Christian Monasticism in Palestine and Syria

Review Article

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The Lives of Symeon Stylites, translated by Robert Doran (Cistercian Studies Series, 112; Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications 1992)
Cyril of Scythopolis, *The Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, translated by R.M. Price, annotated by John Binns (Cistercian Studies Series, 114; Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications 1991)
John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow*, translated by John Wortley (Cistercian Studies Series, 139; Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications 1992)

These three volumes translate texts which are of immense importance for our knowledge of the history and outlook of Christian monasticism in Palestine and Syria in the early Byzantine period. Two of the three *Lives of Symeon Stylites* translated by Robert Doran in his volume have appeared in earlier English versions, but the *Lives of the Monks of Palestine* by Cyril of Scythopolis and *The Spiritual Meadow* by John Moschos have not previously been translated into English.

The emergence of Christian monasticism in Palestine and Syria, like the parallel movement in Egypt, was a part of the changes in the position of the Church in society which accompanied the Christianization of the Roman empire in the course of the fourth century. Unfortunately, from a historical point of view, our earliest information about monasticism in Palestine centres on individuals whose *Lives* – the *Life of Hilarion* by Jerome[1] and the *Life of Chariton*[2] – are of semi-legendary character. The *Life of Chariton* informs us that Chariton founded three lavrae or monastic communities of hermits in the Judean desert in the late third or early fourth century. Hilarion, according to his *Life*, spent a short period in Egypt in the first decade of the fourth century as a disciple of Antony (the traditional founder of lower-Egyptian monasticism whose *Life*,[3] probably by Athanasius of Alexandria, is the archetype of monastic hagiographical writing) and then lived for twenty-two years as a hermit near Gaza before embarking on a more public career as a healer and miracle worker. The best attempt to construct a general history of

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early Palestinian monasticism out of these traditions is still Derwas Chitty's well-known study, *The Desert a City: an Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford 1966).

In the case of Syria, there is more to go on. In about A.D. 444 Theodoret of Cyrus, one of the leading theologians of the first half of the fifth century, wrote a work called the *Philotheos Historia,*[4] which is a collection of biographies of Syrian monks spanning the period from the early fourth century to Theodoret's own day. It was once usual to believe that Syrian monasticism was dependent on Egyptian monasticism for its inspiration and ideas, but it is now accepted that the two movements were parallel phenomena with independent and somewhat different origins in earlier traditions of Christian asceticism and spirituality.[5] It is Theodoret's work which enables us to confirm that this is the case. The dominant picture of the Syrian monks according to Theodoret's work is of holy men living a life of extreme asceticism involving, in many cases, complete and prolonged solitude and detachment from society as well as a life of the harshest physical deprivation and hardship. The contrast between this picture and the more moderate asceticism and less solitary form of life characteristic of Egyptian monasticism was one of the points to which Peter Brown drew attention in his classic study, 'The rise and function of the holy man in late antiquity'.[6]

Theodoret's work provides a link between the earliest period of Syrian monastic history and the time of Symeon the stylite over a century later. Theodoret included a biography of Symeon in his *Philotheos Historia* at a time when Symeon himself (d. 459) was still alive. This is the first of the three *Lives* of Symeon translated by Doran. The other two were both written within a few years of Symeon's death. They are the Greek *Life* by his disciple Antonius, and the earliest version of the Syriac *Life* (the longest of the three texts translated), which is dated by a colophon preserved in the manuscript tradition to 17 April 473.

The early date of all three of the *Lives* of Symeon makes it inappropriate to approach them by asking which is the more historically reliable and selecting this for special study in order to recover the historical Symeon. The unique value of the three *Lives* (and of Doran's translation of them) as hagiographical documents derives from the fact that they provide three complementary and synoptic portraits of Symeon, each supplementing the others and each drawn from a different perspective – a fact which Doran brings out extremely well in his long introduction to the *Lives* (especially pp. 36-54).

Symeon is of course best-known for the form which his ascetic life took. He

lived for over forty years on top of three or four pillars in succession, the last and highest perhaps forty cubits (about 20 metres) in height. (The *Lives* differ somewhat over the number of successive pillars, their heights, and the lengths of time spent on each.) Doran is interested, like other recent students of Symeon,[7] in the origins of this form of asceticism. But he rejects the view that it has connexions with a cult of sacred pillars referred to by sources for the non-Christian religions of late-antique Syria. He sees the origins of the stylite phenomenon as lying in the emphasis placed on *standing* or *remaining* before God as a description of the Christian life of prayer which is found in some pre-monastic Syrian sources and in gnosticism (pp. 32-4). Symeon's motionless life on the pillar was an opportunity for continual prayer and a witness to the constancy of his discipleship. Theodoret and the Syriac *Life* defend Symeon's way of life (eccentric even in the eyes of contemporaries who were used to the bizarre ascetic practices of Syrian holy men) by reference to various biblical examples of the unusual behaviour demanded by God of his servants – often as an example or witness to their contemporaries. But Symeon's own motives are lost to us, and we can only speculate on the possible influence of ideas which may explain his adoption of the stylite way.

The same conclusion would apply to Symeon's perception of his role *vis-à-vis* the numerous visitors who came to the enclosure surrounding his column. Doran (pp. 18-23) carefully charts the perspectives of the *Lives* on Symeon's social role, and he does not dissent from the conclusions famously reached by Brown in his article of 1971, that Symeon functioned as a patron and a mediator in society, a dispenser of advice, a reconciler, and a defender of offended parties in social or financial conflicts, as well as a healer and the source of more strictly religious counsel. What was demanded of a holy man was strict neutrality in the conflicts that beset society. As the Syriac life (ch. 43) puts it, Symeon is seen 'publicly and even-handedly to rebuke all men, whether rich or poor'. Even though their perspectives on the characteristics of the holy man do differ, the three *Lives* are agreed on the nature and importance of Symeon's social role.

To turn from the *Lives* of Symeon to the other two volumes under consideration here is not only to move from Syria to Palestine but to move forward over a century in date from the death of Symeon. Cyril of Scythopolis wrote the seven biographies which make up the *Lives of the Monks of Palestine* by c. A.D. 558, but like Theodoret's work the *Lives* themselves cover a period of over a century. Cyril's writings are the most important of all surviving sources for the history of the monastic movement which developed in the Judean desert from the early fifth

century onwards (though, as we have seen, Chariton was regarded as having been active in this area over a century before). Cyril's work supplies a very detailed insight into the complex topography of the communities which existed in this varied and often hostile terrain (the influence of which on the forms on monastic life adopted is brilliantly described by John Binns in his introduction to the volume). Cyril's account can now be compared with the extensive archaeological evidence from the region which has recently been published.[8]

Cyril's two longest biographies are of Euthymius and Sabas, the two principal leaders and founders of the Judean monastic movement whose period of activity extends from the arrival of Euthymius in Jerusalem from his Armenian homeland in c. 405 to the death of Sabas in 532. The monastic life which developed in Judea under their direction was centred around a number of cenobia (monasteries in which monks lived a common life) and lavrae (groups of hermits living close to one another but responsible for the organization of their own routine of life within broad limits). These were linked with one another and there was frequent exchange of personnel between them. Nevertheless divisions within the movement grew up in the sixth century as a result of doctrinal disputes. Sabas took an active part in the campaign in support of the Council of Chalcedon and against the views of the anti-Chalcedonians, traditionally referred to as 'Monophysites'. Sabas was also opposed by an elite group of more educated monks who drew on the views of Origen for their spiritual teaching. Cyril writes as a champion of the orthodox position (that of Sabas) on both of these issues, and Cyril (though not his hero) lived long enough to see his views officially accepted at the Council of Constantinople in 553. Cyril's *Lives* combine discussions of the divisions caused by these controversies within the community with many insights into the daily life and spirituality of the monks and – like the *Lives* of Symeon – into the role of the monks in society, though this does not seem to be of such importance to Cyril as to the authors whose work is translated by Doran. This is perhaps an indication that Judean monasticism in Cyril's day had become much more institutional in character and concerned with the problems posed by its own development than had been the more individualistic Syrian monasticism described by Theodoret.

The *Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschos is different in character from the other works described in this article. It is later in date, having been completed in c. 619 in Rome, where the author, originally a monk in a community in Bethlehem, ended a career of extensive travelling in the Mediterranean world of the late sixth and early seventh centuries. The *Meadow* is not the biography of a single monk or the

history of a community but a collection of over two hundred anecdotes and reports about the monks of Egypt and Palestine, some written in the first person and presented as stories of monks whom Moschos himself knew, others as the products of oral tradition. The collection belongs to the same tradition of monastic writing as the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (*Sayings of the Fathers*) of the Egyptian monks of Nitria and Scetis,[9] though the individual units in the *Meadow* tend to be longer, and to contain more narratives and descriptions than the *Apophthegmata*, which are characterized by vigorous and memorable use of dialogue and reported speech.[10] The arrangement of Moschos' work is generally less mechanical than that of the *Apophthegmata*, in that he tends to link units by theme or place or origin.

Several different recensions of the *Meadow* are found in the manuscript tradition, containing different numbers of stories and different arrangements. In the absence of a modern critical edition on which to base his translation, Wortley's version is inevitably provisional in character. He has aimed to provide a clear and sparsely annotated translation without attempting to solve any of the textual or historical problems connected with the work in the manner of Doran and Binns in their respective volumes. Nevertheless this too will be a work of immense value to students and general readers in making available this important source.

The *Meadow* contains many conventional stories such as those concerning the peaceful relations enjoyed between monks and wild animals (e.g. 2, 18), or those discussing the sexual temptations which arise as a result of encounters between monks and women (19, 204, 217). But there are also many stories which illustrate the devotion of the monks to their life of prayer and asceticism in the face of the hardships of the monastic life (e.g. 9) and the facts of sickness and death (5, 8, 10), or which illustrate the nature of their beliefs about conversion and repentance (20) or about the sacraments (25). To read Moschos' work is probably to obtain the most varied picture of the life and beliefs of Palestinian monasticism in the Byzantine period – a period when the monastic movement continued to develop and flourish, drawing both on the traditions of the Desert Fathers of Egypt and on the emphases of the Syrian tradition, even though some monks warned their contemporaries that standards of asceticism and devotion to God were inferior to those of the past (168).

To students of Christian spirituality, then, the *Meadow* has a great deal to offer. But for students of Byzantine history too it is an important document because of its capacity to illuminate aspects of the daily life of Byzantine society on the eve of the seventh-century Persian and Arab conquests of Palestine; for example, the following story is a vivid illustration of the relations between monks and society,

of the incidence of poverty and hardship, and of the dangers of travel in an insecure environment and a hostile climate. It is also an excellent illustration of Moschos' narrative style (24):

> There was an elder living at the cells of Choziba and the elders there told us that when he was in his village, this is what he used to do. If ever he saw somebody in his village so poor that he could not sow his own field, then, unknown to the man who worked that land, he would come by night with his own oxen and seed, and sow his neighbour's field. When he went into the wilderness and settled as the cells of Choziba this elder was equally considerate. He would travel the road from the Holy Jordan to the Holy City carrying bread and water. And if he saw a person overcome by fatigue, he would shoulder that person's pack and carry it all the way to the Holy Mount of Olives. He would do the same on the return journey if he found others, carrying their packs as far as Jericho. You would see this elder, sometimes sweating under a great load, sometimes carrying a youngster on his shoulders. There was even an occasion when he carried two of them at the same time. Sometimes he would sit down and repair the footwear of men and women if this was needed, for he carried with him what was needed for that task. To some he gave a drink of the water he carried with him and to others he offered bread. If he found anyone naked, he gave him the very garment that he wore. You saw him working all day long. If ever he found a corpse on the road, he said the appointed prayers over it and gave it burial.

NOTES

1 Ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 23, cols. 29-54.
2 Ed. G. Garitte, *Bulletin de l'institut historique de Belge* 21 (1940) 5-40.
3 Ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 26, cols. 835-976.
4 Ed. P. Canivet and A. Leroy-Molinghen, *Sources Chretiennes*, 234 and 257 (Paris 1977, 1979).
5 See R. Murray, 'The features of the earliest Christian asceticism', in P. Brooks, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Gordon Rupp* (London 1975) 65-77.
6 *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80-101; reprinted (along with other important studies) in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London, 1982) 103-52.
7 See D.T.M. Frankfurter, 'Stylites and *phallobates*: pillar religions in late antique Syria', *Vigiliae Christianae* 44 (1990) 168-98.
8 Y. Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven 1992).
9 Ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 65, cols. 71-440.
10 On the *Apophthegmata* see D. Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (New York 1993).