

# “Let Him Guard Pietas”: *Early Christian Exegesis and the Ascetic Family*

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Often those Church Fathers most concerned to press the new ascetic elitism of the fourth and fifth centuries might also produce surprisingly “profamily” interpretations of biblical texts that otherwise supported an ascetic agenda. Through analysis of patristic interpretation of Luke 14.26 (an arguably “anti-family” passage of the New Testament), this article seeks to explore the intersection of ascetic and family values in the scriptural interpretation of ascetic late antiquity. Through exegetical strategies (intertext and context) that emphasized at once the multiplicity and the unity of biblical meaning, the most ascetic of Church Fathers might also become the most productive proponents of particularly distinctive notions of Christian family life.

“*This hatred bears no malice.*”

—Didymus the Blind

## INTRODUCTION: SCRIPTURE, MEANING, AND POWER

In her study *Reading Renunciation*, Elizabeth A. Clark explored how “the Fathers’ axiology of abstinence informed their interpretation of Scriptural texts and incited the production of ascetic meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Although Clark suggests at the outset that social historians might find her

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1. Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 13.

study “literary,”<sup>2</sup> she notes also that literary analysis should not be divorced from material life, since both work towards “an analysis that raises issues of social power and cultural interests—a sociology of interpretation, if you will.”<sup>3</sup> The interpretation of meaning, and the imposition of meanings, are a cultural point at which a commonly perceived dichotomy between late antique “rhetoric” and “reality” breaks down, where we see that beliefs rarely exist independent of actions, and that the power relations of discourse involved more than “just words.” From a perspective of inextricably bound rhetoric and reality,<sup>4</sup> I propose to examine how the Christian family might be subjected to this “sociology of interpretation,” and ask how families themselves were sites of discursive transformation in the age of asceticism.

Clark’s analysis of how Christians produced ascetic meaning from worldly Scriptures can, perhaps ironically, provide students of early Christian families with one path out of “the problem of asceticism” discussed in the introductory essay above. On the one hand, Clark has demonstrated with finesse how significant the interpretation of the Bible was to crafting a dominant and persuasive (ascetic) identity in early Christian culture. On the other hand, she has also shown us how important it is to comprehend the Fathers’ *manner* of reading in order to understand the sort of thought-worlds they confronted and transformed. For early Christians, the interpretation of Scripture was not a literary exercise carried out in the remote recesses of the mind. Biblical interpretation served to map out the moral and salvific relationship between humans, the world, and divinity.

To plot the multivalent interpretation of Christian families on this moral map, I shall focus on the exegetical life of a single gospel verse, perhaps the most “antifamilial” New Testament text, Luke 14.26: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, cannot be my disciple.”<sup>5</sup> Certainly in the age of asceticism, Christians at times read this verse (and

2. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 12. “Literary” presumably stands in some sort of hypothetical opposition to “historical.”

3. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 373.

4. See the introductory piece, “Fathers Know Best? Christian Families in the Age of Asceticism.”

5. This gospel passage seems oriented towards a male head of household so that, among the family members listed, “husband” is notably absent. This absence will be glossed over by ascetically minded Fathers intent on devising an ascetic economy of salvation for both male and female family members. See the discussion on Ecdicia in Rebecca Krawiec’s article below.

similar “antifamilial” dominical injunctions) as a call to renounce the life of this world in order to gain a foretaste of the world to come, as a sign that traditional family life was inherently opposed to the higher calling of the spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Quite often, however, bishops and other ascetic exegetes who, in different circumstances, might press this asceticizing line, chose instead to modulate the antifamilial tone of their Bible. The dominical hatred of family can even be used, in the commentaries and sermons and letters of Christian Fathers, as a crucial text in the productive definition of Christian family life.<sup>7</sup> This notable interpretive move, deploying the Lucan “hatred” of family in the service of constructive engagement with Christian families, deserves closer attention. We should not merely dismiss this as an “antiascetic” countermovement on the part of more “profamily” Christian authors: some of the more rigorous ascetic minds of late antiquity may be found pressing this novel line. Nor can we simply say that “in private” contemplation the ascetically minded Fathers allowed themselves to express the inner, “spiritual” (and ascetic) meaning of the Bible while proffering a watered-down, family-friendly version in public sermons to the *vulgus*. A more complex sense of interpretive elasticity, and a more productive interplay of ascetic rhetorics and familial realities, emerges out of this exegetical matrix.

I limit myself here to the writings of later fourth- and early fifth-century authors, writing in contexts private and public, apologetic and polemic, in a period during which ascetic ideals and monastic practice were still crystallizing across the Christian Roman Empire. Ascetic elites were always a demographic minority among mainstream Christians, but it is in this period especially—between the radical resistance of early “encratite” movements and the chill institutionalism of later clerical celibacy—that this elite minority voice began to engage productively, and necessarily, with the realities of the majority.<sup>8</sup> Issues such as the merits of virginity, the

6. On the “straight” reading of this passage, for ascetic renunciation, see Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 151 n. 283, 195, 275 n. 75 as well as eadem, “Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1995): 356–80.

7. My use of “Fathers” to describe the authoritative figures of early Christian discourse is deliberate: see Virginia Burrus, “*Begotten Not Made*”: *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity*, *Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1–20.

8. See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, *Lectures on the History of Religions*, n.s. 13 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), xv, on the “disturbing strangeness” of early

exaltation of Mary, and the valorization of celibate clergy and monastics over married laypersons were still very much under debate in this period.<sup>9</sup> The ideological work of these authors was particularly significant in the foreclosure of cultural and religious horizons that seems to characterize the later Byzantine and medieval worlds.<sup>10</sup> By noting the strategies and functions of such occasional “profamilial tendencies,” we can begin to discern how Christian families were molded to fit new Christian identities in the fluctuating period, and how the family itself exerted a measure of influence on those newly fashioned identities.

### “HATE YOUR FAMILY”: INTERTEXT AND CONTEXT

Hilary of Poitiers probably speaks for many concerned Christians when he writes of Luke 14.26, “‘This saying is hard’ [cf. John 6.60], and the command is difficult: to impose family disloyalty [*impietas*] as a condition of religious perfection.”<sup>11</sup> Hilary’s method for reconciling this dominical precept with Christian life signals the primary strategies and effects of Christian exegesis of the family: first he introduces an intertext that would seem to contradict Luke 14.26. Here he uses the Leviticus penalty of death for those who “curse mother and father” (Lev 20.9). When commenting on Psalm 118(LXX).113, “I have hated my enemies,” Hilary says:

But the rationale for this same command must ignore that of the gospels themselves. For the Lord, who commands that we love our enemies [cf.

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Christian discourses of sexual renunciation in the broader stream of the history of Christianity.

9. See the ongoing work of David Hunter, such as his “Resistance to the Virginal Ideal in Late-Fourth Century Rome: The Case of Jovinian,” *TS* 48 (1987): 45–64; “Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome,” *J ECS* 1 (1993): 47–71; and “The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine,” *CH* 69 (2000): 281–303, in which he treats most explicitly the rhetorical productivity of exegesis in exploiting the discursive “paradoxes” of family and asceticism.

10. Averil Cameron, “Ascetic Closure and the End of Antiquity,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 147–61.

11. Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus in psalmo 118* 15.2 (SC 347:156). In many “family”-oriented exegeses, *pietas* and *impietas* seem to signify the classical concept of “family (dis)loyalty.” Hilary likely executed this long, detailed work in the mid-to-late 360s, following Origen’s precedent of dividing his commentary according to the acrostic format of Ps 118 (LXX): see the introduction to *Hilaire de Poitiers: Commentaire sur le Psaume 118*, vol. 1, ed. Marc Milhau, SC 344 (Paris: Cerf, 1988).

Matt 5.44], and condemns to death those who curse their father or mother [Lev 20.9], in another place commands the opposite [*rursum praecepit*]: “If anyone comes to me, and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” [Luke 14.26]. So these commands would seem contradictory [*contraria*], that by his command not only hatred of parents but even cursing them deserves death, but he also says the opposite, that no one can be his disciple unless they hate their father and mother and wife and children and brother and sisters and their own life.

This is the point where Hilary notes that “this saying is hard, and the command difficult.” Both commands destabilize each other, by their very juxtaposition calling into (unthinkable) question the unity of Scripture, that roadmap of Christian salvation. Such a disjunction is untenable for the late ancient Christians, as Hilary goes on to remark: “But nothing hard, nothing impious [*impium*], nothing contradictory has been ordered by God’s commands.”<sup>12</sup> There must be an exegetical resolution to the “difficulty” of Luke 14.26, and Hilary prepares the way for this resolution by first throwing the Lucan command off balance. Destabilizing the dominical command in this way, often through juxtaposition with another biblical passage, an intertext, was a common first step in “redirecting” the reading of Luke 14.26.<sup>13</sup> The mechanism of intertextuality as employed in early Christian biblical interpretation allowed for this rearticulation of meanings by which “several utterances . . . intersect[ed] and neutralize[d] one another.”<sup>14</sup> In addition to this Leviticus curse, the

12. Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus in psalmo 118* 15.3 (SC 347:156). *Durum* and *contraria* have already been introduced; Hilary signals which “commandment” he will prefer by disavowing any *impietas* (here “irreligiosity,” but also shades of “family disloyalty”).

13. On intertextuality, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); and Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 122–28. Poststructuralist intertextuality (emerging from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva) usually signifies “a kind of language which, because of its embodiment of otherness, is against, beyond and resistant to (mono)logic” (Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, *The New Critical Idiom* [London: Routledge, 2000], 45). What scholars of early Christianity delineate as intertextual interpretation usually involves a double gesture of dialogic or heteroglossic openness and monologic or homoglossic closure. On intertextuality in early Christian discourses, see Stephen J. Davis, “Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men,” *J ECS* 10 (2002): 1–36.

14. Julia Kristeva, “The Bounded Text” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, tr. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 36; cited in Allen, *Intertextuality*, 35.

Fathers also often introduced the positive command to “honor father and mother,” since it appeared in both Old and New Testaments (Exod 20.12, Matt 15.4, Eph 6.2).<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, many Christian exegetes destabilized and reframed Luke 14.26 through intertextual use of its synoptic parallel, Matthew 10.37–38, where Jesus does not command blanket hatred so much as thoughtful prioritization: “Whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” This milder intertext of Matthew 10.37 became a common way of understanding Luke 14.26 as a passage about the correct “ordering” of loves (God first, family second), and not about eternal divisions of loyalties (God versus the family). John Chrysostom, for instance, invokes both synoptic passages in one of his *Homilies on Matthew*:

For it is holy to render to them [i.e., one’s parents] every other honor [τιμήν]; but when they demand more than is owed to them, you must not obey. On this account Luke says, “If someone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” [Luke 14.26]. This does not command us simply to hate them, since this is very much against the law [παράνομον]. Rather [it is as if he were saying]: “If he wants to be loved more than me, hate him for it. For this destroys both the beloved himself as well as the lover.”<sup>16</sup>

The play of intertexts in this passage (in addition to the synoptic Matthean parallel, Chrysostom invokes Old Testament Law and deutero-Pauline *Haustafeln*) allows Chrysostom to recite Luke 14.26 and conclude that Christ does not command “simple hatred.” Family “honor” (*pietas*) remains intact as long as family members respect the primacy of God’s love. Intertextual nuancing of Luke 14.26 provides an opening to reinterpret subtly the dominical command on family hatred, and thus to refashion Jesus’ message about the Christian and his or her family.

15. See, for example, Ambrose, *Expositio in psalmum 118* 15.22 (PL 15:1417–18), on this same passage from Psalms, where he invokes Exod 20.12 et al. instead of Lev 20.9. But see also Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 151, where she cites a passage from the Pachomian corpus where Luke 14.26 is used to destabilize Exod 20.12.

16. John Chrysostom, *Hom. 35 in Matt. 1* (PG 57:407). Such prosopopoetic rephrasing of scriptural words is a common rhetorical device of Chrysostom; on rhetorical sophistication in Chrysostom, see Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation*, *Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie* 40 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2000).

The potential open-endedness enabled by intertextual readings is not, however, allowed to remain eternally open: Christian exegetes took the opportunity of rhetorical reformulation to redirect scriptural commandments on “family.” To this end, intertext is followed by context, as Chrysostom’s conditional paraphrase above (“*If he wants to be loved more than me . . .*”) suggests. Once Hilary has thrown Jesus’ words (according to Luke) off balance, for instance, he further moderates its severity by establishing an appropriate context for any family disloyalty that might be enjoined by Jesus. For Hilary, the reference to Jesus’ followers carrying their “cross” in Luke 14.27 provides a specific and potent context for the exegete: the bygone days of Christian martyrdom. Hilary invokes Christians going to martyrdom in the face of family disapproval,<sup>17</sup> and argues that family hatred had its own particular time and place:

Therefore they should be hated when they do not want us to carry the cross of martyrdom, when they dissuade us from following God through the example of his suffering. This hatred is honest and useful, to hate those who try to draw us away from Christ’s love.<sup>18</sup>

By narrowing the scope of the passage, Hilary renders it less severe, a mark of Christian piety in the face of non-Christian disbelief, the words of a more “profamily” Jesus.<sup>19</sup> Jesus’ words drift more harmlessly into the heroic Christian past, more obviously suited to Perpetua and Thecla than the lay Christian in Hilary’s church.<sup>20</sup> They also introduce important ways in which “family” gives historicized shape and contours to production of Christian identities.

17. Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus in psalmo 118* 15.3 (PL 9:600). Such images of family members attempting to stop a Christian’s martyrdom would have been frequent: the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* would have been a commonly retold story of family opposition to martyr glory.

18. Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus in psalmo 118* 15.3 (SC 347:156–58).

19. See likewise Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus super psalmos 138* 46 (PL 9:815), on *odium religiosum*, where Luke 14.26 is invoked in a similar manner: “But clearly, since peace and justice and truth is the sentiment he displays to them, he says, ‘Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and do I not see the against your enemies? With perfect hatred I have hated them, and made them into my enemies’ [Ps 138(LXX).21–22]. This is religious hatred, as much as the one who hates God is the object of our own hatred. We are commanded to love our enemies [Matt 5.44], but *ours*, not God’s. For, according to God, even father and mother and wife and children and brothers are liable to be hated [Luke 14.26].”

20. So also Cyril of Alexandria opens one of his sermons on the martyrs Cyrus and John by citing Luke 14.26, claiming that “for this reason we believe these holy men should be honored,” for giving up their loves and lives for God through martyrdom (*Hom. 3 in trans. sanctorum Cyri et Joanii* [PG 77:1104]).

Church Fathers provided similar contexts to designate when hatred of one's family might be "honest and useful." Ambrose of Milan similarly understands Luke 14.26 not to signal the demise of the family *per se*, but rather the division of pious Christian from scoffing non-Christian even within the same family: "Indeed even according to the simple mode of understanding, the child who follows Christ sets him before his *gentile* parents, and religion [*religio*] is set before the duties of family loyalty [*pietatis officii*]." <sup>21</sup> The parents to be hated in the Lucan passage are suddenly gentile parents, and a specific context for "useful hatred" is established: the conflict between Christian and non-Christian. <sup>22</sup> Religion and family are not mutually exclusive (as Jesus' call in Luke 14.26 *might* have implied); rather intertext and context place them in relation to one another: *religio* is "set before" *pietas* at those moments (and only those moments?) when there is no common *religio*. While this situation might certainly obtain in fourth-century Milan, as one member of a family embraced a Christian life that left other family members indifferent or perhaps even scornful (one need think only of Monica and Augustine), there is a vaguely historicizing gesture on Ambrose's part, evoking for his audience those first-century families divided by the Christian message when the movement was still young (cf., for instance, 1 Cor 7.12–16). <sup>23</sup> Jesus' words once again are not allowed to disrupt the coherent nature of the uniformly Christian family. If only all family members were believing Christians, this "useful" hatred might go by the wayside. Ambrose's interpretation of Luke 14.26 does not convey the moral of "familial hatred in the service of God" but rather "godly service for the unity of families." Both Hilary and Ambrose have gently historicized and contextualized this passage into a more practicable register: family hatred is not an enduring condition of Christian life, but rather an understandable (if increasingly dated) response to unbelievers, that separates Christian from

21. Ambrose, *Expositio in Lucam* 7.146 (CCL 14:265), emphasis added.

22. The intertext to Luke 14.26 is the passage under explicit comment in this section of Ambrose's commentary, Luke 12.51–53, another particularly "antifamilial" passage: "Do you think I come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." Ambrose envisions this (first-century) "division" between converted son and daughter-in-law and gentile parents.

23. See Judith Evans Grubbs, "'Pagan' and 'Christian' Marriage: The State of the Question," *J ECS* 2 (1994): 387–91.

gentile.<sup>24</sup> As Didymus the Blind, the fourth-century Alexandrian exegete, remarked, “This hatred bears no malice.”<sup>25</sup>

Other intertexts and contexts allowed bishops and exegetes to deploy the Christian family as a bulwark of division, reunion, identity, and difference, often in public discourses (homilies) delivered to congregations of primarily nonascetic composition.<sup>26</sup> Augustine, in a homily on the Sermon the Mount, employs intertext and context to render the Lucan antifamilial passage into a typically anthropological lesson about religious distinction writ large, and not simply (if at all) about Christian families *per se*. Like Hilary, Augustine laments the difficulty of this passage: how, he wonders, could God expect Christians to “love their enemies” (Matt 5.44) and “hate their families”?<sup>27</sup> The answer comes not from the nature of families, but the nature of humans: the Christian should not hate his or her family, but rather hate *in* them what is perishable and

24. Ambrose also uses Matt 10.37 to create a historicized division between Jew and Christian. In *De Iacob beata vita* 2.2.25 (PL 14:624), while allegorizing Jacob’s two brides Rachel and Leah as Christ’s two “brides,” the Church and Synagogue, he writes: “No one should believe that the reverence of paternal family loyalty [*paternae pietatis reverentia*] has been marred, because someone sits [in judgment] while their father remains standing [for judgment], since it is written, ‘Whoever sets father and mother before me is not worthy of me.’ Whenever it is a matter of religion, faith ought to possess the judge’s seat, and likewise criminal faithlessness [*rea perfidia*] to stand [i.e., in the docket].”

25. Didymus the Blind, *Commentarii in psalmos* 112.22–27 (text in *Didymos der Blinde: Psalmenkommentar*, part 2: *Kommentar zu Psalm 22–26*, 10, ed. M. Gronewald, Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen 4 [Bonn: Rudolf Habelt Verlag, 1968], 246), also employing the intertext of Matt 10.37: “so hating father and mother does not signify [σημαίνει] that hatred according to which we reject and despise, but according to which we don’t place them before [προκρίνειν αὐτούς] God. So too with wives and children and siblings. ‘And even hate your own life,’ he says. The one enduring death under martyrdom hates his own life, but on account of the savior: for he sees what he’s talking about: this one hates his father ‘on my account,’ not absolutely [ὄυ κατάπαξ]. The savior is to be set before all, so therefore someone hates his mother and father on the savior’s account. This hatred bears no malice [τὸ μίσος τοῦτο οὐ διαβολὴν φέρει].”

26. As I stated above, and as Krawiec demonstrates ably in her article (“From the Womb of the Church”), facile distinctions between “internal” ascetic discourses and “public” profamily discourses are not tenable.

27. Augustine, *De sermone Domini in monte* 1.15.40 (CCL 35:44): “But how true it is that ‘the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and those who do violence snatch it away’ [Matt 11.12]! How much violence is in this task, that a person should love his enemies and hate his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers!” Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarius in Lucam* 14.26 (PG 73:794) uses not only Matt 5.44, but a string of other intertexts to soften Luke 14.26: Exod 20.12, 1 Tim 5.10, Eph 6.1, Eph 5.25, Eph 5.33, and Eph 5.8.

corruptible. “A good Christian cherishes in a woman, whom he wishes to be remade and reborn, the creation of God; yet he hates the joining [*coniunctionem*], the corruptible and mortal coupling [*copulationem*]. That is, he cherishes in her what is human, and hates what is wife.”<sup>28</sup> In a later revision of this exegesis, Augustine clarifies that families in and of themselves—as a set of relations—do not belong to this “corruptible” and fleshly world, since “there would still be families by descent [*cognationes*] and families by marriage [*adfinitates*], even if original sin had never come into being, and the human race would have increased and multiplied without death.”<sup>29</sup> Families are not the object of hatred, only the corruptible and sinful element that has crept into them since the Fall. Like everything else in this postlapsarian world, families have been tainted by human sin and corruption. Families have not been more or less tainted; they neither bear particular stain nor are they somehow exempt. Therefore, it seems, Jesus was not talking about the family specifically in this passage, but rather using a vivid and gripping example, the family, to convey a universal truth: life and relations on earth are tainted by the Fall. The woman *qua* God’s creation is to be cherished; the woman *qua* wife in this fallen world is to be detested.

By reading Luke 14.26 in an anthropological sense, and not an immediately social sense, Augustine and like-minded interpreters could also relegate the passage to a more eschatological context. “Family” articulates the human condition in the fallen present and in the redeemed future. In the same text in which he exhorts Christian husbands to “love the woman and hate the wife,” Augustine interprets Luke 14.26 with intertextual passages on eschatology and the flesh, such as Matthew 22.30 and 1 Corinthians 15.53.<sup>30</sup> The good Christian learns to “hate” fleshly bonds on earth because they will no longer exist in the kingdom of heaven:

How much force must this task bear, that a person should love his enemies, but hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers! Indeed he who calls us to the kingdom of heaven commands both. But how these do not contradict each other is easy to demonstrate, with his guidance. . . . Indeed the eternal kingdom where he deigns to call his disciples, whom he

28. Augustine, *De sermone Domini in monte* 1.15.41 (CCL 35:44–45).

29. Augustine, *Retractationes* 1.19.5 (CCL 57:57–58). Augustine also adds an exegetical postscriptum perhaps derived from Ambrose or Hilary: “we love the enemies achieving the kingdom of God, and we hate our relatives if they hold us back from the kingdom of God.”

30. Matt 22.30: “In the resurrection they will not marry, nor will they be made wives, but they will be like God’s angels in Heaven.” 1 Cor 15.53, 55: “he will clothe the corruptible in incorruptibility, and he will clothe this mortality with immortality.”

also calls his brothers, does not have these sorts of temporal relationships. It is fitting therefore that whoever wishes to practice here and now the life of that kingdom should not hate those persons, but those temporal relationships by which *this life*, which is fleeting, is supported, a life agitated by being born and dying. Because if he does not hate that which binds mortal bonds [*terrena coniugia*], he will never love *that life* in which there will be no state of being born and dying.<sup>31</sup>

Again, the hateable family serves for Augustine as a useful locus for tackling the more difficult metaphysical questions of human fallenness and salvation. What in us will persist in the heavenly life without sin? What will be lost? What will the quality of human relations be? What will the quality of *humans* be? Should I *really* hate my wife, mother, father, and children? For Augustine, the answer remains “no,” with a proviso: humans should not hate their mothers, but should be prepared for that day when the fleshly bond of maternity will no longer be as prominent.

John Chrysostom likewise transposes this family hatred to an eschatological context, but with perhaps less metaphysical finesse than Augustine. John imagines some poor soul approaching the heavenly tribunal still burdened by concerns about his family and other worldly matters, unmindful of Luke 14.26’s warning: “There you sit, lingering [*σχολλάζων*] over your desire for a woman, for laughter, for merriment, for luxury!” Woe to this Christian who, in the presence of the divine judge, cannot learn to hate the things of this earth and enter the realm of angels.<sup>32</sup> The hatred of family, John suggests, will be a necessary passport into the afterlife. Even though the hatred is praiseworthy for John, since it is a condition of eternal blessedness, it is still an ultimately deferred condition, one towards which humans will not progress until they are ready for the heavenly gates.

In addition to deferring the hatred of Luke 14.26 to a future life like Augustine, John also provides us with an excellent and extreme example of deploying intertext and context to reshape this antifamilial passage, and so redirect Christian questions about the proper family. John pushes Luke 14.26 to the point where the content of the precept is not as important as its “shock value.” According to John, Jesus very wisely laid out both difficult and easy commands for his followers, “so you will not flee from them as laborious [*ἐπιπικρῶν*], nor scorn them as exceedingly easy [*εὐκόλων*].”<sup>33</sup> John discusses Jesus’ comments in Matthew 11.30: “For

31. Augustine, *De sermone Domini in monte* 1.15.40 (CCL 35:44).

32. John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 73.3–4 (SC 125:352–54).

33. John Chrysostom, *Hom. 38 in Matt.* 3 (PG 57:431).

my yoke is easy and my burden light.” He uses Luke 14.26 as his most compelling example of a “difficult” decree that would seem, on the surface, to belie Jesus’ statement:

Someone asks how this burden is light, since it says, “unless you hate mother and father”? . . . If you fear and tremble hearing about the yoke and the burden, fear doesn’t come from the nature of the command, but from your own laziness [ῥαθυμίας]; if you were prepared and ready, everything would be easy and light for you.<sup>34</sup>

The very appearance of “difficulty” redirects the point of the passage entirely, through intertext and context. Jesus has already *told* John’s congregation that the yoke is easy and the burden light. If they perceive difficulty, the fault lies not with Jesus but with their own “lazy” souls. In this way, John removes this antifamilial saying entirely from the realm of the family. The difficulty of the passage *is* its point, separating the fearful from the faithful, giving Christians an inner measure of their own preparedness for a life in Christ. Questions about what it means for a Christian to hate his or her family are ultimately occluded by that Christian’s concern for the state of his or her soul.

In addition to separating the faithful from the lazy, the gentile from the Christian, and earthly life from the life to come, the dominical command of family hatred in Luke 14.26 could also be deployed against heretics. Jerome, in his *Dialogue against the Pelagians*, latches upon Luke 14.26 as proof positive that humans can never be sinless (as he insists the Pelagians claim).<sup>35</sup> Even the apostles, he claims, were chided by Jesus for their faithlessness; who are the Pelagians to claim they have surpassed the apostles? Can they possibly claim, in the face of such “impossible” commands as the hatred of their families, that they have become perfect and sinless?<sup>36</sup> Here Jerome, whose unyielding exaltation of virginity and asceticism licensed his harsh and often shocking rhetoric on married life

34. John Chrysostom, *Hom. 38 in Matt. 3* (PG 57:431). Chrysostom employs Luke 14.26 similarly in *Hom. 19 in Acta Apost.* (PG 60:157), where it appears in a chain of passages that would seem (to the thoughtless auditor) to suggest the gospels have little in the way of “good news” (τὰ εὐαγγέλια).

35. The “dialogues” are putatively held between Critobulus, the “Pelagian,” and Atticus, the “Catholic.” Before running through his evangelical prooftexts, Atticus summarizes his opponent’s position (which he must disprove through Scripture) as: “You say it is possible to avoid sin for all time” (*Dialogus adversus pelagianos* 2.14 [CCL 80:73]).

36. Jerome, *Dialogus adversus pelagianos* 2.15 (CCL 80:73–74), in a list of *testimonia* designed to demonstrate the impossibility of sinlessness.

and family,<sup>37</sup> concedes that hating the family is, in fact, impossible: Jesus has laid this trap precisely in order to snare those heretics who, puffed up with pride, believe they can do no wrong.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, ascetic Christians also engaged in what we might call more “natural” readings of Luke 14.26, that is, as a support for Christian renunciation. For instance, John Cassian makes a pointed alteration in the famous story of Antony the Great’s monastic calling. Cassian recounts that Antony was inspired by the antifamilial rhetoric of Luke 14.26 and not (as in Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*) the call to “eunuchdom” and perfection in Matthew 19.21.<sup>39</sup> But it is worth noting that even these overtly asceticizing interpretations often use the same strategies as more “profamilial” readings (destabilization through intertext and recasting through context), frequently in order to rein in their “antifamilial” rhetoric and create clear markers of difference and sameness.

For example, Augustine cites Luke 14.26 in letters of ascetic counsel, but in a blunt manner, reserving the devastating impact of this command for the specific context of ascetic argument. On one occasion, Augustine invokes Luke 14.26 for the vexing question of Christian wealth. He first concedes that riches are evil (*pecuniaria damna*), and then advises that we can use them to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, and store up treasure in heaven: “If for Christ’s faith evil riches are to be endured, then people hate their own riches. And if the world threatens their renunciations and withdrawals [*orbitates vel separationes*], they would hate their parents, brothers, children, wives.”<sup>40</sup> Here the specific renunciatory context of the passage reduces hatred to something milder—resentment, perhaps, of necessity in the service of ultimate virtue.

37. See, among others, Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 68–104 on Jerome’s consistently antitraditional rhetoric of ascetic superiority.

38. In a similar vein see Ambrose’s more “profamilial” recuperation of Luke 21.23 (“Woe to those with child and who give suck in those days”), in *Expositio in Lucam* 10.22–25 (CCL 14:352–53) which, according to Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 99–100, reflects “the later Fathers’ worry over Manicheism and related heretical movements” that denigrated physical reproduction.

39. John Cassian, *Conlationes* 3.4 (CSEL 13:69); compare to Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 2.3–4 (SC 400:132–34). For Cassian, this represents the highest (and most difficult) of the three “calls to renunciation [*tres vocationes*].” Later in the *Conferences*, Cassian relates the tale of Theonas, who unsuccessfully attempted to deploy Luke 14.26 against his wife, who refused to practice continent marriage with him (*Conlationes* 21.9 [CSEL 13:583–84]). Here Luke 14.26 is placed in exegetical opposition to Eph 6.2 (“honor your mother and father”). See also Basil of Caesarea, *Regula fusius* 8, 12 (PG 31:936, 949) for similar monastic use of Luke 14.26.

40. Augustine, *ep.* 157.4.35 (CSEL 44:482).

In writing to a certain Laetus, persuading him not to give up monasticism for his pleading (and threatening) mother, Augustine cites Luke 14.26 at the beginning of his argument.<sup>41</sup> Does Laetus feel bad about

her burdening her organs for ten months, and the pains of childbirth, and the agonies of childrearing? *This* is what you must do away with to be saved, *this* part of your mother must you lose, so you may find her again in eternal life. Keep in mind that *this part of her* should you hate, if you love her, if you are Christ's recruit.

And what is "this part of her"? "This is surely fleshly affection, and resonates only with the 'old man.'" As Christ's "recruit," Laetus must look beyond the fleshly ties of this earth. Augustine adds a warning, though, that sharpens the specific context of his exegesis:

It's not for just anyone to be ungrateful to their parents, nor to deride the long list of benefits he has received from them in this life, nurtured and cared for. Let him rather guard family loyalty in all cases [*servet potius ubique pietatem*], for it has its place when greater things [*maiora*] do not call.<sup>42</sup>

Just as ascetic endeavors are the exception to the rule of corruptible life on earth for Augustine, so too family "hatred" in the form of extreme monastic rejection of the family is read as an extraordinary condition. For everyone else, the mass of Christians, the norm is *pietas*, family loyalty. Even at its most asceticizing, Luke 14.26 provides the patristic exegete with material for constructively approaching and patrolling the Christian family.

For the Fathers, interpretation of Luke 14.26 and similarly antifamilial scriptural passages provided an opportunity to establish religious distinction: between Christian and gentile, between ascetic and nonascetic, between orthodox and heretic, between "higher" and "lower," between this world and the next. In this sense, reading families turns out to serve many of the same purposes of identity construction as "reading renunciation." By simultaneously introducing and diffusing the great "difficulty" of Luke 14.26 through intertexts and contexts, the Fathers preserved the stratified social field of the family,<sup>43</sup> while at the same time transforming it

41. Augustine, *ep.* 243.2 (CSEL 57:569–70). He cites the whole pericope, Luke 14.26–33. See also the discussion of this letter in Krawiec, "From the Womb of the Church," 289–92.

42. Augustine, *ep.* 243.7 (CSEL 57:574).

43. See the sentiments of Basil of Caesarea, *de baptismo* 1.1.4 (SC 357:96–98): "this hate is not the setting of one's mind on injury, but refusing to listen to those dragging us away from the virtue of piety."

into a terrain for the complex working out of difference. The Christian family, in the same fashion as the ascetic's body, should be a site for the production of Christian distinction, as Ambrose suggests when interpreting another famously "antifamilial" passage from the Gospel of Luke:<sup>44</sup>

The ethical teacher [*moralis magister*]<sup>45</sup>—who offers himself as an example to others—although he is himself the instructor, he has even followed his own instructions. Indeed the one who will go on to instruct others that whoever will not leave behind his father and mother is not worthy of the Son of God,<sup>45</sup> he subjects himself first to this commandment; he will not refute the obedience of maternal family loyalty [*maternae . . . pietatis*] (as it is his own command, "Who does not honor mother and father will be put to death"),<sup>46</sup> but he knows that he ought to be more full of paternal mysteries than maternal affections. Nevertheless parents are not injuriously turned away, but rather the bonds of the mind are taught to be more religious than those of the body.<sup>47</sup>

The Christian mind and the Christian body find their appropriate place through the idiom of the Christian family, perhaps paradoxically affirming the central importance of mothers, fathers, spouses, and children in the exalted Christian life.

## CONCLUSION

My point in highlighting the strategies by which the Fathers affirmed traditional notions of family, even as they elaborated a discourse of ascetic elitism, has not been to argue the enduring, universal centrality of "the family" in contradistinction to the fleeting, contingent ideal of renunciation. We should not imagine that the Fathers, somehow against their own (ascetic) will, found themselves compelled by the power of

44. The passage under examination here is Luke 8.20–21: "And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, waiting to see you.' But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'"

45. Ambrose is surely looking ahead here to Luke 14.26 although the "hatred" of mother and father is muted through (possibly) the intertextual echo of Matt 10.37 (although the phrase *relinquet matrem et patrem* actually comes from Gen 2.24, on marriage, repeated in Matt 19.5 and Mark 10.7; this verse does not appear in Luke, however).

46. The biblical wording of the fifth commandment (Exod 20.12 and Deut 5.16) does not include a death sentence, nor does the curse language of Deut 27.16. Ambrose is likely conflating Exod 21.17 ("Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death"), thereby strengthening the "profamily" stance of Jesus (who, as the Word, was considered by Ambrose the "author" of the Ten Commandments).

47. Ambrose, *Expositio in Lucam* 6.36 (CCL 14:187).

family values to tote a “profamily” banner. Nor has it been my intention to demonstrate how the Fathers willfully distorted or otherwise denatured the original, pristine message of liberation or radical transcendence of social structures found (arguably) in the Lucan passage under examination. Indeed, if the creative employment of intertextual and contextual interpretations, the productive juxtaposition of ascetic souls and earthly families, should suggest anything, it is the degree to which these two central bedrocks of social identity in the early Christian world—“scriptural truth” and “family ties”—demand constant interrogation by students of late antiquity.

In ancient discourses of Christian identity and in scholarly studies, both Scripture and family run the constant risk of being naturalized, of escaping the careful scrutiny afforded other structures of Christian meaning and identity in late antiquity (such as martyrdom or monasticism) that are less fluidly incorporated into a modern or postmodern context.<sup>48</sup> In fact, neither the Bible nor the family stood as solid, immutable fixtures in the diverse worlds of Christian late antiquity, secure signposts by which believers of occasionally incompatible values might navigate the common enterprise of Christian salvation. As the familial exegesis of the ascetic Fathers suggests, the very productivity of early Christian discourse relies on interpretive gestures that are fluid and open: the play of intertexts and contexts, the willingness to entertain the possibility of paradoxical meanings and consequences within the authoritative nodes of Bible and family, the ability to speak, as Didymus did, of a family “hatred without malice.”

Yet we should also note how such gestures of exegetical openness and fluidity can simultaneously be employed to institute certainty and fixity: multiple intertexts and contexts are marshaled to arrive at a singular and, perhaps, totalizing understanding of Christian identities and relationships.<sup>49</sup> The solid bulwark of “family values” might serve to stabilize multiplicitous exegeses of Scripture, even as the solid bulwark of “scriptural meaning” serves to stabilize conflicting and conflictual understandings of the Christian family. Family and Scripture slip so easily into “natural” categories for ancient and modern readers because they are so

48. See, for instance, Dale B. Martin, “The Construction of the Ancient Family: Methodological Considerations,” *JRS* 86 (1996): 49–51, and the studies cited in the introductory essay, “Fathers Know Best.”

49. On “totalizing discourses” in early Christianity, see Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, Sather Classical Lectures 55 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 2, 57–58, 220–21.

constructed by the authoritative meaning-making practices of Christian leaders. Through deft biblical interpretation of Jesus' harsh, potentially "antifamilial" words, the ascetic Fathers exerted pastoral influence over even the most "worldly" of social systems.

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