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“Gladly to the Truth”: The Role of the Bishop in Shaping Late Antique Imperial Orthodoxy

In 449, a disappointed bishop named Theodoret wrote to the consul Nomus to petition the imperial decree that had “forbidden [him] to travel beyond the boundaries of [his town of] Cyrrhus.”¹ Theodoret did not understand this sanction from the imperial magistrate. In a previous encounter between the two, they spent amicable time together, leaving Theodoret convinced that future “good will and friendly intercourse” would result from their meeting.² Something had apparently gone wrong though. Theodoret mentioned in his letter that he had written the consul two previous times “without receiving any reply.”³ The consul had soured in his disposition towards Theodoret and had charged the bishop with the crime of wrongly convening an episcopal synod. But why would an ecclesiastical act like organizing an episcopal synod result in sanctions against a bishop? The answer to this question lies in a complex situation that arose in Late Antiquity that saw theological disagreement and political maneuvering inextricably linked together in a unique religio-political reality that characterized the Later Roman Empire (LRE).

Theodoret lived in the ancient city of Cyrrhus, located on the modern border of Syria and Turkey. The precise date of his birth is not known, but his consecration as bishop can be dated to 423 CE. The sparse information known about his parents came directly from Theodoret’s own hand. He described his parents as affluent citizens of Antioch who became persuaded through the miraculous healing of Theodoret’s mother to convert to an ascetic lifestyle under the guidance of Peter the Galatian. His parents endured a twelve year period of childlessness before another holy man, Macedonius the Barley-Eater, promised them a son, as long as they consecrated that son to the Lord. They did as they were commanded, and because of the eventual fulfillment of this

¹ Theodoret, *Epp.* LXXXI

² Theodoret, *Epp.* LXXXI

³ Theodoret, *Epp.* LXXXI

promise from God, they named their son Theodoret, or “gift of God.”⁴ They provided their son with an extensive religious and secular education. He first studied under Peter the Galatian and Macedonius the Barley-Eater, but his writings also show a profound familiarity with Greek literature as well.⁵ The consecrated and prepared Theodoret quickly earned a place within the ever-changing religious structure of the Christian Church.

Beginning with the Edict of Milan (312) and the Edict of Thessalonica (381), the relationship between the Church and the Roman State became one of symbiosis with scholars still disputing the dominant agent in the relationship. At the same time that classical structures of Roman society began to diminish in societal power, a dramatic rise in Christianizing influences on the Empire occurred. The contracting of religious perspectives into a more systemized and codified entity complicated these relationships substantially.⁶ From the foundation of the Church in the first century through to its third century development, Christianity existed as numerous disparate Christian movements held together by a relatively common conception of the divine, a shared lexicon, and consistent iconography. These divergent traditions within the Christian movement often expressed themselves in dramatically different, and sometimes mutually exclusive, belief systems and practices.⁷ The period of Theodoret represented a decisive shift in ecclesiastical history in which proponents of a more rigid, monolithic understanding of Christian thought attempted to gain a firm hold in a world of competing models of Christianity.

⁴ Theresa Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus: The Bishop and the Holy Man* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 10-12.

⁵ Frances M. Young and Andrew Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010), 323.

⁶ Robert Austin Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 16.

⁷ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6-7.

The movement towards standardization and unification faced opposition from bishops entrenched in the minority perspectives. Sometimes, as in the case of John Chrysostom, those minority perspectives achieved notable power within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the years just before Theodoret's birth, John Chrysostom served as the Archbishop of the imperial see of Constantinople, one of the most prominent positions within the broader Church at this time. Theological disagreement, opposition, and instability characterized his tenure as Archbishop.

The polarization and consternation reached a fever pitch, however, when John Chrysostom's successor, Nestorius, assumed the office in 428 CE. Nestorius' views on the nature and divinity of Christ sparked intense and vitriolic debate, ultimately culminating in the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE. The council provided Nestorius a chance to defend his views, but in the end, a majority of the bishops in attendance condemned Nestorius as a heretic. A few years later, Emperor Theodosius II (401-450) exiled Nestorius to Egypt. When Theodosius II published his monumental *Codex Theodosianus* in 439, a portion of the work decried Nestorius as "the author of monstrous superstition" branding him and his followers as people that "misuse[d] the name of Christians."⁸

Throughout the trials and condemnation endured by Nestorius, he maintained one primary ally, the bishop of a small town in Syria, Theodoret of Cyrrhus. Eventually, just seven years before his death, even Theodoret condemned Nestorius as well, but in the decades prior to this he ardently defended the Patriarch and suffered dearly in his ecclesiastical and political life because of his support of Nestorius. Theodoret exemplified the ascetic lifestyle that allowed bishops to gain social prominence and political influence in the Later Roman Empire, but his

⁸ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.66.2.

sympathies towards Nestorius ultimately prohibited him from actually influencing the religious and political ideologies of the state.

A proper understanding of the time period of Theodosius II, Nestorius, and Theodoret requires a nuanced analysis of political, legal, social, theological, and ecclesiastical issues that together comprised the complex history of the Late Roman Empire. Conventional histories of this period, however, often unfold as political histories traced through the influential leaders of the Roman Empire. In this schema, Augustus inaugurated a decidedly different form of Roman existence with the establishment of the Principate in 27 BCE. His reforms continued with some modification through the Flavian, Antonine, and Severan dynasties, ultimately concluding with the tumultuous time known as the Third Century Crisis in which twenty-four distinct rulers and nineteen usurpers laid claim to the throne of the Roman Empire. Following this conventional schema, the Third Century Crisis ended with the innovations of Diocletian (284-305) and the establishment of the tetrarchy as a means of administrating a diverse and often disjointed empire. Eventually Constantine (306-337) rose to power within this tetrarchy before reshaping it in a way that allowed him to consolidate power and restore the monarchy through the adoption of Christian ideology. Finally, this political schema understands the roles of later rulers like Theodosius the Great (379-395), Theodosius II, and Justinian (527-565) as efforts to further consolidate, systematize, and Christianize the Roman Empire. These emperors are seen as the major active forces operating within the Roman Empire throughout its history.

In conjunction with this political, or imperial, view of history, the conventional approach also focuses heavily on Roman law throughout this time period. Again focusing first on Augustus, this view emphasizes the innovations and transformations of conceptions of law at the end of the classical period. Augustus repurposed the structures of the Roman Republic in such a

way to consolidate his own power while maintaining a façade of an empowered Senate as a means of suppressing any would be resistance to his regime. The next major development, according to this schema, came in 292 CE, when Diocletian gathered all of the imperial rulings from the previous four centuries into one codified law code. The Gregorian Code, as it came to be known, was the first systematic attempt to codify Roman law. In 295 CE, Diocletian also published the Hermogenian Code as a supplement to the earlier Gregorian Code.⁹ The connection between prominent emperors and legal developments is then traced through Constantine and Theodosius I's edicts that first permitted Christianity, then marginalized paganism, and then ultimately fused the Christian religion to the Roman state. The climax of this political and legal approach to the LRE history comes in the efforts of Theodosius II and later Justinian to reify the Christian empire in their formal legal codes, the *Codex Theodosianus* and the *Codex Justinian* respectively. This approach to the history of the LRE tells the story of prominent emperors and subsequently emphasizes their chief accomplishments in statecraft, law codes.

Such an approach has a glaring flaw, in that it forces other considerations, such as social, ecclesiastical, and intellectual history, into a subservient position with respect to this dominant political narrative. That is to say, the political schema is superimposed as the way in which things occurred and all non-political concerns are forced to be interpreted as if the political developments perfectly map to these other developments as well. The broader category of religious history serves as an illuminating example of this problematic approach. With the political narrative assumed, religion is viewed in rather simplistic terms. Diocletian attempted to fortify Roman religion and legitimize his tetrarchy by venerating Jupiter and Hercules, a father-

⁹ Stephen Mitchell, *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284-641*, (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 63.

son tandem of gods intended as a mirror image of the relationship between Augustus and Caesar. Eventually, with the rise of Constantine and his desire to consolidate power for himself, he availed himself of the rather marginal but monotheistic religion of Christianity as means of spreading the message one God and one ruler and consolidating his authority. Then finally this forced political interpretation understands the theological disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries almost exclusively in terms of imperial intervention in church matters in the form of councils and legislation, failing to consider the reciprocal influences of the Church in shaping imperial power.

Scholarship over the last fifty years has sought to reframe this narrow, political understanding of the Later Roman Empire, bringing social, ecclesiastical, and intellectual elements into much more prominent roles within the discussion. The first of these approaches came with the social and religious corrective offered by Peter Brown in the 1970s and 1980s. He set out to understand the unlikely rise to prominence of Christian ascetics in the Late Roman Empire. As he surveyed existing scholarship, he noted a lack of analysis regarding causation. Most analysis presupposed the political framework mentioned above and saw the decline in Roman religion as the result of a rapid democratization of the nominally religious approach of the Greco-Roman elite. In other words, the Roman elites assented to Roman polytheism on the surface but in reality it was simply a civil or token religion devoid of any spiritual substance, and it was this nominal religion that the common populace quickly came to embrace in Late Antiquity, leading to an overall diminishment in competing religious authorities and creating a spiritual void that was easily filled by Christian ascetics. Brown instead examines the unique social situation that arose in Syria which precipitated the rise of ascetic holy men, men like Theodoret of Cyrrhus.

Another revision to the consensus came through the work of Fergus Millar, when he offered a social corrective to the entrenched political narrative. In his work he focused exclusively on the eastern half of the empire, allowing him to set aside the typical questions of decline or transformation that often preoccupy scholars of the Roman Late Antiquity. Instead, Millar was able to evaluate the unique reality of the eastern half of the empire, which he argued existed as a complex interplay of Greek language, religion, and culture, functionally separate from the West despite formal continuity being maintained through certain political structures and formal linguistic conventions. He specifically analyzed the legal system as a means of illustrating his argument, noting that official legislation for the Roman Empire was recorded in Latin, but eastern communications with provincial magistrates and eastern edicts and laws were written in Greek. This social corrective offered by Millar is vastly important in understanding the unique realities shaping the Greek reality in Syria where Theodoret lived and ministered.¹⁰

The work of Christopher Kelly also served as a social corrective to the consensus narrative, but his work sought to broaden the perspective of the political structures of the Late Roman Empire which are often assumed as established and in no need of revision. Through a careful consideration of the sixth century work by John Lydus, *On the Magistracies of the Roman State*, Kelly revealed behind the scenes look at the sixth century reality of Roman government. He demonstrated the complex bureaucracy and the interactions between different social and political registers within the system. Above all else, he demonstrated the networks of influence and the power dynamics that existed between emperor and official and between subject and empire.¹¹

¹⁰ Fergus Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 2-5.

¹¹ Christopher Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2006), 11-17.

The focus of Brown's work has been revisited by another scholar, Claudia Rapp, in an effort to articulate the overlapping types of societal influence that culminated in holy men and bishops gaining a prominent place with the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Late Antiquity. Rapp contended that "just as imperial authority was intricately linked to the divine, the religious authority of holy men had overtones of secular power."¹² In other words, it was not sufficient to understand the imperial power's influence over the religious realm of the empire, but one needed to consider the political power exerted by religious men as well. In offering this theological and social corrective, Rapp highlighted three primary categories in which studies of holy men from this time period fall: the development of their role within the church, their public role in urban societies, and their works of hagiography.¹³ Her work clearly demonstrated the way in which these preceding studies of holy men had been held captive by the assumed political narrative. The first two categories of studies demonstrated the arbitrary distinction of Constantine's rule as the major turn in the historical narrative. Scholars understood the development of the role of bishops within the church as a pre-Constantine consideration and the development of their role within the broader society as a post-Constantinian matter. In essence, the assumed political narrative forced an unnecessary and unhelpful sacred secular divide in ecclesiastical history centered on the rise of Constantine and his Romanization of Christianity.¹⁴

A final perspective is need within this reframed view, and it addresses holy men in the geographic region of Roman Syria, specifically focusing on the life and ministry of Theodoret. Theresa Urbainczyk's work on Theodoret represents the only scholarly monograph addressing the bishop. She focused on his well-known works, *Ecclesiastical History* and *Religious History*,

¹² Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2005), 6.

¹³ Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, 12.

¹⁴ Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, 13.

and sought to understand the broader cultural reality of asceticism within the Greek East. Urbainczyk read Theodoret's histories seeking to understand a perplexing and ubiquitous element; he consistently denigrated or at least downplayed non-Syrian holy men. She concludes that Theodoret sought to validate his own ministry as a bishop in Syria by demonstrating that he occupied a more prominent position within the church hierarchy than any bishop in Egypt, the other major center of ascetic activity. In seeking to elevate his status above bishops in Egypt, Theodoret, Urbainczyk argued, downplayed the accomplishments of ascetics in Egypt and emphasized his role as the leader of a devout "army" of devout ascetics in Syria. Despite serving as an enlightening corrective demonstrating the polemical nature of religious disagreement in the fifth century, Urbainczyk work is also of great value simply because it is the only available scholarly biography of Theodoret.¹⁵

My work draws on the immense insights of the scholars in this field over the last five decades who have painstakingly and expertly demonstrated the complex social, religious, and political realities of the Greek East in Late Antiquity. Further, they have definitively demonstrated that the flat political or imperial narratives of the history of the Later Roman Empire are insufficient. The political reality of this time was one of fractured loyalties and competing worldviews, one in which multiple versions of Christianity existed and competed for prominence and political legitimization.

My work then serves two major functions. First, it brings to the foreground an under-researched individual in Theodoret of Cyrrhus. It relies in particular on a body of textual evidence in his personal correspondence that, as of yet, has not served as the key evidentiary base for any project. The major analyses of Theodoret by Brown and Rapp relied primarily on

¹⁵ Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, 3-9.

his professional prose, *Religious History* and *Ecclesiastical History*, with only supplementary references to his letters. This paper supports the conclusions of these preeminent scholars but does so by adding the bishop's own voice to the conversation. Given this approach, the second function of this paper is to construct an argument in the negative. Preceding scholarship has clearly demonstrated the role of Late Antique bishops in shaping Nicene theological consensus through church councils and legislation, but this paper will substantiate those arguments by demonstrating the lack of success of a bishop that did not fully embody the expectations necessary to influence the developing orthodoxy. Put succinctly, Theodoret strove to perfectly fulfill the role of the bishop in the imperial system of his era, but his identification with the heretic Nestorius muted his voice and rendered his overall political influence ineffectual.

The letters of Theodoret present both an opportunity and a dilemma. The opportunity arises as the bishop's own words spring forth illuminating the religious and political systems in ways that second hand accounts cannot. Theodoret's letters represent one of the largest extant collections of correspondence from the fifth century. The source material consists of truncated letters addressed to anonymous recipients and lengthy epistles intended for magistrates, consuls, other bishops, and even the emperor's sister, Pulcheria. The dilemma arises when one considers the limitations of one-sided conversation. Understanding the broader perspective of these personal dialogues would prove much easier if one had access to both sides of the conversation. In the case of Theodoret's letters, only his words survive. In some instances, a series of letters can be seen addressing one recurring event or issue, but often the subsequent letters are just slightly modified versions of the first. Overall, the important elements of religious, social, and political life can be traced throughout the correspondence providing a compelling explanation for Theodoret's successes and failures.

Asceticism, a movement Theodoret repeatedly identified with throughout his letters, arose as a unique spiritual expression in the fourth century in Egypt through the efforts of Antony and Pachomius. The core tenets of this movement focused on cosmic warfare against the forces of evil through self-denial and renunciation of temporal cares. Antony established the practice of retreating in isolation into the desert to engage in what he perceived as battles with demonic forces. Pachomius, instead, understood asceticism to be a communal endeavor, and as such, he established the first monasteries as shared living spaces for ascetic holy men and women.¹⁶

These approaches to Christian spirituality quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire, taking firm root in places like Syria. The Syrian conception of ascetic Christianity augmented the basic framework some and understood the steppeland regions of the Syrian landscape, outside the towns and villages, as the area where God's new creation was breaking through in tangible ways in the lives of holy men and women. For them, these liminal spaces, constituted the "abode of angel-like existence" whereas urbane life, even in the towns and villages, constituted a lifestyle consumed with worldly cares.¹⁷ Theodoret firmly identified with this ascetic lifestyle both in his early life and training and even after his ascendancy to the office of bishop.

In a late letter in which Theodoret sought to defend his credentials as a righteous and qualified bishop, he succinctly described his ascetic background to the consul Nomus by first invoking the piety of his parents who "even before [his] conception...promised to devote [him] to God."¹⁸ He also emphasized the early years of his ministry that he "spent in a monastery"

¹⁶ A.D. Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium AD 363 to 565: The Transformation of Ancient Rome*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 11.

¹⁷ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200 – 1000*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), 117-118.

¹⁸ Theodoret, *Epp.* LXXXI

before being “unwillingly consecrated bishop.”¹⁹ In stating his assumption of the office of bishop in these terms, Theodoret called attention to his desire to continue in ascetic life of renunciation of the cares of the world, but he also showed his devotion to the Church in acquiescing to its needs by surrendering his own desires and becoming the bishop of Cyrrhus instead. In a separate letter to Leo, the bishop of Rome, Theodoret asserted that throughout his episcopate he had “not acquired a house, not a piece of ground, not an obol, not a tomb.”²⁰ He had rejected the opportunity to secure temporal wealth, and instead, throughout his life and episcopal career had “embraced poverty” as an ascetic.²¹ And it was this ascetic lifestyle that allowed Theodoret to achieve enough notoriety to become an integral part of the municipal structure of Cyrrhus.

The letters of Theodoret clearly establish the bishop as deeply imbedded within the ecclesiastical movement of asceticism that rose to power in the fourth century and significantly altered the socio-political structures of the Later Roman Empire. Prior to this ascendancy of Christian ascetics, Late Antique Roman society operated with a social structure whose antecedents lay in the patron system of the classical period. The traditional urban patron/client system of the Roman Republic effectively came to an end in the second century BCE, but a modified version of the system arose, specifically in the rural villages of Syria in Late Antiquity.²² The system centered on the *προστάτης*, or protector, of the village who was himself typically somewhat disenfranchised from the normal channels of wealth and prestige available in urban society, but was able, through this modified structure in more rural regions, to gain access to the one true permanent source of wealth and prestige, the land.²³ Within this system the

¹⁹ Theodoret, *Epp.* LXXXI

²⁰ Theodoret, *Epp.* CXIII.

²¹ Theodoret, *Epp.* CXIII.

²² Fergus Millar, “The Political Character of the Classical Roman Republic, 200-151 B.C.” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 74 (1984): 1.

²³ Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity.” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 85.

protectors of villages served as the intermediaries between the Syrian villages and the broader Roman world, handling lawsuits that arose, negotiating taxes, and arbitrating inter-village disputes. The protectors also handled intra-village issues as well, specifically maintaining the water supply and orchestrating debt repayment and even, from time to time, debt forgiveness among the people of the villages. The highly involved role of the protector led to a crisis in these villages when these individuals began to retreat from their rural settings in the mid-fourth century as opportunities for personal gain and advancement presented themselves with the rise of Constantine.²⁴

In the wake of this retreat, ascetic holy men in Syria found themselves uniquely poised to fill the void left by the protectors. Ascetics already exerted some spiritual authority among the rural populations of Syrian villages because they were perceived as devout followers of Christ, disentangled from the cares of the world.²⁵ The geography of Syria brought these holy men into contact with the broader society in ways that led to consistent exposure and eventually sustained influence. Other instances of asceticism during this time, specifically in Egypt, differed dramatically from Syria because of profound differences in geography. Because Egypt existed in sharp lines of contrast between fertile lands and desert, the ascetics of Egypt established permanent living spaces on the edge of civilization, allowing them access to water and the opportunity to produce some type of goods to support their lifestyle.

Syria's desert, however, was much different. Water from occasional but consistent rainfall permitted Syrian holy men to detach more from the structures of civil life. Instead of placing deep roots in a specific location on the edges of society, Syrian ascetics were free to move throughout the countryside in a semi-nomadic way, much like the Bedouins in neighboring

²⁴ Brown, "Rise and Function," 86.

²⁵ Rapp. *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, 17.

regions. This semi-nomadic existence caused the ascetics to come into contact with a number of villages instead of just one fixed population center. More importantly, it also allowed them to maintain an apartness and otherness that made them appealing as potential objective arbitrators as that need arose.²⁶ As ascetics living on the margins of society and not bound by temporal concerns, the holy men of Syria were less susceptible to the corrupting influence of bribes, and as such, villagers saw them as the perfect objective mediators necessary to fill the role of the recently departed protectors.²⁷

Over the course of time, these objective mediators became entrenched within the leadership structures of these villages and their role grew into that of municipal administrators. Theodoret's letter to Nomus provides a rare glimpse into the role and function of these ascetic administrators in Syria. In his petition to Nomus, Theodoret emphasized the important role he played in the administration of the town of Cyrrhus. He detailed the "public porticoes...two large bridges...and public baths" that he built or maintained with Church finances.²⁸ He also recalled a time when the town of Cyrrhus faced potential peril because of a drought. Theodoret intervened as the dominant municipal leader at the time by building an irrigation conduit and supplying "the dry town with water."²⁹ Beyond these administrative duties and interventions, Theodoret also stood as an advocate for the people of his town when they were faced by inequitable legislation, specifically in the form of taxes. In a letter to "the Learned Elias," Theodoret charged his friend to "put down the oppressors" and to intervene on behalf of "them that are put down by them" by defending "them with the law as with a shield."³⁰

²⁶ Brown, "Rise and Function," 83-85.

²⁷ Brown, "Rise and Function," 86-92.

²⁸ Theodoret, *Epp.* LXXXI.

²⁹ Theodoret, *Epp.* LXXXI.

³⁰ Theodoret, *Epp.* X.

Interventions like this on behalf of the people of Cyrrhus by Theodoret were quite common. In a series of letters from the mid-440s, Theodoret wrote “to defend the cause of the poor” in his town against the “severity of the taxation” levied against them.³¹ The recipients of these letters from the administrator and advocate Theodoret demonstrate the profound range of influence that he attempted to exert within LRE society. The bishop, because of the social prominence he attained as overseer of Cyrrhus, felt emboldened to address a number of dignitaries about this issue of unjust taxation, including the Praetorian Prefect of Oriens, Constantius,³² the sister of Emperor Theodosius, Pulcheria,³³ an unnamed Patrician Senator,³⁴ and another Senator and the former Magister Militum in Oriens, Anatolius³⁵ Beyond this one prolonged instance of imploring prominent government officials on behalf of his town, Theodoret wrote roughly sixty other letters to Roman magistrates and aristocrats.³⁶

Theodoret’s appeals to prominent magistrates were not an anomaly but rather emanated directly from the entrenched political apparatus that had evolved over the previous two centuries of the LRE. By the time of Theodoret, the government of the Greek East functioned as a complex and pervasive bureaucracy. Legislation during this time came about through a system of two way communication between provincial magistrates and imperial court in Constantinople. Either entity could originate a *suggestio*, or a request for imperial intervention in a particular matter. Envoys then transported the *suggestio* to the other party involved, soliciting their feedback regarding the proposal. Satisfactory proposals resulted in formal legislative acts known as *constitutiones*.³⁷

³¹ Theodoret, *Epp.* XLII.

³² Theodoret, *Epp.* XLII.

³³ Theodoret, *Epp.* XLIII.

³⁴ Theodoret, *Epp.* XLIV.

³⁵ Theodoret, *Epp.* XLV.

³⁶ Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire*, 146.

³⁷ Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, 34.

As this process developed, the provincial governments saw a rise in autonomy. They still operated as a part of the larger Roman Empire, but the decision by Constantine to centralize the imperial court in Constantinople resulted in reduced visibility of the emperor in frontier provincial regions. As a result, provincial quasi-self-governance, under the auspices of the bureaucratic framework, became the norm during this period. The majority of *constitutiones* enacted in the fourth and fifth centuries specifically addressed individual concerns in provincial territories, not the broader Roman Empire.³⁸ Even in the instances where a law was passed that stipulated expectations for the entire empire, it can most often be traced back to a particular issue in a particular locality.³⁹

As ascetic bishops filled the social and municipal roles vacated by the protectors of villages and towns, they gained the opportunity to exert their voice within the political bureaucratic framework of the empire, and their voices were decidedly and understandably theological in nature. Originally they served simply as representatives of the city, negotiating for the temporal well-being of their people, but in time they earned the authority to intervene in ways that allowed them to censure non-Christian members of society. The first efforts of legislative censure from these bishops came when they sanctioned the *superstitio*, or non-Christian pagans and Jews in the Roman Empire. Bishops first undertook this effort of crafting legislation specifically outlawing these groups and their practices in an effort to establish *religio*, or the normative understanding of Christian thought and practice in their area at that time.⁴⁰ As the blurred lines and interconnected and interdependent relationships between church and state further developed, the state began to understand its role in a different way. Government officials

³⁸ Mitchell, *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, 110.

³⁹ Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire*, 8.

⁴⁰ David Hunt, "Christianising the Roman Empire: the evidence of the Code," in *The Theodosian Code*, ed. Jill Harries and I. N Wood. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 149.

within the imperial administration began to see it as their duty to enforce the internal rules of the Church, as well as the theological decisions delivered through the church councils.⁴¹

The culmination of these efforts of state enforcement of church belief and practice was the Theodosian Code. Emperor Theodosius II commissioned the Code in 429 CE, and eventually published it in 438 CE, with the specifics becoming enforceable in 439 CE. The code began as Theodosius' effort to preserve antiquated constitutions from past eras in Roman history which had fallen into disuse or been superseded by others.⁴² As the redaction process wore on, the project morphed subtly into an attempt to coalesce all previous Roman legislation and all new proposed legislation into one masterpiece of Roman legal writing that would stand as a testament to Roman might and serve as a standard for the Christian state from its publication forward.⁴³ Despite the power and prestige of the emperor commissioning such a monumental work, in the end the ascetic bishops of Late Antiquity exerted the most formative influences on the developing law code, as demonstrated by the final book in the published form, Book XVI, which dealt exclusively with matters related to "the Catholic Faith."⁴⁴

Crafted into the very framework of this state-sanctioned legal code was the idea that "all the peoples" ruled by the Roman Emperor "should practice that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans."⁴⁵ The legislative declaration continued by adding that all "who follow this rule shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians" which was subsequently clarified as "the true Nicene faith."⁴⁶ Further this Roman law code stipulated that all "who dissent[ed] from the communion of faith...shall be expelled from their churches as manifest

⁴¹ Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire*, 139.

⁴² Jill Harries, "The Background to the Code," in *The Theodosian Code*, ed. Jill Harries and I. N Wood. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 3.

⁴³ Harries, "The Background to the Code," 14-15.

⁴⁴ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.1.

⁴⁵ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.1.2.

⁴⁶ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.1.2.

heretics.”⁴⁷ Based on the guidelines clearly stipulated in the Theodosian Code, dissent was not an option. Those who dissented from Nicene Christianity were judged “demented and insane” and marked for the “infamy of heretical dogmas.”⁴⁸ While Emperor Theodosius II, and subsequent emperors, found ways to utilize these legal edicts for political gain, their inclusion in the formal law code of the Roman Empire indicated the very profound influence of Late Antique bishops. As one scholar described the situation, “the emperor merely prescribed what bishops had decided.”⁴⁹

One bishop, however, remained outside this religio-political process. Despite a devoted life of ascetic leadership in the town of Cyrrhus, Theodoret’s affiliation with Nestorius led to his exclusion from the religio-political apparatus of the LRE. Nestorius, as previously mentioned, served as the Patriarch of Constantinople after John Chrysostom. Like John Chrysostom and Theodoret, Nestorius was an ascetic from Syria. Prior to the theological controversy that undermined his archbishopric, Nestorius fervently persecuted Arian, Novatian, and Pelagian heretics; however, in 429 CE, Nestorius preached the first of his sermons against the word *Theotokos*, meaning “mother of God,” declaring instead that Mary was the mother of Christ only in respect to his humanity. Nestorius argued that Mary could at best be called *anthropokos*, or “mother of man” because she gave birth only to the human incarnation of Jesus, not the divine incarnation of Jesus as the living word of God.⁵⁰ Nestorius viewed Christ not in terms of a hypostatic union, or a perfect combination of both divine and human natures in one person, but

⁴⁷ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.1.3.

⁴⁸ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.1.2.

⁴⁹ Hunt, “Christianising the Roman Empire,” 149.

⁵⁰ Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, 24.

instead viewed Christ as “a man who became progressively linked to God” in a similar, but more profound way, than the prophets of the Hebrew Bible became linked to God.⁵¹

For Alexandrian Christians, specifically Cyril of Alexandria, Nestorius’ view departed from orthodoxy and merited severe condemnation. Cyril contended that the Council of Nicaea (325) had definitively settled all disputes regarding the nature of Christ as a hypostatic union. He further argued that the Council of Constantinople (381) corroborated the testimony of Nicaea, determining that Cyril’s own particular Christological definition stood at the very center of orthodox Christian thinking.⁵² Cyril and Nestorius became the dominant figures in this theological dispute that culminated with the Council of Ephesus (431). Theodoret served as president of this Church council and even advocated for the Antiochene view espoused by Nestorius. It is, however, not entirely clear, how closely Theodoret personally aligned with this view despite his articulation of the view at Ephesus. In a letter to Bishop Irenaeus of Tyre, Theodoret bemoaned the conversation stating, “What does it matter whether we style the holy Virgins at the same time mother of Man and mother of God?”⁵³ If nothing else, Theodoret clearly voiced apprehension about the overall relevancy of the broader discussion, and in the end, he made peace with his Alexandrian opponents without agreeing to condemn Nestorius.⁵⁴

Theodoret’s decision to support Nestorius in the face of the sanction of the bishops at Ephesus and the later sanctions of the Theodosian Code severely undermined his credibility despite an otherwise superlative record of upholding orthodoxy and opposing heresy. In his letter to Bishop Leo of Rome, Theodoret praised Leo for “emitting the rays of orthodoxy” which he stated they shared because of their “common fathers and teachers of the truth, [the Apostles]

⁵¹ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 73.

⁵² Mitchell, 313.

⁵³ Theodoret, *Epp.* XVII.

⁵⁴ Urbainczyk, *Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, 25.

Peter and Paul.”⁵⁵ This letter in particular continued with repeated articulations of theological positions, with Theodoret affirming belief in the incarnation and the “impassible, immutable, and invariable” nature of the triune Godhead.⁵⁶ In his letter to Consul Nomus, Theodoret struck a similar chord, seeking to appeal to his orthodox beliefs, but also emphasizing the work he did in opposing heresy. He specifically noted “eight villages of Marcionists” that he brought “gladly to the truth” of the “light of divine knowledge”⁵⁷

Despite Theodoret’s insurances to the contrary, his contemporaries continually looked on him with scorn and skepticism because of his support of Nestorius. Theodoret, from his youth and early training to the epoch of his ministry as the bishop of Cyrrhus and beyond, exemplified the ascetic principles that stood at the center of ecclesiastical identity in the fifth century. His embrace of asceticism allowed him to achieve a prominent position within the social structure of the town of Cyrrhus, which he consistently used for the benefit of the town’s residents. The success achieved by Theodoret led him to believe that he could approach the imperial regime of Theodosius II and influence policy to fit his personal tastes, but his efforts fell consistently flat and his correspondences remained unread simply because he refused to condemn his fellow Syrian, Nestorius. Rather than shaping imperial ideology in accordance with his theology, Theodoret spent his waning years defending his reputation and record, fighting allegations of heresy, and bemoaning his prohibition from travelling outside the boundaries of Cyrrhus.

⁵⁵ Theodoret, *Epp.* CXIII.

⁵⁶ Theodoret, *Epp.* CXIII.

⁵⁷ Theodoret, *Epp.* LXXXI.

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