external and outside force overtaking Christian and Byzantine cities. The Saracen conquerors were not the cause of the turmoil Anastasios and his recipient were facing, but rather a consequence of this collective evil for which the people were responsible. Anastasios portrayed the Arab other as the means of divine discipline for these evil actions. In this letter, the Arab presence was essential to the discipline deserved, because God could have used another means, the Greens and Blues (see Louth 2008: 120-21). Anastasios, like many other witnesses to the Arab conquest, was interpreting the events of the world around him through his understanding of divine punishment for sin (Guenther: 364).

Casting the Arabs as “Saracens”

Anastasios was clearly working from a perspective whose central concern was promoting the pro-Chalcedonian theology and practice in the Christian community amid the contraction of the Byzantine empire and expansion of the Arab conquests. Caught in occupied territory, Anastasios attempted to make sense of his community’s situation and the new rulers at hand. Over and again, Anastasios drew lines of distinction between the Christian community and the Arabs. It is my contention that Anastasios was drawing upon the understanding of the Arabs as a tribe of the Saracens that both exploited the cultural distances separating the Arabs and Christians but also retained the privileged status of the Christian community.

From Anastasios’s other writings, it is clear that he and the monks at Sinai had interactions with nomadic people called Saracens before the Arab conquest and that he understood some

connection between the Saracens and the Arab conquerors (Caner: 40). Anastasios's references to "Saracens" in his *Narrations* and *Edifying Tales* include Christian Saracens, non-Christian Saracens, and Saracens fighting with the Arabs during the conquest. As collected stories, these conform to other late antique uses of "Saracens" to refer to local sedentary and nomadic inhabitants, including those from Arabia, with whom Christians in Byzantium had numerous interactions (Caner: 40).

Three current publications have also explored the Byzantine use of "Saracens" to describe Arabs before and after the conquest of the seventh century. Robert Hoyland noted that "Byzantine and Persian citizens employed the terms 'Saracen' and 'Tayyaye' to designate the nomads of Arabia and the imperial borderlands, whereas they used the term 'Arab' to refer to the settled inhabitants of the provinces of Arabia" (26). Hoyland argued that "saracen" was a term applied by Byzantines to draw a "clear distinction between themselves and these nomadic Arabs, regarding the latter as devoid of civilized values" (23). Likewise, John Tolan has argued that Byzantine Christians in the early seventh century utilized "established categories for the religious other: Jew, pagan, and heretic" (3). Drawing on Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, Tolan illustrated how Christians utilized these categories to portray the Arab conquest and rise of Islam as "a divinely sent punishment, as pagan idolaters, as Christian heretics, as followers of Satan, or as devotees of Antichrist" (4). Finally, Walter Ward has recently surveyed the use of "Saracen" by late-antique authors and shown how the term casts the sedentary and nomadic pastoralists in the Sinai region as other (1-12). Utilizing postcolonial theory, Ward argued that at Sinai "monks acted as colonizers, bringing the new imperial culture, Christianity, and justified their occupation of it with vitriolic attacks against the colonized nomads" (6). The depiction of Saracens in tales and stories was a means of establishing a literary and cultural diminution of local peoples (for a depiction of Saracens as demons, see Flusin: 404-9; Strickland: 29-59). Anastasios's perspective fits well within this Byzantine tendency.

In Anastasios's *Questions and Answers*, the presence and power of the Arabs was consistently relegated to a secondary position to that of the proper response of the Christian community. This is an important frame to accurately interpret the theological position Anastasios held and taught through his correspondence. The Arabs were portrayed as outsiders being used by God as the proper punishment and purification of the Christian community. Anastasios's was drawing on the motif of the "Saracens" as a distinct other bringing God's punishment upon the Christians, a punishment for which Christians were themselves responsible. The response Anastasios sought to elicit was one of perseverance in the orthodox faith and endurance of the Christian community in the hope that God would redeem the faithful.

Conclusion

Anastasios stood at an important intersection between the diminishing Byzantine empire and the institution of the Umayyad caliphate (Donner: 41). His reframing of the Saracen as the means for God to sanctify the church through trials and persecution was essential to his interpretation of these events and his support for his fellow Christians. His concern when corresponding with individuals was primarily pastoral, helping his flock cope with the aftermath of the Arab conquest and communicating an understanding of God's providence amid confrontation, persecution, death, and enslavement. Crucial to his pastoral care,

Anastasios cast the conquering Arabs as “Saracens” to depict them as other but also to present them as the chosen external medium for divine chastisement.

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