

Fathers Know Best? Christian Families in the Age of Asceticism

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The lure of the early Christian family has grown strong in recent years: for cultural historians seeking the roots of “Western” civilization,¹ for social historians trying to explore the lives of non-elite populations in the ancient world,² and for religious historians still trying to answer the question, “What difference did Christianity make?”³ Although students of the earliest era of Christianity still press for more work to be done in their period,⁴ the steady growth of scholarship on the Roman family from

1. See, for instance, *A History of the Family*, 2 vols., ed. André Burguière et al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1996), esp. Aline Rouselle’s essay “The Family Under the Roman Empire: Signs and Gestures,” 1:269–310; and more recently Jack Goody, *The European Family: An Historico-Anthropological Essay*, *The Making of Europe* (London: Blackwell, 2000), 27–44.

2. Family studies have notably drawn the attention of historians interested in the history of children, women, slaves, and gays. A few recent examples: Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Life-Styles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); eadem, “The Fathers and the Children,” in *The Church and Childhood*, ed. Diana Wood (London: Blackwell, 1994), 1–27; Chris Frilingos, “‘For My Child, Onesimus’: Paul and Domestic Power in Philemon,” *JBL* 119 (2000): 91–104; Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994).

3. Famously posed by Ramsay MacMullen, “What Difference Did Christianity Make?” *Hist* 35 (1986): 322–43, who answers that the major difference lies in ethics and sexual morality.

4. As noted by Halvor Moxnes, “What is a Family? Problems in Constructing Early Christian Families,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 1, in a series of studies focused mainly on the New Testament and subapostolic periods.

Republic to later Empire continues to set the stage for studies of Christian families in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁵ Roman historians have laid helpful groundwork through their thorough investigations of the creation of ancient kinship—through marriage, inheritance, and adoption—and kinship’s destruction—through divorce, disinheritance, and death.⁶ The advent of Christianity—with impact both historical and historiographic—introduces fissures and cracks in this sturdy scholarly bedrock, however, complicating our notions of ancient family structure and development.⁷

Scholars seeking early Christian families, especially after the third century, encounter two stumbling blocks—ancient sources and modern assumption—that intersect in what might be termed “the problem of asceticism.” By this we mean, first of all, the nature of our surviving early Christian sources. Although families certainly merit discussion among ancient Christian authors, we possess neither explicit Christian treatises *de familia* (as do classicists) that might balance the numerous Christian

5. On the role of the Roman family in the Christianization of the Empire, see Anne Yarbrough, “Christianization in the Fourth Century: The Example of Roman Women,” *CH* 45 (1976): 149–65 and Michele R. Salzman, “Aristocratic Women: Conductors of Christianity in the Fourth Century,” *Helios* 16 (1989): 207–20. At times Roman historians show the effect of the boundaries of academic disciplines, as they deftly treat “classical” sources but misstep in their handling of Christian sources, as, for instance, the otherwise thorough work of Geoffrey Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity: The Rise of Christianity and the Endurance of Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2000), at 40–43 (using Ephesians and 1 Timothy as “authentically Pauline” writings), 44 (calling Tertullian “a lawyer by trade”), and 221 n. 206 (attributing the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* to Palladius).

6. The continued work of Beryl Rawson and Suzanne Dixon, among many others, epitomizes the excellent ongoing work in Roman families: *Childhood, Class, and Kin in the Roman World*, ed. Suzanne Dixon (London: Routledge, 2001); eadem, *The Roman Family* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997); eadem, *The Roman Mother* (London: Routledge, 1990); *The Roman Family in Italy: Status, Sentiment, Space*, ed. Beryl Rawson and Paul Weaver, Canberra: Humanities Research Centre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson, Canberra: Humanities Research Centre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives*, ed. Beryl Rawson (London: Routledge, 1992).

7. Nathan, *Family in Late Antiquity*, is particularly concerned with this question of “Christianization of the Roman Family.” See also Andrew S. Jacobs, “A Family Affair: Marriage, Class, and Ethics in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” *J ECS* 7 (1999): 105–38. Nevertheless, not all studies of the family recognize the advent of Christianity until it has already transformed western Roman society into the middle ages: see David I. Kertzer and Richard P. Saller, *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) for a collection of articles jumping from antiquity to the middle ages (it is notable that the editors are, respectively, a modernist/anthropologist and a classicist).

treatises *de virginitate*,⁸ nor the types of statistical data on day-to-day life that make, for instance, studies of the early modern family seem socially grounded and authentic.⁹ From the fourth century onward, Christians appear increasingly to approach the description of the Christian life on a sliding scale of renunciatory ideals and practices.¹⁰ To be “like the angels” meant to renounce all that was unheavenly, fleshly, weighty with earthly concern:¹¹ food, sex, money, politics, and, it would seem, family.¹² This

8. Treatises do emerge on specific topics that we tend to associate with “family” issues: Augustine’s *de bono coniugali* (which is a companion piece to his *de virginitate*), John Chrysostom’s *de inani gloria* on the rearing of Christian children, Jerome’s letters on the education of children (*epp.* 107 and 128); and, of course, early Christian authors spoke in other contexts about families and aspects of family life. Our point here is that we do not possess specific theoretical treatments of “the family”; Christians did not adapt such classical formats as Xenophon’s *Oikonomikos* until well into the medieval period: see Sarah Pomeroy, *Xenophon Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 68–90. Arguably, the only such theoretical framing of family and households by early Christians appears in the “household codes” (*Haustafeln*) of Colossians and Ephesians: see John M. G. Barclay, “The Family as the Bearer of Religion in Judaism and Early Christianity,” in Moxnes, *Constructing Early Christian Families*, 66–80, esp. 75–80.

9. See the comments of Dixon, *Roman Family*, 12–19, as well as Sarah Pomeroy, *Families in Classical and Hellenistic Greece: Representations and Realities* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 1–16, where both scholars discuss methods in family studies and the pitfalls of ancient sources. The dearth of statistical data has not stopped historians of the later Roman Empire from attempting *Annales*-style histories, based mostly on funerary inscriptions and Egyptian papyri: see, for instance, B. D. Shaw, “Latin Funerary Epigraphy and Family Life in the Later Roman Empire,” *Hist* 33 (1984): 457–97, expanding the methodology used by Shaw and R. P. Saller, “Tombstones and Roman Family Relations in the Principate: Civilians, Soldiers, and Slaves,” *JRS* 74 (1984): 124–56 (the conclusions of which have been critiqued by Dale B. Martin, “The Construction of the Ancient Family: Methodological Considerations,” *JRS* 86 [1996]: 40–60). Shaw correlates the statistical tombstone reading of his earlier articles with an analysis of Augustine’s writings (of sufficient breadth and size to provide a “valuable corpus of data”) in “The Family in Late Antiquity: The Experience of Augustine,” *Past and Present* 115 (1987): 3–51.

10. So that it has been noted more than once that some of our best sources for ideas and even social practices in Christian marriage, for instance, come from treatises *de virginitate*: see Carol Harrison, “The Silent Majority: The Family in Patristic Thought,” in *The Family in Theological Perspective*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 87–105. Nathan, *Family in Late Antiquity*, 93–96, attempts to glean details on Roman and Christian ideals of marriage from the *Vita Melaniae Iunioris*, remarking that “Pinian and Melania in some ways had a typical aristocratic marriage, with the exception of their joint celibacy” (93).

11. John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* (SC 125:126): “The angels do not marry nor are they given in marriage; nor does the virgin. Always are they waiting on and serving God: this too does the virgin.”

12. See Jerome, *ep.* 3.4.1–2 (CSEL 54:15): “Bonosus bears his cross, he thinks not about tomorrow nor does he look back. . . . That young man, educated in the world

perspective emerges from the styluses of those individuals (usually men) most invested in delineating a morally superior brand of Christianity, men who were generally well educated and well situated in the institutional hierarchies of Christian churches.¹³

Additionally, students of early Christianity are faced with the temptation to naturalize certain ideas and structures, seeing “families” only when they correspond to a predetermined ideal.¹⁴ Even when scholars acknowledge that the extant literature is skewed, they still attempt to draw from it a social history, a pervasive and persuasive world view that can then appropriately frame our understanding of ancient Christian societies. The most dazzling example of such an attempt to move from literary particularity to social reality is Peter Brown’s justly famous *The Body and Society*. Brown charts an intellectual history that, he argues, will culminate in the grim social reality of the middle ages.¹⁵ Sexual renunciation becomes the lens through which to bring an entire social world into focus.

The “problem of asceticism,” therefore, becomes the problem of how to study a particular social or ideological concept against the perceived grain of our sources: discovering families in an age of ascetics. Yet we must also take care not to construct a “black-and-white” vision of the ancient Christian world: to remove the blinders of the ascetic movements is not to deny the power of ascetic discourse altogether. The history of early Christian families need not be a counterhistory, designed to “un-

with us in the liberal arts, who had sufficient wealth, first place of honor among his peers, now has spurned his mother, his sisters, and a brother very dear to him.” See Elizabeth A. Clark, “Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1995): 356–80, but see also Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in Early Syriac Hagiography,” *J ECS* 4 (1996): 27–56, who argues in part that “[t]he distinct ascetic tradition of Syriac Christianity, however, allowed a convergence of familial bonds and ascetic vocation in ways that may have proved especially significant for women” (28).

13. See Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), on the ways in which even sixth-century “household manuals” served to “accommodate the experience of *matronae* within Christian moral language in light of the ascetic takeover” (111).

14. Slightly masked but quite present in such sweeping studies as Goody, *European Family*, and similar works.

15. 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), esp. 428–47: “By studying their precise social and religious context, the scholar can give back to these ideas a little of the human weight that they once carried in their own time. When such an offering is made, the chill shades may speak to us again. . . .” (447, in a wonderfully Brownian Homeric simile).

mask” the corporeal reality behind rarefied ascetic rhetoric, any more than the history of early Christian asceticism needs to deny that, at times, pious Christians ate, drank, and biologically reproduced.

Social historians have already crafted studies on the family from within the heart of institutional ascetic Christianity. Over a decade ago Brent Shaw made some interesting observations on the “family in late antiquity” based (ironically) on the writings of the familiarly and sexually troubled Augustine of Hippo Regius.¹⁶ More recently, Blake Leyerle has collated information on childrearing from the sermons and treatises of John Chrysostom,¹⁷ the bishop who lamented with Paul the “tyranny of desire (τῆς ἐπιθυμίας ἢ τυραννίδος)” that necessitated conjugal sex,¹⁸ and who insisted that the reproduction of children was *not* the goal of Christian marriage.¹⁹ Both Shaw and Leyerle attempt to surmount the “problem of asceticism” by combing their sources for “inadvertent asides” and “stray comments,”²⁰ points at which Augustine and Chrysostom are presumably speaking “off the cuff,” and revealing (perhaps unintentionally) realistic details of the ancient family.²¹

In addition to these attempts to glean social history from ancient Christian oratory, some studies have probed the use of family discourse as theological or intellectual models for Christian society.²² While providing

16. Shaw, “Family in Late Antiquity.”

17. Blake Leyerle, “Appealing to Children,” *J ECS* 5 (1997): 243–70.

18. John Chrysostom, *Hom. 19 in 1 cor.* 2 (PG 61:153), citing here 1 Cor 7.9: κρείττον γάρ ἐστι γαμήσαι, ἢ πυροῦσθαι.

19. John Chrysostom, *Propter fornicationes* 3 (PG 51:213): “For there are two reasons why marriage (γάμος) had been introduced: so that we might be chaste (σωφρονῶμεν) and so that we might become fathers. Of these two the pretext for chastity (σωφροσύνης) is primary. For when desire came, so marriage came along to excise excess, and to persuade men to take but one wife. For by no means does marriage make one have children (τὰς παιδοποιίας), but rather it was the command spoken by God: ‘Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth.’ And they bear witness to this who married but did not become fathers. Therefore its primary cause is the reason of chastity, especially now, when the whole world has been filled with our children.” See Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 195–96, 266, 272.

20. Shaw, “Family in Late Antiquity,” 10; Leyerle, “Appealing to Children,” 244.

21. Nathan, *Family in Late Antiquity*, takes this method of “combing the sources” to an extreme, compiling a critical mass of sources, but concludes that “as a whole, much remains speculative” (189), perhaps suggesting the limitations of such a methodology.

22. Recent examples include Denise Kimber Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), who theorizes a link between notions of Christian orthodoxy and metaphors of kinship and legitimacy; Theodore S. de Bruyn, “Flogging a Son: The Emergence of

broad insights into complex Christian *mentalités*, these studies generally do not posit a link between family ideology (expressed “metaphorically” or “conceptually”) and real Christian families in the way Brown moved from rhetorics of renunciation to a social world of sexual repression. The double bind of the “problem of asceticism” would seem to nudge us continually towards frustrated aporia about the social *realia* of early Christian families. One possible avenue that we explore in the following articles is a move into more rhetorically-informed methods of historiography in order to think in new ways about how family discourses, like ascetic discourses, could effectively construct Christian reality in antiquity.

In the firmly hierarchical and status-oriented societies of Christian late antiquity, rhetoric was the common vehicle for negotiating, asserting, and contesting power relations.²³ We cannot then speak of “mere rhetoric,” or casually remark on the simply reflective or dissociated nature of authoritative ancient Christian speech. If postmodern theorists are coming now to insist that “no human utterance [can] be seen as innocent” and that the “place of language, culture and the individual in political and economic processes [can] no longer be seen as simply derivative or secondary,”²⁴ these assertions would surely come as no surprise to the ancient Christian exegete or abbot.

With this in mind, we shall approach the study of the early Christian family and the “problem of asceticism” from two discursive vantage points, designed to integrate the social and the rhetorical and to emphasize how Christian language and Christian life might have converged in the early Christian family. In “‘Let Him Guard *Pietas*’: Early Christian

the *pater flagellans* in Latin Christian Discourse,” *J ECS* 7 (1999): 249–89, who traces the language of paternal punishment in Latin theological writings; Virginia Burrus, “*Begotten Not Made*”: *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), who examines the familial language of Trinitarian treatises in order to discuss notions of gender and masculinity in the period; and Michael Penn, “Performing Family: Ritual Kissing and the Construction of Early Christian Kinship,” *J ECS* 10 (2002): 151–74, who uses the familial ritual of kissing to trace Christian community construction.

23. See, for instance, Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, Sather Classical Lectures 55 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire*, The Curti Lectures (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); and Richard Lim, *Public Disputation, Power, and Social Order in Late Antiquity*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 23 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

24. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, The New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 1998), 37.

Exegesis and the Ascetic Family,” Andrew S. Jacobs examines the growing body of ascetic exegesis in the fourth and fifth centuries, probing specifically those ascetic readings of seemingly antifamilial passages of the New Testament that recuperate “the family” as a positive locus of Christian identity, adaptable in the hands of the ascetic interpreter. Rebecca Krawiec, in “‘From the Womb of the Church’: Monastic Families,” attends to the role of the biological family *within* the ascetic worlds of late ancient Christianity, in order to uncover how “antifleshly” discourses might be welded to new and persuasive Christian ideologies of the fleshly family. While these two perspectives on family discourse in early Christianity are certainly not exhaustive, they do provide a geographic and contextual scope through which we might begin to gauge the ways in which the discourse of families might be as productive for Christian identity as the discourse of renunciation. Our goal is not to prove that the Fathers were really pro-family, thereby securing some patristic grounding for contemporary family values agendas. Rather, through this overview of complex, and often internally contradictory discourses of earthly and heavenly life, we are attempting to explore how otherwise ascetically-minded “church fathers” found in their families not simply a metaphor for the Christian community but also a locale where salvation might be wrought, or lost.