
Beyond Imitation? Paul of Sadamant (fl. 1260 CE) on “the best of works”

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A perennial problem in the life of Christian discipleship and formation is how to work out the relationship between the life of active engagement with the world on the one hand, and the life of contemplation and prayer on the other. Those of us who teach at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago have had to confront this issue in a new way since adopting an activist-leaning “public church curriculum” about six years ago, while simultaneously insisting on “spiritual formation” as one of this curriculum’s “competency areas” in which students are to be trained and assessed. How to rhyme these two sides of Christian discipleship? It was with joy that we welcomed the Rev. Gordon J. Straw to the faculty in July of 2017, as occupant of the Cornelsen Chair for Spiritual Formation. Here was a colleague who could help us with the rhyme. And help us he did—although his tenure in the Cornelsen Chair was tragically cut short by illness and death.

As my contribution to this issue of *Currents* in honor of Gordon and his legacy, I would like to present a brief text from the Arabic-language heritage of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, here translated into English for the first time.¹ In a way appropriate to the conditions of this church in the thirteenth century, it deals with works of mercy (in particular, almsgiving) on the one hand, and the life of prayer on the other.

Peter of Sadamant’s *Instructive Lives*

Peter of Sadamant (Buṭrus al-Sadamantī in Arabic) was a Coptic Orthodox priest whose name is frequently mentioned as one example of the explosion of theological creativity that took place in the Coptic Church, in the Arabic language, throughout the thirteenth and into the fourteenth centuries CE.² Although Peter wrote a number of important works, very little is known about his life. We do not know whether Sadamant (Sadamant al-Jabal, a

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village in Middle Egypt, not far from the Fayyūm Oasis) was the place of his birth or the place where he became a monk. We know nothing of his “call story.” One can perceive from Peter’s writings that he had received the education of a refined person of culture (whether Muslim or Christian) in his day, which means that he may well have come from the class of elite Copts who served as financial administrators in successive Islamic governments. Perhaps he had served in some such bureaucratic role himself. If so, however, by the year 1260 (the one fixed date we have for his activity) he had retired or been forced out of office, as we then encounter him as a priest and author of specifically theological works. His most famous work was a book-length commentary on the passion narrative, *Kitāb al-Taṣḥīḥ fī ālām al-sayyid al-Masīḥ* (*Establishing what is Right, with regard to the Passion of the Lord Christ*).³ Today, however, I present a text from another work, which the late Bishop Epiphanius of the Monastery of St. Macarius published in 2016 under the title *Siyar ta’līmiyya, Instructive Lives*.⁴

Instructive Lives is a set of three edifying tales, about three (sets of) wealthy people who embraced various forms of the ascetic life: Isaiah (and his brother Āsiyā), Babnūdah (an Arabic form of the Coptic name Paphnoute), and Isidore of Alexandria (and

1. I should stress that this translation is still a draft, although I hope eventually to incorporate it into a volume of selected Copto-Arabic texts in English translation.

2. What we know about Peter is usefully summarized in Awad Wadi, “Buṭrus al-Sadamantī al-Armani (Peter of Sadamant ‘the Armenian’),” in *Christianity and Monasticism in Northern Egypt: Beni Suef, Giza, Cairo, and the Nile Delta*, eds. Gawdat Gabra and Hany N. Takla (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2017), 201–211.

3. This was one of the first books to be *printed* by the Copts, in about 1875 by the Coptic National Press.

4. Bishop Epiphanius of the Monastery of St. Macarius, *Siyar ta’līmiyya li-l-qiss Buṭrus al-Sadamantī* (Cairo: Dār Majallat Marqus, 2016). Bishop Epiphanius made the edition from manuscripts in the monastery’s library.

his unnamed wife).⁵ While scribal introductions present these tales as Peter’s *translations* (presumably from Coptic originals), I think it can be plainly shown that Peter has assembled fragments of ancient Christian stories into thin narrative frameworks into which he has poured his own teaching, written in a rich and often poetic Arabic style.⁶

Much of the first tale, *The Story of Isaiah and Āsiyā*, is in fact not a narrative at all but rather discourse that Peter puts into the mouth of Isaiah, who had inherited great wealth but gave it away to the poor in order to follow Christ (cf. Matt 19:21). One section of this is a set of twenty-one questions that an unnamed disciple poses to Isaiah, identified as “the teacher.”⁷ In what follows, I offer my first attempt at translating Questions 10 through 19, in which Isaiah explains “the best of works.”

Translation of the Arabic text⁸

10. *Disciple*: My father, acquaint me with the best of works!
Teacher: My son, what one needs to ask about is the most *beneficial* of works, not the best.
11. *Disciple*: Why?
Teacher: The best may be harmful to you, even if beneficial for others.
12. *Disciple*: I really want to come to know the best!
Teacher: The best of works (*afḍal al-a ‘māl*) is that in which the human comes to resemble (*shābaha*) the best of those who do works (*afḍal al- ‘āmilīn*), that is, the Creator.
13. *Disciple*: And what is that?
Teacher: Beneficence towards all (*al-iḥsān al- ‘āmm*). Therefore our Lord said to us all: “Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). He taught us an aspect of perfection, explaining that it is generosity (*al-jūd*) and mercy (*al-rahma*), through his saying: “Because [God] is the one who causes the sun to rise upon the good and the evil [alike], and the rain to come upon the righteous and the wicked” (Matt 5:45).
14. *Disciple*: Mercy in what?
Teacher: In whatever someone other than yourself

5. I give a fuller introduction to the work in: Mark N. Swanson, “Once Again on the 13th-Century Flowering of Copto-Arabic Literature: Introducing an Edition of Buṭrus al-Sadamantī’s *Instructive Lives*,” *Coptica* 17 (2018): 25–42.

6. *Ibid.*, 35–40.

7. *The Story of Isaiah and Āsiyā* occupies pp. 21–40 in Bishop Epiphanius’s edition. The 21 Questions and Answers are at pp. 24–30.

8. English translation from the Arabic text published in Epiphanius, *Instructive Lives*, 27–29.

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gets benefit from (and *you* will get benefit by it from God!), whether in word or deed, through almsgiving or prayer or consolation, in silence or through speech, and so on.

15. *Disciple*: If there are many categories of mercy, and I am incapable of performing every single one of them, will just *some* [of them] be sufficient for me to imitate the heavenly Father (*al-tashabbuh bi-l-Āb al-samā ‘ī*)?
Teacher: Yes, because the likeness (*mumāthala*) holds good in each part [and not just in the whole]. The goal is that the human come to be like (*yumāthil*) the Creator in the virtue of generosity, *according to one’s capacity*.
16. *Disciple*: Can salvation take place without accomplishing [all] the categories of mercy?
Teacher: Yes, because Zacchaeus did not bring to completion all the kinds of mercy, but despite that he attained salvation (Luke 19:9), and likewise the widowed woman (Mark 12:42).
17. *Disciple*: If mercy is the best of works, and if it does not occur except by means of wealth, why did our Lord stipulate to the person seeking perfection (Matt 19:21) that he reject all wealth?
Teacher: Listen, my son. There are [different] kinds of mercy: some of them are not fulfilled without wealth and possessions, and some of them are fulfilled without wealth—indeed, wealth and possessions may be *harmful* to some kinds of mercy! Indeed, those who detach themselves from the world and devote themselves to prayer and supplication for all are *harmed* by possessions, hindered by the gathering of wealth from completing their purpose.

For us as well, if we say that mercy is the best of works, we only mean that it is the best of *transitive*

works, because there is another work, an *intransitive* one, that is better than this.

18. *Disciple*: And what is that?

Teacher: The cutting of earthly ties and clinging to the Creator alone, prayer in the Spirit, and intimate conversation with God in “the better part” (Luke 10:42?). The evidence that this is better is that it is the work of the angels and of the righteous in this world and the next; and because prayer in the spirit is a work *with God*, while mercy is a work *with the creatures*; the difference is between intimate conversation (*munājāt*) with God and direct contact (*mubāshara*) with the creatures. Making *mercy* the best of works is correct with reference to this world in particular, it being the work that is specific to this existence and that is cut off by death. The virtue of *prayer* endures and abides with the soul, and [thus] becomes the best kind [of work] in the spiritual world.

19. *Disciple*: If *mercy* is a work that is characteristic of the Creator, so that the Creator is the best of those who do works, how can *prayer* be the best work, since it is characteristic of the creatures? In prayer, one comes to resemble the creatures rather than the Creator!

Teacher: Prayer and intimate conversation [with God] consists in the orientation of the creature towards the Creator, and its goal is seeking piety (*taqwā*) and attaining contentment and mercy, where mercy consists in procuring the good and beneficial or in removing the evil or harmful. The Creator is all-sufficient and fully abundant, not in need of anything at all [so as to require prayer], but rather the cause of the existence of all that is and the source of all goodness—or, rather, goodness itself, the intended goal of [every] work. Thus, it is correct [to speak of God’s] mercy to the exclusion of [God’s] prayer.

What is explained clearly from all of this is that mercy is the best work upon which a human being relies *by analogy* to the Creator, because mercy preserves the order [of the world] for God’s own people and for all people (Matt 5:45); while prayer in the Spirit (and intimate conversation with and attachment to God) is the best work that the creature does *with* the Creator.

Paraphrase and commentary

In this text, Peter puts into the mouth of the ascetic Isaiah a rationale for a program of seeking perfection (*al-kamāl*) through almsgiving that runs throughout the *Instructive Lives*. Key biblical proof

One should “seek perfection” gradually (since striving for too much too quickly might actually cause harm, Question 11), and according to one’s capacity (Question 15).

texts appear in this short reading: “Be perfect (*kāmilīn*), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (*kāmil*)” (Matt 5:48), as well as the verse about “the person seeking perfection (*al-kamāl*),” that is, Matt 19:21: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor . . . ; then come, follow me.”⁹ Peter had no need to quote the whole of this last text; it was (and is) well known among Coptic Christians as the verse that the young Antony (St. Antony the Great, 251–356) heard in church one day—and that launched him on his ascetic career.¹⁰

Peter makes the logic of verses such as Matt 5:48 explicit: Christian discipleship is a matter of mimesis, of *coming to resemble God*; he uses the related Arabic terms *shābaha* and *tashabbuh bi-*, as well as the synonyms *māthalal/mumāthala*, where Western Christians might speak of the *imitatio Dei*.¹¹ If sheer “perfection” (*al-kamāl*) *per se* is difficult to imitate, Peter is quick to explain that a principal aspect of God’s perfection is God’s beneficence towards all (*al-ihsān al-‘amm*) or generosity (*al-jūd*) or mercy (*al-raḥma*); Peter settles on this last term, *al-raḥma*, as convenient shorthand. The work of mercy can now be described as “the best of works” (*afḍal ala ‘māl*), since it imitates the mercy of “the best of those who do works” (*afḍal al-‘āmilīn*).

Peter insists (as he does throughout the *Instructive Lives*) that “seeking perfection” is something that can be undertaken in various ways.¹² There are different kinds or categories of mercy

9. Here and throughout this essay, biblical quotations—unless translations from Arabic—are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

10. *Life of Antony* 2.3. See, for example, Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and The Greek Life*, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003), 59. Modern Coptic icons of St. Antony often show him holding with his left hand a scroll with Matt 19:21 written on it.

11. Should this sound strange, it may be good to mention Eph 5:1: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children . . .” For a reflection on the place of *mimēsis* in an ethical system, see Raphael Loewe, “Imitatio and Ethics in Judaism and Christianity,” in *For the Sake of Humanity*, ed. Alan Stephen and Raphael Walden (Leiden: Bartinus Nijhoff, 2006), 217–238.

12. This point had already been made in *The Story of Isaiah and Āsiyā*. While Isaiah gave away his share of the inheritance at once in order to embrace the ascetic life, Isaiah’s brother Āsiyā made the decision to expend his share gradually, being a *steward* of this wealth so as best to serve the poor; Epiphanius, *Instructive Lives*, 22–23.

(Questions 14–16), not all of them involving wealth (Question 17). One should “seek perfection” gradually (since striving for too much too quickly might actually cause harm, Question 11), and according to one’s capacity (Question 15).¹³ In all this, one may have confidence in God’s salvation (Question 16), as illustrated by the case of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:9): “salvation came” to Zacchaeus’s house even before he had embarked on his project of making restitution to those he had wronged.¹⁴

With these points made, Peter’s specifically theological task might have been considered finished, at least as far as *Instructive Lives* is concerned. In its pages, a number of characters illustrate the varieties and complexities of lives seeking perfection through almsgiving, in accordance with Matt 19:21. However, having asserted that the work of mercy is “the best of works,” Peter surprisingly takes a step beyond this discourse (Question 17), resorting to Arabic grammatical terminology to do so: the work of mercy is the best of *transitive* works (*al-a māl al-muta’addiya*), works that have a specific object. The work of mercy benefits (*direct object*) others. However, there is also a work better than this (Peter has Isaiah tell the surprised disciple), one that can be described as *intransitive* (*lā yata’addā*), having no particular object. And that work (see Question 18) is prayer (*al-ṣalāt*).

As in the case of “mercy,” “prayer” is shorthand for Peter. With this term he probably would include liturgical prayer; after all, he was a priest, and one of his characters in *Instructive Lives*, Babnūdāh al-Mitradī, was ordained priest in Alexandria and is portrayed as baptizing converts to Christianity.¹⁵ However, Peter’s emphasis in the *Story of Isaiah and Āsiyā* is on prayer of an individual, intimate, and probably largely silent kind: “prayer in the Spirit” (*al-ṣalāt bi-l-rūḥ*) or “intimate conversation with God” (*al-munājāt ma’ Allāh*).

With this, Peter’s logic of discipleship as *imitation* seems to be broken, as Isaiah’s disciple is quick to point out (Question 19): the believer may imitate the merciful God by performing works of mercy, but in what way can *prayer* be an imitation of God, who (as Isaiah concedes) is in need of none of the things that prayer regularly seeks? In the end, for Isaiah, one must go beyond the logic of imitation. *Both* works of mercy *and* prayer are necessary. They relate to one another as the transitive work to the intransitive (Question 17); or as work with the *creature* (*ma’ al-makhlūq*) to work with *God* (*ma’ Allāh*) (Question 18); or as work *by analogy* to the Creator (*bi-l-qiyās ilā l-Khāliq*) to work *with* the Creator (*ma’ al-Khāliq*) (Question 19).

Peter in this brief text offers us a picture of active (transitive!) Christian discipleship conceived of as *imitation of God*, specifically God as merciful and generous, yoked with the more passive (*receptive* is probably a better word) practice of prayer of an intimate

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kind, a prayer that is at once “in the Spirit,” a secret conversation (*munājāt*), and a being “with God.” Both of these, mercy and prayer, have legitimate claims to be “the best of works.”

What shall we make of this?

As far as I can tell, in this text Peter does not make a case that what he describes under the category of prayer (*al-ṣalāt*) is *necessary* in order to sustain the works under the category of mercy (*al-raḥma*). Peter makes a case for both to be “the best of works,” but gives the impression that they may be in competition with one another; indeed, in Question 21 (not translated here) the disciple asks whether (!) the two can be combined.¹⁶ A possible allusion to the story of Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42, Question 18) would seem to confirm the traditional exegesis of a passage that has regularly been used to value the *vita contemplativa* above the *vita activa*; Mary, after all, had chosen “the better part.”¹⁷ Peter in fact says just this (Question 17): the intransitive work (of prayer) “is better than” the transitive work (of mercy). This is not surprising, and yet I am a little disappointed. For our purposes today, we need more than a hierarchy of “best works”!

But perhaps there is more to this passage than meets the eye . . .

One feature of the passage translated here, and indeed of the *Instructive Lives* as a whole, is the author’s christological reticence. While Peter makes ample use of the canonical gospels in support of his arguments, he gives little indication that he regards Jesus as “Lord, God, and Savior”—as the Coptic liturgy puts it and as Peter clearly affirms elsewhere. In the *Instructive Lives*, it seems to me, Peter seems to be at least imagining the possibility of engaging *Muslim* readers, addressing them in a beautiful and accessible Arabic style. Peter makes good use of vocabulary that would be familiar to readers of the Qur’an and the Islamic spiritual tradi-

13. Elsewhere in this text and elsewhere in the *Instructive Lives*, Peter will insist on the importance of spiritual direction.

14. Peter also alludes to the case of the widow, probably an allusion to the story of the widow’s offering in Mark 12:41–44. Generosity in almsgiving not measured by the size of the gift.

15. For the story, see Swanson, “Once Again,” 29–31.

16. Epiphanius, *Instructive Lives*, 30. Isaiah says Yes, but defends the status of the one who is *entirely* devoted to prayer, undistracted by the surrounding world.

17. A nice reversal of this traditional valuation of Mary above Martha is found in Meister Eckhart’s *Sermon 86*; see Bernard McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 529–534.

tions, e.g., *taqwā* (piety or God-wariness) as a goal of prayer,¹⁸ or *munājāt* (intimate conversation, here with God) as a possibility of the God-wary life.¹⁹ Indeed, even his logic of the spiritual life as imitation (or conformity-to-the-extent-possible) would not be strange for Muslims who, like the great Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (c. 1058–1111), had pondered the possibility and extent of the believer’s participation in the character of God expressed in God’s most beautiful names, including the name *al-Raḥīm*, the Merciful.²⁰

In his desire (whether realistic or not) to engage a Muslim audience, Peter for the most part keeps specifically Christian christological discourse under wraps. There is one point in our passage, however, where such discourse may faintly be heard (by those who have ears to hear). In Question 18, Peter explains his prayer/mercy distinction as the contrast between “intimate conversation (*munājāt*) with God and direct contact (*mubāshara*) with the creatures.” Peter does not spell this out, but *mubāshara* had functioned among arabophone Christian writers as a christological term: the root of *mubāshara*, “direct contact,” is *bashar*, flesh. *Mubāshara* can refer to God’s direct, *flesh-to-flesh* contact with humanity, that is, in the Incarnation.²¹

Did Peter intend that his Christian readers pick up on this christological echo? I think it possible; I read *Instructive Lives* as a reticent text in which there is regularly more that can be said from a specifically Christian perspective. In any event, I will take this echo as permission to “promote Christ” more explicitly throughout Peter’s presentation. Thus, God’s generosity (*jūd*) and mercy (*rahma*), the model for Christian imitation, is most profoundly seen in the *mubāshara* of the Incarnation. The works of mercy of which Peter speaks can be expressed in incarnational terms as works of embodied solidarity with humanity.

Also with regard to prayer: if Peter’s reference to intimate conversation with God (*al-munājāt ma’ Allāh*) echoes Sufi discourse, his reference to “prayer in the Spirit” (*al-ṣalāt bi-l-rūḥ*) echoes various New Testament passages. Perhaps this reference is enough to “let in” a passage such as Rom 8:14–27, with its description of prayer in which “the Spirit helps us in our weakness . . . with sighs too deep for words” (v. 26), and which is in solidarity with “the

18. University of Chicago professor Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988) once described *taqwā* as “perhaps the most important single term in the Qur’ān;” Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 28.

19. The notion is rooted in the Qur’ān, 19:52, where God draws Moses near for intimate conversation (*wa-qarrabnāhu najīyan*). One well-beloved and much-copied and -published set of intimate prayers is the *Munājāt* of the Sufi sage ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī of Herat (1006–1088).

20. See *Al-Ghazālī: The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, translated with notes by David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1999).

21. *Mubāshara* is used this way in the treatise “On the Proof of Christianity and the Trinity” of the great ninth-century Syriac Orthodox theologian Ḥabīb Abū Rā’iṭa; see Mark N. Swanson, “A Frivolous God?” in *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*, eds. David Thomas and Clare Amos (London: Melisende, 2003), 166–183, here p. 182 and the references given there.

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whole creation” that “has been groaning in labor pains until now” (v. 21).²² It is here that prayer on the one hand, and embodied solidarity with the entire creation on the other, are taken up in *one* movement of longing and hope.

Conclusion

At the end of this little essay, I find myself wondering what Gordon Straw would have had to say about all this. I am confident of this: Gordon was open to spiritual wisdom from wherever it came, and so would not at all have been thrown off-stride by an odd thirteenth-century Arabic text from a non-Chalcedonian church. And I am confident that he would have had something to say about the problem that Peter of Sadamant does not really address (unless in hints and whispers): that is, the precise *relationship between* Christian discipleship as embodied solidarity with humanity and with the creation as a whole, on the one hand, and prayer as intimate conversation with God on the other. Gordon knew something about that relationship. As Pastor Daniel Tallon Ruen put it in his sermon at Gordon’s memorial service, Gordon knew about “rage against the machine,” but he also knew that place of balance, of joy in the Lord, from which he was able to advocate for others.²³ Gordon knew both sides of Peter’s mercy/prayer distinction, and lived out their connection in a life that was far too short—but for which we continually give thanks, and from which we still have a lot to learn.

22. On the importance of the experience of prayer described in Romans 8 to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, see Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Chapter 3, “Praying the Trinity: A Neglected Patristic Tradition.”

23. My recollection (aided by some jotted notes) of the Rev. Daniel Tallon Ruen’s sermon at the Memorial Service for Gordon Jon Straw, Augustana Chapel, LSTC, February 9, 2019. [presented elsewhere in this issue of the journal]