Piety AND Plague
FROM BYZANTIUM TO THE BAROQUE

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Franco Mormando
Thomas Worcester

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CHAPTER 1

The Literature of Plague and the Anxieties of Piety in Sixth-Century Byzantium

Anthony Kaldellis

IN 381, GREGORIOS OF NYSSA (bishop of Nyssa and brother of Basileios, or Basil the Great, the theologian and bishop of Kaisareia) was in Constantinople to promote the cause of Orthodoxy at the general council of the church convened by the emperor Theodosius I. In a famous passage, he complained of the lower classes' addiction to theological speculation.

> You know who I mean. The whole city is full of them, the alleys, the markets, the squares, and the wards; those who deal in apparel, who change money, who sell us our food. If you ask about a sale, he will philosophize to you about the Begotten and the Unbegotten; if you inquire about the price of bread, he will answer that "the Father is greater and the Son lesser"; and if you say, "Is the bath ready?" he will assert that the Son comes from non-Being. I don't know what to call this evil, an inflammation of the brain or a mania or some other illness that destabilizes the mind.[1]

This passage has caused considerable mischief. Offering some comic relief in an otherwise tedious theological context, as well as a glimpse of the passions of the common man, it has become one of those fixed quotations that have been lifted out of context and recycled by historians who see here

[1]Gregorios of Nyssa, *Oration on the Divinity of the Son and the Spirit, Including an Encomium of Abraham the Just*, in *PG* 46 (1863): 553–76, quote at 557. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

the essence of the Byzantine mind. It confirms the western stereotype of a civilization addicted to and debilitated by theological subtlety. "The eager pursuit of religious controversy afforded a new occupation to the busy idleness of the metropolis," wrote Gibbon,[2] whose conclusion has been extended by others to all classes and periods of Byzantine culture. The passage is invoked talisman-like against all who would qualify or reject this impossible picture, especially for centuries after the fourth; Gregorios "asserts everyone was obsessed by theological niceties."[3]

In truth, Gregorios's complaint strictly applies to only one year—a year of a council, which is significant—and one city, though encounters such as he describes would certainly have been possible throughout that century, as well as in other parts of the empire. Many sources attest to the turmoil and even violence of the theological controversies. But one must be careful. Gregorios is not saying that "everyone" was obsessed with theological niceties, only that the lower classes were. Moreover, what he is actually saying is that those niceties were Arian; he is complaining that the population of the capital followed a theology that had been declared heretical. In short, he is deriding the theological enemies of his own faction as ignorant moneychangers and tailors. It is rarely acknowledged in this connection that Gregorios is here expanding a passage in an oration by the leader of his faction, the acting bishop of Constantinople, Gregorios of Nazianzos, who likewise argued that theology was not a proper subject for gossip. What is essentially a polemical caricature has "since been overused to portray the Byzantines as collectively obsessed" with theology.[4]

This is not the place to examine the social scope of theological obsessions in Byzantium, a study that has oddly never been undertaken despite (or because of) the confident use of passages like the one quoted above. The aim of this essay is to reveal a different limitation of Byzantine theology that has also gone unnoticed, in part because scholars have allowed the sources to dictate what theology really is. It can be seen from Gregorios's complaint that theology for him (and the shopkeepers) was exclusively a matter of defining the nature of God viewed abstractly, for example, the relation between the Father and the Son, involving questions of essence, substance, and so forth. What one realizes after perusing a few centuries' worth of theological treatises is that the Byzantines produced little or nothing that explained God's historical agency in their own post-apostolic times,

[2]Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall,* 2:28. See also Jones, *Later Roman Empire,* 964. Many more such statements can be cited. The idea has made its way into fiction—for example, Reed and Mayer, *Two for Joy* (35), which is set in the age of Justinian. For the social attitudes involved, see MacMullen, *Voting for God,* 37.

[3]Baldwin, review of *Procopius of Caesaria,* 478. Prominent Byzantinists have suspected that the average Byzantine neither knew nor cared about the theories and laws of the church fathers, e.g., Beck, *Byzantinisches Erotikon.*

[4]McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus,* 279.

in living history. To be sure, the Incarnation, a historical event, had to play a central role in any theory, but that event was theorized more in relation to the nature and substance of God and less in relation to human history. By human history is here meant the concrete events of which the historians wrote and not the notion of the salvation of man in the abstract that was a part of God's plan and, therefore, fed back directly into discussions of his nature, barely scratching the surface of the infinitely more humble world of human history.

Christianity is often called a historical religion, by which two things are meant: first, that God became an individual Man at a particular moment in history dated by the reigns of historical kings and procurators; and second, that as a religion it postulates a linear story of Creation, Incarnation, and Second Coming against which mundane human history is supposed to be taking place. What is remarkable, then, is how rarely that overarching divine story intersected in Byzantine thought with actual human history. For the Byzantines, the Incarnation was a theological problem, not a historical one; they were far more interested in how the divine and the human interfaced in the person of Jesus Christ than in the question of why God chose that particular moment to become man. Granted, some answers were offered to the latter question, involving the consolidation of the Roman Empire and the reign of Augustus, but they are vague, unconvincing, and rarely attested after Eusebios of Kaisareia (ca. 300 AD)—they never became the subject of impassioned (or really any) debate.[5] One has to look to find them; no treatises were written on the topic. At the other extreme, the Byzantines produced no systematic theology explaining in terms of human history the where, when, and why of the Second Coming. What exists is a very small number of apocalyptic narratives—the closest that the culture came to quasi-historical fantasy—but these can hardly be called theology, did not influence the intellectual mainstream, and in some cases had been written outside the empire.[6]

Looking beyond events that were integral parts of the Christian message, one finds that the Byzantines avoided clarifying God's role in history and only alluded to it rhetorically. Imperial orations and decrees proclaimed that the emperor was God's vicegerent on earth, but what this meant exactly was left unsaid, probably deliberately so as not to infringe on the rights of the church.[7] The covenant between God and nation in the Old

[5]See the passages cited in Setton, *Christian Attitude towards the Emperor,* 35–36, 48–49; and Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius,* 185–86. For the Byzantines' fundamentally nonhistorical theology of the Incarnation, see Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology,* chap. 12.

[6]For an introduction to these texts, see Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition.* To some scholars, especially Mango, "Byzantinism and Romantic Hellenism," apocalypticism represents the essence of Byzantium, but the claim is polemical and no argument is offered. Undue importance has been assigned to apocalyptic texts.

[7]See Dagron, *Emperor and Priest.*

Testament could also be invoked, with Orthodox Romans as the new Israel, but the model was not a good fit, because Christianity promised individual and not national salvation and because the state and the faith were never fully integrated in Byzantium. Constantine's conversion was not taken as a historical national covenant like that of Abraham.

The Byzantines knew that their state and national polity had a different historical origin from their faith and was constituted along different lines to serve different purposes. An Orthodox patriarch could in all honesty concede that a hated heretical emperor was still a brave, conscientious, and incorruptible ruler and an "excellent administrator of the Roman commonwealth."[8] And while it was common to ascribe imperial defeat and natural disaster to God's anger at human sin, this explanation was only a pietistic cliché invoked in response to individual events. It never constituted a theology of God's intervention in history and never clarified the nature of divine justice in relation to human history. Any sin would do for this purpose or even sin in general, with no need to point to specific historical deeds. Moreover, no attempt was made to prove the commensurability of crime and punishment. Why did the innocent suffer for the crimes of the wicked and why did the wicked prosper? In short, the Byzantines never engaged systematically with the problem of evil.[9] Apollo of the Silver Bow could stride down from Olympus with anger in his heart and send plague to the Achaian camp in order to avenge the insult to his priest Chryses. But how can one reasonably blame a plague on an omnipotent, all-good, and eternally unchanging God?[10]

If the preceding is correct, one expects to find that great natural catastrophes and imperial reverses did not elicit coherent theological responses in Byzantium; rather, one must expect that writers who set out to explain such events failed either to find a common ground among themselves or to deploy individually the precision, sophistication, and internal consistency of which they were capable in strictly doctrinal theological matters. What should be expected is a range of reactions reflecting the real complexity of Byzantine intellectual life, as each writer turned selectively to different classical, biblical, personal, theological, scientific, and rhetorical modalities. And this is exactly what is found in the written sources for the plague of the sixth century, the so-called Justinianic plague. The Byzantines had no agreed-upon way of talking about the historical agency of their God or the

[8]Patriarch Nikephoros I on Emperor Leon V in *Theophanes Continuatus*, Book 1: *On the Reign of Leon V* 19, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn: E. Weber, 1838), 30–31; Ioseph Genesios, *On the Reigns of the Emperors* 1.16, 1.22–23, ed. A. Lesmüller-Werner and I. Thurn, *Josephi Genesii regum libri quattuor* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1978), 14, 20–21.

[9]Cf. Young, "Insight or Incoherence?" For a seventh-century attempt to confront this problem, see Anastasios of Sinai (?), *Questions and Answers*, in *PG* 89 (1865): 311–824, esp. *Question* 96 (cols. 736–49).

[10]The shift away from pagan conceptions, and the inevitable rise of the problem of evil, can be detected in Plato *Republic* 379a and in many other subsequent passages throughout the work.

moral meaning of calamitous events for which he, logically, must have been in some way responsible.

Nature was especially unkind to the Byzantines in the sixth century. Fires and earthquakes destroyed major cities such as Antioch and Berytos. In 536–537, a dust cloud obscured the sun for months. Worst of all, 541 witnessed the outbreak of the deadliest plague in European history before the Black Death. So far, discussion of this plague has focused on historical problems, primarily those of demographic impact and epidemiological identification.[11] This plague was the worst disaster in all of Byzantine history and occurred in an age that was exceptional in terms of intellectual activity and unusually rich in written sources. However, there has been no systematic study of the Byzantine response to this event.[12] This essay will focus on its impact on popular piety and on the theological conjectures that it elicited. Evidence from earthquakes will also be adduced on occasion, as responses to those were not fundamentally different.

The ultimate authority in the Byzantine Empire during the plague was Justinian himself (527–565 AD), who went beyond all his predecessors and successors in formulating an ideology of imperial rule that asserted his own supremacy in both Roman and Christian terms. Not only did he codify existing Roman law and legal theory (in the *Corpus iuris civilis*), he issued a continuous stream of legislation in which he sought to regulate many aspects of his subjects' lives in accordance with his theological-ideological priorities. "We are accustomed to consider God in everything that we do," he declared in 536.[13] Justinian fully developed the logic of punitive theology and was the only contemporary willing to specify the sins that incurred divine anger before the outbreak of the plague. Before 541, he had declared that it was sodomy and blasphemy that caused plagues, earthquakes, and famines; whole cities and their inhabitants had been destroyed because of these sins.[14] Accordingly, Justinian's regime became infamous for cutting the penis—*kaulotomia* is not "castration"—of those who so offended against God and nature, though skeptics like the historian Prokopios believed that the charges were usually pretexts to confiscate the wealth of the accused or to dispose of personal enemies.[15]

[11]See Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence,* esp. 110–54, 277–94; and Horden, "Mediterranean Plague in the Age of Justinian," chap. 6, both citing previous scholarship.

[12]Stathakopoulos (*Famine and Pestilence,* 146–54) devotes a few pages to the social response; Allen ("The 'Justinianic' Plague," 20) devotes a few lines to the stance of the writers.

[13]Justinian, *Novel 18,* preface, in *Novellae,* ed. Schöll and Kroll, 127–28; and Scott, *The Civil Law,* 16:95. In general, see Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea,* 157–58. For Justinian's legal works, see Honoré, *Tribonian.* For his ideology, see Pazdernik, "Justinianic Ideology and the Power of the Past."

[14]Justinian, *Novel* 77, in *Novellae,* ed. Schöll and Kroll, 381–83; and Scott, *Civil Law,* 16:288–89. Cf. Justinian, *Novel* 141 (559 AD), in *Novellae,* ed. Schöll and Kroll.

[15]See Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality,* 171–74. The main sources are Prokopios, *Secret History,* 11.34–36, 16.18–21; and Malalas, *Chronographia,* 18.18, in *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia,* ed. Thurn, 364–65; and in *Chronicle of John Malalas,* trans. Elizabeth Jeffreys et al., 253.

Of course, one must be careful in drawing conclusions about what the emperor "believed" from this evidence. Even disregarding Prokopios's cynicism—which, despite its bias, may still have accurately represented the emperor's motives—it is not clear that the zealous pronouncements of a reformist emperor are a full or faithful reflection of his thoughts on the matter. Proclamations designed to put the fear of God into his subjects and discourage them from unnatural acts did not necessarily correspond to how he himself responded to the plague when it struck or indeed when he himself was infected by it, as Prokopios reveals that he was.[16] Prokopios's account of the plague makes it clear that physicians were very active in the capital during those months and were widely available, not only to the upper classes. Justinian certainly made use of their services. One of his court doctors, Aetios of Amida, composed a popular medical encyclopedia that included a (cribbed) section on pestilence and contagious diseases.[17] Justinian, then, certainly knew and probably actively solicited opinions about the plague that had nothing to do with sodomy and such, and there is every reason to believe that he put faith in those opinions. A passage in a different work by Prokopios implies that the emperor was constantly attended by physicians and, in a separate episode, it was only *after* their remedies had failed that he sought healing from the saints (a standard pattern of behavior in Byzantium).[18] There is also evidence that at some point during his reign, Justinian reformed the medical profession by assigning doctors to Christian hospitals and providing state support for them.[19]

There is at present no satisfactory way to reconcile the imperial patient surrounded by state doctors with the zealous moral reformer who blamed plagues on sin or with the inquisitor who unmanned bishops for crimes against nature. These passages show different modalities of thought that perhaps rarely intersected in Justinian's conscious mind. At any rate, he may have known the theological statements in the edicts to be specious but useful for the purposes of reform. Many modern historians have viewed that emperor's military policies, ideological positions, and even theological views as flexible and pragmatic in the extreme.[20] A "noble lie" about sodomy could only be salutary.

The majority of the empire's population would not have required Justinian's prompting to view the plague as a manifestation of divine anger, yet

[16]Prokopios, *Wars* 2.23.20; and Prokopios, *Secret History* 4.1.

[17]For Aetios as a court physician, see Scarborough, "Procopius, Theodora, and Aetius of Amida," 48. For his works, see Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* 294–97. For pestilence in his encyclopedia, Photios, *Bibliotheke* 221 (178a), ed. Henry, 3:143.

[18]Prokopios, *Buildings* 1.7.12. The later *Life of St. Sampson* 1.5 (*PG* 115:284) has Justinian served first by an army of doctors and then healed by the doctor-saint Sampson. These encounters are probably fictional; Miller, *Birth of the Hospital*, 63, 80–84. For doctors and saints, see Efthymiades, "A Day and Ten Months in the Life of a Lonely Bachelor," esp. 15n33.

[19]Miller, *Birth of the Hospital*, 48–49, 80–81, 91–92, 100–110.

[20]See, for example, Gray, "Legacy of Chalcedon," 228; and Greatrex, "Byzantium in the East," 503.

that view was only one among many other interpretations. As far as contemporary *historians* were concerned, this view was limited to the chronicle of Ioannes Malalas and those who used it. There is some uncertainty about the sources of that chronicle, whose Greek text survives in an abbreviated form covering all of history from the Creation to the end of Justinian's reign. The first seventeen books reflect an Antiochene perspective, but at some point in book 18, which covers the reign of Justinian, the perspective shifts to Constantinople.[21] That latter part of the chronicle, moreover, loyally promotes Justinian's propaganda about important events such as the Nika riots of 532, possibly by following official notices. Unlike, say, Prokopios, Malalas regarded the "reign of terror as proper and right" and believed that "security" could result from "fear."[22]

Malalas's view of the plague can accordingly be predicted from these premises. "The Lord God saw that man's transgressions had multiplied and he caused the overthrow of man on the earth." His very brief extant entry on this event ends by piously declaring that "God's compassion [*eusplachnia*] lasted in Byzantion [that is, Constantinople] for two months."[23] This "compassion" does not refer to the passing of the plague but very precisely to the duration of its outbreak. In other words, the plague itself manifested God's compassion, not the fact that he allowed it to pass after two months. Malalas is not being cynical here, as when Suetonius says that the emperor Domitianus did not propose any cruel measure without first expounding on the virtue of clemency.[24] This "compassion" is meant either as a euphemism for God's "anger," or quite literally in the sense that God sent the plague in order to reform mankind for its (long-term) benefit. By definition, all that God does, however terrible it may appear, is done out of compassion and love.

It was not possible to maintain this paradox, or euphemism, consistently. The early ninth-century Byzantine chronicler Theophanes the Confessor probably copied his entry on the earthquake of 554 AD from the original version of Malalas. It states that "for a while men were overcome by contrition, went on litanies, and frequented churches, but after God's mercy [*philanthropia*] had returned, they lapsed again to worse habits."[25]

[21]See Croke, "Malalas, the Man and His Work," 17–25; and Jeffreys, "Malalas' Sources," 169, 211–14. Warren Treadgold (*Early Byzantine Historians*, chap. 7) argues that for events before circa 500, Malalas basically plagiarized Eustathios of Epiphaneia while inventing other sources and information to give an appearance of original research.

[22]Scott, "Malalas, *The Secret History*, and Justinian's Propaganda," 103–4; and Scott, "Malalas and Justinian's Codification," 12–31.

[23]Malalas, *Chronographia* 19.92, in *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, ed. Thurn, 407; and in *Chronicle of John Malalas*, trans. Jeffreys, 286–87.

[24]Suetonius, *Domitianus*, 11.

[25]Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronicle s.a.* 6046, in *Theophanes Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, 1:229; and *Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, trans. Mango and Scott, 335. For the origin of this entry in Malalas, *Chronicle of John Malalas*, trans. Jeffreys et al., 293–94.

Here "mercy" (lit. "love of mankind") has its usual sense: it refers to the lifting of the punishment and not to the punishment itself.

This complex moral logic shapes the longest surviving account of the plague, that by Yuhannan, a native of Amida (like Justinian's doctor Aetios) and, after 558, the (titular) Monophysite bishop of Ephesos (usually called John of Ephesos, though his name was not John and he never settled at Ephesos). During his long life, Yuhannan was alternately allowed to speak at the court for the Monophysite cause or persecuted for doing just that. He witnessed the outbreak of the plague at Constantinople in 542, but was assigned in that year by Justinian to convert the pagans of Asia Minor. Later in life, he wrote an ecclesiastical history in Syriac that started with Julius Caesar, but this has mostly been lost. It is known that he used Malalas for his own account of the sixth century, which has been preserved in part in a Syriac chronicle written toward the end of the eighth century.[26]

Yuhannan's account of the plague is the longest extant and may have originally been a separate treatise before he incorporated it into his *Ecclesiastical History*. Though he used Malalas generally, his account of the plague itself is too long to have been lifted from the Antiochene chronicler. It is also very personal and reflects Yuhannan's circumstances and outlook. (Relatively little progress has yet been made in determining exactly what he took from Malalas.) His account of the event is in almost all ways the opposite of the better-known one by Prokopios: biblical rather than classical, non- or even anti-scientific, emotionally charged rather than seemingly dispassionate, pietistic rather than ironic, and relatively incoherent. Its moral and theological tone also differs from the third main account of the event, that by the ecclesiastical historian Evagrius.

Yuhannan begins his narration by invoking the lamentations of Jeremiah "over the afflictions of Jerusalem" (74). This sets the stage for a rhetorical lament charged throughout with biblical allusions, quotations, and parallels; the narrative, if one can call it that, is often interrupted by passages of scriptural and theological expostulation. The plague, Yuhannan claims, fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah (81–82, 84). Like Pharaoh, the empire was scourged with earthquakes and wars, the plague being the last and most terrible chastisement (82–84). He often refers to it simply as "the wrath" or "the chastisement," that is, God's wrath at humanity's sins, which have corrupted the earth (for example, 75, and throughout). He says that he decided to leave a record of the event, hoping that those who read it "during this remainder of the world" will become wiser "and will be saved from wrath here [that is, in this world] and from future torment" (76, also 98). This moral logic, however, is muddled and distorts the events themselves.

[26]Yuhannan's account of the plague will be cited from the translation by Witakowski, in *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre: Chronicle Part III*, 74–98. For his relationship to Malalas, see Witakowski, "Malalas in Syriac," 299–310. For additional fragments, see Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* 9.28, ed. Chabot, 2:235–40.

First, Yuhannan implies in his general statements that the chastisement was "a just sentence" (77) for the accumulated sins of mankind, but the specific anecdotes in his account—his "evidence," as it were—never link this punishment to sins committed *before* the plague appeared, only to those committed *during* it. He never specifies the collective sins that (presumably) brought the plague on in the first place. And in order to maintain a tight causal link between sin and punishment, he has his characters die impossibly swiftly, in fact as soon as they commit a sin, contradicting all that is known about the symptomatology of the disease (for example, 78: "within one hour," and throughout). A week's delay would, apparently, weaken the moral lesson. Moreover, with the exception of one town that reverted to pagan worship (79–80), all of Yuhannan's sinners are killed for what he regards as the cardinal (and capital) sin of avarice. But the crimes hardly justify the punishment: for example, taking goods from houses and towns whose inhabitants have died (77–79); asking someone (politely!) for a gift of money for his commemoration in case he should die and after all his family had also died (93–94); and corpse-bearers asking for higher wages when the labor supply had diminished and cash was readily available (94–95);[27] none of these seems to merit the death penalty.

Was this, then, the worst that Yuhannan witnessed? He seems to have been obsessive about greed and indeed suggests at one point that the whole purpose of the plague was to curb or eliminate desire for material goods: "everyone who might still covet things of this world was quickly deprived of life" (95; cf. also 94). Certainly, his ethics differ from those of the modern world, but still the crimes alleged are tepid. Yuhannan chose to concentrate on sins committed during the plague rather than before it, but it seems that he could not find much to give a credible picture. After surveying all the evidence, it emerges that law and order did not break down during the plague and, in fact, many Byzantines turned to a life of piety and charity because of it. "The modern reader must be struck by the soberness of the accounts, and the degree of acceptance by the general populace. We hear of no processions of flagellants or persecutions of Jews."[28]

Second, although Yuhannan acknowledges that the punishment was "pitiless" (74) and "terrible" (84), he insists that it revealed the "benignity and grace of God," given that it acted as "a call to repentance" (85). Here, he stands close to Malalas, his source for other events of the sixth century. Yuhannan compares the advance of the plague to that of the armies of a great king, their movements slow and methodical to give the residents of the next city time to repent by giving away their material goods (85–86). But contrary to what he promises at the beginning of his account (76), such

[27]In 544, Justinian was trying to limit wage inflation; Justinian, *Novel* 122.
[28]Evans, *Age of Justinian*, 163.

repentance apparently did not save anyone "here," in this world. Those who, like Noah, "built ships of almsgiving" only managed to "buy for themselves the kingdom" (86)—if "only" is an appropriate word in a Christian context. Still, they died like the rest. No one was spared, even those who recognized their sinfulness and tried to desist from it (cf. 79). Even Yuhannan cannot avoid the moral illogicality of all these events, and concludes by taking refuge in apophantic theology: the plague caused "astonishment about His righteous judgments which cannot be understood, nor comprehended, by human beings" (87). This admission of theological ignorance about God's historical agency stands in significant contrast to Yuhannan's confident understanding of God's essential nature (the Monophysite position), for which beliefs he was willing to endure persecution and imprisonment.

Yuhannan's God is capable of virtually annihilating mankind for the purpose of morally reforming it. Could God not foresee that only a few would hear his message and change their ways? Here we stand on the threshold of the thorny problem of (human) free will and (divine) omniscience, which the Byzantines avoided. Still, there were times when the logic of punitive theology verged on incoherence. In his account of the miracles of St. Demetrius, Ioannes, the bishop of Thessalonike in the early seventh century, looks back to the outbreak of 586 (or 597) and notes that the plague destroyed not only bodies but also souls, as many people became angry with God for sending such an affliction and spoke out against him. This, Ioannes claims, jeopardized their fate in the afterlife.[29] Put differently, the remedy itself occasioned further opportunities for the sins it was presumably meant to correct, but this, for Ioannes, only proved God's wisdom. The bishop maintained that the punishment was still less than what his flock's sins really warranted. But no theological treatise attempted to weigh the balance.

Whereas Byzantine theology about the nature of God rose to an exceptional level of sophistication and subtlety and has remained fundamental to the discipline to this day, what Byzantine ecclesiastical writers had to say about God's historical role and active justice in this world remained vague and sometimes barely coherent. And whereas sixth-century Byzantines adhered to very specific doctrinal formulas when it came to questions of Christology and divine essence, when it came to events such as the plague their theological instincts seem to have been very uncoordinated—unlike Gregory of Nyssa's shopkeepers and bath attendants. Interestingly, the first extant literary source to record the sixth-century plague is the Latin epic poem that Flavius Cresconius Corippus wrote in 549 on the North African

[29]Ioannes of Thessalonike, *The Miracles of St. Demetrios: Miracle* 3 (31), in *Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de Saint Démétrius*, ed. and trans. Lemerle, 1:76. For Ioannes and St. Demetrios, see Skedros, *Saint Demetrios of Thessaloniki*. For the date of the outbreak in question, see Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence*, 324–28.

campaigns of the Byzantine general Ioannes Troglita (though this text is absent from almost all discussions of the plague). Despite the vast differences in genre, language, subject matter, and geographical location, Corippus's moral schema is quite similar to that of Yuhannan; it too singles out the sin of avarice as the source of God's ire. In fact, the only sins Corippus cites have to do with property disputes arising from the large number of premature deaths: "all kinds of courts were opened, vindictive legal actions introduced... piety withdrew entirely." Again, this is mild stuff, hardly a collapse of law and order. But "the Almighty Creator, as his anger bade Him, delayed no longer to apply the lash to that wretched populace." Still, Corippus's theological narrative differs in one crucial point from that of Yuhannan. Here it is not the plague that is ascribed to God's anger; rather, God is said to have punished the African provincials for the sins they committed during the plague by sending Moors against them afterwards.[30] It is not known how Corippus "explained" the plague, as the opening verses of his account are missing.

Corippus's logic is near to Yuhannan's, despite the differences between the two men. In writers closer in genre and cultural origin to the Syriac Monophysite monk, there is increasing divergence. The fragment on the plague in the Syriac continuation of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Zacharias of Mytilene (Zacharias wrote the original in Greek in the late fifth century before becoming the bishop of Mytilene; his continuator was an anonymous monk writing in 569 in Amida, Yuhannan's hometown) says vaguely that the plague "was a scourge from Satan, who was ordered by God to destroy men."[31] One can only guess at the "theology" behind this statement. When turning to the chief ecclesiastical historian of the sixth century, the lawyer of the church of Antioch, Evagrius, one finds an even more different picture.

Evagrius wrote his history in the 590s and also used the original version of Malalas as a source. While he relied heavily on Prokopios for the sixth-century wars, which, for an ecclesiastical historian, he discussed extensively, still he does not seem to have followed Prokopios on the plague. He notes at the outset of his account that the plague resembled the one in Thucydides, but he does not go on to imitate Thucydides as Prokopios had. Evagrius, then, stands midway between the theological and emotional account of Yuhannan and the dispassionate classicism of Prokopios. For one thing, there are no references to God's anger or the sins of mankind in

[30]Corippus, *Iohannis* 3.343–400, in *Flavii Cresconii Corippi* Iohannidos, *seu* De bellis libycis *libri 8,* ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 60–62; and trans. Shea, *The* Iohannis, *or,* De bellis Libycis *of Flavius Cresconius Corippus,* 107–8. In general, see Modéran, "Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique."

[31]Pseudo-Zacharias, *Chronicle* 10.9, in *The Syriac Chronicle Known as That of Zachariah of Mitylene,* trans. Hamilton and Brooks, 313. See, in general, Allen, "Zachariah Scholasticus and the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Evagrius Scholasticus," 472–73.

his account, though that outlook is sometimes ascribed to him, presumably on the assumption that all Byzantines thought that way.[32] Evagrius discusses the spread and periodic outbreaks of the disease and notes that he himself was infected while still a child and that he lost many family members in later outbreaks (his wife, many children, and other relatives and servants; in 591/592, he lost a daughter and her son). He discusses the symptoms and reports (contrary to Yuhannan) that most died on the second or third day; he then tries to discover the pattern of contagion. Noting that the plague has lasted for fifty-two years, he closes with this "bland"[33] remark: "And what will happen now is unclear, as it will move in whatever direction pleases God, who knows both the causes (*aitiai*) of the event and where they lead."

Evagrius imposes no moral interpretation on the plague (there is no "sin" nor "wrath"), and even the theological conclusion quoted directly above is vague, almost certainly purposefully. God, for him, bears a very loose responsibility for the event, if any at all; at the very least, Evagrius implies, God will direct only the future movement of the plague, which is perhaps a polite way of asking for reprieve. God, then, may not have been responsible for the original outbreak, but he may now intervene to protect his long-suffering worshippers. This interpretation of Evagrius's position is reinforced by his reference to the plague's "causes" (the classical scientific term used since the time of Thucydides and Hippocrates), implying that these causes were something separate from God. God "knows" them, he is not the same as them; he is an omniscient *physiologos*, not necessarily a moral reformer wielding plagues as blunt instruments. Evagrius himself, however, does not speculate on the nature and identity of these natural causes.

It is possible that, having experienced the horrible death of so many loved ones, Evagrius was less eager to throw about words like "sin" and "wrath," which is always easier to do when someone else is the sinner—and the victim. In his chapter on Simeon Stylites, he notes that the saint had personally encouraged him to stop thinking about why his own children had died while those of a pagan neighbor had not (6.23). This episode is recorded in the contemporary *Life of St. Symeon the Stylite (the Second)*, according to which Evagrius's mind was tempted by diabolical thoughts and moved to blasphemy, because his daughter had died while the children of a pagan neighbor had not. The saint read Evagrius's mind and sent him a reproachful letter. Evagrius rushed to Simeon to beg forgiveness.[34] Even so,

[32]Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.29 in *Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius*, ed. J. Bidez and L. Parmentier, 177–79; and *Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*, trans. Whitby, 229–32. On "anger," etc., see Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 42; and Evans, *Age of Justinian*, 163, 292n74.

[33]Allen, *Evagrius Scholastikos the Church Historian*, 194. On the plague in general, see ibid., 190–94.

[34]*Life of St. Symeon the Stylite (the Second)*, 233 in *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune (521–592)*, ed. and trans. van den Ven, 1:210–11, 2:235–36.

this did not mean that he accepted that his relatives deserved to die because of their sins. Hence perhaps the neutrality of his account and, possibly, its implied protest.

Beyond these personal motives, Evagrius's reluctance to accept punitive theology may have also been due to his respect for the Greek scientific and historical tradition, which he knew far better than Malalas and Yuhannan. In fact, by drawing attention to his own and his family's experience of the plague—"for I decided," he says, "to interweave my own affairs also into the narrative"—Evagrius enhances his credibility as a reliable eyewitness of events, a traditional objective of the ancient historians.[35] Overall, however, his difference from Malalas seems to have been fundamentally theological, though the Byzantines were not inclined to put that difference into words. Evagrius, for instance, cites Malalas as his source for the fires and earthquake that destroyed Antioch in 525/526. The extant version of Malalas refers throughout and constantly to God's wrath, his benevolent chastisement of man, and the mysteries of his love' (17.16), whereas Evagrius, even though he claims to have followed Malalas here, omits all this in his account of those events, noting only in the following chapter that the subsequent election of Ephraim of Antioch as bishop proved to be beneficial: "God's saving grace for men, which devises cures before the blow, and tempers the sword of anger with mercy, which exhibits its own sympathy at the very moment of despair, raised up Ephraim of Antioch" (4.5–6).[36] This is a more balanced view of God's involvement; indeed, the balance seems to tilt toward the merciful. Evagrius must have been aware that he was altering Malalas's theological interpretation, but unfortunately he did not cite his reasons for doing so. It is possible that Byzantine theology was insufficiently developed in this direction for him to do so with confidence. Granted, God was both merciful and wrathful. But in what proportion? And what did all this have to do with earthquakes and plagues?

The most important source for the sixth-century plague is found in the chapters that Prokopios embedded in his narrative of the wars between Justinian and Persia (*Wars* 2.22–23). His outlook is in all important respects the exact opposite of that of Yuhannan. Prokopios follows classical models, not biblical ones. In particular, he so closely imitated Thucydides' account of the plague in Athens in the first year of the Peloponnesian War that he was accused by many modern scholars both of lack of originality (imitation being regarded as affectation) and of distorting the facts of the event itself. But these charges no longer carry conviction, as it has been shown that Prokopios was careful to preserve the distinctive aspects of the sixth-century plague

[35]See, in general, Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography*. Evagrius again highlights his family misfortunes in his account of the 588 earthquake at Antioch; *Ecclesiastical History* 6.8.

[36]See, in general, Allen, *Evagrius Scholastikos*, 177–79 ("mild by comparison"). Cf. Evagrius's account of the 588 earthquake at Antioch; *Ecclesiastical History* 6.8.

and also because literary classicism is being rehabilitated as a more sophisticated and effective narrative technique than was previously recognized.[37]

Prokopios's narrative is seemingly dispassionate, yet its soberness conveys a humanity that rivals Yuhannan's gory and hysterical lamentations. He follows the geographical spread of the plague, describes the visions that accompanied the onset of the disease in a few of its victims, provides a careful medical account of the symptoms, and then devotes a chapter to the course of the plague in Constantinople, which he witnessed himself (2.22.9), commenting on the disruption of burial practices. The feel of clinical precision throughout is reinforced by the observations and investigations of the capital's doctors, whom Prokopios obviously consulted (for example, 2.22.29), despite the fact that their remedies proved ineffectual. Now, it is sometimes assumed that despite this "classicizing façade" Prokopios basically shared his contemporaries' view that the plague was sent by God. He suggests this himself in his opening remarks, where, like Thucydides, he denies that any of the *physiologoi* possessed an accurate understanding of the causes (*aitiai*) of the plague, though they were not short of opinions. Unlike Thucydides, however, he then goes on to say that in the end one can do nothing but ascribe the whole thing to God (2.22.1–2). However he says nothing of "wrath" or "sin." And what does "God" mean in Prokopios, anyway?

Throughout the *Wars*, including the narrative of the plague, Prokopios constructs a careful argument about the fundamentally amoral nature of the power that he believed was really dominant in the world: this was *tyche*, "fortune" or "chance." For obvious reasons, he did not make this argument explicit, but there are so many passages in his work whose theological implications are, from an Orthodox point of view, so utterly bizarre that one is entitled to be suspicious.[38] One of these occurs in connection with the plague. Consider how carefully the moral logic is parsed here. The wicked, he says, gave up their lawlessness and took up religion, but not because they had learned wisdom or had suddenly become lovers of virtue, for it is impossible to change qualities that are instilled in people by nature (*physis*) or habituation (*didaskalia*) over a long period of time, unless some divine influence has touched them. No, they changed their ways now because of fear and what they took to be necessity. But when they had survived the disease, they reverted to their previous way of life and became even worse than before. In fact, it would be entirely correct to say that "either because of some chance (*tyche*) or providence (*pronoia*)" the disease carefully picked out the worst and allowed them to live (2.23.14–16).

[37]For the plague, see Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea*, 26–27; for classicism in general, see ibid., chap. 1.
[38]Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea*, 210–13, citing previous bibliography.

This argument has many interesting implications, though in accordance with his pedagogical intentions (and concern for his safety), Prokopios leaves the reader to think them through for himself. First, it refutes the belief of Malalas, Yuhannan, and others that (temporary) terror can lead to moral reform. The kind of religion that wicked men practice in times of crisis has nothing to do with wisdom or the love of virtue. This insight completely reverses the "standard" belief about God's punitive measures in this world, and Prokopios is no doubt responding to such views as were put forth at the time orally before they made their way into the Christian chronicles. Second, the implication of this passage is that the God to which Prokopios seems to ascribe the plague at the beginning of his account is not the same as the Christian God. Only if they had been touched by God, he says, would wicked men have been changed permanently, but they were not so changed, which means that the plague cannot have been sent by a benevolent God intent on reforming wicked men.

That is why, toward the end of his argument, Prokopios allows the reader to wonder whether all this happened by chance or by providence, an alternative not present in his opening formulation, but a standard device by which the historian points his readers in the right direction after making a pietistic opening (cf. 2.22.18 for another "unexpected" alternative). Third, Prokopios's statement that the plague chose the worse men and allowed them to live reinforces the suspicion that he cannot have believed that the Christian God (or any like god) was responsible for the plague. It also introduces a new element to the discussion of the Byzantine reaction to the plague in the sixth century, namely irony. For in the next paragraph, Prokopios casually mentions that the emperor Justinian had become ill too (2.23.20). The emperor is the only person in the whole narrative whom Prokopios specifically designates as having survived the plague.[39] Is the reader meant to think of the most wicked men whom the plague picked out and allowed to survive?

Prokopios was not a lone skeptic in an age of fear-induced pietism. His *Wars* was continued thirty years later by Agathias of Myrina (in western Asia Minor), a poet and lawyer in Constantinople who turned his hand to historiography. Sharing Prokopios's classical outlook, Agathias wrote accounts of the earthquakes of the early 550s, the earthquake of Constantinople in 557, and the outbreak of the plague in 558,[40] mixing Thucydidean scientific agnosticism with philosophy, pietism, and sociology. To a certain degree, Agathias transferred to the earthquakes what he found in Prokopios's account of the plague. For instance, he describes in detail the marked rise

[39]For Prokopios on Justinian, see Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea*, chap. 4.

[40]Agathias *Histories* 2.15–16, 5.3–5, and 5.10, respectively; in *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum Libri Quinque*, ed. R. Keydell; and *Agathias: The Histories*, trans. Frendo.

in justice and piety that occurred in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe and that many assisted the needy. But all reverted to their former way of life when the terror passed. That behavior, he notes, "could not properly be called justice or firm and active piety of the sort which stamps itself on the mind through the operation of sound convictions steadfastly held.... It is in fact only under the stimulus of sudden fear and for as long as the emergency lasts that we make a few reluctant and perfunctory concessions to the ideal of charity" (5.5.6). This conclusion is essentially homage to Prokopios.

But Agathias had more use for fear than had Prokopios. He devotes a whole chapter (5.4) to the death of the wicked senator Anatolios in the earthquake of 557, because many believed that it represented divine retribution for his sins. This kind of reasoning was not uncommon. Yuhannan, for instance, gloated over the hideous death of Euphrasios, the Chalkedonian bishop of Antioch, in the great earthquake that struck that city in 526. Like those who, according to Agathias, rejoiced at the death of the wicked senator Anatolios, Yuhannan ascribes Euphrasios's death directly to God and claims that "the believers remembered the impudence of his evil deeds" (46–47). But here we see what a philosophical difference a classical education could still make. Agathias rejects the popular ascription of Anatolios's death to God. Earthquakes, he reminds us, do not discriminate between good and evil people. Still, he continues, it is not altogether a bad thing if people should believe that they do, "since the fear of dying a horrible death may have a deterrent effect on some wrongdoers" (5.4.5). Agathias, then, advocates the use of "noble lies," like those devised by Plato (and indeed Agathias shows himself familiar with Plato throughout the *History*). His advocacy of such pious lies, however, should caution the reader against accepting at face value any instances where Agathias attributes events to God in his own voice without raising the possibility of pious fraud. In the end, all that may remain secure in his digressions on the earthquakes of the 550s is the belief that they were due to "nature" (*physis*).[41] Agathias was operating on a different level of philosophical sophistication than were Malalas, Yuhannan, and even Evagrius.

Having surveyed the learned classes' diverse reactions to the plague, it is interesting to look again at Gregorios of Nyssa's shopkeepers. How was their religion affected by such events? What refuge could it provide? The evidence is inconsistent. Two very different sources, the Latin epic poet Corippus and the Syriac monk Yuhannan, depict a society driven by greed (though one in which the laws of property were apparently still observed). But the evidence they cite is weak and forced, adduced to justify their a priori negative view of their contemporaries or to promote a moral agenda.

[41]For a thorough discussion, see Kaldellis, "Historical and Religious Views of Agathias," 206–52.

Prokopios and Agathias, by contrast, present a plausible picture: the majority of the population suddenly found faith and practiced justice and charity, even if only to lapse into their former habits when the crisis was over. This picture harmonizes with the general impression gained from putting all of the sources together. There was no breakdown in public order, no rise in violent crime, no popular discontent, and only venial opportunism; in other words, nothing like the lawlessness and disregard for others that Thucydides adduces for the plague of 430 BC (2.53). Overall, the Byzantines responded calmly and with compassion, though certainly they were numbed and depressed by the magnitude of the horror. Their doctors, many of whom were public servants, tended the sick without pause or fear, while others labored to clear the city of bodies. Justinian made money available for both purposes.

When the earth shook, many Byzantines uttered pious cries of surprise and looked to the heavens to propitiate God.[42] When they were infected with the plague and began to see frightful apparitions, they tried to exorcise them by calling out holy names—vainly, according to Prokopios.[43] In both kinds of crisis, many fled to the churches, a zealous few prostrating themselves before the altar; some slaves even abandoned their masters to do so. Ioannes, bishop of Thessalonica, claimed that in the recent outbreak the citizens packed the churches, especially that of St. Demetrios himself, who healed many by appearing to them in visions. Almost all of those who stayed home, he adds with satisfaction, died.[44] Many who had not set foot in a church before would have fled there during the plague. But in 541 their hopes were in vain, at least according to the skeptical Prokopios (for the plague) and Agathias (for the earthquakes of the 550s). Even Yuhannan notes that they died in droves in the churches, but his attitude is not ironic; his point is rather to emphasize how universal and pitiless God's wrath was.[45]

Many also turned to the saints, both living and dead, for advice and prayer, and often found healing and a halt to further progress of the plague, at least according to hagiographic sources.[46] The "Great Old Man" Barsanouphios, a wise hermit who would answer the questions of other monks from his retreat near Gaza, was once petitioned "in regard to the world," namely, regarding the imminent destruction of the world in the plague. He replied that "there are many who entreat God's compassion to cease his wrath from the world; and none is more compassionate than God, who wants to have mercy but is opposed by the multitude of sins that occur

[42]Agathias *Histories* 5.3.4–6. For Byzantine reactions to earthquakes in more detail, see Dagron, "Quand la terre tremble..."; and Vercleyen, "Tremblements de terre à Constantinople."

[43]Procopius *Wars* 2.22.11.

[44]Ioannes of Thessalonica, *Miracles of St. Demetrios: Miracle* 3 (37–41); ed. and trans. Lemerle, 78–80.

[45]Procopius *Wars* 2.22.11; Agathias *Histories* 5.3.6–8 and 2.16.3; and Yuhannan *Chronicle* 75, 88.

[46]See Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence,* 150–151, to which list Evagrius *Ecclesiastical History* 4.35 (the relics of St. Thomas) should be added.

in the world." He directed his fellow monks to seek the prayers of three holy men in particular: "There are three men, perfect in God, who...keep the whole world from complete and sudden annihilation. Through their prayers, God combines his chastisement with his mercy."[47] For the sake of these three men, apparently, God had not yet entirely destroyed humanity.

Yet, as with the chroniclers and historians examined above, the reaction of the empire's population was not absolutely consistent, though the majority probably conformed to the orthodox cultural model outlined above. Yuhannan tells of a town near Palestine that reverted to pagan worship, which only a few townsmen had practiced in secret before then.[48] According to Agathias, the earthquakes opened the market for apocalyptic scenarios, charlatans, and other prophets (as Thucydides had noted for the plague in Athens).[49] Agathias cites two explanations for the plague that were current in his day: the first had to do with the "world cycles" attested in ancient Egyptian oracles and by the astrologers of Persia; the second was that God's anger was punishing mankind for its sins.[50] No doubt the former was confined to a small number of dabblers in the occult, while the latter was believed by the majority of the Christian population.

But this does not mean that the majority behavior was predictable. While some turned to holy men, according to Yuhannan the people of Constantinople somehow got it into their heads that the plague was carried around by the clergy and those itinerant black-cloaked monks, so when they saw one in the streets they screamed and ran away. Presumably Yuhannan himself was treated in this way, so he ascribed this belief—which was not at all to his liking and which persisted for two years after the initial outbreak—to rumors spread by demons.[51] At Thessalonica, many became angry with God for sending such a terrible affliction; surely, they were not inclined to sympathize with God's anger. Evagrius was tempted by "diabolical" thoughts even to the point of "blasphemy" when his daughter died while the children of a pagan neighbor did not. Much did not make sense about this plague, and it was all that preachers and monks could do to maintain a semblance of theological order.

In short, the shopkeepers and money changers of 542 most likely did not display the theological uniformity that Gregorios of Nyssa encountered in 381. The burning issue was now a plague, not a council, and Byzantine theology had not formulated a coherent answer to such events. It was the state that led the response, not the church, while the population coped

[47]Barsanouphios and Ioannes of Gaza, *Letter* 569; in *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza: Correspondance,* ed. Neyt and de Angelis-Noah, 2.2.730–735; and *Letters from the Desert, Barsanuphius and John,* trans. Chryssavgis, 153–54.

[48]Yuhannan *Chronicle* 79–80.

[49]Agathias *Histories* 5.5.2. Cf. Thucydides *History* 2.54.

[50]Agathias *Histories* 5.10.5–6.

[51]Yuhannan *Chronicle* 97–98. Cf. Procopius *Wars* 2.22.21.

mentally, emotionally, and theologically in whatever way seemed best to each, even blaming those plague-carrying monks for spreading the disease. Among the literate classes especially there was a wide range of reactions. This diversity was not merely a function of the diverse languages, genres, educational backgrounds, and philosophical goals of the authors, but of strictly personal factors as well. The skeptics Prokopios and Agathias, who were coming from the same classical background, apparently differed regarding the degree to which fear promoted moral improvement. Both Yuhannan and Evagrius wrote ecclesiastical histories at the same time and used the same source, Malalas, but their outlook was fundamentally different.

Even those who believed that the plague constituted divine punishment or led to it rarely bothered to specify what had caused it. When they did, they did not always agree. Yuhannan and Corippus took aim at trivial acts of financial self-protection, while Justinian had preemptively blamed sodomy and blasphemy. The theology, or rather the moral logic, behind these explanations was not always coherent, and belies the expectation that the Byzantines had a solid understanding of their God's actions (as opposed to his nature). And the main and most reliable source for the plague and the age as a whole, Prokopios, an author who personally witnessed much of what he described and was very well connected at the court and to powerful men in the provinces, the author on whose history all modern reconstructions are fundamentally based, offers in his account a subtle refutation of what many take to be the common outlook of all Byzantines. There, the classical traditions of precise medical observation, careful organization of material, a dispassionate outlook, subtle irony and rejection of superstition, and the pedagogical imperative to help the readers think for themselves rather than tell them what they ought to believe were still very much alive in sixth-century Byzantium.

ABBREVIATION

PG *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca.* Edited by J.-P. Migne. Paris, 1857–86.

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