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Introduction

Although the Siegen conference on “Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity” focused largely on patristic authors’ deployment of Biblical texts to create ascetic meaning for Christians of late antiquity, it is helpful to recall that New Testament authors and editors *themselves* reworked earlier materials to produce messages pertaining to asceticism. Through literary compositions that drew on materials at-hand and that were in turn to become sources for patristic commentators, New Testament authors and editors displayed their creative ingenuity. Here, Hans-Ulrich Weidemann’s essay illustrates the ways in which the authors or editors of Luke and 1 Timothy subtly reworked the materials before them to provide these materials with a different “afterlife”, one that would furnish later Christians with a host of examples for imitation.

Examining numerous passages in Luke, Weidemann shows how that editor reworked his Markan materials to cast the disciples as model celibates: even Peter, whose unmarried status might be questioned, is “rescued” for asceticism by Luke’s positioning the pericope of Peter’s cure of his mother-in-law (Luke 4:38–39) to a time *before* his call to discipleship in Luke 5. Likewise, Luke recasts the discussion of marriage and the afterlife (Luke 20:34–36) so that followers of Jesus are urged to adopt the unmarried, angelic state here and now, not just at the resurrection of the dead, as Mark 12:25 implies. As for dietary asceticism, Luke’s John the Baptist stands in the Nazarite tradition, abstaining from wine (Luke 1:15), while Jesus is said to live forty days in the wilderness without eating, where he is not, as in Mark 1:13, “served by” angels. The Last Supper, as described in Luke 22:14–38, casts that meager meal as a mere “breaking of bread”, and “breaking bread” without wine will be the regime of Jesus’ followers in the intervening time until they again eat and drink at his table in the Kingdom. Luke’s asceticized portrayals of the celibate Jesus and his teaching, of John the Baptist, and of the unmarried disciples would give patristic commentators much ammunition for their ascetic warfare – as (Thomas Karmann shows) do the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke, which in the fourth century become interpretive sites for Mary as a model for Christian ascetics.

In 1 Timothy, however, we see a different pattern. Widely understood as an attempt to tame Paul’s more ascetic message in 1 Corinthians and other “genuine” Pauline books, 1 Timothy represents Paul as counseling the previously-ascetic Timothy to abandon his water-only regimen, taking wine

“for the sake of his stomach” (1 Tim 5:23). Nor is Timothy to wander about as a homeless missionary, but to “stay in Ephesus” (1 Tim 1:3) as part of the city’s Christian community. Borrowing a phrase from Gail Corrington Streete, Weidemann labels as “counter-asceticism” 1 Timothy’s recommendation of an orderly, disciplined but *not* radically ascetic Christian life. Exhibiting moderate control now trumps the more rigorous message of 1 Corinthians. “Paul” has “corrected” himself.

If such examples illustrate the ingenious ways in which authors of what became canonical New Testament books could shape their material to deliver a particular message, patristic authors had an even more riotous field-day in the production of ascetic meaning. Such production, to be sure, required “interpretation”. “Interpretation is work”, Catherine Chin claims in her discussion of Origen, and indeed, the essays in this volume show just how *much* labor early Christian commentators expended to align Scripture with their ascetic commitments – or, alternatively, to read Scripture’s “harder” passages in ways that lessened renunciatory demands on Christians of late antiquity. “Interpretation” was directly related to what the exegetes needed the texts to *do* for their respective audiences. Some wished to advocate a stringent interpretation of Scriptural texts while avoiding charges of “heresy”, while others read Scriptural passages in ways that would not overwhelm “average” Christians with sacrifices greater than they could bear. Here looms the question of the commentator’s audience: for writers addressing only their fellow-monastics, the “average” Christian might fall out of consideration altogether. Some writers go so far as to imply that ascetic devotees were the *only* real Christians (see David Brakke’s essay on Evagrius Ponticus, and Andrew Jacobs’, on Origen): an ascetic version of Christianity *was* Christianity, meant for all. Throughout, the startling malleability of Scriptural texts, which skilled writers often pressed (in Virginia Burrus’ phrase) to an “abyss of interpretation” is evident. As Liesbeth Van der Sypt shows in regard to ancient interpretations of 1 Corinthians 7:36–38, there *was* no agreement about the “plain” meaning of some passages.

Asceticism in late ancient Christianity included a range of practices and renunciations. Essays in this volume center largely on just three. The exegesis of sexual renunciation, or at least moderation in marriage, is examined in essays by Judith Kovacs and David Hunter. Second, dietary practices receive the essayists’ attention: verses relating to wine-drinking, as Andreas Merkt shows, required ingenious interpretation for those who had “renounced”. Michael Theobald points up how urgently “interpretation” was needed to make the narrative of Jesus changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2) into an ethically, spiritually, and theologically satisfying tale. The dietary regime of John the Baptist (especially if the locusts were removed) could inspire later Christian ascetics, as Martin Meiser shows. Some food

practices here detailed startle the modern reader: while all ascetics reduced food intake (although cenobitic communities featured a heartier diet than desert anchorites), Origen can depict both angels and ascetics as “eating” the Scriptures, as Chin and Burrus note.

Third, the degree to which a radical asceticism required the renunciation of riches and property, with no allowance for interpretive “hedging”, is illustrated in Elizabeth Clark’s essay. Even if Scripture did not explicitly mention such “renunciations”, as in the case of John the Baptist, later patristic authors, Meiser shows, could detail the items he allegedly “renounced” in his pursuit of the “angelic life”. And, as Andreas Hoffmann writes in his essay on Cyprian’s *De habitu virginum*, the dedicated virgins from higher social circles in Carthage were sternly warned that any display of expensive clothing and jewelry would align them with the Whore of Babylon of Revelation 17:1–4.

The essays in this volume reveal both scholars’ intense interest in early Christian asceticism in recent decades as well as changed directions in scholarship. Doubtless some of the interest and the changes relate to wider theoretical and scholarly currents, most especially, the focus on “the body” and attention to textual interpretation, now simply called “reading”. Throughout these essays, the focus on “the body” is supreme: the bodies of Christians, the body of Christ (somewhat problematic in its “Jewishness”), bodies of angels and demons, even the “body” of Scripture. Up for debate was whether the body should be considered solid or porous, whether it could be “transformed” here and now or only – even if then – in the afterlife.

A second direction in recent scholarship has been a concern to relate textual interpretation to *praxis*. Exegesis related to “life”: reading and practice were closely linked. Essays by Burrus on Origen, Mariya Horyacha on Pseudo-Macarius, and Brakke on Evagrius Ponticus bring this claim into strong focus. As Karmann shows in his essay on three patristic interpretations of the nativity story in Matthew 1:18–25, the focus on Mary’s virginity was strongly driven by the desire of authors to showcase Mary as a model for Christian ascetics.

Likewise, in recent scholarship, the role of the audience in influencing a speaker’s presentation has received closer attention. Andrew Jacobs, treating Origen’s homily on the Lucan story of Jesus’ circumcision and purification in the Temple, argues that Origen sensed his audience’s discomfit at the text’s suggestion that the body of Jesus was “Jewish” and in need purification, and sought to allay their qualms. Another example: Basil of Caesarea’s portrayal, Karmann suggests, of Mary as a model for *both* the virginal *and* the married relates to his need as bishop to craft a nativity sermon that could appeal to both groups among his audience. And when Christianity began to find a greater audience among the higher, educated social classes, bishop Cyprian of Carthage (as Hoffmann shows) tried to spur their Christian devotion through the employment of rhetorical techniques that signaled his *own* high background, education, and rhetorical training: *he* could count as one of *them*.

A fourth direction in recent scholarship on early Christian asceticism has been to supplement the evidence from texts with that from material remains. In this volume, one essay – Stephen Davis’ essay on painted inscriptions at Kellia and related sites – addresses such remains. Davis shows how nine painted inscriptions cite 2 Timothy 4:7–8 (“I have fought the good fight to the end; I have run the race to the finish; I have kept the faith; all there is to come now is the crown of righteousness reserved for me...”), complete with illustrations of crowns. The decorated inscriptions thus visually ally the monk with the earlier martyrs: both have “fought the good fight”.

Also important for scholars of our day is an increased recognition of the different cosmological frameworks and presuppositions of early Christian ascetic authors, often strange to modern readers. In Christian antiquity, humans had no monopoly on populating the universe: all around them, battling angels and demons fought for mastery of the ascetic practitioner’s soul. Scripture reading for Origen, Chin argues, serves as an intervention in this struggle, giving “nourishment” to the “good” angels who hope to gain the soul of the Christian. Davis, writing on 2 Timothy 4:7–8, illustrates the prominence of the theme of the ascetic life as an *agon*, an athletic contest aimed at “winning the prize”, in both ascetic literature and in ascetics’ art. Images of battle and contest abound in this literature, as ascetics in general are seen as engaged in a “battle against the flesh”, as Hoffmann’s elaboration of Cyprian’s exhortation to virgins shows.

The theme of “contest” is especially prominent in the essays on Origen and Evagrius Ponticus by Chin, Jacobs, and Brakke. Chin posits that for Origen, however, the notion of ascetic praxis as *individual* effort might usefully be modified by the notion of *collaboration* between ascetics and their helpers (for Origen, the angels who fought along with humans in the latter’s struggle for eternal salvation). Thus asceticism is not always best explained by the Durkheimian theme of competition, of an ascetic’s struggle to attain a “distinction” unachievable by most; in the Origenist model, the ascetic joins with “Others” – whether spiritual powers or human – in a “discourse of union”, as Jacobs puts it. In addition, Johan Leemans shows how a less individual and more communal approach to the ascetic life came to be favored by Basil of Caesarea, a change that can be traced in the number and selection of Biblical texts he employs to argue his case.

But back to the question, what did early Christian exegetes need the Biblical texts to *do*? The answers are multiple. Of course, many read texts so that the latter were taken to advocate renunciation, yet avoided outright “heretical” denigration of the body, allegedly God’s creation. Any implication by ascetic devotees that the created world, including the human body, was tainted with evil could raise charges of “heresy”. Already in 1 Timothy (as Weidemann shows) this theme was prominent, as “Paul” there warns against the

demonically-inspired who would tempt Christians to overly rigorous ascetic renunciation. Kovacs shows how Clement of Alexandria's Scriptural interpretation countered that of both libertine and radically ascetic "Gnostics", and Jacobs, how Origen disputed "heretics" who claimed that Christ's body was made of a special, non-human "stuff". Karmann observes that Basil adds an anti-heretical note to his discussion of Christ as Mary's "firstborn" by claiming for orthodoxy the intertext of Colossians 1:15: "first-born of all creation" does *not* mean (as Basil accuses Arians of holding) that Christ is a "creature". Theobald, for his part, cites various Church Fathers who "read" the Johannine story of Jesus' wine-producing facility at the wedding at Cana to critique Encratites, Marcionites, and Manicheans, who were held to denigrate the goodness of God's creation, including the fruits of the vine; the narrative also served, in its seeming approval of marriage, as a bulwark against those "heretics" who claimed that marriage was impure.

Should Biblical texts be taken in a "harder" reading, or might the already-"hard" ones be gently lightened in their ascetical import? Both possibilities stood as options, depending on the exegete's desired end. For example, Jerome (Hunter notes) interpreted Biblical texts such as 1 Corinthians 7 so as to make more rigorous the injunctions regarding sexual impurity; while Tertullian, Van der Sypt claims, "hardened" his own approach within the course of just a few years, "self-correcting" his earlier, less rigorous writings. The story of Jesus' attendance at the marriage at Cana, Theobald shows, could be taken by rigorous ascetic advocates such as Tertullian and Jerome as a somewhat grudging acceptance of first marriage, but as implicit rejection of second marriage.

On the other hand, some exegetes felt impelled to "tame" already "hard" Biblical injunctions. As noted above, 1 Timothy's "Paul" self-corrected so as to "lighten" ascetic rigor. Jeremy Barrier, in his essay, shows how Greek scribes reduced an encratic version of the Beatitudes in a Coptic version of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* to something "merely ascetic". Kovacs illustrates Clement's "taming" of 1 Corinthians 7:9 ("better to marry than to burn") by citing his explanation that the verse should be taken to apply only to *second* marriage. Likewise, Merkt shows how Pauline texts counseling renunciation of wine were "softened" by interpretations that appealed to intertexts from Psalms and the Wisdom Literature celebrating the joys of the vine, or that conceded with Paul, that each follower of Jesus "had his own gifts" (1 Cor 7:7), which might not include such abstention. Preferences regarding the ascetic life could find support one way or the other by the verses the commentator chose to argue his case as Leemans shows through Basil of Caesarea's choice of texts in his promotion of cenobitic over anchoritic asceticism.

What passages of Scripture might most handily assist the ascetic exegete? 1 Corinthians 7 was often a text-of-choice for those advocating sexual renunciation or at least extreme moderation in marital relations (as Van der Sypt and Hunter make clear). Surprisingly, however, 1 Corinthians – or even

the New Testament – does *not* dominate the discussion in the Church Fathers' writings here considered. This is true even for Clement's treatise on marriage, *Stromateis* 3, Kovacs notes; since Clement believed that Paul was also the author of the Pastoral Epistles, he could cite verses from these books praising marriage and childrearing to "tame" the more ascetic message of 1 Corinthians 7. Even *within* 1 Corinthians 7, a clever exegete could isolate the verses emphasizing the "holiness" of children (7:14) or the "calling" of even non-celibate Christian (7:17, 24).

Why are New Testament passages less in the forefront than we might expect? The essayists offer two plausible reasons. For one, if an ascetic writer were addressing a group already committed to celibate renunciation, there was no need to emphasize verses counseling celibacy over marriage (as the tables of Biblical citations Leemans provides in his essay on Basil's *Asketikon* make clear). Second, if a thoroughly "Christological" reading of Old Testament books was in place, New Testament passages found no special favor: Old Testament verses did just as well, as Brakke shows in the case of Evagrius Ponticus. Moreover, if ascetic interpreters could construe Old Testament figures such as Elijah, Elisha, and Jeremiah as "virginal exemplars", then (as Meiser claims) the Old Testament could provide inspiring ascetic paradigms.

To what extent should the exegete argue for *difference* between teaching and examples drawn from the Old Testament and those from the New? How far should the argument from the "difference in times" be pressed? For some writers, as Clark shows in her examination of the Pelagian treatise "On Riches", the Old Dispensation was deemed decidedly inferior to the New, even worthy of mockery. Yet in the intriguing dialogue constructed by the author of the *Life of Helia*, Burrus argues, one book of that *Life* was devoted to showing the *continuity* between the examples and teaching of the Old Testament and those of the New; while a second book argued for their sharp *difference*; and Book Three, a graceful resolution, showed how both marriage and child-bearing could be taken "literally" (with the Old) and "spiritually" (with the New). Another intriguing example is furnished by patristic commentators' treatment of John the Baptist: as Meiser shows, he was a character standing in-between old and new, but when the ascetic features of the lifestyle were brought to the fore, he could become a model for Christians ascetics in his clothing, food, and "lifestyle".

Was there a correlation between Christian writers' treatment of Judaism and their treatment of Old Testament examples and practices? Not necessarily, some essayists conclude: Old Testament books could be fully and approvingly exploited, but "Jews" did not usually thereby receive any higher evaluation. Thus Jacobs shows the rhetorical use to which Origen could put the topic of Jesus' circumcised body; Brakke, how easily Evagrius appropriated language of a "second circumcision" for Christian purposes; and Burrus, how the message of Exodus 12 (on the Paschal sacrifice) could be preserved for

Christians “through transformation”, resulting in a certain ambivalence toward Judaism. On the other hand, Clark illustrates how the author of the treatise “On Riches” deems those Christians who refuse to divest here and now no better than “Jews”, who are very negatively cast. Although the author of this treatise could construe Christianity as a religion of “law”, he by no means thought that Christians should imitate the rich patriarchs of old.

An intriguing aspect of the essays concerns *how* the exegetes wrought rigorous – or, in some cases, less rigorous – meanings from the Biblical texts they employed to advance their positions. Here, Weidemann elaborates the ways in which even within the New Testament books themselves, some manipulation of previous materials either produces or reduces ascetic meaning. The techniques with which patristic commentators worked by no means devolve into something as simple as “literal” versus “allegorical” readings. Sometimes authors who criticize allegorical interpretation abundantly use it themselves, as Samuel Moawad illustrates in the case of Shenute. The essays on Origen and Evagrius, to be sure, show the wonders of allegorical interpretation, while the treatise “On Riches” brings out in full rigor the “literal” application of Jesus’ claim regarding the rich man’s entrance to Heaven. In some cases, as Chin shows for Origen in his *Homily 20 on Joshua*, the power of scriptural words is such that they can do their work without even being understood.

In one technique, scribes and exegetes could add to or change the text on which they worked, to make it more agreeable to orthodox sentiment, as Barrier shows in the case of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. They could also alter their *own* writings, adding Biblical verses to give fuller support to a particular position, as Ambrosiaster did in his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, as Hunter illustrates. As noted above, even by the mere repositioning the time of an event’s occurrence (as Weidemann’s example of Luke’s positioning of Peter’s cure of his mother-in-law *before* his call to discipleship) could effect the necessary ascetic message. And the emotional force of Biblical verses could be strengthened if a bishop (as Hoffmann details in the case of Cyprian) was highly adept in using rhetorical techniques and tropes to rouse his audience.

“Contextualization” was another common way of creating ascetic meaning, or, alternatively, lessening the ascetic rigor of a text. Thus Clement, as Kovacs shows, appealed to the notion of contextualization against his Gnostic opponents: they must quote the *whole* of a Biblical passage, not merely single out a few words that might advance their cause. And the lively dialogist, the young virgin Helia, in Burrus’ account, accuses those who oppose her desire to remain a virgin of “selective quotation”: if they took whole passages in context, she argues, they would see that her claim for rigorous ascetic renunciation was correct.

Yet “decontextualization” could also lend assistance to the ascetic exegete. By focusing on the meaning of a particular word, quite removed from the larger sense of a sentence, the exegete could create the meaning he needed for his argument. Thus Karman illustrates how patristic exegetes could creatively

interpret the word “until” (ἕως) in Matthew 1:25 (that Joseph did not know Mary “until” she had given birth) to argue that Joseph and Mary *never* had sexual relations. Just as Jesus vowed to be with his disciples “until” the end of time (Matt 28:20) – i. e., forever – so the perpetual virginity of Mary might be given an exegetical assist by a different understanding of one word.

“Internalization” was another interpretive ploy. Ancient Christian writers could perform acts of “interiorization” to make verses describing outward acts and deeds (e. g., fornication) apply to inward states, as Horyacha shows for Pseudo-Macarius; historical facts and eschatological promises similarly become events in the mystery of the soul. Texts themselves become “internalized” in the monastic’s mind, so that the distinction between text and reader breaks down, as Brakke argues in the case of Evagrius.

Similarly, Biblical events that took place in times past could be “eternalized”, as Burrus puts it, so that they are always happening “now”. As an example, she cites Origen’s treatment of Passover, which happens “now” for the Christian in the act of reading. As early as Luke’s Gospel, Weidemann claims, the link of celibacy with the resurrection could be recast so that it was a requirement for real Christians *now*, not just in an “angelic” life in the Kingdom. Last, Christians who thought that only in the afterlife would poor and rich be equalized were harshly judged by the author of “On Riches”, who claimed that such equality should not be relegated merely to a mythical Golden Age of yore or to a future millennium: past and future should be condensed into the “now” when it comes to redistribution of wealth.

Last, a “gender-bending” exegetical technique is evident in some of interpretations. As Davis notes in his discussion of the “crowns” that martyrs and ascetics are represented as winning, the metaphor of “winning the crown” derives from the (male) activity of the athletic contest – but how easily it could cross sexes to apply to women ascetic devotees, such as Severa, Macrina, and Paula! Women are thus assured that if they have run the race to the finish, they, along with male contenders, will receive their “crown”.

By such exegetical techniques and innovative readings, Christian writers and clergy of ancient Christianity created ethical, theological, and ascetic meaning for their respective audiences. The essays in this volume thus illustrate just how *much* work was expended by Biblical and patristic authors to advance their respective positions in debates over early Christian asceticism.