

CHAPTER TWO

Asceticism in Late Ancient Christianity

I: Introduction

It is significant that the Society of Biblical Literature Group on Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity, despite prolonged meetings throughout the 1980s, never reached consensus on a definition of asceticism. After scholars in the Group rehearsed the dictionary definition of “ascetic” (“given to strict self-denial, esp. for the sake of spiritual or intellectual discipline”)¹ and noted its derivation from the Greek word for the physical training that an athlete might undertake,² questions of function, motivation, and purpose intruded to disturb the short-lived agreement. Group members disagreed as to whether they should stress deprivation, pain, and the “shrinking of the self” as definitive components of asceticism—or, conversely, the liberation of true “human nature.” Such disagreements signal scholars’ differing intellectual and ideological investments, the evidence they privilege as well as their own social and religious placements.

Participants in the Group finally settled on a definition of “ascetic behavior” (thus retreating from the “thing-in-itself” to its observed practices), namely, “ascetic behavior represents a range of responses to social, political, and physical worlds often perceived as oppressive or unfriendly, or as stumbling blocks to the pursuit of heroic personal or communal goals, lifestyles, and commitments”;³ “abstention or avoidance” lay at its core.⁴ Writing for the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Group member Walter O. Kaelber posits that asceticism, “when used in a religious context, may be defined as a voluntary, sustained, and at least partially systematic program of self-discipline and self-denial in which immediate, sensual or profane

¹ Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, s.v. “ascetic.”

² *Askēsis*: Liddell-Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.

³ Vincent L. Wimbush, “Introduction,”

in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 2.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 10–11.

gratifications are renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state or a more thorough absorption in the sacred.”⁵

Although these latter definitions edge in a social-scientific direction, other approaches abound. A psychoanalytical description holds that asceticism “recognizes and manages drive or impulse, commonly called desire, by harnessing and directing resistance,”⁶ and defines the phenomenon as “any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification.”⁷ Performance theory proffers this: “Asceticism may be defined as performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe.”⁸ Even economic theory is not excluded in the following definition that underscores asceticism’s structure of investment and profit: “Early asceticism is capitalism without money.”⁹

However divergent these definitions, they share an etic, not emic, perspective: they are views of asceticism by “outsiders,” not “insiders.”¹⁰ Christian devotees themselves might rather highlight the renunciant’s desire to commune with God, to imitate the life of Jesus, or to recapture the life of Paradise. Yet whether we opt for “outsider” or “insider” descriptions, it is dubious that the study of early Christian renunciation locates an “essence” of asceticism that holds cross-culturally. Since asceticism has meaning only in relation to other behaviors in a given culture, scholars can best study the varying “structures of compensation,” what ascetics give up and what they get, in various particular historical situations.¹¹

The question of whether or not early Christian asceticism functioned as a radical critique of the larger society has much occupied scholars. On the one hand, it would seem that the ascetic’s rejection of worldly values

⁵ Walter O. Kaelber, “Asceticism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan; London: Collier Macmillan, 1987), I:441.

⁶ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 61.

⁷ Ibid., p. xiii.

⁸ Richard Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995): 797.

⁹ Harpham, *Ascetic Imperative*, p. 30. Harpham also cites the case of Augustine, who passes from being a “word-vendor” (as a public orator; *Confessiones* 4.2.2) to

the more sophisticated “capitalist” economy of textuality: here, for a small investment, he aspires to receive a larger return (p. 112).

¹⁰ For a discussion of the history of the emic/etic distinction, see Paul Jorion, “Emic and Etic: Two Anthropological Ways of Spilling Ink,” *Cambridge Anthropology* 8 (1983): 41–68.

¹¹ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Asceticism and the Compensations of Art,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 359–60; cf. William E. Deal, “Towards a Politics of Asceticism,” in the same volume, pp. 424–29,

implies a condemnation of the social order. Yet historian Philip Rousseau nonetheless suggests that early Christian ascetic ideals were more closely linked to those of “the world” than we may imagine:

the stable society they [ascetics] created for themselves, with its own routine, its own economic endeavours and patterns of authority, became an invitation to others, a call to “conversion,” to a new sense of purpose and direction. The models they espoused appeared, even at the time, “alternative,” if not anarchic. Yet they made their points within the context of a growing public debate—about authority and leadership, about the mechanisms of social formation, about the nature of the very tradition to which Christianity was entitled to appeal. Although their own social system could never have usurped or absorbed all others, and their permanence, therefore, could only be assured on eccentric terms, the very tolerance and admiration of other people prove that they had a central role to play in the definition of Christian society.¹²

In the arena of gender relations, for example, monastic organization came more to conform to the customs of “the world” than to challenge them. In Susanna Elm’s words, “Asceticism began as a method for men and women to transcend, as virgins of God, the limitations of humanity in relation to the divine. It slowly changed into a way for men as men and women as women to symbolize the power of the Church to surpass human weakness.”¹³ Since gender continued as a differentiating factor in the monastery, as in the larger society, the power (in theory) of a radical critique of worldly mores was blunted.

Despite dilemmas of definition, scholars of early Christianity largely agree that ascetic renunciation was one of the important characteristics of the early Christian movement. Yet even before Christian writers appropriated the word *askēsis* to name their ideal,¹⁴ pagan writers had provided a safe passage for the concept from the realm of the physical discipline that an athlete might undertake to the philosopher’s goal of self-restraint,¹⁵ a

arguing for contextualization, a “politics of asceticism.”

¹² Philip Rousseau, “The Structure and Spirit of the Ascetic Life,” unpublished typescript, pp. 2–3.; cf. his forthcoming essay, “Monasticism,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History* XIV.

¹³ Susanna Elm, “*Virgins of God*”: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 384.

¹⁴ For discussions of the development of ascetic/monastic terminology, see E. A. Judge, “The Earliest Use of Monachos for

‘Monk’ (P. Coll. Youtie 77) and the Origins of Monasticism,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 20 (1977): 72–89; Antoine Guillaumont, “Perspectives actuelles sur les origines du monachisme,” in idem, *Aux Origines du monachisme chrétien*, Spiritualité orientale 30 (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1979), pp. 218–20; and Françoise-E. Morard, “Monachos, moine: histoire du terme grec jusqu’au 4^e siècle,” *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 19 (1972): 332–411.

¹⁵ See James E. Goehring, “Asceticism,”

goal that might not demand any more rigor than the moderate “care of the self” so engagingly described by Michel Foucault.¹⁶ Christians claimed, however, that renunciation was not to be undertaken simply for the general well-being of the person, that is, not merely to achieve an appropriate balance between bodily desires and mental equanimity, but for the sake of a closer relation to God. While early Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria acknowledged that other groups had cultivated self-restraint (so his catalog of Indian gymnosophists, Olympic contenders, and “Gnostic” devotees attests), they insisted that all ascetic practitioners who were not “orthodox” Christians were wrongly motivated and that their exertions and deprivations were thus for naught.¹⁷

Early Christian ascetics assumed that humans were transformable: the human person could be improved by ascetic practice. The standard textbook approach to asceticism that dualistically pits soul against body is in urgent need of nuance, for early Christian ascetics usually claimed that soul and body were tightly connected, that the actions and movements of one had a direct effect upon the other. And this effect was not just in the direction of the soul reining in the body: rather, ascetic practitioners believed that attention to the body’s discipline could improve “the self.” Thus, despite the obvious ways in which asceticism can appear as a pessimistic movement in its alleged flight from “the world,” there is a certain optimism at its heart. Men and women are not slaves to the habitual,¹⁸ but can cultivate extraordinary forms of human existence.

Beyond such intellectual and ideological differences in approach to early Christian asceticism, however, scholars of the phenomenon must also grapple with a wealth of new sources (archeological, epigraphic, papyrological, as well as textual) that continue to offer new data and perspectives for consideration. Indeed, scholars’ knowledge of early Christian asceticism has expanded considerably even in the past few decades. Let me first review briefly some of the traditional approaches to early Christian asceticism before noting the new information and theories that call them into question.

in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson, 2nd ed. (New York/London: Garland, 1997), pp. 127–30.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Care of Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1986; French original, 1984). See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. A. I. Davidson, trans. M. Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995; French 2nd ed.,

1987), chap. 7, for a discussion and critique of Foucault’s approach.

¹⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.1.1; 3.1.4; 3.3.24; 3.6.48; 3.6.50; 3.7.60 (GCS 52 [15], 195, 197, 206–7, 218, 219, 223–24).

¹⁸ Robert A. F. Thurman, “Tibetan Buddhist Perspectives on Asceticism,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Wimbush and Valantasis, pp. 108–9.

*II: Changing Approaches to the
Study of Early Christian
Asceticism*

The study of early Christian asceticism in recent years has retreated from the two questions that dominated discussion in decades past, namely, “Where did Christian asceticism come from?” and “Why did ascetic practitioners do what they did?” For convenience, we may label these the “origins” question and the “motivations” question. Both, I think, have proved unproductive for future research.

There is no doubt that by the later fourth century, the ascetic movement within Christianity had won many adherents. Even if we downsize the numbers furnished by such writers as Rufinus of Aquileia and Palladius—numbers suggesting that in the 370s, at the Egyptian monastic center of Nitria alone, three thousand or more ascetics were in residence, and that by the 390s, around five thousand;¹⁹ or Jerome’s (not credible) figure that by the late fourth century, the combined population of the several Pachomian monasteries farther south in the Thebaid stood at around fifty thousand²⁰—it is safe to assume that retreat from “the world” was by that time considerable. Indeed, the very proliferation of Pachomian communities within the first two generations of cenobitic monasticism in Egypt testifies to the ever-increasing population that required these expanded quarters.²¹ By the mid- to late fourth century, ascetic renunciation had also achieved popularity in the West, with virgins and monks attested not just for the Italian peninsula,²² but for Gaul²³ and Spain²⁴ as well. Syrian

¹⁹ Rufinus, *Hist. eccles.* 2.3–4 (PL 21, 511); Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 7 (Butler, p. 25). For a classic discussion of monasticism at Nitria and Scetis, see Hugh E. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wādi ‘N Natrīn*, pt. II, *The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis*, ed. Walter Hauser (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1932).

²⁰ Jerome, *praef.*, Pachomius, *Regula* 7 (PL 23, 68). Palladius reports 7000 at Tabennisi and 1300 at Phbow in his day (*Historia Lausiaca* 32 [Butler, pp. 93, 94]).

²¹ Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966), chap. 2.

²² Italy: Rome (Jerome, e.g., *ep.* 22, 23, 24, 45; Ambrose, *De virginibus* 3.1.1); Bologna (Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.10.60; *Ex-*

hortatio virginitatis 1.1); Milan (Augustine, *Confessiones* 8.6.15). Rita Lizzi links the birth of asceticism in Italy to the resistance to Arianism; see her essay, “Ascetismo e monachesimo nell’Italia tardoantica,” *Codex Aquilarensis* 5 (1991): 61.

²³ Gaul: Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini* (organized asceticism around Tours from the 360s). Honoratus founded his monastery on the island of Lérins probably in the first decade of the fifth century; Cassian, his near Marseilles around 415. See Rousseau, “The Structure,” typescript, pp. 18–20. Robert Markus emphasizes the tendency of the Gallic church to recruit its bishops from monasteries: *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 181.

²⁴ Spain: for a summary of the early evidence, see Adalbert de Vogüé, *Histoire lit-*

asceticism was also in full flower, as will be detailed below. In the same period, Palestine became a popular site for both transitory pilgrims²⁵ and more permanent ascetic practitioners.²⁶ The Palestinian monastery at Calamôn may have been founded at the turn to the fourth century, and others soon followed;²⁷ by the early Byzantine period, more than sixty monasteries existed in the Judean desert.²⁸ In Asia Minor, forms of ascetic practice associated with Eustathius of Sebaste preceded the Cappadocian Fathers' endorsement of monasticism in the second half of the fourth century.²⁹ Where and how did this movement arise, earlier generations of scholars asked? Their answers testify both to the divergent evidence to which they appealed and to their own ideological and religious presuppositions.

Thus Protestants of an older generation, more comfortable with Martin Luther's blessings on marriage and family than with the rigorous renunciations of the desert fathers, tended to downplay the very early manifestations of asceticism within Christianity, and to cast the blame for these developments on the dualism supposedly attendant upon the "Hellenization" of Christianity.³⁰ In this view, asceticism must have sprung from a

téraire du mouvement monastique dans l'antiquité. Première partie: Le Monachisme latin de la mort d'Antoine à la fin du séjour à Rome (356–85) (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1991), pp. 190–99, 206–10; Virginia Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 24 (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1995), esp. pp. 28–29, 37–38, 40–42, 82–84, 111–14. For a discussion of the anti-ascetic *Acta* of the Council of Saragossa in 380, see Virginia Burrus, "Ascesis, Authority, and Text: The Acts of the Council of Saragossa," *Semeia* 58 (1992): 95–108.

²⁵ Especially the pilgrimage of Egeria: see her *Peregrinatio (Itinerarium)* (PLS 1, 1047–92); cf. Jerome, *ep.* 108.8–13, on Paula's pilgrimage through Palestine. See also John Binns, *Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ: The Monasteries of Palestine 314–631* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), pp. 91, 95.

²⁶ Such as Jerome, Paula, Rufinus, Melania the Elder, and Melania the Younger.

²⁷ Binns, *Ascetics*, p. 155; cf. p. 245.

²⁸ Yizhar Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven, Conn./London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. xv; also discussed in

Binns, *Ascetics*, p. 81. For books and libraries in the Palestinian monasteries, see Binns, *Ascetics*, pp. 57ff., 61, 65, 69, 70, 141–42.

²⁹ See especially Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1994), chap. 7; Jean Gribomont, "Eustathe de Sébaste," in idem, *Saint Basile: Evangile et église. Mélanges* (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1984), I:95–106; idem, "Le Monachisme au IV^e siècle en Asie Mineure: De Gangres au Messalianisme," in idem, *Saint Basile*, I:26–41. Susanna Elm, "Virgins," p. 199, posits that the issue of the communal life of male and female ascetics, and the public role of women, were the decisive issues separating "orthodox" and "heretical" asceticism.

³⁰ Adolph von Harnack's famous thesis: see his *Outlines of the History of Dogma*, trans. E. K. Mitchell (Boston: Beacon, 1957; German original, 1889), pp. 81, 133, 194–95. Such argumentation parallels that of several early church fathers (e.g., Hippolytus) who "blame" the importation of Greek philosophy into Christianity for the development of "heresy." More attention is given to early ascetic currents in Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Phila-

later, “Greek” contribution to Christianity, since “we all know” that ancient Jews were not ascetic. Here, the view that asceticism may have been indigenous to the early Christian movement was not seriously countenanced.

It is puzzling that Protestants, so given to the study of the Bible, overlooked the ascetic dimensions of the New Testament itself. Already in 1892, Johannes Weiss in *The Proclamation of Jesus on the Kingdom of God* had trenchantly scored the ascetic dimension of the Synoptic Gospels in his critique of nineteenth-century Biblical interpretation. In the eschatological context of early Christianity, Weiss noted, a negative ideal of renunciation was championed for those who would follow Jesus. Riches were not to be used, but renounced, a view unwelcome to German Liberalism’s notions of social improvement. As for Protestantism’s exaltation of secular vocation as a manifestation of religious devotion, Weiss argued that Jesus and the first disciples *abandoned* their secular vocations. Nor is family life an evangelical value: the Gospel injunction to hate one’s family for the sake of following Jesus, Weiss claimed, had been consistently ignored or diluted by Protestant interpreters.³¹ Likewise, the tendency to interpret such passages as Paul’s advice on celibacy and marriage in I Corinthians 7 as an aberration spurred by particular and temporary historical circumstances has been noticeable in Protestant circles.³²

Rather than assign ascetic currents to the earliest days of Christianity, interpreters of the older school often cited the infusion of a dualistic Greco-Roman philosophy into the “purity” of Christian teaching to account for asceticism’s rise: Platonic dualism was the leading culprit. Thus a “foreign” group of philosophers could be blamed for infesting Christianity with alien ideas. This view needs considerable tempering. While there is no doubt that within the movements we now label Middle Platonism and Neo-Platonism, body stood lower on the ontological scale than did soul or spirit, it was not a later Greek philosophy that first introduced ascetic notions into an otherwise world-affirming primitive Christianity. And contrary to popular opinion, it was not only philosophers who counseled bodily restraint to a populace wallowing in licentiousness—again, a textbook picture of the Roman world into which Christianity came. Rather, ideals of temperance and bodily discipline in matters of sex, diet, and exercise were often expressed throughout a spectrum of authors and texts, especially by medical writers.³³ Among the upper levels of society,

delphia: Fortress, 1978; German original, 1977), chap. 2.

³¹ Johannes Weiss, *The Proclamation of Jesus on the Kingdom of God*, ed. and trans. R. H. Hiers and D. L. Holland (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; German original,

1892), pp. 105–12.

³² For more recent assessments of the ascetic dimensions of I Cor. 7, see below, pp. 263, 264, 299, 321.

³³ Recent commentators cite works of (e.g.) Galen, Rufus of Ephesus, Caelius Au-

from which strata these authors largely came, “moderation” was a common watchword. Ascetic practitioners within Christianity may have engaged in more extreme renunciations than their pagan counterparts, but both groups agreed that the self-regulation of the body is a desideratum for all “rational” people.

Likewise, the argument that earliest Christianity’s derivation from Judaism precluded any originary ascetic impulses has come under increasing scrutiny. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and subsequent excavations at Qumran, scholars were forced to register the ascetic way of life that marked this form of Judaism. Despite the presence of a few female skeletons in the cemetery at Qumran,³⁴ the Qumran community appears to have been composed of male celibates.³⁵ Moreover, scholars such as Daniel Boyarin in his book *Carnal Israel* have given new prominence to such early Jewish texts as “The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs,” a treatise that is equally ambivalent about sexual relations as the Hellenistic Jewish author Philo of Alexandria and as early Christian ascetic texts. Boyarin argues that early Judaism moved away from the more skittish attitudes toward sex characteristic of documents written close to the time of the New Testament’s composition, toward a stronger affirmation of body and marriage by the time that the Babylonian Talmud was compiled several centuries later.³⁶ If these suggestive arguments can be substantiated,

relianus, Celsus, and Soranus. For a popular overview of philosophers’ and physicians’ advice on bodily regulation in the imperial period, see Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, pt. 4.

³⁴ Roland de Vaux, *Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 47.

³⁵ For a more recent qualification of the Qumran requirement of celibacy, see Joseph M. Baumgarten, “The Qumran-Essene Restraints on Marriage,” in *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls (Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha)*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Suppl. 2, JSOT/ASOR Monograph 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), pp. 13–25. The “maleness” of the Qumran community had much earlier been noted by the ancient literary sources pertaining to the Essenes.

³⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, The New Historicism 25 (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), chap. 2; cf.

Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 159. Boyarin’s argument is somewhat hindered by the widespread recognition that “The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs” contains Christian interpolations. See also Adalbert G. Hamman, “Les Origines du monachisme chrétien au cours de deux premiers siècles,” in *Homo Spiritualis: Festgabe für Luc Verheijen*, ed. Cornelius Mayer and Karl Heinz Chelius (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1987), pp. 322–23, on ascetic currents in early Judaism. Will Deming argues that “The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs” is pro-marriage, although anti-*porneia*; see his *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of I Corinthians 7* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 17–18. Deming nonetheless concedes that “The Testament of Naphtali” 2.9–10 warns that marital sex and prayer may be incompatible (pp. 123–26).

it is questionable whether scholars of early Christianity should claim that ascetic currents must have been a product of later Hellenization, not indigenous to the early Jewish-Christian movement.³⁷ Given considerations such as these, scholars of early Christian asceticism now deem it misguided to try to locate some particular moment after the late second century when Christianity took an ascetic turn. Rather, they prefer to trace parallel ascetic developments within various religious and philosophical groups of later antiquity.

The “motivations question” has likewise been restyled. A half-century ago, there were several dominant hypotheses as to why early Christians adopted asceticism: the question itself presupposes that ascetic strains entered the religion only at a later point of its development. In two of these motivational explanations, Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and the faster pace of Christianization thereafter are privileged moments. One explanation held that with the increased rapidity of conversion, more ardent devotees sought a way of life that would distinguish them from the ordinary (and ever-swelling) ranks of lukewarm Christians, *hoi polloi* in the hierarchy of renunciatory enthusiasts. To be sure, many Christian texts suggest that by virtue of their renunciations, ascetics transcend the ranks of the commonplace: “Learn from me a holy arrogance,” Jerome advises the teen-aged Eustochium, who had vowed herself to perpetual virginity, “if you are better than they.”³⁸ Yet it must be noted that ascetic renunciants do not themselves appeal to such an explanation. The creation of “difference,” of “distinction,” I would argue, was surely a *function* of early Christian asceticism, but it fails to provide a documentable *motivation* for renunciation.³⁹ The *topos* of ascetic superiority may offer better access to the psyches of the framers of such language than to those of their ascetic subjects. Likewise, the functions that our contemporaries sometimes assign to ascetic renunciation after the fact perhaps differ from the motivations expressed by early Christian ascetic practitioners and their biographers.

A second explanation of ascetic motivation that privileges Constantine suggests that with the cessation of the Roman persecutions, a new means

³⁷ Gilles Quispel credits Erik Peterson and his students as pioneering this opinion: see Quispel, “The Study of Encratism: A Historical Survey,” in *La Tradizione dell’encrateia: Motivazione ontologiche e protologiche*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Roma: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1985), pp. 42–47, 49. Also see Steven D. Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 1:253–88; and Marcel Simon, “L’Ascétisme dans les sectes juives,” in *La Tra-*

dizione, ed. Bianchi, pp. 393–426.

³⁸ Jerome, *ep.* 22.16 (CSEL 54, 163).

³⁹ The creation of “distinction” by means of religious practices is a theme emphasized by Pierre Bourdieu (borrowing from Durkheim); see chap. 8 below for discussion. Giving purely theological-philosophical “motivations” is Carlo Tibiletti, “Motivazioni dell’ascetismo in alcuni autori cristiani,” *Atti della Accademia delle Scienze di Torino* 106 (1972): 489–537.

was sought by Christians to display their religious commitment: since physical martyrdom was no longer an option after Constantine's conversion, asceticism, considered a form of spiritual martyrdom, might prove an adequate substitute. As expounded by scholars such as Edward Malone in *The Monk and the Martyr*,⁴⁰ from the fourth century onward, those Christians aiming for "perfection" through renunciation were seen as seeking a form of spiritual martyrdom. Again, we must ask to what extent this supposed motivation stands largely as a rhetorical *topos*: although writers of the fourth and fifth centuries often inform renunciants that a glory like that of the martyrs awaits them in heaven, the claim is not emphasized by ascetic practitioners of themselves.

Another motivational explanation that earlier enjoyed some currency privileged the development of clerical hierarchy. With the rapid development of church office, especially in the fourth century, Christian worship became increasingly formalized and subjected to priestly authority; on this view, the wish to escape liturgical formality and hierarchical control for a freer style of Christian life accounts for the origins of asceticism. (This explanation often cites the advice of the desert fathers to "flee women and bishops.")⁴¹ Yet this explanation too has its problems. We know, for example, that even desert hermits congregated for worship led by ordained priests and bishops, and hence do not appear anticlerical in principle. Moreover, a wider-ranging freedom may not have attended the ascetic life: does not the ascetic's submission to the control of an elder or an abbot seem at least as rigorous as the married Christian's submission to a bishop? Here it is worth noting that all the above explanations privilege the fourth century as the moment of monastic origins. I would argue to the contrary that although monasticism undoubtedly flourished in this era, we cannot posit the fourth century as the founding moment of Christian asceticism.

Still another motivational explanation also privileges the period of late antiquity, but takes its cue from the repressiveness of late Roman imperial bureaucracy that increasingly foisted the burden for the collection of taxes and the upkeep of civic structures on the curial class of towns and cities. On this view, the retreat (*anachōrēsis*) of the ascetic is linked to the flight of midlevel officials from towns and cities to escape the burdens of civic life. Evidence such as the following is cited in support of such a view: a law of Valentinian I and Valens dated to 370 C.E. instructs the Count of the Orient to "rout out" those who have abandoned their public duties and retreated to "solitary and secret places," joining up with *monazontes*.

⁴⁰ Edward Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr: The Monk as the Successor of the Martyr*, Studies in Christian Antiquity 12 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University

Press, 1950).

⁴¹ John Cassian, *Institutiones* 11.18 (SC 109, 444).

Although such men act “under the pretext of religion,” they in truth are “devotees of idleness.” Those who refuse to return to their municipal duties, the law threatens, will lose their right to family property.⁴² Does not such evidence suggest that monastic flight to the desert was an appropriate response for the most burdened classes? Here, the crumbling of governmental structures is seen as contributing to the attractiveness of Christian asceticism.

As a general explanation, however, this approach also fails: not only was asceticism a much earlier phenomenon within Christianity, but recent archeological studies suggest that fourth-century Roman towns and cities had not so precipitously declined by midcentury as earlier scholars had imagined,⁴³ an assumption on which this explanation depends. Moreover, this explanation would require that the curial class be identified as a prime constituency among the early monks. This claim, however, would be difficult to sustain, since the sources indicate a wide variety of social backgrounds among the early desert fathers.⁴⁴ Writers such as Augustine worry that the lower classes might flock to monasteries as a way to improve their social status,⁴⁵ a point that might not have troubled him if a sizable number of monks were derived from the decuriae. Although several laws of the period attempt to prevent town councillors from abandoning their civic duties,⁴⁶ as noted above, there is little direct evidence that many of these “political escapees” embraced the ascetic life of Christian renunciants.⁴⁷

One further possible motivational explanation regarding monasticism’s popularity pertains to women, who are better documented in the sources pertaining to asceticism than in much other early Christian literature. Can

⁴² *Codex Theodosianus* 12.1.63. Contrast this law with that of Theodosius I in 390: monks are to be driven from the cities to desert places; they are to be “solitary” (*Codex Theodosianus* 16.3.1). Church councils such as that held at Saragossa in 380 also strike at clerics who out of “presumptuous vanity” abandon their posts to become monks (canon 6).

⁴³ See Claude Lepelley, *Les Cités de l’Afrique romaine au Bas Empire* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1979), I, esp. Introduction and chap. 1. Bryan Ward-Perkins, *From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Urban Public Building in Northern and Central Italy A.D. 300–850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), documents the shift from private patronage to imperial and Christian sponsorship of building projects.

⁴⁴ On the wealthier end, Isidore (Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 1); Amoun (*Historia monachorum* 22.1); Arsenius (*Apophthegmata patrum* [Arsenius 42]); on the humble end, Paul the Simple (Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 22); John of Lycopolis (Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 35); Sisinnius (Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 49).

⁴⁵ Augustine, *De opere monachorum* 22.25 (CSEL 41, 570–71).

⁴⁶ E.g., *Codex Theodosianus* 12.1.59; 12.1.62–64; 12.1.76; 12.1.82; 12.1.86–87.

⁴⁷ The most notable “political escapee,” Arsenius, of senatorial rank, earlier held the post of tutor to the sons of Theodosius I, but he was of far higher social status than the curial-class officials who are the subjects of the above legislation; see *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Alphabetical), Arsenius.

we not posit that asceticism proved particularly attractive to Christian women insofar as it offered an alternative lifestyle to marriage and childbearing—and hence a motivation to renounce? A variety of evidence indeed suggests many women's desire for sexual renunciation. For example, ascetic sentiment dominates in fictional works that highlight women, such as the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles; the alleged founder of communal monasticism, Pachomius, had a monastery built for his sister and other women renunciants;⁴⁸ and late-fourth- and fifth-century eyewitness reports stress the large number of women who adopted ascetic living in the Egyptian desert.⁴⁹

Here again the problem is one of assigning causation: although some women derived advantage from undertaking the ascetic life, as I have detailed in a number of my own writings, it is less clear that women were *motivated* to renounce for the sake of benefits such as increased opportunities for travel (pilgrimage), for study and reflection, for the cultivation of friendships with scholarly and spiritually minded men, for monastic leadership, and for the receipt of honor through the exercise of patronage. If we accept the church fathers' rhetoric, we would also believe that women ascetics gained greater freedom from the tyranny of husbands and in-laws, from anxieties over the health and welfare of children, from concerns for the directing of extensive households which were serviced by dozens, even hundreds, of slaves. Whether the women themselves interpreted their celibacy as freedom, as did their male biographers, we have no sure way to know.⁵⁰ Yet we may note that ascetic women did not, any more than did ascetic men, explicitly appeal to such explanations: when we occasionally hear the words placed upon their lips by their biographers, devotion to God and repentance for sins are the reasons given for their renunciations.

Thus all attempts to find a sure moment of origin for early Christian asceticism or to locate the motivations of early ascetics seem problematic. There is now strong agreement that ascetic impulses are present in the

⁴⁸ *Vita Pachomii* (Bo) 27 (CSCO 89 = Scriptores Coptici 7, 26–27); cf. Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 33 (Butler, pp. 96–97). The chapter in the first Greek *Vita* of Pachomius that deals with the building of the women's monastery (chap. 32) was not contained in good condition in the manuscript on which Halkin based his text in SubsHag 19 but is found in Ms. 1015 from the National Library in Athens.

⁴⁹ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 33 (Butler, p. 96); (Anonymous), *Historia monachorum* 5 (PL 21, 409); Marcellinus and

Faustinus, *De confessione verae fidei* 99, cf. 93 (CCL 69, 384, 382).

⁵⁰ See Elizabeth A. Clark, "Friendship Between the Sexes: Classical Theory and Christian Practice," in idem, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1979), esp. pp. 48–56; idem, "Devil's Gateway and Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World," in idem, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen, 1986), esp. pp. 42, 46–48.

earliest extant Christian writings (Paul's letters) and that the Synoptic Gospels are replete with verses that Christians developed in a highly ascetic direction, for example, verses on the damnation that awaited a man who looked lustfully at a woman (Matt. 5:28) and the praise for those who became "eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. 19:12). Modern Biblical criticism (not available, of course, to patristic authors), which established that the Pastoral Epistles were not written by Paul himself, enables a recognition of anti-ascetic as well as ascetic strands in the New Testament itself. The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles are now seen as developing the pro-ascetic trajectory of New Testament teaching: to read the Apocryphal Acts over against the anti-ascetic Pastoral Epistles is one enlightening exercise for which recent scholarship has provided considerable assistance.⁵¹

Ascetic teaching is likewise present in the writings of second-century authors such as Justin Martyr and Athenagoras, who defend Christianity's respectability by appealing to the loftiness of its sexual ethics. These authors claim that Christianity stands against second marriage, that many Christians "in every nation" have lived from childhood to old age in sexual abstinence, and that Christians cannot be blamed for child exposure, since for them the *only* purpose of marriage is the raising of children.⁵² By the turn to the third century, Tertullian emerges as a strong critic of second marriage, which he scorns as an unnecessary decline into sexual indulgence.⁵³ Tertullian, in Peter Brown's phrase, was the first real spokesman for educated Christians "of the belief that abstinence from sex was the most effective technique with which to achieve clarity of soul."⁵⁴

The Apocryphal Acts, probably composed largely in the third century (although in all likelihood based on earlier oral traditions), present the message of apostolic Christianity as one of asceticism, pure and simple. Thus the anonymous author of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (a text that probably dates to the second century) can "rewrite" the Gospels' Beatitudes to stress the centrality of asceticism in Christian teaching:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
 Blessed are those who keep the flesh pure, for they shall become the temple
 of God.
 Blessed are those who remain continent, for to them shall God speak.

⁵¹ Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), esp. chap. 3.

⁵² Justin Martyr, *Apologia I*, 15, 29 (PG 6, 349); Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 33 (PG 6, 965, 968).

⁵³ See Tertullian, *De monogamia* (CCL 2, 1229–53).

⁵⁴ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 78.

Blessed are those who have wives as if they had them not, for they shall inherit God.

Blessed are the bodies of virgins, for they shall be well-pleasing to God and shall not lose the reward of their purity.⁵⁵

Thus diverse evidence suggests that Christianity in the first through the third centuries—not just in the fourth—contained many testimonies to asceticism's popularity. In fact, early Christian writers warn against overly ascetic interpretations of Christianity, interpretations that the Fathers labeled "heretical" and from which they sought to distance themselves.

Rather than stress either origins or motivations, contemporary scholars of asceticism are more apt to explore the rhetoric of ascetic argumentation, the shifts in ascetic practice within particular geographical areas, the material supports that undergirded the ascetic lifestyle, and the forms of power (secular and political, as well as spiritual) that the ascetic practitioner was able to wield.

III: The Geographic Specificity of Early Christian Asceticism

Given such evidence of asceticism's popularity even in the earliest Christian centuries, scholars now concentrate on exploring its development in geographically specific areas, especially in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine.

Antony, the alleged founder of Egyptian asceticism, retreated to the desert in about 270.⁵⁶ Although Antony is customarily called the first desert ascetic, his *Vita* itself calls this claim into question by its report that in a neighboring village dwelt an old man who had devoted himself to the solitary's life from youth up, and that there were already "men of zeal" practicing renunciation whom Antony copied.⁵⁷ Jerome also maintains that Antony, in his old age, sought out Paul the Hermit who had preceded him in solitary ascetic living (Paul being 113 years old when Antony jour-

⁵⁵ *Acta Pauli et Theclae* 5–6 (Lipsius/Bonnet I:238–40). For a discussion of the asceticism of the Apocryphal Acts, see Yves Tissot, "Enkratisme et Actes Apocryphes," in *Les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres: Christianisme et monde païen*, ed. François Bovon et al., Publications de la Faculté de Théologie de l'Université de Genève 4 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981), pp. 109–19.

⁵⁶ Armand Veilleux, "The Origins of Egyptian Monasticism," in *The Continuing*

Quest for God: Monastic Spirituality in Tradition and Transition, ed. William Skudlarek (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1982), p. 47. For a brief overview that sets Egyptian monasticism in a larger social and economic setting, see Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 293–303.

⁵⁷ Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 3–4 (PG 26, 844–45).

neyed across the desert to find him)—although Jerome's tale probably constitutes not "history," but reputational demotion.⁵⁸ By the 320s and 330s, the first inhabitants of rigorous ascetic groups at Nitria, Scetis, and "the Cells" are in place.⁵⁹ Pachomius' organization of communal monasticism is usually dated to the 320s,⁶⁰ and Palladius reports that by the end of the century the Pachomian monasteries boasted about seven thousand inhabitants.⁶¹ So rapidly did monasticism's popularity develop that, in Athanasius' famous phrase, "the desert was made a city by monks, whose citizenship was that of heaven."⁶²

Of interest to contemporary scholars are hints that early Egyptian asceticism may have been in a more tenuous state of "orthodoxy" than its later commentators found tolerable. Take the case of Antony. Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh have argued persuasively in their book *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* that Antony's biographer Athanasius "polished up" Antony's image so that he emerged as a resolutely orthodox (by mid-fourth-century standards) fighter of Arian heretics.⁶³ Moreover, Samuel Rubenson's study of the letters of Antony, in which he argues convincingly for their authenticity (heretofore usually denied), shows an Antony far more at home with Origen's theology, soon to become suspect, than does Athanasius' representation of him in the *Life*.⁶⁴

But Antony is not the only unsettling flashpoint regarding the "orthodoxy" of early Egyptian monasticism. Despite the church fathers' attempts to paint many so-called Gnostics as licentious libertines, the bulk of the evidence from the Nag Hammadi finds at midcentury suggests that much of early Egyptian Christianity that is customarily labeled "Gnostic" was resolutely ascetic, a point early stressed by Henry Chadwick in his memorable essay, "The Domestication of Gnosis."⁶⁵ Indeed, for some of

⁵⁸ Jerome, *Vita Pauli* 1, 7 (PL 23, 17–18, 22): Jerome appears to attempt the ouster of Antony from pride-of-place.

⁵⁹ Veilleux, "Origins," pp. 47–48; Chitty, *Desert*, pp. 11–13, 29–30.

⁶⁰ Chitty, *Desert*, pp. 10–11.

⁶¹ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 32 (Butler, p. 93).

⁶² Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 14 (PG 26, 865).

⁶³ Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), chap. 4. For earlier important discussions of the literarily constructed nature of the *Life of Antony*, see Richard Reitzenstein, "Des Athanasius Werk über das Leben des Antonius," *Sitzungsberichte*, Heidelberger Akademie des

Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse 5 (1914): 3–68; Karl Holl, "Die Schriftstellerische Form des griechischen Heiligenlebens," *Neue Jahrbücher für das Klassische Altertum* 29 (1912): 406–27.

⁶⁴ Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1990), esp. chap. 4.

⁶⁵ Henry Chadwick, "The Domestication of Gnosis," in *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 1:3–16. Also see Robert McL. Wilson, "Alimentary and Sexual Encratism in the Nag Hammadi Tractates," in *La Tradizione*, ed. Bianchi, p. 319. Michael A. Williams argues that the older division of "Gnostics" into "ascetics" and "libertines"

the anonymous authors of the Nag Hammadi documents, Catholic Christianity's deficient embrace of ascetic practice was a point to be faulted. Some writers deemed "Gnostic" argued that if Catholics had received a genuine "baptism of truth," they would know that all things of the world must be renounced, including "the dominion of sexual procreation."⁶⁶ To what extent, scholars ask, did Catholic renunciation resemble Gnostic asceticism?

But more than the similar ascetic content of Gnostic and Catholic texts is at issue here: there is also the question of the actual sharing of documents. Once it was posited that among the cartonnage filling for the bindings of the Nag Hammadi codices were letters and rescripts possibly coming from nearby Pachomian monasteries,⁶⁷ a scholarly furor erupted over the relationship between the allegedly "orthodox" monasticism and the supposedly "heretical" Nag Hammadi documents. Frederik Wisse has argued that the Nag Hammadi texts probably did not look so "heretical" to the Pachomian monks, whose constituency may have been partly composed of former "Gnostics" retreating from their earlier allegiance. Equally important, Wisse added, it is "highly improbable" that either anchoritic or cenobitic monasticism arose only with "orthodox" Christianity.⁶⁸ Scholars were left with the delicate question, to what extent was "orthodox" Christian asceticism in Egypt influenced by, or parallel to, "Gnostic" asceticism—in many of its forms, also Christian?⁶⁹

Similarly, the question of possible Manichean influences on the development of Christian asceticism in Egypt has been raised. Manicheism ap-

needs serious revision: see *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 140.

⁶⁶ *Testimonium Veritatis* (NHC 9.3) 69, 30 (Nag Hammadi Studies 15:186, 124); cf. Klaus Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), esp. pp. 113, 116–17.

⁶⁷ John W. B. Barns, "Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Covers of the Nag Hammadi Codices: A Preliminary Report," in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts: In Honour of Pabhor Labib*, ed. Martin Krause (Leiden: Brill, 1975), pp. 9–18; Frederik Wisse, "Gnosticism and Early Monasticism in Egypt," in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, ed. Barbara Aland (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), p. 433. For a critique of Barns' position that rejects the

hypothesis that the cartonnage material is Pachomian, see Clemons Scholten, "Die Nag-Hammadi-Texte als Buchbesitz der Pachomianer," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 31 (1988): 144–72.

⁶⁸ Wisse, "Gnosticism and Early Monasticism," pp. 433, 436, 440; the scribal colophons and decorations also suggest that the copyists did not think that the works were heretical (p. 435). Wisse argues against Torgny Säve-Söderbergh ("Holy Scriptures or Apologetic Documentations?: The 'Sitz im Leben' of the Nag Hammadi Library," in *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi*, ed. Jacques-E. Ménard [Leiden: Brill, 1975], p. 7), who holds that the Nag Hammadi documents were present in orthodox libraries to assist the monks in refuting the Gnostic heretics.

⁶⁹ See Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*; Williams and other scholars now

pears to have had its origin in a Jewish-Christian baptismal sect, the Elchasaïtes,⁷⁰ an assumption that renders similarities between Manichean practice and Christian practice more understandable than was imagined before the discovery of the Cologne Mani Codex that describes Mani's "founding" of a new religion.

The process by which Manicheanism spread westward has received considerable attention in the past few decades.⁷¹ It is now hypothesized that Manicheanism entered Egypt in the mid-third century, perhaps introduced by communities of merchants who were followed by Manichean missionaries.⁷² Already by about 300 C.E., two Egyptian documents warn against Manicheanism, one from a Christian bishop who feared that Catholics might adopt the highly ascetic interpretation of I Corinthians 7 that Manicheans in his area were teaching.⁷³ Another Manichean document speaks of the Manichean mission in mid-third-century Egypt and mentions "collective houses" in which the Manichean "elect" lived. Were these like cloisters, scholars ask?⁷⁴ We are here reminded that the third quarter

question whether the label "Gnostic" is either accurate or useful.

⁷⁰ Albert Henrichs, "The Cologne Mani Codex Reconsidered," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 83 (1979): 357–59, 366–67; also Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 28–37; doubted by J. Kevin Coyle, "The Cologne Mani Codex and Mani's Christian Connections," *Eglise et Théologie* 10 (1979): 179–93.

⁷¹ Lieu, *Manichaeism*, pp. 67–68, 75, 81, 92; idem, "Some Themes in Later Roman Anti-Manichean Polemics: I," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester* 68 (1986): 434–35; Han Drijvers, "Facts and Problems in Early Syriac-Speaking Christianity," *The Second Century* 2 (1982): 170; Michel Tardieu, "Les Manichéens en Egypte," *Bulletin de la Société française d'Égyptologie* 94 (1982): 8–10. On Mani's letter to Edessa, see Reinhold Merkelbach, "Manichaica (1–3)," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 56 (1984): 45–48. Also see G. A. M. Rouwhorst, "Das Manichäische Bemaifest und das Passaifest der Syrischen Christen," *Vigiliae Christianae* 35 (1981): 397–411; Henrichs, "The Cologne Mani Codex," pp. 352–53.

⁷² G. Stroumsa, "Monachisme et Marranisme chez les Manichéens d'Égypte,"

Numen 29 (1982): 186, probably on the basis of the notice in the *Acta Archelai* that Scythianos, a Saracen merchant, carried Manicheanism to Egypt, married an Egyptian, and settled there; his disciple wrote books. See the fragments discussed in Peter Brown, "The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies* 59 (1969): 92–103.

⁷³ Papyrus Rylands 469, ed. in Alfred Adam, *Texte zum Manichäismus*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969), p. 175. See Ludwig Koenen, "Manichäische Mission und Klöster in Ägypten," in *Das Römisch-Byzantinische Ägypten (Akten des internationalen Symposions 26.–30. September 1978, Trier)*, ed. Günter Grimm et al. (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1983), p. 94; Tardieu, "Les Manichéens," p. 10.

⁷⁴ Stroumsa, "Monachisme," p. 188; Koenen, "Manichäische Mission," p. 98, uses the word "cloister." The text is edited by F. C. Andreas and W. Henning in *Mitteliranische Manichaica aus Chinesisch-Turkestan II* (Berlin: Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1933), pp. 301–2. The question of its reliability regarding date and place is raised by Samuel N. C. Lieu, "Precept and Practice

of the third century was supposedly the very time of Antony's retreat to the desert—and well before the development of Pachomian communal monasticism. Catholic monastic sources from or reporting on Egypt describe Catholic monks' encounters with Manicheans, but always distance their heroes from Manichean teachings.⁷⁵ It thus appears likely that Manichean and Christian asceticism developed almost concurrently in Egypt. Since the significance of Manichean asceticism for early Catholic asceticism has only recently begun to be explored, there is always the danger of overinterpretation on the basis of a few fragmentary remains; nonetheless the evidence is intriguing.

Despite the importance of Egypt as an early venue of Christian asceticism, we should be cautious not to adopt the "diffusionist" view that Egypt was the center from which all early Christian asceticism emerged; in other areas, such as Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Syria, asceticism probably developed independently of Egypt.⁷⁶ The attempt to link all Christian asceticism to a founding moment with Antony in Egypt seems aligned with the misplaced search for origins: a "big bang" theory of monastic origins," in James Goehring's evocative phrase.⁷⁷

Syria is a second area of the early Christian world that has received considerable recent study as a center for asceticism's development. So strongly was ascetic practice rooted in early Syriac Christianity that over four decades ago the prominent scholar of Syrian asceticism, Arthur Vööbus, argued that celibacy was a virtual requirement for baptism in the early Syrian church.⁷⁸ This claim has since been nuanced,⁷⁹ but even so, there is good evidence from early Syriac texts that renunciation was a prominent feature of Christianity in that area: so we would gather from the second-century *Gospel of Thomas* and the third-century *Acts of Judas Thomas*, which proclaim that ascetic engagement is a norm for all Christians.⁸⁰ Also distinctive to Syria are the views and writings of the ascetic leader Tatian, who

in Manichaean Monasticism," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 32 (1981): 155–56.

⁷⁵ Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 68 (PG 26, 940–41) cf. Stroumsa, "Monachisme," p. 185; (Anonymous), *Historia Monachorum* 10.30–32 (Festugière, pp. 87–88); Philostorgius, *Hist. eccles.* 3.15 (GCS 21, 46–47).

⁷⁶ See Rousseau, "Structure," typescript, p. 5; also see Antoine Guillaumont, "Perspectives actuelles," pp. 217–18.

⁷⁷ James E. Goehring, "The Origins of Monasticism," in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), p. 235.

⁷⁸ Arthur Vööbus, *Celibacy, A Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1951), esp. chap. 2.

⁷⁹ As explained by Syriac scholar Sidney Griffith, the evidence on which Vööbus drew (e.g., Aphraat, *Hom.* 7) dates only to the fourth and fifth centuries (personal communication).

⁸⁰ The third-century *Acts of Judas Thomas* make celibacy a requirement for baptism: see Vööbus, *Celibacy*, pp. 26–29, citing Act 13. Cf. *Gospel of Thomas* 75 (it is solitaries who will enter the bridal chamber).

deemed marriage to be *porneia* (fornication), and whose harmony of the Gospels, the *Diatesseron*, provided an ascetic rendition of the Gospel texts (e.g., references to Joseph as Mary's husband are omitted, as is mention of wine as the beverage preferred in the Kingdom of Heaven).⁸¹ Special praise was reserved in early Syriac Christianity for the *ihidaya*, the "single ones," who within the structures of the church committed themselves to celibacy and to "singleness of heart" in imitation of the "singly-begotten one," Jesus.⁸² From the fifth century on, there are reports of more extreme forms of asceticism—wandering, homelessness, living in common with the animals, wearing iron chains around the body, standing for years on pillars—although scholars such as Sidney Griffith argue that this fiercer variety of ascetic practice should not be dated too early (its previous placement in the mid-fourth century relied on texts that should probably be assigned to a somewhat later period).⁸³ The view that Syria represents the "Wild West" of early Christian asceticism demands some nuance,⁸⁴ given the incorporation of ascetics within the larger communal life of the Syrian church.

The third area here noted, Palestine, developed its own distinctive forms of monasticism as well. Jerome assigns to Hilarion, allegedly a follower of Antony, the impetus to ascetic practice in Palestine;⁸⁵ the *Life of Chariton*, however, rather credits *its* hero as originator (although his *floruit* should probably be moved from the mid-third to the early fourth century).⁸⁶ Another ascetic center, located near Eleutheropolis and dating from the mid-fourth century, is associated with Epiphanius, later bishop

⁸¹ For a discussion of such omissions and emendations, see Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, vol. I, *The Origin of Asceticism: Early Monasticism in Persia*, CSCO 184 = Subsidia 14 (Louvain: CSCO, 1958), pp. 39–43. For a discussion of Tatian and the Encratites, see Georges Blond, "L'Hérésie encratite vers la fin du quatrième siècle," *Recherches de science religieuse* 31 (1944): 157–210.

⁸² Sidney H. Griffith, "Singles in God's Service: Thoughts on the Ihidaya from the Works of Aphrahat and Ephraem the Syrian," *The Harp* 4 (1991): 145–59; Guillaumont, "Perspectives actuelles," pp. 218–20.

⁸³ Sidney H. Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. Wimbush and Valantasis, pp. 220–21.

Also see Jean Gribomont, "Le Monachisme au sein de l'église en Syrie et en Cappadoce," *Studia Monastica* 7 (1965): 17, discussing the evidence from Ephrem on "wanderers" detaching themselves from the church community.

⁸⁴ The phrase is from Peter Brown, *Body*, p. 334; critiqued by Griffith, "Asceticism," p. 220.

⁸⁵ Jerome, *Vita Hilarionis* 3, 13 (PL 23, 31, 34). Chitty, *Desert*, pp. 13–14, puts the founding of this monastic community at around 330, but cautions that Jerome's representation is not historically reliable.

⁸⁶ *Vita Charitonis* 2: Chariton fled the persecution of Aurelian (270–275 C.E.). The *Vita* comes from perhaps the fifth or sixth century, and is incorporated into Symeon Metaphrastes' *Vita Sanctorum, Mensis September* (PG 115, 899–918; ET by Leah DiSegni in Wimbush, ed., *Ascetic Behavior*, pp. 396–420).

of Salamis in Cyprus.⁸⁷ Early monasteries in the Palestinian desert were organized as “lavras,” an allusion to the rows of stalls in a market that were replicated in the rows of caves providing shelter for the solitaries; communal worship and food production, however, suggest that these monks were not, strictly speaking, hermits.⁸⁸ Within a few decades, numerous monasteries had sprung up in Bethlehem and Jerusalem near the holy sites associated with Jesus’ life: the monastic establishments of Jerome and Paula in Bethlehem, and of Rufinus, Melania the Elder, and Melania the Younger in Jerusalem, ensured their fame.⁸⁹ Thus asceticism flourished in widely separated areas of the Greco-Roman world. Some of its manifestations appear to have developed independently, while the borrowing of ascetic theory and practice seems clear in other cases.

IV: Forms of Ascetic Living

Another topic of recent interest is the variety of models for ascetic living. The distinction between anchorites or hermits, who lived alone, and cenobites, who lived in community, stands as a traditional differentiation, although modern commentators question the degree to which anchoritic monasticism was truly solitary.⁹⁰ Urban asceticism was an equally important phenomenon, although it received less attention from ascetic writers of the period who tend to romanticize the virtues of hermits in the Egyptian desert and other allegedly isolated regions. Recently, Susanna Elm has argued that urban asceticism was normative for parts of Asia Minor and that Basil of Caesarea’s praise of country retreat for monks and nuns constituted one feature of his program to break with earlier (allegedly “heretical”) ascetic patterns of a more urban nature.⁹¹ Likewise, David Brakke’s study of asceticism in Alexandria demonstrates the centrality of both female and male urban ascetics in Athanasius’ struggle to maintain control of the Alexandrian church.⁹² Despite such episcopal contests for dominance and for the maintenance of

⁸⁷ Sozomen, *Hist. eccles.* 6.32.2–3 (PG 67, 1389, 1392).

⁸⁸ Rousseau, “Structure,” typescript, p. 6; Binns, *Ascetics*, pp. 109–11; Chitty, *Desert*, pp. 13–16.

⁸⁹ For Jerusalem monasteries: Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 46; 54; 61; (Gerontius), *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 40–49. For Jerome’s and Paula’s Bethlehem monasteries: Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 41; Jerome, *ep.* 108.14; 108.20. For sixth-century material, see the *Lives* of Palestinian monks by Cyril of Scythopolis (*Kyrrillos von Skythopolis*, ed.

Eduard Schwartz, TU 49.2); also the fine study by Bernard Flusin, *Miracle et histoire dans l’oeuvre de Cyrille de Scythopolis* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1983).

⁹⁰ Gochring, “Origins,” p. 235.

⁹¹ Elm, “*Virgins*,” pp. ix, 210.

⁹² Brakke, *Athanasius*, pp. 9, 57–79. It is of interest that the female virgins appear to have given Athanasius considerable difficulty, since the Hieracites (deemed heretical by Athanasius) as well as the Arians made strong bids for the virgins’ support.

“orthodoxy,” urban ascetics may have been more tightly linked to the bishop and his establishment, as evidence suggests for Asia Minor,⁹³ Alexandria,⁹⁴ Milan,⁹⁵ and Hippo.⁹⁶ Moreover, papyrological and other evidence from Egypt shows that ascetics also abounded in smaller towns and engaged in the commercial life of the communities around them, selling goods and renting property.⁹⁷

In the early Syrian church, as I have suggested, ascetics appear to have functioned within the larger structures of the church. Here, “fleeing the bishop,” we may infer, was not thought necessary for ascetic practice; renunciants could qualify as “wanderers” (a common name for early Syrian ascetics) while remaining within their local communities.⁹⁸ Simply adopting an ascetic lifestyle while residing at home was another popular option, especially for female ascetics, some of whom stayed in their parental households, or, as widows, in their own homes (or palaces, as the case may be).⁹⁹ Susanna Elm has documented how prevalent this form of “household asceticism” was in Asia Minor; in the case of figures such as Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and their sister Macrina, entire families came to adopt the ascetic life.¹⁰⁰

Male ascetics as well practiced this “house asceticism,” as testimony from Augustine, Paulinus of Nola, and Sulpicius Severus, among others, suggests.¹⁰¹ Ownership of property was thus not absolutely condemned if

⁹³ Elm, “*Virgins*,” p. 310; Rousseau, “Structure,” typescript, pp. 10, 18.

⁹⁴ Brakke, *Athanasius*, p. 2.

⁹⁵ Paulinus of Milan, *Vita Ambrosii* 10.49 (PL 14, 47); Augustine, *Confessiones* 8.6.15 (CCL 27, 122).

⁹⁶ For Augustine’s establishment at Hippo, see George Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), chap. 5; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 198–200; Rousseau, “Structure,” typescript, pp. 26–27 (Rousseau contrasts Augustine’s pattern [a bishop learning to become a monk] with that prevalent in Gaul [monks learning to become bishops] [p. 27]); Markus, *End*, p. 160.

⁹⁷ Elm, “*Virgins*,” p. 358; Roger Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, pp. 298, 300; James E. Goehring, “The World Engaged: The Social and Economic World of Egyptian Monasticism,” in *Gnosticism and the Early Christian World*, ed. James E. Goeh-

ring et al. (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge, 1990), pp. 137–44.

⁹⁸ For “wandering” as an important category in early asceticism, see Hans von Campenhausen, *Die Asketische Heimatlosigkeit im Altkirchlichen und Frühmittelalterlichen Mönchtum* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1930), esp. pp. 6–7.

⁹⁹ See, for example, evidence in Jerome, *epp.* 23.2 (CSEL 54, 212); 47.3 (CSEL 54, 346); 108.5–6 (CSEL 55, 310–11); 127.8 (CSEL 56, 151); *Comm. in ep. ad Eph., praefatio* 2 (PL 26, 507); (Gerontius), *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 7, 36, 41 (SC 90, 140, 194, 204); Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 61 (Butler, p. 157); Paulinus of Milan, *Vita S. Ambrosii* 4 (PL 14, 28).

¹⁰⁰ Elm, “*Virgins*,” pp. 34–49, 92, 100, 134, 374–75; also see Rousseau, *Basil*, chap. 3.

¹⁰¹ Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae Catholicae* I.33.70 (PL 32, 1339–40); Possidius, *Vita S. Aurelii Augustini* 3 (PL 32, 36): Augustine returned “*propriam domum agrosque*.” On Paulinus’ arrangements, see

the renunciant adopted the correct attitude toward it, namely, not allowing himself or herself to be mentally captivated by wealth.¹⁰² Jerome, John Cassian, and Benedict all express reservations about monks residing together in cities under no set rules, with money at their disposal to distribute as they pleased;¹⁰³ for Benedict, such men are “without a shepherd and in their own sheepfolds.”¹⁰⁴ Yet the very evidence that these writers provide suggests that the practice was widespread.

Last, we should note the popular ascetic arrangement of “spiritual marriage,” or “syneisaktism,” in which men and women committed to Christian celibacy shared living quarters.¹⁰⁵ Although theologians and ecclesiastics authors rail against the practice for a variety of reasons—for example, it runs counter to the Christian freedom that asceticism promises and appears suspect to Christianity’s critics—syneisaktism proved a popular ascetic lifestyle and continued as a practice into the Middle Ages.¹⁰⁶ Thus early Christian asceticism offered a variety of living arrangements, although, to be sure, not every arrangement was available to each ascetic; no doubt opportunities varied by region, and differed for men and women.

Despite the representations of early Christian ascetics as solitary hermits in the desert or the wilderness, most ascetic practitioners depended on considerable community support. An ascetic phenomenon that underscores this point is that of the pillar saints, the stylites, who spent their renunciatory careers atop narrow pillars and who from their lofty perches became the focus of intense admiration. Take the case of perhaps the most famous of the stylites, Simeon. After undertaking forty-day fasts, chaining himself to rocks, and engaging in other extreme ascetic practices for some years, Simeon took to a pillar, and then to a higher one. The fifth-century author who tells his story, Theodoret of Cyrrhus,¹⁰⁷ reports that at first, Simeon had to be tied to a beam attached to his pillar so that he would not topple over, but God soon gave him the grace to stand continuously without support. For twenty-eight years, he stood aloft—but his life was far from isolated. In addition to requiring a community of devotees who

Paulinus, *ep.* 5.4 (CSEL 29, 27); *Carm.* 11.11 (CSEL 30, 39); *Carm.* 21.386–569 (CSEL 30, 171–76), for numerous references to his buildings and property. For Sulpicius Severus, see Paulinus, *ep.* 24.3 (CSEL 29, 204): “domus tuae hospes es, ut sis hospitium domus.”

¹⁰² These are Paulinus’ consoling words to Sulpicius Severus, *ep.* 24.2 (CSEL 29, 203); see also Paulinus, *ep.* 16.9 (CSEL 29, 122–23).

¹⁰³ Jerome, *ep.* 22.34 (CSEL 54, 196–97); John Cassian, *Conlationes* 3.18.7

(CSEL 13, 513–16); *Benedicti regula* 1.6–9 (CSEL 75, 18).

¹⁰⁴ *Benedicti regula* 1.8 (CSEL 75, 18).

¹⁰⁵ The classic study is Hans Achelis, *Virgines Subintroductae: Ein Beitrag zum VII Kapitel des I. Korintherbriefs* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1902).

¹⁰⁶ See Elizabeth A. Clark, “John Chrysostom and the Subintroductae,” *Church History* 46 (1977): 171–85, for a list of the evidence.

¹⁰⁷ Theodoret, *Vita Symeonis* 26 (SC 257, 158–214).

would supply his bodily needs, Simeon like other “holy men” of late antiquity became a “power broker” for his community and for those who came from afar to seek his assistance. As Peter Brown has argued in his brilliant article, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,”¹⁰⁸ such men used the power accorded them to issue blessings and curses, to mediate disputes, to predict future events, to smooth human relations within their communities in an era when legal and other governmental structures were proving inadequate. So with Simeon: atop a pillar in alleged isolation, he performed cures, rendered sterile women fertile, foretold droughts, famines, and plagues, issued verdicts in legal and personal disputes, and exhorted eager mobs twice a day during festivals . . . all this, as his foot rotted under him. Such a story jolts our sense of ascetic “solitude,” for Simeon, like many other ascetic practitioners, is thoroughly embedded in a community.

Indeed, although hagiographic literature stresses the separation of the ascetic from “the world,” other evidence, especially that derived from archeological finds, suggests that ascetics were often more connected to it than we at first might imagine. Pachomian remains, as explicated by James Goehring, provide a good case in point. Although literary sources assert that Pachomius built his first monasteries in deserted villages, twentieth-century archeologists question whether the sites, at least as they developed, were as deserted as the texts claim. There was, for example, a sizable Roman settlement around the Pachomian monastery at Pbow. Remains of two basilicas have been uncovered, one of them with five aisles, 36 meters wide by 72 meters long, with rose granite columns furnishing its internal pillars. Likewise, coins dating from the mid- and late fourth century at this site contribute to the impression that Pachomian ascetics of this period did not retreat to uninhabited wilderness. Moreover, some of the monastic *Rules* given by Pachomius’ successor, Horsiesius, indicate that the monks had associations with laypeople living in towns and cities: the *Rules* stipulate how much time the monks may spend outside the monastery’s walls, and regulate their work in nearby villages. Pachomian monks shipped the products they made to sites as distant as Alexandria.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101. Brown subsequently offered some emendations to his position in “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. John Stratton Hawley, *Comparative Studies in Religion and Society* 2 (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 8–9 (emphasizing the holy man’s exemplarity

and his embeddedness in community). See Brown’s retrospective discussion, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971–1997,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 353–76.

¹⁰⁹ Goehring, “The World Engaged,” p. 141; idem, “New Frontiers in Pachomian Studies,” in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. B. A. Pearson and J. E. Goehring

Such data indicate that many monks were linked to the outside world to a degree that the literary evidence does not always suggest.

And it was not just monks living in community, that is, cenobites, who enjoyed these wider relations: stories of desert fathers who lived a more hermit-like existence report that they conducted a trade for their reed mats and other wares, journeying to nearby villages to sell them and to buy necessary supplies.¹¹⁰ Evidence from documentary papyri supports the archeological data. To scholars' surprise, there have even been uncovered petitions concerning the reclamation of a dead monk's property.¹¹¹ Probably we should allow for more fluid relations between the desert and the town in considering early Egyptian monasticism.¹¹² Likewise for Palestine: as Israeli archeologist Yizhar Hirschfeld has demonstrated by comparing archeological with literary materials pertaining to early Palestinian monasticism, the "proximity to population centers was vital for the monks, especially in the initial stages of their settlement in the desert."¹¹³

Women renunciants stand as another notable topic in recent studies of early asceticism, and for good reason. Excluded from the priesthood and the ecclesiastical offices reserved for men, women could participate on a somewhat more equal footing in the ascetic life. Women figure prominently in ascetic texts of the early Christian period, whether we turn to the tales of Thecla and Drusiana (among others) in the Apocryphal Acts; to the catalogs of information on early ascetics supplied by such writers as Palladius and the anonymous author of the *History of the Monks of Egypt*; to reports on monasteries founded and monastic Rules adopted; or to full-blown *Lives* of ascetic practitioners. Renunciation, somewhat ironically, provided an avenue for patronage and for monastic leadership that was open to such wealthy aristocrats as Melania the Elder and her granddaughter Melania the Younger, to Jerome's friend Paula, and to John

(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), pp. 253–56. See also Goehring's helpful overview of early Christian asceticism, with many of the same emphases I make here, "The Origins of Monasticism," in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), pp. 235–55. It is not known whether the Roman settlement at Pbow was still occupied when Pachomius founded this monastery (I thank James Goehring for this information).

¹¹⁰ E.g., *Vitae patrum* 5.27; 6.11 (PL 73, 880, 890).

¹¹¹ James E. Goehring, "Through a Glass

Darkly: Diverse Images of the APOTAKTI-KOI(AI) of Early Egyptian Monasticism," *Semeia* 58 (1992): 30–35.

¹¹² See James E. Goehring, "The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Egyptian Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1 (1993): esp. 281–90, and "Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism" *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (1996): 267–85.

¹¹³ Yizhar Hirschfeld, "The Life of Chariton in Light of Archaeological Research," in *Ascetic Behavior*, ed. Wimbush, p. 447.

Chrysostom's friend and benefactor, Olympias. Several such women provided vast funds for the construction of monasteries and often assumed the leadership themselves.¹¹⁴ Various texts report that Melania the Elder's community on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem had fifty virgins; that Olympias' monastery for women in Constantinople housed 250 women; and that Paula's in Bethlehem was sufficiently large so that the women were divided into three companies.¹¹⁵ Although their male biographers do not reveal much about the women's leadership of the monasteries (albeit a great deal more about their strenuous renunciations), we here glimpse women in roles other than the domestic. That such activity was enabled by Roman law, which in this era encouraged husbands and wives to retain their property separately,¹¹⁶ is an important and often-neglected fact that needs frequent repetition: these women, because they had financial and legal control over their own estates, could use their fortunes for the up-building of ascetic life. Of course, there were thousands more not of this social class who also flocked to monasteries, but of them we hear little in the sources; those who were accorded high status in the "outside" world tended to be those also honored in the literary sources pertaining to women's monasticism.¹¹⁷ Moreover, "orthodox" Christianity had no special purchase on women renunciants: evidence gathered by recent scholars shows that Arian, Priscillianist, and other kinds of "heretical" groups were also adept—sometimes highly adept—at providing opportunities for female ascetics.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ For an insightful response to Jack Goody's thesis (one aspect of which argued that the Church had an economic interest in tightening the degrees of relationship legally permissible so that it would benefit from the de-concentration of money amidst a small number of aristocratic families), see Rita Lizzi, "Una società esortata all' ascetismo: misure legislative e motivazioni economiche nel IV–V secolo D.C.," *Studi storici* 30 (1989): 129–53 (Lizzi argues that there was considerable direct giving to the Church, as the cases of these women suggest, without appealing to endogamy, as does Goody).

¹¹⁵ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 46 (Butler, p. 135); (Anonymous), *Vita Olympiadis* 6 (SC 13bis, 420); Jerome, *ep.* 108.20 (CSEL 55, 335).

¹¹⁶ On the separation of marital property in the imperial period, see Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the*

Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), chap. 11; Antti Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), pp. 133–54.

¹¹⁷ For evidence regarding less aristocratic communities, see Alanna Emmett, "An Early Fourth Century Female Monastic Community in Egypt?," in *Maistor: Classical, Byzantine and Renaissance Studies for Robert Browning*, ed. Ann Moffatt, Byzantina Australiensia 5 (Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1984), pp. 77–83.

¹¹⁸ Elm, "Virgins," chap. 4 and pp. 199, 233; Brakke, *Athanasius*, pp. 57–79, for fights between Arians and supporters of Athanasius at Alexandria for the virgins' favor; Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*, pp. 33–34, 40–42, 131, and passim. Augustine complains that Catholic virgins are going over to the Donatists: *Tract. Ioan.* 13.13.1–2.

V: Ancient Critiques of Asceticism and the
Church Fathers' Response

To be sure, there were many in this era, Christians as well as non-Christians, whose enthusiasm for the ascetic enterprise was considerably less ardent than that of the ascetic writers and practitioners here noted. Jerome reports that many Roman nobles considered monasticism "strange, ignominious, and debasing"; pagan writers compare monks to swine and to elephants.¹¹⁹ Within the Christian camp, some writers (such as Jovinian) thought that the exaltation of asceticism degraded marriage and established a hierarchy among Christians that was unbecoming to the baptized, who should all be "one in Christ."¹²⁰ As Kate Cooper has argued, the traditional criteria for social ranking were thrown askew by the new evaluational hierarchy based on degrees of ascetic renunciation.¹²¹ More threatening, excessive ascetic fervor might be labeled "Manichean"—and here, we enter the realm of heresy charges.¹²²

Many ascetically inclined church fathers believed that "Paul" in I Timothy 4:1–3 had predicted the coming of "heretics" who would forbid marriage and the eating of meat. Since they themselves, however, eschewed marriage and followed a sparse vegetarian diet, it was crucial for them to distinguish their own behaviors from those of dreaded opponents whose observed practice might all too readily be confused with their own.¹²³ The Fathers' self-defense rested on three points: that they did not forbid marriage, as did the alleged heretics, but only sought to regulate it;¹²⁴ that

¹¹⁹ Jerome, *ep.* 127.5; Eunapius, *Vitae Sophistarum* 472; Libanius, *Oratio* 30.8. See L. Gougaud, "Les Critiques formulées contre les premiers moines d'occident," *Revue Mabillon* 24 (1934): 145–63.

¹²⁰ Jovinian in Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.3 (PL 23, 224); also see David G. Hunter, "Resistance to the Virginal Ideal in Late-Fourth-Century Rome: The Case of Jovinian," *Theological Studies* 48 (1987): 45–64. Augustine as well testifies that "some" think some Catholic forms of asceticism have "gone too far": *De moribus ecclesiae Catholicae* 31.66 (PL 32, 1337–38).

¹²¹ Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 82–83, 87.

¹²² As Jerome came to fear: see *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.3 (PL 23, 223); *ep.* 49(48).2 (CSEL 54, 352).

¹²³ The desire to differentiate lies close to the surface in Augustine's *De moribus Manichaeorum* and *De moribus ecclesiae Catholicae*. See also Jerome, *ep.* 18.*3–4 (PL 30, 191–92): Catholic monks will be accused of Manicheanism for their restrictive diets. For an exhaustive discussion of how encratic themes get appropriated by the mainstream Church, see Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, *Enkrateia e antropologia: le motivazioni protologiche della continenza e della verginità nel cristianesimo dei primi secoli e nello gnosticismo*, *Studia Ephemeridis "Augustinianum"* 20 (Roma: Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum," 1984).

¹²⁴ Tertullian, *De monogamia* 15 (CCL 2, 1250–51). Tertullian faults the Marcionites for disallowing baptism to any person who was not a virgin, widow, or celibate (*Adversus Marcionem* 1.29; 4.11).

they abstained from marriage by free will, not by coercion or prohibition;¹²⁵ and that their own motivations for abstinence were holy, not derived from a hatred of the Creator and creation.¹²⁶ Rather, they argued, it was “heretics” of various stripes (“Gnostics,” Montanists, Marcionites, Manicheans, as well as unspecified dissenters)¹²⁷ who were the intended targets of “Paul’s” warning.

In addition to their refutation of such “heretical” groups, the Fathers also fault such individuals as Tatian (who allegedly claimed that marriage is fornication),¹²⁸ in addition to the Encratites (considered Tatian’s successors),¹²⁹ Saturninus,¹³⁰ and Julius Cassianus.¹³¹ Athanasius and Epiphanius attack the fourth-century Egyptian ascetic leader Hieracas for positing that although marriage was allowable in Old Testament times, Christ’s advent signaled a New Dispensation that requires sexual abstinence.¹³² Moreover, the Fathers were eager to dissociate their position on second marriage from that of the Montanists, who firmly prohibited it: thus many Fathers allege that they, like Paul, concede (but do not encourage) second marriage after the death of a spouse.¹³³ To teach that Adam and Eve engaged in sexual union only after the Fall in Eden might be considered a Manichean position¹³⁴—but this is in fact the view that Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom themselves often espouse.¹³⁵ Differentiation became all the more necessary when theories and behaviors were similar.

¹²⁵ So Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Ad I. Tim.* (4:3); John Chrysostom, *Hom. 12 I. Tim.* (4:1–3); Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum* 2.9; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.7.58; 3.9.66.

¹²⁶ So Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.1.4; 3.3.12; 3.5.40; Origen, *Comm. I Cor.* 7:7; 7:18–20; Tertullian, *De ieiunio* 15; Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 2.16.

¹²⁷ So Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.6.51; 3.12.85; Tertullian, *De ieiunio* 2 (“psychics” say this of the “New Prophecy”); Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 2.16; Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 14.11; 15.10; 20.16; 30.1; *Contra Felicem* 1.7; *Contra Secundinum* 22.1; *Contra Adimantum* 14.2; Pelagius, *Comm. I. Tim.* 4:2.

¹²⁸ So Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.28.1; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 46.2; Jerome, *Comm. Gal.* 3 (6:8); Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnes haereses* 8.16; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.12.81. For an informative discussion of Tatian and the Encratites, see Sfameni Gasparro, *Enkrateia*, pp. 23–55, 78.

¹²⁹ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 47.1 (GCS 31, 215). See Blond, “L’ ‘Hérésie’ encratite,” pp. 175–76.

¹³⁰ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.24.2 (PG 7, 675).

¹³¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.14.95 (GCS 52[15], 239–40).

¹³² Athanasius, *ep. 1 ad virgines* (CSCO 150 = Scriptores Coptici 19, 83–86; Brakke, ET, pp. 282–83); Epiphanius, *Panarion* 67.1 (GCS 37, 132–34). See Brakke, *Athanasius*, p. 55: Hieracas “placed marriage in ancient history and its practitioners in a state just this side of ruin.”

¹³³ So Jerome, *ep.* 41.3; *Comm. Tit.* 1:6 (Tertullian’s *De monogamia* is here deemed heretical); Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 32.17; *De bono viduitatis* 4.6–5.7 (Tertullian went astray in his views, forbidding what Paul allowed).

¹³⁴ So Didymus of Alexandria, *Contra Manichaeos* 8 (PG 39, 1096).

¹³⁵ Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.4; 1.16; Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 12.4–13.1; John Chrysostom, *Hom.* 20

Thus it is not surprising that the Fathers were accused of the very same “heresies” that they themselves often denounce. Manicheanism was the favorite “heresy” to allege against ascetic opponents in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, including both Jerome and Augustine, not least because in that period, Manicheanism had been legally proscribed.¹³⁶ The allegations against Jerome were prompted in part by his unguarded contempt for marriage in *Adversus Iovinianum*. Here, Jerome claims that when Paul wrote in I Corinthians 7:1 that it was “good not to touch a woman,” he meant that so to touch was “bad.” Moreover, if Paul thought that sexual intercourse impeded prayer (I Cor. 7:5), how much more did it impede the reception of the Eucharist! For Jerome, “all sexual intercourse is unclean in view of the purity of the body of Christ.”¹³⁷ When criticized for “Manichean” leanings, Jerome bristled, alleging that only heretics would deny the goodness of marriage.¹³⁸ He claims that he had spoken “in great moderation” on the issue, and protests that his restraints on the married were considerably more gentle than were Paul’s.¹³⁹

Augustine, for his part, after a long career debating and writing against Manicheans (a movement to which Augustine himself had adhered in his youth),¹⁴⁰ was in his later years accused of Manicheanism: so Pelagian opponents such as Julian of Eclanum construed Augustine’s theory of the transmission of original sin through the sexual act.¹⁴¹ Is it not Manichean, they asked, to assert that no child can be conceived without receiving the stain of an inherited sin, a sin that he or she did not personally commit? Does not such a belief suggest that evil is an inevitable constituent of the material world, a view to be identified as Manichean? Augustine judged that he had adequately defended himself by rehearsing his views developed two decades earlier on the “goods” of marriage (offspring, fidelity, the sacramental bond),¹⁴² but the accusations against him, some of which were

Gen. 1; *De virginitate* 14, 17. For the metaphysical and historical presuppositions of such a view, see Ugo Bianchi, “La Tradition de l’enkratie: Motivations ontologiques et protologiques,” in *La Tradizione*, ed. Bianchi, pp. 308–10.

¹³⁶ *Codex Theodosianus* 16.5.3 (372); 16.5.7 (381); 16.5.9 (382); 16.5.11 (383); 16.5.18 (389); 16.5.35 (399); 16.5.38 (405); 16.5.40 (407); 16.5.41 (407); 16.5.43 (408)—and so on, up to 435 C.E. (16.5.65.2).

¹³⁷ Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.7; 1.8; 1.20 (PL 23, 229–30, 231, 249).

¹³⁸ Jerome, *ep.* 49 (48).11 (CSEL 54, 366).

¹³⁹ Jerome, *ep.* 49 (48).11; 49 (48).3 (CSEL 54, 365, 349).

¹⁴⁰ Augustine, *Confessiones* 3.11.20; 4.1.1 (CCL 27, 38, 40); *Contra ep. fundamenti* 10 (CSEL 25, 206); *De moribus Manichaeorum* 19.68 (PL 32, 1374); *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 18.34 (PL 32, 1326).

¹⁴¹ Julian of Eclanum in Augustine, *Opus imperfectum contra Iulianum* 1.27; 1.66; 2.27.2; 2.202; 3.10 (CSEL 851, 23, 64, 181, 314, 355).

¹⁴² Augustine, *De bono coniugali* 32(24) (CSEL 41, 266–67). For Augustine’s moderating position as a “defence of Christian mediocrity,” see Markus, *End*, pp. 45–46.

leveled in circles connected to the imperial court,¹⁴³ suggest otherwise. Christian writers of ascetic inclination, despite their efforts to distance themselves from excessively ascetic “heretics,” could find instead that their own positions were conflated with those of their enemies. Since the alleged heretics, such as Augustine’s Manichean opponent Faustus, often claimed that *they* were the true Christians, that *they* (unlike the Catholics) had renounced in accordance with Jesus’ commands in the Gospels,¹⁴⁴ Catholic Christians had to walk a fine line to uphold their own ascetic values yet distinguish themselves from their “heretical” opponents. As Jerome put it, Catholics must keep to the king’s highway, not turning to the left (i.e., to the lust of the Jews and the Gentiles) or to the right (i.e., to the errors of the Manicheans); although aspiring to virginity, they should nonetheless not condemn marriage.¹⁴⁵

Thus the church fathers strove to protect themselves from allegations that their views bordered on a heretical disparagement of the Creator and the created world in all its materiality, that they differed little from the “heretical” opponents they themselves claimed to deplore.¹⁴⁶ Yet in this task of self-justification and self-protection, they faced the disturbing problem that the Bible only sporadically justified their ascetic agenda; many verses seemed rather to assume as a norm, even champion, marriage and reproduction. How to “read” the Bible so that it delivered a message wholeheartedly supportive of ascetic renunciation of an “orthodox” variety, so that it furnished a foundational rationale for the ascetic program, was a task that challenged the wits, ingenuity, and Biblical acumen of ascetically enthusiastic patristic writers. The following chapters investigate the interpretive strategies that the Fathers employed to produce properly asceticized Scriptures that supported their programs of renunciation.

¹⁴³ Augustine, *Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum* 1.3.1; 1.4.2 (CSEL 60, 424–25).

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, the impassioned speech by Faustus that Augustine reports in his *Contra Faustum* (5.1) (CSEL 25, 271–72):

“Do I believe the Gospel? You ask me if I believe it, though my obedience to its commands proves that I do. . . . I have left my father, mother, wife, and children, and all else that the Gospel requires—and you ask if I believe the Gospel? . . . I have parted with all gold and silver, and have stopped carrying money in my purse; I am content with my daily food; I am not anxious for tomorrow and am without care for how I

shall be fed, or with what I shall be clothed—and you ask if I believe the Gospel?”

¹⁴⁵ Jerome, *ep.* 49 (48).8 (CSEL 54, 361).

¹⁴⁶ That some Gnostic texts had far more resonance with the Old Testament than has often been admitted by either the church fathers or contemporary scholars is shown by Birger A. Pearson, “Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature” and “Jewish Elements in Gnosticism and the Development of Gnostic Self-Definition,” in idem, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), esp. pp. 38, 126–27, 130.

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Reading for Asceticism

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CHAPTER THREE

Reading in the Early Christian World

I: Christian Readers

A recent spate of scholarly works on the history of reading and writing has focused on the distinction between oral and literate cultures, and on the prevalence (or absence) of literacy at various historical periods. To place early Christians in this discussion has proved a vexing question. An important contribution to this exchange is classicist William V. Harris' *Ancient Literacy*, published in 1989. Arguing for a minimalist view of ancient literacy, Harris claims that not more than 10 percent of the adult population of the Roman Empire at the time of Christianity's origin was literate and that literacy declined from that already low percentage in later antiquity.¹ Despite Christianity's heavy reliance on the written word (Harris notes the "acute logorrhea" of church fathers such as Augustine and John Chrysostom),² Harris disclaims writing as the chief means of furthering the Christian missionary effort in the first three centuries of the new religion's existence.³

Harris' minimalist interpretation of literacy in the Greek and Roman worlds has not gone unchallenged. Indeed, earlier studies already had cast doubt on overly minimalist estimates by noting such details as that the Alexandrian Museum (i.e., Library) contained between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand books;⁴ that papyrus finds in Egypt prove the dissemination of both religious and secular texts in out-of-the-way places;⁵ that the very process of Hellenization depended to a certain

¹ William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 22, 282, 285.

² Ibid., pp. 305–6.

³ Ibid., pp. 311–12, 316, 319, 322.

⁴ Frederic G. Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932), pp. 26–27.

⁵ Colin H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 4, 70–71; P. E. Easterling, "Books and Readers in the Greek World: The Hellenistic and Imperial Periods," in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. I, *Greek Literature*, ed. P. E. Easterling and B. M. W.