

Brother Leão de São Tomás: the *Benedictina Lusitana* and the 17th century vision on the origins of Monasticism in Biblical Antiquity

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1. Brother Leão de São Tomás, chronicler of the Order of St. Benedict: the *Benedictina Lusitana* (1644-1651)

The present study intends to better understand the particular ways by which a Portuguese clergyman and scholar conceived the precursors, in Biblical Antiquity, of European monasticism during the first half of the 17th century. His name was Leão de São Tomás, a monk of St. Benedict's Rule. As Lens of the University of Coimbra, his foray through history-writing with the composition and publication of *Benedictina Lusitana* earned him recognition as chronicler of his own Order. This work comprised two volumes, both printed at Coimbra in 1644 and 1651, by the typographers Diogo Gomes de Loureiro and Manuel de Carvalho, respectively¹.

At the beginning of the first volume, Brother Leão de São Tomás addresses the readers, presenting the work and warning that it would be divided in two treatises: the first would refer to the origins of monasticism, to the hagiography of St. Benedict and the foundation of the Benedictine Rule and Order; the second would concern the arrival

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¹ A facsimile edition exists of two tomes, with introduction and critical notes by José Mattoso (Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1974).

of the Order in the Iberian Peninsula and the first monks who settled there, founding monasteries by the year 700. It is exactly this chronological boundary that sets the start of his second volume.

This date represents Brother Leão de São Tomás' fundamental position about History: it gave start, in his own words, to a «fateful century for Spain because, from then on, it would be subjected to the tyranny of the Arabs, and the Empire and Glory of the Gothic kings would fade»². In his mind is clearly the Muslim invasion of the Iberian Peninsula led by Tāriq ibn Ziyad, which brought the defeat of the Christian Hispano-Visigoths in the battle of the river Guadalete, near Cádiz, in the year 711.

From statements such as this stand out an obvious Eurocentrism or Christian-centric vision that implied, above all, an inverse feeling of aversion to the Muslims, also called indistinctively “Saracens”, “Moors” and “Arabs”. Such invaders that came from outside Europe, bearing a very different culture and religion, laid on its feet the Christian kingdom of the Visigoths, a «glorious empire», in the author's own words, subjecting its people to a «despotic» regime, yielding the idea that Muslims brought religious intolerance to the Peninsula. This intolerance, we know today, was not quite real in the Middle Ages.

This vision that Brother Leão transmits is conditioned, of course, by his historical context, where such religious tolerance had already disappeared. In Portugal, for example, religious minorities such as the Jews and Muslims had been officially replaced, by the end of the 15th century, by a social group called *Cristãos Novos*, «New Christians», i.e., people who had received baptism by force. This marked one of the significant differences between these «New Christians» and the «Old Christians»: the latter could claim to be Roman Catholics through several generations of family tradition.

Born in Coimbra, probably 1574, Leão de São Tomás studied Grammar, Oratory and Poetry. He took his vows for St. Benedict's Order in the monastery of Santo Tirso (Northern Portugal) the March

² In the original: «Seculo fatal pera Hespanha, pois nelle ficou sojeita à tirannia dos Arabes, & feneceo o Imperio, & gloria dos Reys Godos» (*Benedictina Lusitana*, tome I, fol. 4v of the preliminary pages.

5th, 1590. Graduated at the University of Coimbra; there, he was attributed with the Lens of Gabriel (from June 3rd, 1617), Durando (which he took over May 31st, 1635), of Escoto (from November 12th, 1641), Vespera (from May 24th, 1645) and Prima of Theology (from April 11th, 1648).

He was twice Rector of St. Benedict's College of Coimbra (1627 and 1638), being responsible to consecrate the College's church in March 15th, 1634. Diogo Barbosa Machado (1682-1772), Catholic presbyter, bibliographer and writer, states in his *Bibliotheca Lusitana* that Brother Leão de São Tomás died in Coimbra, June 6th 1651, aged 77 years old, of which 61 were devoted to religious profession³. However, Inocêncio Francisco da Silva (1810-1876), another important Portuguese literate and bibliographer, argues against this chronology, stating that Brother Leão's death occurred June 6th, 1661, aged 86⁴. Inocêncio Francisco da Silva, however, does not only argue over the correct date of demise of the *Benedictina Lusitana*'s author. He also contradicts, with violent attacks, the prevailing views concerning the results of Brother Leão's chronistic effort, otherwise well accepted among their peers and even praised by Barbosa Machado. Inocêncio writes:

«This work is filled with erudition and, at first sight, reveals broad studies and in-depth knowledge of his author about Ancient things; but the fact is that, having Brother Leão de Santo Tomás been devoid of good principles of criticism – or was induced by objectionable reasons that swept him by wrong guides, supporting his narratives in false chronicles of Peres, Dextro, etc., claiming to adopt legitimate and genuine texts, and taking assertions of Brito, Bivar, Higuera, etc. as truthful – also left evidence, at least, of negligence in the way he examined some of the documents that he produces in his labour, and of minimal credulity concerning the information that other confreres have given to him»⁵.

³ *Bibliotheca Lusitana*, Tome III, Coimbra: Atlântida Editora, 1966 (rep.), 4-6.

⁴ *Diccionario Bibliographico Portuguez*, Tome V, Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, 1860 (rep.), 170.

⁵ *Id.*, *ibid.*, 170-171.

Such harsh criticism from Inocêncio Francisco da Silva came from a man that was accustomed to a positivist inspiration and heuristic discipline. It focused, however, on a text that was already two-centuries-old, produced at a time when historical exercises depended on different values. This study does not have the purpose to classify the veracity of Brother Leão's information or to evaluate his sources and interpretations of the facts; it is essentially interested in the ways he weaves his observations on Ancient peoples, and how its work can contribute to a better understanding of how 16th and 17th century European culture could conceive other parts of the world. In particular, these lines will deal mainly with the information he collects and how the author leverages them to achieve his ends.

Above, there was opportunity to present his position regarding Islam; now, we may focus in the Hebrew world.

2. The thesis of Brother Leão de São Tomás: the vision of the Orient and Antiquity

The essential of the theses of Brother Leão de São Tomás about the distant past and the East is connected to the genesis of the monastic phenomenon. Such is stated early in his work, right at the opening, in «Treaty I. When it comes to the principles of the Monastic State, life of the great Patriarch St. Benedict»⁶.

In the first prelude of the tome («Prelude First. The principles of monastic life in the time of old Law»)⁷, he starts by establishing the perfection of the “Law of Grace” (the Law of Christ, Christianity) in contrast to the Law of Moses, the “Old law” (i.e., Judaism). However, more than to uphold the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, Brother Leão legitimizes the monastic way of life by establishing its

⁶ In the original: «Tratado I. Em que se trata dos principios do estado Monastico, & vida do Grande Patriarcha Saõ Bento» (*Benedictina Lusitana*, tome I, fol. 1).

⁷ In the original: «Praeludio Primeiro. Dos principios da vida Monastica no tempo da Ley velha» (*id.*, *ibid.*).

roots back to the time of the Old Law, regarding both the eremitical and Cenobitic movements as its precursors. Even by doing so, says Brother Leão that «the old law did not have the real image and perfect substance of future Good, but had its contours and shadows»⁸. Almost paraphrasing St. Paul: «For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then shall we see face to face. Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known.»⁹

By assuming there were monastic phenomena in the Old Law, only the Christian monasticism acquires, however, the perfection conferred to by the law of Christ; incidentally, referring to Samuel as the founder of the Cenobitic movement, he claims that he was «the first who launched the first rude lines of the Cenobitic monastic state to which, afterwards, the Law of Grace gave the lively ones and proper perfection, by the virtue and efficacy of the blood of Christ the Redeemer, our Lord»¹⁰.

3. The prophets of the Old Testament and the foundation of monasticism

To Brother Leão, the founders of monasticism were two prophets of great weight in the history of Israel. Samuel appears as the founder of Cenobitic monasticism; Elijah is the precursor of the eremitic monks. Concerning Samuel, the author states that he was

«the first one who, one thousand and a hundred fifty years before the coming of Christ, instituted the Religious colleges of those days, in which were raised the most devoted of those who wanted to learn the Law, to be literate, sage and intelligent, learning

⁸ In the original: «Não teue a ley velha a sustancia & imagem real, & perfeita dos bens futuros, mas teue as linhas, & sombras delles» (*id., ibid.*, tome I, fol. 1).

⁹ I Corinthians 13, 12.

¹⁰ In the original: «ser o primeiro que lançou as primeiras & rudes linhas do estado monastico cenobitico, a que depois a ley da graça deu os vivos, & perfeição deuida, com a virtude & efficacia do sangue de Christo Redemptor e Senhor nosso» (*Benedictina Lusitana*, tome I, fol. 2).

together to sing and to play so that, by the sound of their musical instruments, more solemnly, and with greater edification of the people, they would sing the divine praises»¹¹.

Not much further, the author argues that such colleges were «houses of doctrine, not only schools where one could only learn, but also convents where, in certain times and hours, God was praised»¹². Those who lived this way in such schools were called in the Scriptures as Prophets, not because «they all prophesized and harbingered future things, but because, according to the phrase in the same Scriptures, to sing the divine praises is one way to prophesize»¹³.

Apparently, the Benedictine chronicler did not realize that, by pointing Samuel as the initiator of conventual life, he was taking from St. Benedict himself the credit of creating a substantial part of his Rule. On the other hand, Brother Leão does not clarify if the activities of Samuel's students included prayer, if the Benedictine conception of *ora et labora*, where prayer coexisted with work, or even if those youths were exclusively dedicated to the Divine Office.

Nevertheless, he argues that Samuel founded two such schools, one in Gibeah¹⁴, home to Saul, and another in his own homeland, Ramah¹⁵, governed by himself¹⁶.

The eremitic monasticism, according to Brother Leão, was founded 146 years after the death of Samuel and 930 years before the coming of Christ by another Prophet, Elijah, elected by God once he was generated. As attested by the vision of his father, Iobab, «angels

¹¹ In the original: «foi o primeiro que mil & cento & sincoenta & tantos annos antes da vinda de Christo, instituiu Collegios de Religiosos daquele tempo, nos quaes se criauão os mais deuotos que querião aprender a ley, fazer se letrados, sabios, & inteligentes nella, aprendendo juntamente a cantar & tanger, pera que ao som de seus instrumentos musicos, com mais solemnidade, & mayor edificação do pouo cantassem os diuinos louvores» (*Benedictina Lusitana*, tome I, fol. 1-2).

¹² In the original: «casas de doutrina, não erão precisamente escollas em que sò se aprendia, senão tambem conventos, em que a certos tempos & horas se trataua de louuar a Deos» (*id.*, *ibid.*, fol. 2).

¹³ In the original: «não porque todos Prophetassem & prenunciassem cousas futuras, senão porque conforme a phrase da mesma Escritura, cantar os louvores diuinos he hum modo de profetar» (*id.*, *ibid.*).

¹⁴ In the original: «Gabaa».

¹⁵ In the original: «Ramatha».

¹⁶ Cf. *Benedictina Lusitana*, tomo I, fol. 2.

dressed in white saluted the newborn boy, giving him flames of fire to eat and with the same fire they washed his mother's breast»¹⁷.

As inferred from this passage, divine election, for Brother Leão, is expressed in a double form, besides the signs directed towards Elijah: on the one hand, the vision granted to his father; on the other hand, the purification of his mother, whose signs of recent pregnancy were washed away by the angels with fire. Regarding the prophet himself, says Brother Leão:

«Elijah appeared in the world like a man made of fire; his words were like a torch that burned the hearts of men; and so, I am not wondered that he left and triumphed over this world in a chariot of fire, as said in the Sacred text»¹⁸.

Next to myth and mysticism, Brother Leão makes historical authority arise to legitimate monasticism through Elijah's example, by reference to ancient authors. Concerning the birthplace of Elijah, he initially refers that the Prophet would be a native of Tishbe, in the land of Gilead, beyond the River Jordan¹⁹. Resorting to John, the Patriarch of Jerusalem (387-417 CE), he situates it, however, in the territories of the tribe of Manasseh. Just ahead, he mentions Adricomius²⁰, who placed the city in the territory of the tribe of Gad; and, still, Dorotheus²¹ and Epiphanius²², who maintained that Elijah was born in Arabia.

¹⁷ In the original: «Anjos vestidos de branco que saudauão ao menino nacido, & lhe dauão a comer chamas de fogo, & com o mesmo fogo lauauão o peito da may» (*id., ibid.*, fol. 3).

¹⁸ In the original: «Apareceo Elias no mundo como hum homem todo composto de fogo, & suas palauaras erão como hũa facha aceza que abrazauão os coraçõs dos homens; E assim não me espanto que em carro de fogo fosse sahindo & triumphando deste mundo como consta do Sagrado texto» (*id., ibid.*, fol. 3).

¹⁹ Cf. I Kings 17, 1.

²⁰ Christianus Adricomius Delfus (1533-1585), priest native of Delf, composed a set of treaties gathered in the so-called *Chronicon*.

²¹ Dorotheus of Antioch, Arian bishop of Antioch between 376 and 381, was later Archbishop of Constantinople.

²² Epiphanius of Salamis (born between 310-320, deceased in 403), bishop of Salamis and Metropolitan of Cyprus, was one of the speakers at the Council of Antioch (376). He attacked Origen and urged John, Bishop of Jerusalem, to condemn Origen's doctrine.

The eremitic life of Elijah, according to Brother Leão, developed in three distinct periods: by the divine inspiration, he firstly retreated to the mountains of Ephraim and there lived in a cave for several years somewhere along the river Carith; God provided his sustenance with food subtracted from the table of king Ahab of Israel himself. Later, escaping from Queen Jezebel, the prophet withdrew to the desert, where it is said he have been for forty days before his arrival at Mt. Horeb, in Sinai. Finally, he settled on Mount Carmel, seeking for *contemplation* and to live a *solitary life*; nevertheless, many disciples gathered there, joining him three times a day «in a house they had as Oratory, in order to sing the divine praises»²³. Thus, concludes the chronicler of St. Benedict, Elijah «not only, by himself, initiated hermitic life, but preserved and incremented the cenobitic one, in the colleges of the Prophets.»²⁴

4. Other forms of religious association in the Old Testament: the Rekabites and Essenes

Brother Leão de São Tomás writes the first pages of *Benedictina Lusitana* with the clear intention to reconstruct the origins of the monastic movement through the light of the Old Testament's prophets. Moreover, he seeks to find those origins in the virtues and holiness of two great figures, as were Samuel and Elijah. An important factor in his choice of such characters is their proximity to God himself.

In this sense, competition from any other communal religious movements present in the Old Testament could not be admitted. Brother Leão selects two that he considered to comply with such condition: the Rekabites²⁵ and the Essenes. Regarding the former, he states that

²³ In the original: «em hũa casa *que* tinhão a modo de Oratorio pera cantarem os lououres diuinos» (*Benedictina Lusitana*, tomo I, fol. 5).

²⁴ In the original: «não sò por sua pessoa deu principio à vida eremitica, mas conseruou, & augmentou a caenobitica nos Collegios dos Prophetas» (*id.*, *ibid.*).

²⁵ In the original, «rechabitas». According to Jeremiah 35, the term derived from Recab, Jehonadab's father, Patriarch of the Rekabites.

«...the institute of the Rekabites was reputed to be pious and religious because they lived outside the cities, in fields and in Tabernacles, or portable houses, as guests and pilgrims on the land; they did not make crops or plant vineyards, nor they drank wine or were accustomed to delicate dishes; all of which is reported in chapter thirty-five of Jeremiah; [... they] were similar to the monks of nowadays»²⁶.

The Rekabites originated from Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, or from his descendants, who are known in the Scriptures as the *Kenites*²⁷; Joshua gave them lands in Jericho, which they left to join the tribe of Judah on his journey to the desert of Arad, more than one thousand and four hundred years before the birth of Christ. From this option of detachment from the mundane world and of retreat into the wilderness, concludes Brother Leão that they constantly aspired towards eremitic life. In fact, the episode in which the Book of Jeremiah highlights the Rekabites is linked to their fidelity towards the divine precepts (such as their refusal to consume wine), as opposed to the disobedience of the sons of Israel²⁸.

Turning now to the Essenes, Brother Leão writes:

«...they were the most religious people amongst the Jews, very different from the Pharisees and the Sadducees; [...] being more than four thousand men, their belongings were common property to all; they had no women, slaves or servants but instead served each other, and professed; their everyday fast [...] became already part of their nature; they were not opponents of Christ our Lord [...]»²⁹.

²⁶ In the original: «o instituto dos Rechabitas consta que foi pio & Religioso; porque viuião fora das Cidades pellos campos em tabernáculos, ou casas portateis & leuadiças como hospedes & peregrinos sobre a terra, não fazião searas, não plantauão vinhas, nem bebião vinho, não vsauão de manjares delicados, o que tudo consta do capítulo trinta & sinco de Hyeremias; [...] erão semelhantes aos monges de agora» (*Benedictina Lusitana*, tome I, fol. 5).

²⁷ According to information from the Brother Leão himself (*id.*, *ibid.*); «Cineos» in the original.

²⁸ Cf. Jeremiah 35.

²⁹ In the original: «era da gente mais religiosa que entre os Iudeõs auia mui diferente dos Phariseos, & Saduceos; [...] passando de quatro mil homẽs, eram seus bẽs communs a todos não tinhão molheres,

However, to Brother Leão, none of these movements were prior to Samuel and Elijah. The Rekabites were not because «the way of their religion and observance is more modern than Elijah»³⁰. In fact, the Rekabites would be descendants of Jehonadab, a relative of Moses' wife, forbidden by their Patriarch to live in cities and to drink wine; Brother Leão argues that Jehonadab lived when Jehu began to reign in Israel, 902 years before Christ, in a time when Elijah would already have ascended to Heaven for twelve years³¹.

With regard to the Essenes, he mentions that there were two branches: the Samaritan Essenes, whose beliefs were “filled with errors”; and the Palestinian Essenes, who lived on the banks of the Jordan, near the Dead Sea and who, according to the ways of their living, would demonstrate themselves to be a sort of upcoming of Christianity. Both, however, proceeded from the Rekabites, and so, could not have existed before Samuel and Elijah³².

Conclusions

Brother Leão de São Tomás, when designing the *Benedictina Lusitana*, sought, essentially, to sketch the history of his own Order, with few concerns about the various movements which gradually built the Western Monasticism. The pages on which we are holding in this study constitute, therefore, an exception to the body of his work. Nevertheless, they are deserving of attention because they denote how the author shaped ancient writings to legitimize his views.

The search for the origins of monasticism in the past was not an innocent feature in his work. It was based on relevant figures of the Old Testament, namely the prophets Elijah and Samuel, but never in dissident movements within Judaism. Brother Leão finds similarities

seruos nem criados, hūs aos outros se seruião, & ministrauão, & seu jejum cotidiano [...] tinham já convertido em natureza; não forão aduersarios a Christo Senhor nosso [...]» (*id., ibid.*, fol. 6).

³⁰ In the original: «o modo de sua Religião & obseruancia he mais moderna que Elias» (*id., ibid.*).

³¹ Cf. *id., ibid.*, fol. 6.

³² *Id., ibid.*, fol. 7.

with monasticism, however, in two of these movements: the Rekabites and the Essenes. Revolving around them, he tries to weave an argument that would not leave any doubts that the beginnings of monasticism could never lie in such movements. He goes further: recognizing though the virtues and the religious zeal manifested by both Rekabites and Essenes, he considers the prophets as those who were closest to God. Brother Leão's pages are filled with descriptions of fantastic ways which Yahweh used to legitimize the prophets, showing that they were, indeed, at his service.

However, the author did not hesitate to distance himself and his assertions from Judaism: the forms of religious association in ancient Israel were, to him, nothing but a pale image of the true monastic movement that would emerge centuries later, under the light of the faith of Christ; for him, it was Christianity that imprinted in monasticism the "seal of truth" and its fulfillment. On the other hand, he was a 17th century man who spoke about a distant past and, therefore, described it according to the standards of his own time. Expressions like «...similar to the monks of nowadays...», referring to the Essenes, or his description of the Elijah's followers experiences in «colleges» or «schools» demonstrate that Brother Leão adopted a comparative standard to confront the past through anachronistic perspectives: the way by which he describes the precursors of monastic movements reminds one of his coeval painters, when representing scenes from the Old Testament by using scenarios and characters constructed from landscapes, architecture and clothing of their own time.

Finally, a word about the landscape that dominates the imagination of Brother Leão de São Tomás: his ideal of monastic sanctity focuses on a distanced relationship with the urban environment, which undeniably contrasts with the reality of his experience as a religious man and teacher connected to the University of Coimbra. On the first pages of his work, we find praises on hermitic life through the example of the prophet Elijah, although it does not conform to the countryside ideal expressed in the case of Samuel, absolutely cenobitic. We find this paradigm, however, in the experience of detachment from the

mundane of Rekabites and Essenes, groups who live away from urban environments. We can highlight the case of the former, though: the character of their communities was nomadic; they did not cultivate the land and lived as foreigners or pilgrims in tents or houses that could easily be carried when moving.

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