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978-0-521-89490-6 - Authorised Lives in Early Christian Biography: Between Eusebius and Augustine

Michael Stuart Williams

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION: BIOGRAPHY AND TYPOLOGY

And so was God here then, but now has gone on a journey? God can always do these things.

(Apa Apollo, quoted in the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 8.47)

Living Scripture

In 1897, the State of Massachusetts took possession of the original manuscript of what was inaccurately described as the log of the Mayflower – it was in fact, the seventeenth-century history *Of Plymouth Plantation* by William Bradford, who had rapidly established himself as leader of the Plymouth pilgrims and who spent much of his life as Governor of the new colony. In his speech on the occasion, Senator George F. Hoar welcomed the acquisition and declared that there had been nothing like this history of the early American colonists ‘in human annals since the Story of Bethlehem’.¹ In making this grand claim the Senator was only following the example of the Pilgrim Fathers and indeed of Bradford himself, for whom parallels were easy to draw between their own age and the age of the first Christians in the New Testament, or else between the predicament of the new arrivals and the travails of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. As Bradford looked back in his history on the arrival of the Mayflower at Cape Cod, he asked:

May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: ‘Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and He heard their voice and looked on their adversity’ etc.²

¹ Bradford 1952; the text was completed in manuscript around 1650, and a first full printed edition was published at Boston in 1912; I am using the 1952 revised edition by Samuel Morison, with Hoar’s comment quoted at Morison 1952: xxxviii.

² Bradford 1952: 63; cf. Deuteronomy 26:5–7.

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Like the others who would come to refer to the new colony and its surroundings as the ‘New English Israel’ or the ‘New English Canaan’, Bradford found his parallel with the Israelites who could say, ‘the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey’.³

It is perhaps not unexpected that someone such as Bradford should see around him the ‘signs and wonders’ of Deuteronomy, and the ‘mighty hand and outstretched arm’ of God guiding the settlers, but it is important to note that for these seventeenth-century Puritans this was not simply a matter of literary allusion; rather it reflected a genuine belief about history. The evident connection between their own escape from persecution and entry into the Promised Land and that of the Israelites as recorded in Scripture was not to be considered merely a product of the author’s rhetorical skill; rather, it was to be supposed that God Himself, as the divine author of events, had arranged them in precisely this way. The belief was that ‘God had commissioned this small band of colonists to fulfil the special mission of creating a new Jerusalem in a barbarous land.’⁴ The biblical parallels in works such as Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* were therefore an indication of the pilgrims’ true place as successors to the nation of Israel in God’s divine plan:

Between Israel and Plymouth exists more than a parallel, more than an analogy; for when God’s chosen peoples go in search of Canaans, the ancient lives are reenacted. The past lives again in the present.⁵

Thus the Pilgrim Fathers imagined themselves to be a new chosen people, watched over and directed by divine providence; and they found proof of this in the similarities between the events and personalities of their own time and those recorded in the authoritative accounts of God’s work as set out in the scriptures. They believed themselves to be pioneers not only in a new land but of a new

³ Deuteronomy 26:8–9 [RSV]; Cotton Mather would later proclaim ‘Good News for the Israel of God, and particularly for His *New English Israel*’ in his *Wonders of the Invisible World* (Boston, 1692), quoted at Lowance 1977: 245; Thomas Morton had already published his account of the *New English Canaan*: Morton 1637.

⁴ Elliott 1977: 206–7. ⁵ Rosenmeier 1972: 99.

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LIVING SCRIPTURE

biblical age, such that the ‘contemporary events’ of their own lives ‘formed part of sacred history’.⁶

Yet this willingness on the part of the Plymouth pioneers to see themselves in such terms should not be dismissed as ‘mere sectarian extravagance’: indeed, ‘there was nothing extraordinary or perverse’ in their understanding of Scripture as providing both a pattern for events of their own time and a guide to their interpretation.⁷ Their attitude was not universal among Christians, but it was not unprecedented; and if seventeenth-century Protestantism was a ‘golden age’ for this kind of interpretation, nevertheless it may also be recognised as a prominent feature of Christian thought in the later Roman empire.⁸ There too a formerly persecuted sect had found itself suddenly presented with a world in which it was now the dominant party, and with an opportunity to build for itself a new relationship with that world. The guiding hand of divine providence could easily be seen in the conversion of the Emperor Constantine; and like William Bradford, many Christian authors turned to the scriptures as a means of interpreting that and subsequent events.⁹ The Bible was an obvious recourse in the face of the apparent intervention of God. It offered not only a historical precedent for strange and marvellous events, but also a structure and narrative within which they could be located and rendered meaningful. For many in late antiquity, the understanding of contemporary history came to be predicated on, and structured by, the re-enactment of Scripture.

There is evidence of such an attitude among the explicit doctrinal statements of many late-antique theologians; but as a theory of history, it is manifested above all in contemporary historical writings.¹⁰ The church histories and chronologies composed

⁶ Zwicker 1977: 116. ⁷ Fabiny 1992: 113.

⁸ Fabiny (1992: 10) does indeed pick out these two periods as successive ‘golden ages’.

⁹ It is notable too that Bradford locates a parallel with the post-Constantinian church at the beginning of his history, quoting a passage from the fifth-century historian Socrates to help paint his picture of contemporary Europe; Bradford’s history, which was unusual in including ‘letters and even long official documents’ (Morison 1952: viii), may even have taken some inspiration from Eusebius of Caesarea.

¹⁰ For the traditional theological approach to ideas of biblical typology and re-enactment, see especially the works of de Lubac (1947 and 1959), and Daniélou (1960); more recent works have engaged with the implications of particular late-antique approaches to biblical exegesis, as for example Dillon (1983) and Dawson (1992).

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by Christians in this period show a certain development of this approach, not least in the revealing attempts to combine history sacred and secular into a single universal narrative.¹¹ Yet the beliefs and assumptions which underlay Christian historical thinking in the later Roman empire may also be effectively approached through another literary form which developed in the wake of Constantine's conversion in the fourth century AD: one which also involved the relationship between the present and the past, and between the world of the Bible and the lives of contemporary Christians. Biography in the ancient world has at times been considered a poor relation of history – less ambitious in its scope, and often more various in its structure and style. It is one of the most self-effacing of literary genres, in which content has traditionally seemed to take priority over form, and so it has often resisted satisfactory definition: perhaps the best that can be said, at the risk of tautology, is that a biography provides an account of an individual life.¹² Christian biography presents further problems, and I intend to focus on the most problematic examples. Yet despite these difficulties of definition, or perhaps precisely because of them, the study of Christian biography can offer a valuable insight into an attitude to the world which was shared among a variety of different authors in the century after Constantine.

Christian biography

Insofar as it can be defined as a phenomenon in its own right, Christian biography can be said to have its origins in late antiquity. Of course, biographies – even biographies of Christians – were known before the conversion of Constantine. The written life had long been a significant part of Graeco-Roman culture, reaching perhaps its most lasting expression in the *Parallel Lives* of

¹¹ The contours of the Christian understandings of history were famously set out in Momigliano (1963), which remains the best introduction to the problem; more recent accounts of Christian attempts to write universal and sacred histories include Mortley (1996) and Inglebert (1996).

¹² See, for example, the discussion in Heffernan 1988: 38–54.

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Plutarch; and late-antique examples of the form can be seen as continuing some important aspects of this tradition.¹³ At the same time, biography had been employed as a Christian mode since that faith's very foundation in the gospels, and can be traced further back into the Hebrew scriptures.¹⁴ Attempts have been made to combine Christian and non-Christian biographies, under the early Roman empire especially, into an over-arching genre of 'aretalogy' defined by the inclusion of miraculous events.¹⁵ Even when this 'hypothetical genre' is rejected, however, studies of biography in the Roman empire have tended to concentrate on the similarities between Christian and non-Christian lives, and implicitly to regard them as comprising a common tradition.¹⁶ Yet there are also significant differences between pagan and Christian lives – in form and content, and in the underlying assumptions of the authors – and these differences are equally worthy of study.¹⁷ Thus without wishing to deny the possibility of non-Christian influence on Christian writings, it may reasonably be maintained that '*l'homme de Dieu biblique et hagiographique est autre chose que l'homme divin antique*'.¹⁸ Christian and non-Christian biographies can perhaps be usefully thought of as siblings: as interesting as what they share is what they also fail to share.

¹³ For ancient biography in general, the best introduction is Momigliano (1993); from a vast amount of literature on Plutarch, one particularly interesting study is that of Duff (1999). The development of biographical literature from a late-antique viewpoint is discussed in Cox (1983) and in Edwards and Swain (1997) – and particularly in the contributions of Edwards and Swain themselves. See also the review of this collection by Fox (2000). The collection edited by Hägg and Rousseau (2000) provides alternative perspectives on the issue of Greek biography in late antiquity.

¹⁴ BurrIDGE 1995; cf. Edwards 1997: 228–33.

¹⁵ Aretalogy is the concept used in Hadas and Smith 1965, and is further explained in Smith 1971.

¹⁶ Cox (1983: 1–4) provides a useful account of the problems of what she calls the 'hypothetical genre' of aretalogy, noting that the need for miracles would exclude such notable pagan and Christian lives as the *Life of Plotinus* by Porphyry and the so-called 'Life of Origen' – in fact one chapter of a larger work – by Eusebius of Caesarea. Cox nevertheless goes on to consider Christian and non-Christian lives as engaged in a common biographical enterprise.

¹⁷ For Momigliano, indeed, Christian biography was a very different enterprise from its ancient model, and Christianity 'influenced ordinary biography less than we would expect': Momigliano 1963: 88.

¹⁸ Van Uytenghe 1985: 566; cf. the account of hagiography and aretalogy in Van Uytenghe 1993.

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Elsewhere, a similarly fraternal relationship has been suggested between Christian biography and the acts of the Christian martyrs, as produced or set in the persecuted church of the first few centuries AD.¹⁹ It is again undeniable that there are many things that the two forms have in common; yet it seems reasonable to exclude the acts of the martyrs from the present study of Christian biography. Certainly by late antiquity there had been a noticeable shift away from martyr narratives and towards biography, so that Constantine's conversion coincided with the development of 'a very different narrative framework'.²⁰ Defining this new structure is notoriously difficult, but it seems intuitively appropriate to limit biographies to those works which present 'an account of a life'.²¹ While vague enough to include a range of works on the margins of Christian biography, such a definition would, I think, have to exclude martyr acts.²² For even when providing an unusually detailed account, martyr acts were concerned with portraying only a tiny proportion of human experience.²³ They offered an account of a death rather than an account of a life.

Thus distinguished on the one hand from the acts of the martyrs, and on the other from its non-Christian counterparts, a case can be made for late-antique Christian biography as a suitable object of study in its own right.²⁴ It will also be useful to maintain a distinction between 'Christian biography' and the more familiar, but also rather narrower, generic term 'hagiography'. Historically, studies

¹⁹ Bowersock 1995: 24. They 'constitute a twin literary offspring of early Christianity'.

²⁰ Wilson 1988: 109. This is not to say that martyrs lacked importance in the post-Constantinian church, and the various roles they played are ably demonstrated in Tilley 1997 and Grig 2004.

²¹ BurrIDGE (1995: 93) notes the view that biography 'is more than just an account of a life', but seems to disagree; Dihle, whom BurrIDGE was citing as a supporter of this maxim, in fact wished merely to make a distinction between 'die spezifisch griechische Kunst der Biographie', exemplified by Plutarch, and a looser conception of biography in general: Dihle 1983: 406, quoted at BurrIDGE 1995: 92. See also Edwards 1997, including criticism of BurrIDGE, and Fox 2000 on the difficulties of definition.

²² Swain (1997: 22–3) is prepared to label martyr narratives as in some sense 'hagiographical', but this seems to fall short of considering them to be full-blown hagiographies.

²³ Brown 2000: 159. '[M]artyrdom, the impending climax of their lives, had caused their past to pale into insignificance'; see also A. G. Elliott 1987: 11–19 and esp. 45: 'a very different narrative structure'.

²⁴ A case also made at Stancliffe 1983: 86–102, on the context of the *Life of Martin of Tours*.

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of the latter have often focused on formal and generic aspects, and have usually preferred the more obviously fictional or ‘artificial’ examples; even going so far as to exclude the work of writers from the fourth and fifth centuries AD – ‘the last representatives of classical antiquity’.²⁵ This is to recognise the fact that the first century after Constantine produced many more problematic texts – Delehay calls them ‘shot through with art and life’ – which would inevitably complicate such studies.²⁶ These texts have instead been quarried for the historical facts they may accidentally preserve or, in more sophisticated terms, for the evidence that they can supply concerning social relations in late antiquity.²⁷ Yet the variety of unusual forms and approaches taken by texts from the fourth and fifth centuries has more recently been understood as recommending them for closer and more detailed literary and historical study in their own right.²⁸ My intention is to extend this approach to

²⁵ Delehay 1998: 49. Here he specifically excludes Sulpicius Severus and Hilary of Arles, preferring to concentrate on ‘the artificial productions of later epochs which sometimes affect to be inspired by them’. Similarly, A. G. Elliott wishes to emphasise the ‘generative narrative matrix’ (1987: 10) underlying hagiography, and so chooses to study only the most obviously fictional examples of the form. Her study connects directly to the fourth century only through her use of Jerome’s *Life of Paul the First Hermit*; but her examples, and her broadly Proppian account of the genre’s conventions, are confined to a particular variant of hagiographical narrative as exemplified by the *Life of Onophrius*.

²⁶ Delehay 1998: 49. Indeed, it is not clear that a formalist approach is even productive with later medieval hagiography: so that Delehay, having excluded fourth-century texts, must admit that hagiography ‘may take any literary form suited to honouring the saints’ (1998: 4). A more attractive approach is provided by Heffernan, who emphasises historical contexts rather than formal literary analysis; but his focus is on medieval biographies such as the twelfth-century *Life of Aelred* (1988: 74–87).

²⁷ The emphasis on facts may be considered the traditional approach of the Bollandists; their work has been fundamental to any consideration of hagiography, but for some of its limitations see the discussion in Menestò and Barcellona (1994). The second model is perhaps most associated with the work of Peter Brown, although it captures only a part of his broad programme; for the potential difficulties of this approach, see Hayward and Howard-Johnston (1999), and especially the discussion at 16–20 (Howard-Johnston) and 32–43 (Av. Cameron). Brown himself has reflected upon the presuppositions of his study of hagiography in a number of places: see especially the third essay in Brown (1995); the debate and discussion in Brown *et al.* (1997); and the retrospective in Brown (1998) with the companion essays of Elm (1998) and Vessey (1998).

²⁸ Averil Cameron has frequently pointed out the need for such an approach to the biographical texts of the late-antique period, as at Cameron 1991: 2ff.; elsewhere she explicitly demands that biographies be considered not as ‘innocent histories’, but as ‘didactic and apologetic works’: Cameron 2000: 83. In recent years, scholars have taken up this challenge, often following on explicitly from the work of both Brown and Cameron, and of others such as Philip Rousseau and Elizabeth Clark. A particular concern with

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a broader category of late-antique Christian biography, of which hagiography may be considered a special case, and so to include a number of awkward texts which appear sufficiently complex to resist any simple conception of their literary genre.²⁹ These works may be thought of as taking part in what may be considered a Christian biographical discourse – a shared network of concerns and approaches, both literary and historical, which binds together a range of late-antique texts.³⁰

There are, then, numerous texts in this period which seem to exist on the margins of the more familiar genres of biography and hagiography, or which seem to found (or attempt to found) new genres of their own. Among these are some of the most famous works of the period by some of the most celebrated authors: it will suffice here to mention only the *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius of Caesarea and the *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo. Precisely because these works so conspicuously fail to conform to received expectations of content and form, they promise to be all the more useful in clarifying the character of Christian biography in the later Roman empire. If they are indeed to be established as contributing to a single, unified discourse, then it will not be through identifying any generic similarity but instead by demonstrating the

hagiography as a literary phenomenon can be recognised in Clark (1986) on Melania the Younger; a comparable approach is also evident in Brock and Ashbrook Harvey (1987) and in Ashbrook Harvey (1990), although in the latter examples there is a continuing focus on the historical figures obscured by the hagiographer's art. By contrast, and in line with the reflections in Brown (1995), the discussion of the *Life of Antony* in Brakke (1995) focuses (as does the rest of the book) on the hagiographer himself. Such an approach to hagiographies as revealing primarily the interests of the author is characteristic of much subsequent engagement with the form. Thus Cooper (1996) offers a reading which seeks to align hagiographies with the ancient novel; the 'fictional' aspects are foregrounded too in Coon (1997), who in addition seeks to demonstrate the theological and cultural revisionism of many of the works; most prominent in this respect among recent works have been Krueger (2004), which is devoted to Christian conceptions of authorship, and Burrus (2003), which focuses on issues of gender and sexuality. It will be noted that much of the work discussed here has taken for its subject the portrayal of holy women in late antiquity; that my own account discusses almost exclusively male authors and subjects should be seen not as a repudiation of this tradition but as a recognition of its great merit.

²⁹ Hagiography is acknowledged as a special case of biography (both Christian and non-Christian) at Brock and Ashbrook Harvey 1987: 14; but the Christian biographies I shall be discussing here seem resistant to a neat inclusion in either category.

³⁰ I am here adapting the term 'discours hagiographique' from Van Uytanghe 1993: 148–9, where he in turn credits it to de Certeau 1975.

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existence of a consistent set of assumptions about the writing of a life and its implications. For a biography – at least, a significant biography – can claim to be more than an account of a life. In addition, it can claim to be revealing some truth about the world, about lives and about life in general.³¹ Christian biographies in the fourth and fifth centuries AD were set apart by the nature of the truth they revealed, one unavailable to works written in any rival tradition: it was a truth bound up with a Christian interpretation of the world and its history – one expressed above all in the canonical scriptures.

Typology and history

The most significant factor which served to unify late-antique Christian biography was a collective engagement with the biblical tradition. The Old and New Testaments had formed the foundation of an unusually literary religion, and any new writings had first to negotiate a relationship with the authoritative biblical text.³² The importance of this scriptural tradition marked off Christian biography from its pagan counterpart; it was no mere window dressing, but was crucial to the conception, purpose and function of these Christian lives. Late-antique Christians possessed a canonical account of their own past, and it inevitably affected the way in which they viewed their present. They lived in the shadow of Scripture, in a world in which the most important events had already happened. The development of Christian biography in late antiquity can therefore be seen as a specific, polemical intervention – an attempt to redraw the familiar pattern of life in the later Roman empire. In contrast to secular and pagan approaches to biography and history, a close engagement with the Bible allowed the articulation of a distinctively Christian view of the world.³³

³¹ As noted by Goldberg 1981. ³² As recognised at, for example, Cameron 1991: 5–7.

³³ See, for example, the remarks of Reydellet (1985: 433) on the world-view of Ambrose of Milan: 'L'écriture lui fournit les éléments d'une théorie de pouvoir, elle lui inspire des comparaisons entre des situations contemporaines et des épisodes de l'Histoire sainte, elle lui propose des archétypes qui s'imposent à son imagination.' Cf. also Auerbach 1953: 156 on medieval mystery plays.

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Christian biographies from the century after Constantine can thus be understood as efforts ‘to continue, develop and adapt’ the conventions of the Bible.³⁴ As with William Bradford in the seventeenth century, this engagement frequently manifested itself in claims regarding the ‘re-enactment’ of Scripture in the contemporary world: claims which are bound up very closely with the concept and practice of ‘biblical typology’. These terms, and their assumptions and implications, will be important throughout my discussion of late-antique Christian biography. Nevertheless, it must be noted that there has been frequent disagreement about the right use of the term ‘typology’, whether referring to a hermeneutical method or to a literary strategy, and some of the difficulties must first be dealt with here.³⁵

One major problem in using the term is that, in the various ancient discussions concerning the interpretation of Scripture, a consistent technical distinction seems not to have been made between typology and allegory.³⁶ This in turn has led to the proposal that modern accounts should conform to the practice of antiquity, so that both typological and allegorical exegesis are subsumed under the blanket term of ‘spiritual’ or ‘figurative’ interpretation.³⁷ Yet although this may allow some insight into the way ancient authors explained their own practice to others, it is relatively simple from a modern vantage point to distinguish at least two different

³⁴ Penco 1968: 2. Hagiography ‘ha inteso continuare, sviluppare ed adattare . . . [la] . . . Sacra Scrittura’.

³⁵ These difficulties are well explained in the introduction to Charity 1966: 1–9. Interested readers are directed to Charity for a more complete account of the value of this understanding of ‘typology’. I should here like to acknowledge the contribution made to my thinking on the subject by a number of excellent works, among which the most notable have been Charity (1966), Frye (1982), Fabiny (1992), Barr (1966), Markus (1996), Irvine (1994) and Auerbach (1959). Not all of these writers have agreed with one another, and perhaps none of them would agree with me. I must therefore take full responsibility for the presentation of typology here and throughout this study.

³⁶ A difficulty pointed out most recently at Clark 1999: 74, citing de Lubac 1947. Much of my discussion below will be framed as a response to the comments of Clark, who has conveniently collected the critical work of many of her predecessors in her discussion at 70–8.

³⁷ Notably, again, by Clark 1999: 74–8. Such language may well correspond rather better to the ideas of many readers in the ancient world, although perhaps not to all: Augustine, for one, seems to have had strong ideas about the kinds of readings that were and were not permissible, which to a large extent correspond to what are nowadays labelled ‘typology’ and ‘allegory’: Markus 1996: 1–11 and *passim*.