

Some Aspects of Volume 8 of Shenoute's Canons

AS A MEMBER of the international project to edit the works of Shenoute, directed by Professor Stephen Emmel, I am responsible for editing and translating volume 8 of Shenoute's *Canons*. From a certain point of view this is a real opportunity, because the amount of surviving text is very large. But from another point of view it is a mixed blessing, because the texts of *Canon 8* are very hard to understand and often seem to be at the very limit of comprehension. In this chapter I would like to touch on two aspects of *Canon 8*: first, the manuscript witnesses and their codicological and textual relevance; and second, I will analyze a few of Shenoute's themes, which can serve to guide us through the meanderings of his discourse.

1. The textual attestation of *Canon 8*

Canon 8 is by far the best attested of the nine books of the *Canons*. The main witness to *Canon 8* is a manuscript the bulk of which is held by the Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire (IFAO) under the designation of IFAO Copte 2. Some 127 leaves are present in this manuscript, and to them can be added a few leaves in London (British Library), Naples (Biblioteca nazionale), and Paris (Bibliothèque nationale), arriving at a total of 141 surviving leaves out of the 161 that must have made up the original codex. No other manuscript from the White Monastery has survived so completely. (Indeed, in the average Shenoute manuscript, only 10 percent of the leaves survive.)

There are six additional witnesses to volume 8, all much more fragmentary, and including the *Florilegium Sinuthianum*, and these allow us to verify that the same sermons were copied there in the same order, and that the transmission of these texts, as a whole, was very stable, to a degree that is otherwise found only with biblical texts.

Volume 8 of the *Canons* is thus a very important textual source. The main

textual witness, that is, the French Institute manuscript and its related leaves, is designated by the siglum XO in Professor Orlandi's [Corpus dei manoscritti letterari](#), and has been described in detail in Stephen Emmel's *Shenoute's Literary Corpus*.^[1] The accompanying photograph (fig. 1) will give an idea of this codex. The manuscript is written in biblical uncial in two columns, like the majority of the manuscripts of the works of Shenoute.

The regularity of the script contrasts with the vast number of corrections found in the manuscript: omission of letters; repetition of letters—which has generally been corrected by erasure of the parchment; and the dropping of multiple words or phrases through homoeoteleuton—such passages have been marked by the ancient corrector with an asterisk and then the missing words have been written into the margin (in one case the omission was so large that the missing passage had to be copied on to supplementary leaves, thus modifying the structure of quire 16).

The script of this manuscript seems to be of a more ancient type than that of the French Institute manuscript IFAO 1, for example. This manuscript is illustrated in fig. 2; it can be dated to about A.D. 930. What is more, the format of [Codex XO](#) is not very large, only 24 x 18 cm per leaf. These two facts argue for a relatively ancient date, perhaps the eighth century. On the last page there is a subscription giving the title of the volume: "This is the *Canon* of our holy, prophetic father, Apa Shenoute. The eighth (book). O Jesus Christ, amen." Unfortunately, there is no colophon giving the name of the copyist or the date. This may be an additional argument in favor of a date before the ninth century, a time before the usage of [colophons](#) had been established.

It would obviously be tempting, in view of such an early dating, to deem that [codex XO](#) is the earliest of the surviving witnesses, and that the others are subsequent copies. However, up to the present time I have not succeeded in establishing a relative chronology of the witnesses.

Figure 1: IFAO Copte 2, [Codex XO](#),
p. 160 (cliché Ifao)

Figure 2: IFAO Copte 1, [Codex XH](#),
p. 207 (cliché Ifao)

2. Biblical Citations

Before passing to the actual content of *Canon 8*, I would like to note the importance of the works of Shenoute for the domain of Coptic Bible versions. Volume 8 of the *Canons*, for example, cites a very long passage from Leviticus, which is not otherwise known in Sahidic because of the fragmentary manuscript situation. The books of the Prophets are frequently cited, above all the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is without any doubt the Prophet with whom Shenoute identified himself most frequently. Shenoute, of course, often has the epithet of Prophet in texts that mention him or his works; for example, in the subscription of *Canon 8* that I mentioned above.

The Sahidic text of the book of Jeremiah has not survived complete in any manuscript, and for many passages Shenoute's quotations of Jeremiah are the only surviving attestation. One example will suffice to demonstrate the value of these biblical citations.

Shenoute's sermon entitled *My Heart Is Crushed* begins with a citation of Jeremiah 23:9-10, a passage that is quoted even more extensively later in the sermon.

In fact, the only attestation of this passage of Jeremiah in Sahidic is in volume 8 of the *Canons*, attested by [Codex XO](#) and [Codex FL](#): "My heart is crushed within me, all my bones have shaken, I have become like a broken man, like a man who is drunk on wine, in the presence of the Lord, and in the presence of the greatness of the beauty of his glory. For the land is filled with adulterers, the country is stricken with [grief](#) in the presence of these." Given the faithfulness with which Shenoute usually

cites biblical texts, one can consider this quotation to be a good attestation of the Coptic version.

In fact, the Coptic text here has an addition not found in the Septuagint, namely, "the land is filled with adulterers." This addition is found in the Masoretic text, and is typical of the Hexapla, but is not from the Septuagint. Additions of this type are rather numerous in the book of Jeremiah, and so this new variant confirms a tendency of the Coptic version.

3. The composition and coherence of *Canon 8*

Volume 8 of the *Canons* comprises seven works. The first two sermons each occupy sixty-two pages. Then comes a long sermon of 110 pages, which is the central work in the codex, followed by two others, which are shorter (59 and 22 pages respectively). The volume concludes with two very brief texts, two or three pages in length, which have the appearance of letters addressed to precise circumstances.

Up to now, it has not been possible to find any overarching theme in the codex. However, a certain number of specific themes seem to be present in one text or another, notably the themes of garments and sickness. These themes often have a metaphorical function and are part of the author's rhetoric. Probably they also contain allusions to precise situations and inform us more or less directly about the structure and organization of the monastic establishment. We should remember that Shenoute was in charge of a federation of three monastic establishments, including a nunnery for women.

The job cannot have been easy, to judge from the predominant tone of the most of the sermons, which is that of reproach, accusation, and threat. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, there are major difficulties in understanding these texts. Of course that could be owing to my insufficient knowledge of Shenoute's language. It can also be explained, I

think, from the fact that Shenoute refers to facts and customs that were well known to his audience, so that he is able to make very vague allusions to them.

Finally, the repetition of the same phrases and citations from one text to another, the absence of any obvious progression of thought, and the exaggeration of certain images, often give the impression that one is dealing with works written in Shenoute's extreme old age or works that belong to a period of deep depression. I will now try, with a few examples, to give some possible ideas of how to read these texts.

4. **Some extracts from *Canon 8***

First, let us look at an extract from the beginning of the first sermon: "So listen, O you who have friendship for the man who is discouraged, and look at his affliction when he says, 'Behold, Lord, I am tormented, my heart has been become disturbed, and my heart has turned within me because I am in anger, yes, in anger.' Indeed, this sickness has robbed me of my strength and subjected me to an increase of suffering so that I do not wish my garment, and my garments, to touch If it were possible, I would throw them away so as not to wear them."

Shenoute often speaks of himself in the third person, referring to himself as "the man" or "this man." This procedure enables him to introduce smoothly a citation of Lamentations 1:20, where he substitutes himself for Jerusalem in the first person pronoun "I." Like many texts of Christian literature, the sermons of Shenoute are literally stuffed with biblical citations and allusions, though few authors make such extensive use of the Prophets.

From the very beginning of this sermon, the two dominant themes of Volume 8 are clearly in view.

The theme of sickness is susceptible of two readings. On the one hand, it is possible that Shenoute was actually ill with a chronic disease, probably a skin disease that made him subject to unbearable itching, which he

sometimes describes with realistic exactitude. On the other hand, the human body was a commonplace metaphor for the Christian community, mainly inspired by the epistles of Paul, and particularly apt for describing a monastic community. As head of the body, the leader of the federation feels the effects of all weaknesses and suffering.

Associated with this image of the body is the image of the garment. Just as the monastic habit is the outward sign of a monk, the monks are the finest visible expression of the community, that is, the garment of the monastic body. If this body is ill, it can no longer endure contact with garments. Here too the image is [coupled](#) with an allusion to reality: Shenoute's garments are obviously a sensitive issue in the life of the congregation.

Next, an extract from the beginning of the second sermon: "My heart is crushed, and it has become crushed within me because of our affliction that is shown in your faces like a sore—you, O mother superior, and you, O (sister) Tapollé. For you are, and you have been, distraught with much grief; you are, and you have been, saddened; your heart is overturned within you, because of what has been revealed to you and what has been hidden from you. I am talking about the excellent cloak that I requested from you so I could wrap myself in it. And I covered myself whenever I had need. I was very happy with it, and I was satisfied with its color and its style, and with the fact that others admired its beauty, too. And thus, I was all the more filled with grief . . . when the moth ate it, explored it, completely filled it with holes."

Here too the sermon begins with a citation from one of the Prophets (Jeremiah 23:9), which sets the tone of reproach and bitterness. The importance of this rhetorical apostrophe in terms of how the monastic organization worked, is to demonstrate that the manufacture of garments—at least those of the head of the federation—was in the hands of the nuns, who were themselves subject to the authority of a mother superior.

The other female personage, named Tapollé, seems to have been at the center of many conflicts, which are mentioned in other books of the *Canons*. On the question of Shenoute's relationships with the congregation of monastic women, I would refer to Rebecca Krawiec's book.^[2] It seems possible that all the sermons of *Canon 8* were addressed to the congregation of women and that the occasion for most of them had to do with the manufacture of these garments.

It is difficult to be absolutely sure, inasmuch as the second person plural in Coptic does not make a distinction between masculine and feminine. It is very likely that starting from a particular problem, Shenoute extended his subject matter to larger questions of authority and responsibility concerning the entire monastic federation, which is indicated by his frequent repetition of the expression "both males and females." On the other hand, reference to moths is found in many biblical references, for example, Proverbs 25:20a: "Like a moth in a garment and a worm in a piece of wood, so has sadness afflicted the heart of a man." This clearly indicates that the garment also has a metaphorical reference to monastic behavior. Shenoute is not only upset at the bad condition of his garments; he is also sickened by the disorder of the conduct of his communities.

The continuation of the passage that I cited just above seems to indicate that the nuns made him another cloak, which he did not want to wear: "But you say to me, Why? What is wrong with it? First of all, it hangs heavily on me. For, you should have put fringes and tassels on it, so that if they opened out or parted after a certain time they would still remain intertwined; but instead, you have trimmed it with braid like a tunic or a curtain.

You have deliberately constructed it for me as though it were a veil, and I remember the contempt and criticism of this object called 'veil'—and how the prophet fights all the time against the woman whose identity he, for his part, knows well: 'Undo your veil, reveal your gray hairs, uncover your legs'" (Isaiah 47:2). It is difficult to imagine the kind of garment that

Shenoute is describing and the defects that he sees in it.

On the metaphorical level, however, the notion of hanging heavily probably represents the burden of responsibility felt by the head of the federation; while the comparison with a veil or a drapery—which are broad and billowing pieces of textile—could serve on the one hand to criticize a lack of cohesion and discipline, and on the other hand to denounce the ‘perversions’ that such a garment would scarcely be able to conceal. At the end of this rhetorical period, Shenoute declares that he will not wear the garments in question. At best, he will ignore them, and at worst, he will tear them to pieces.

The threat is fairly clear, and the choice imposed upon the monastic leader is the following: either he withdraws from his communities and hands them over to [divine](#) justice, or he punishes the guilty. A third solution, to which Shenoute makes frequent reference, is to throw these spoiled garments onto the scrap heap, that is to say, to expel the trouble makers. This idea is expressed many times in the second sermon, and it is implicit at the beginning of the third.

Finally, an extract from the beginning of sermon three: “Who but God is the witness to that which he said to another: ‘Have you seen that once again the moth has entered into the textile products, in the place where they are stored, and it has destroyed not only their borders, but also their center? Can someone bring them back out into the light? Can someone unfold them again and take them out?’ That is why I am telling you, who concern yourselves with my garments: it is better for me to have just one, two, or three of these garments that you are making for me and to have them well made, than for me to have this heap, which is a matter of shame for the one who is supposed to wear them.”

This is the longest and most turbulent sermon, and it picks up and deepens the themes that were already tackled in the second sermon. In sermon three, we can see the dilemma that must have haunted Shenoute

during all of his long career as head of the monastic federation: on the one hand, to bring into his congregations the largest possible number of members in order to enlarge the flock of God; but on the other hand, to expel, without any hesitation, those who took advantage of the large monastic population to compromise the salvation of the whole congregation by their abuses—above all, by theft and fornication.

The actual number of monks living in these establishments—and our literary sources speak of several thousand—cannot be verified until the archaeological site has been excavated. But whatever the actual number may have been, questions of discipline seem to be central in volume 8 of the *Canons*, leaving not much room for questions of spirituality. Seen from this point of view, the difference between volume 8 of the *Canons* and the Pachomian [corpus](#) is very striking. In order to understand exactly why, we must wait until all of Shenoute's *Canons* has been published.

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[1] Emmel 2004.

[2] Krawiec 2002.

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