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HRABAN MAUR AS MEDIATOR: *DE HONORE PARENTUM* (AUTUMN 834)

In the aftermath of the public penance of Louis the Pious in 833, Hraban Maur, abbot of Fulda, wrote a treatise in twelve chapters for the emperor. It is usually known as *De honore parentum*, after the title of its first chapter: “on the honour owed to parents and the submission required from sons”¹. Modern historians have therefore concentrated on this aspect, but there is more to this text than merely the duty of sons to obey their father². Hraban’s pupil, the monk Rudolf of Fulda, referred to the letter as follows:

a consolation letter after the disaster that struck him [Louis] because of his sons and magnates; in which it is shown by divine testimony that a wrong verdict cannot rightly condemn an innocent; in which he [Hraban] also, finally, exhorted him [Louis] to forgiveness of those who had committed crimes against him³.

Rudolf’s characterisation is entirely to the point: Hraban’s observations on filial obedience were just the start of a more wide-ranging argument about the illegitimate nature of the penance imposed on Louis, and the father’s duty to forgive his son Lothar. It was a letter of consolation, but also of restoration, by which Hraban tried to strengthen Louis’ position. He did so by furnishing him with a dossier of biblical texts that not only defended the emperor’s past actions and attacked his enemies, but also opened the way for a quick resolution of the conflict with his eldest son. As such, it is a very early voice in the chorus that was to debate the rights and wrongs of Louis’s public penance and excommunication; Hraban’s plea to forgive Lothar was probably written during the autumn or early winter

¹ Hrabanus Maurus, *De honore parentum, ad Ludovicum I. Pium*, ed. E. Dümmler, *Epistolae Karolini aevi*, III, Berlin, 1899 (MGH EE, V), nr. 15, pp. 403-415. I follow the title given by R Kortje, *Verzeichnis der Handschriften mit den Werken des Hrabanus Maurus*, Hannover, 2010, (MGH Hilfsmittel, 27) nr. 882, pp. 155 and 256, and cite the work from now on as DHP.

² B. Kasten, *Königssöhne und Königsherrschaft. Untersuchungen zur Teilhabe am Reich in der Merowinger- und Karolingerreich*, Hannover, 1997 (MGH Schriften, 44), p. 210; E. Boshof, *Ludwig der Fromme: Gestalten des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, Darmstadt, 1996, p. 204; C. M. Booker, *Past Convictions. The Penance of Louis the Pious and the Decline of the Carolingians*, Philadelphia, 2009, p. 236; K. H. Krüger, *Herrschaftsnachfolge als Vater-Sohn-Konflikt*, in *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 36, 2002, pp. 226-28. For a more comprehensive impression of the work, see St. PATZOLD, *Episcopus. Wissen über Bischöfe im Frankenreich des späten 8. bis frühen 10. Jahrhunderts*, Sigmaringen, 2008, pp. 192-93.

³ RUDOLF OF FULDA, *Miracula*, c. 15, ed. O. HOLDER-EGGER, Hannover, 1887 (MGH SS, XV.1, p. 341).

Splendor Reginae. Passions, genre et famille, éd. par Laurent JÉGOU, Sylvie JOYE, Thomas LIENHARD et Jens SCHNEIDER, Turnhout, 2015 (Haut Moyen Âge, 22), p. 49-57.

of 834. This brief investigation of *De honore parentum* is meant as a tribute to Régine le Jan, whose work has contributed so much to our understanding of aristocratic family relations in the context of Carolingian politics.

De honore parentum is extant in only one manuscript, dating from the mid-ninth century, which was copied for Thiotmar, *chorepiscopus* of Mainz. It also contains a letter by Hraban to Archbishop Drogo of Metz concerning the position of choir bishops⁴. Each chapter has an extensive heading, intended as a quick guide to its contents. The treatise starts with a full list of the chapter headings, followed by a prefatory poem for Louis. In each chapter, the author followed the order of the biblical books, starting with Genesis and ending with the letters of the Apostles, although for some topics he only drew on either the Old or the New Testament. Occasionally, other texts were included (Orosius, Augustine, Ambrosiaster and a decree of Pope Innocent I), but the majority of Hraban's material consisted of "the teachings of divine law", as the prefatory poem expresses it. The consolation Hraban offered for Louis consisted of a methodical invalidation of the accusations made by the rebels of 833.

Fathers and sons (cc. 1-2)

In the prefatory poem, the submission of sons to fathers is explicitly mentioned, and it is this theme that dominates the first two chapters. The first is about honouring one's parents and the subjection of sons (*honorificatio parentum et subiectio filiorum*). The majority of the texts is taken from the Old Testament, for in this "old law" (*vetus lex*) legal precepts could be found in abundance⁵; in this case, Hraban drew especially on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The second chapter, on dishonouring one's parents (*dishonoratio parentum*) is much shorter, and, moreover, changes course halfway. Having explained that biblical fathers such as Isaac preferred younger sons because of their better behaviour, Hraban added an entire section on mild and merciful leaders of the people of Israel, notably Moses, the mildest of all men on earth (Num. 12, 3) and the humble and patient David, the least esteemed by his brothers, but the most pleasing to God (I Reg. 17, 14)⁶. This is an implicit comparison between Lothar, the rebellious eldest son, and Louis himself, the dutiful and humble younger son who had obeyed and succeeded his father, and whose mildness and mercy were his hallmark; hence, Louis was

4 BNF Lat. 2.443 (29 folia), fol. 1: *Thiotmar chorepiscopus adquisiuit*; fol. 2-13, inc. *Druogoni summo pontifici Hrabanus famulus Christi salutem*; ed. E. DÜMMLER, as above, n. 1 fol. 13v-29, inc. *Opusculum Rhabani Mauri ad Hludovicum imperatorem in XII capitulis comprehensum*. Cf. Kottje, *Verzeichnis*, nr. 882, p. 155.

5 M. de Jong, *Old law and new-found power: Hrabanus Maurus and the Old Testament*, in J.W. Drijvers and A.A. MacDonald (eds.), *Centres of Learning: Learning and Location in pre-modern Europe and the Near East*, Leiden/ New York/ Cologne, 1995, pp. 161-76.

6 DHP, c. 2, p. 406.

associated with Moses, as Walafrid Strabo had done in 829 in his *De imagine Tetrici*⁷. Please note: already at this stage, a central theme of the treatise, the need for forgiveness, comes to the fore.

Kings and subjects (c. 3)

Yet until this point was reached, Hraban set about showing that the revolt in 833 had lacked any legitimacy whatsoever. Subjects were bound to obey their ruler, lest they displease God. Biblical proof for this was abundant, and some of it also implicitly endorsed the author's own activity of furnishing the ruler with the words of truth: "they that act wickedly are abominable to the king: for the throne is established by justice. Just lips are the delight of kings: he that speaketh right things shall be loved" (Prov. 16, 12-13). God was displeased if men behaved arrogantly and rebelled against their rulers. This *superbia et seditio contra principes suos* merited another trawl through the biblical evidence, beginning with the tyrant Nimrod, builder of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 10, 9). Here, Old Testament *historia*, relating the deeds of the ancients in the distant past, was supplemented by the *exempla* of Christian times, taken from Orosius⁸. One of these was the Emperor Theodosius I, not as a penitent but as a ruler who had defeated many tyrants.

Paternal inheritance and greedy sons (cc. 4-5)

Hraban then turned to the events of 833, in chronological order. Sons who stood to inherit should not expel their father from this inheritance and appropriate it by fraudulent means, before their father had died. This is the gist of the fourth chapter, which neatly sums up the background to the revolt of 833: Lothar's fear that he would be done out of his inheritance, and his effort to secure this prematurely by wresting imperial leadership from his father. Nothing so outrageous could be found in Scripture, Hraban pointed out, and had not Christ himself been a model of filial obedience? Furthermore, the sons of Roman emperors who had become co-emperors had remained subservient to their father until the latter had died⁹. A brief fifth chapter then treats avarice and cupidity, no doubt to criticise Lothar who had claimed his inheritance before his time had come, and then squabbled with his brothers over how to divide it.

7 Walafrid Strabo, *Carmina*, nr. 23, ed. E. Dümmler, Berlin, 1884 (*MGH Poetae latini*, II), pp. 374-6.

8 DHP, c. 3, p. 408.

9 DHP, c. 5, p. 409, ll. 8-16.

False judgements: the wrongs of 833 (cc. 6-8)

In the next three chapters Hraban concentrates on the heart of the matter: the miscarriage of justice committed against the emperor in the autumn of 833¹⁰. First, the verdict against Louis pronounced at the assembly of Compiègne is addressed, in a chapter (6) entitled *About just verdicts to be delivered concerning all matters and persons*. Here we get Deuteronomy on the duties of judges and magistrates (Deut. 16, 18-20), followed by a long series of passages from the Old Testament prophets denouncing those who dispensed justice fraudulently. This was clearly intended to discredit anyone, secular magnates as well as bishops, who had deemed Louis guilty of that long list of accusations summed up in the *Relatio episcoporum* of 833¹¹. Hraban countered the accusations by attacking the soundness of those who had pronounced this verdict. Most of his ammunition against its injustice (*iniquitas iudicii*) was taken from the prophets Zachary, Jeremiah and Isaiah (“Woe to them that make wicked laws: and when they write, write injustice”, Is. 10, 1), while Ezekiel’s false prophets were turned into fraudulent judges¹². A New Testament sequel (c. 7) argued the same point, but with an even tighter focus on recent events. The verdict against Louis had been reckless (*temerarius*) and unjust. Amidst tightly packed biblical citations, Hraban expressed his own view on true justice:

The judge should contemplate the cause and the deed, consult the books of divine precepts in such a manner that it does not occur to him to do anything without the written proof of divine testimony, and without the example of the sainted fathers, who by God’s spirit were taught what they knew to be pleasing to God¹³.

This was meant especially for the bishops who had passed the verdict on Louis; in the next chapter (8, on *How to assess those who pass secular verdicts*) Hraban tackled one of the key accusations against Louis, namely that he had committed “sacrilege and homicide”. This referred primarily to the dire fate of the emperor’s nephew Bernard of Italy, but also to the aftermath of the rebellion of 830, when rebels had been condemned to death *in absentia*, and to allegedly useless military expeditions when many crimes had been committed against the Christian people, above all homicide¹⁴. For his refutation of these grave charges Hraban

10 M. de Jong, *The Penitential State. Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious (814-840)*, Cambridge, 2009; Booker, *Past Convictions*.

11 *Episcoporum de poenitentia, quam Hludowicus imperator professus est, relatio Compendiensis* (833), éd. A. Boretius and V. Krause, *Capitularia regum Francorum*, 2, Hannover, 1897 (*MGH Leges II*), pp. 51-55; cf. de Jong, *Penitential State*, pp. 234-241; 271-79.

12 DHP, c. 6, p. 410, l. 27-30; cf. Ezek. 13, 18-19.

13 DHP, c. 7, p. 411, ll. 6-10.

14 See nrs. 1, 4 and 6 of the list of accusations in the *Relatio*.

turned to patristic authority, notably Augustine's opinion that he who killed because of legitimate orders bore no guilt¹⁵. When Augustine wrote of killing people as *ministerium* performed for higher authority, however, the meaning of this expression was quite different from when Hraban cited this authoritative text. Commenting on those being commanded to slay enemies, even by God, Hraban had the emperor's divinely bestowed authority in mind, the *ministerium* that was the topic of so many ninth-century reflections on the nature of the order of society. Ambrosiaster's commentary on St Paul's Epistles to the Romans, understood by Hraban as an authentic work of Ambrose, was then brought in to reinforce this line of argumentation.

As Hraban argued, the notion of kings or judges who, after having suppressed a rebellion or passed a death sentence, had been condemned by a synodal decree or by the verdict of bishops, was unheard of in all authoritative and sacred texts¹⁶. Citing the council of Antioch, Hraban maintained that it was a ruler's duty to maintain divine law and to punish whoever persisted in throwing the Church into disorder ([...] *qui ecclesiam conturbare [...] persisterit*). In 833 Louis had been accused of having created *perturbatio* rather than peace¹⁷; here, Hraban threw this incrimination back into the rebels' face. Their actions constituted an unwarranted and dangerous break from tradition.

Public confession versus excommunication (cc. 9-10)

After his attack on the quality of the judges and their verdict in 833, Hraban confronted a difficult issue: in the full church of Saint-Médard in Soissons, Louis had publicly confessed his guilt. Should someone who had publicly (*generaliter*) declared to have sinned, but who could not be convicted of having committed a grave crime, be punished by an episcopal excommunication or not? Hraban argued that this was not the case. Instead, he emphasised the redeeming power of a public confession, pointing out that many saintly men – Moses, David, Job, Jeremiah and Daniel – had declared themselves to be sinners in God's presence. For this they had deserved the forgiveness and mercy of the Lord, not his displeasure. David, the king and Psalmist, had acknowledged his sins without losing his kingdom because of it. Having received immediate redemption, he had established himself and his sons on the throne forever¹⁸. Whereas confession would lead to forgiveness, hiding one's sins would lead to damnation. This view, namely that a voluntary confession that had become generally known would merit

15 DHP, c. 8, p. 411, ll. 23 ff., with reference to Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, I, c. 21.

16 DHP, c. 8, p. 412, ll. 14-17.

17 *Relatio*, p. 53, ll. 14, 32.

18 DHP, c. 9, p. 413, ll. 14-18.

forgiveness rather than punishment, was aimed directly against the position of the rebel bishops in 833. They had imposed a “public ecclesiastical penance” by which Louis became a public penitent who could not longer carry arms and rule – the equivalent of an excommunication according to Hraban. For him, and no doubt for Louis himself, an open confession of sin that had become generally known should have redeemed the emperor, leading to immediate forgiveness. Although Louis’ public and voluntary admission of his sins in Attigny (822) was not mentioned, this must have served as an implicit precedent¹⁹.

These were the two contradictory faces of public penance. It could be an atonement by choice or a punishment imposed by ecclesiastical authority, but for the latter to be valid at all, the cooperation of the penitent and his voluntary contrition was required. This left much room for interpretation after the event, of which Hraban made the most. By maintaining that the imperial penance of 833 had not been an excommunication meriting deposition, but an instance of voluntary self-humiliation, he struck at the rebellious bishops’ Achilles heel, for they too had been compelled to emphasise that Louis had “asked” for a penance, and had shed tears of contrition. This point was driven home in a brief tenth chapter about false *iustificatio*, against those who exculpated themselves claiming that they had not sinned: *Justify not thyself before God, for he knoweth the heart: and desire not to appear wise before the king* (Eccli. 7, 5). Such men were like the arrogant and hard-hearted leaders of the people of Israel, who were rebuked by Jeremiah for having accused him, claiming they were without sin, while in fact they had turned away from God. This was not just about the arrogance of those accusing others while claiming to be without sin themselves. *Iustificatio* is also a juridical expression which denotes the process of clearing oneself of charges. This is one of the indications that this treatise was composed at a time when Louis had already regained control. Those who had imposed a public penance on the emperor in the previous autumn were now trying to exculpate themselves as best they could. Such an effort at self-justification would only turn against them and contribute to the already accumulated load of their sins, Hraban warned. Their only means of escaping eternal damnation was a true and genuine penance.

Penance and forgiveness (cc. 11-12)

This short but crucial tenth chapter was the logical point of departure for the two last ones, which are about penance and forgiveness. Ezekiel furnished most of the texts explaining that without any doubt, true penitents would merit God’s mercy. He who did penance would surely live, and none of the sins that he had

19 De Jong, *Penitential State*, pp. 122-131, 242-244.

committed would be held against him (Ezek. 13, 16). Thus, Hraban mustered all the force of biblical authority to salvage penance from the after-effects of its misuse in 833²⁰. There was a real risk that this road to salvation would be discredited, along with the authority of the bishops who had imposed the imperial penance.

Hraban's best ammunition once more came from Ezekiel, the biblical book *par excellence* that supported the duty of bishops and other high-ranking churchmen to correct sinners. A key text (Ezek. 3, 18) had been cited in the *Relatio* of 833 in order to defend the bishop's role in Louis' penance. They had seen themselves as the "watchmen of Israel", a self-perception shared by Hraban. This chapter on true penance leads up to the culmination of the entire treatise: the exhortation to Louis to forgive his enemies in general, and Lothar in particular. After an Old Testament section that argues against revenge and warns against shedding innocent blood, follows dossier of New Testament texts on the duty to forgive one's enemies, starting with St Paul to the Romans and culminating with the Gospels. On the one hand, this sudden prevalence of the New Testament is unsurprising, for here one does find the relevant texts on forgiveness, but on the other hand, it also suggests that this last chapter was meant to be the culmination of the entire treatise. Connoisseurs of biblical commentary, and Louis certainly was one of those, would expect the Epistles and Gospels to rank above all other biblical books cited. At the very least they would understand that an extensive series of citations from the Evangelists meant that a crucial point was about to be made.

And so it was, by means of a pointed comparison between Louis, much maligned by his eldest son, and the biblical father who had welcomed back his Prodigal Son (Lc. 15, 22-25). This eminent biblical example of paternal mercy was used in support of a fervent plea for the restoration of Lothar's position as eldest son and co-emperor:

Receive, therefore, most mild father, your penitent son, so that you become the imitator of that most clement father who, coming towards him, received in a most benevolent fashion the immoderate son who, squandering his inheritance in a foreign land with whores, returned to him at last (*novissime*) by doing penance, and who not only forgave him his sins, but also returned the first robe (*stola prima*) to him, put the ring on his finger, and put shoes on his feet [...] If you are his imitator, you will not doubt perpetually possess the eternal kingdom together with this man²¹.

20 On the importance of penance in Hraban's understanding of justice, see recently W. HARTMANN, *Hraban et le droit*, in Ph. Depreux et al. (eds.), *Raban Maur et son temps*, Turnhout, 2010 (Haut Moyen Âge, 9), pp. 91-104.

21 DHP, c. 12, p. 415, ll. 32-38.

Hraban Maur as mediator (autumn 834)

Hraban intervened when Louis was still in the process of trying to deal with the aftermath of the shocking revolt of 833. By casting Lothar as a Prodigal Son, Hraban can only have referred to the latter's public submission in Blois, towards the end of August 834. Lothar's begging for his father's mercy was a highly contested gesture that was discredited by several authors on Louis' side²². The emperor was not pacified either, for he sent his eldest son off to Italy. But Hraban presented it as a genuine and efficacious penance, of the kind he had just defended at great length, and he urged Louis to reconcile himself with his penitent son²³. Could his treatise have been a prelude means to Lothar's submission in Blois? The narrow time frame makes this unlikely. At the beginning of July of 834, Lothar had still laid waste to Chalon-sur-Saône, taking a terrible revenge on his opponents; Louis then summoned troops to Langres and marched against his son, who only gave in when he was confronted with his father's military might²⁴. This led to Lothar's begging for pardon and mercy in Blois, a gesture that put a stop to the fighting, but which left much business unfinished.

Into the ensuing debate about what was to be done, Hraban inserted himself with a plea for Lothar's full forgiveness and restoration, as is shown by the passage cited above. In the biblical context, the Prodigal Son returned to his father "at last", but *novissime* can also mean "very recently". If this is the case and Hraban had Lothar's submission in Blois in mind, it would mean that he wrote his treatise in the months directly thereafter. The expression *reddere stola prima* is a subtle adaptation of the biblical passage, by which Hraban suggested that the "first robe" was not given but returned. The biblical *stola* had priestly as well as royal connotations (David's robes, I Par. 15, 27); the robes, ring and shoes all suggest some kind of reinvestment with the symbols of high royal or priestly office. I suspect that Hraban hinted at Lothar's full reinstatement as a co-emperor. This would be entirely in keeping with his staunch loyalty to the eldest son after Louis' death in 840²⁵.

The abbot of Fulda must have seen his window of opportunity as a mediator when he heard of Lothar's submission in Blois. He then prepared his twelve chapters so these would be taken into account while Louis decided how to deal with the rebels, including the son he had just sent off to Italy. A reckoning was

22 De Jong, *Penitential State*, pp. 250-1.

23 *Recipe igitur, pater mitissimus, filium tuum poenitentem.*

24 Astronomer, *Vita Hludowici*, c. 53, ed. E. Tremp, Hannover, 1995 (*MGH SRG*, 64), pp. 496-98; *Annales Bertiniani* s.a. 834, pp. 14-15.

25 M. de Jong, *The empire as ecclesia: Hrabanus Maurus and biblical historia for rulers*, in Y. Hen and M. Innes (eds.), *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 191-226.

impending, and it came during the assembly at Metz/Thionville (February-March 835). In the preceding months, however, the fate of the rebels hung in the balance, and discussion about how to resolve the crisis ran rife. Hraban intended to do no less than to fully reconcile father and son, so they both could leave this difficult episode behind. Given his position as an expert on biblical law, and as a prominent abbot who had remained loyal to Louis and Judith throughout, his opinion carried much weight. I hope to have made it clear that his treatise *De honore parentum*, with its combination of sharp legal thinking and biblical argumentation, had far wider implications than just the obedience of sons to fathers. There was more at stake: the vindication of his emperor, a quick resolution of the political crisis, and the continued efficacy of voluntary atonement and forgiveness.

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