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The Letters of St. Antony: Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint by Samuel Rubenson (Review)

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Book Reviews

Samuel Rubenson

The Letters of St. Antony: Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint

Bibliotheca Historico-Ecclesiastica Lundensis, 24

Lund: Lund University Press, 1990.

Samuel Rubenson's aim in this work is twofold. First, he seeks to rehabilitate and set on a firmer critical foundation a neglected work of early monastic literature: the *Letters of St. Antony*. Second, he wants to revise the conventional view of St. Antony and of early monasticism as arising largely from the world of uneducated Coptic-speaking peasants ignorant of Greek language and culture. Arguing that St. Antony has been handed down to posterity more as an ideal than as an historical figure, and that our understanding of early monasticism has been distorted as a result, Rubenson aims to recover the elusive "historical Antony" and situate him within a more complex, richly textured understanding of monastic origins. A proper appreciation of the *Letters* is crucial to this project according to Rubenson, for they reveal Antony to be not an illiterate monk but a person who "shared a Platonic view of man, his origin, nature and destination and was dependent for the integration of Christian thinking into this framework on Clement of Alexandria and Origen" (12).

In Part 1, Rubenson makes a compelling case for the authenticity of the *Letters* and provides an overview of their world-view. A meticulous comparative analysis of the numerous versions of the *Letters* (in Coptic, Syriac, Georgian, Latin, Arabic and Greek) leads him to the conclusion that they were originally composed in Coptic, a fact consonant with the attribution of the *Letters* to Antony. Other evidence also points to the *Letters*' authenticity: the nearly unanimous agreement of the early manuscript tradition in favor of Antony as author of the letters, in their Coptic original and in Greek translation; Jerome's mention of seven letters by Antony; citations from the letters by Shenute and Besa; the presence of passages from the *Letters* in the major fifth-century collections of *Apophthegmata*; and evidence, noted in several ancient sources, that Antony wrote letters. In a long chapter entitled "The Gnosis" Rubenson outlines the world-view of the *Letters*. The Antony of the *Letters* is well-acquainted with current philosophical ideas from the Middle and Neoplatonic tradition, has a penchant for allegorical interpretation of Scripture and sees the acquisition of self-knowledge as central to the spiritual quest. This is strikingly different from the ethos of either the *Apophthegmata* or the *Vita Antonii*, the other primary sources of information about Antony, and raises the question of which of these sources can be considered most historically reliable.

Rubenson addresses this question at length in Part 2. He draws upon documentary evidence preserved in contemporary papyri to show that it is inaccurate to think that the vast majority of the early monks were largely uneducated (as the *Apophthegmata* and the *Vita* suggest). The papyri, he argues, indicate a broader level of education and literacy in rural Egypt than has heretofore been imagined: they reveal consistent contact between Alexandria and the towns of upper Egypt, the presence in rural regions of a wide variety of scholars, philosophers, poets and bibliophiles and examples of book trade, calligraphers and Greek literature in the villages. This, together with evidence from the monastic sources themselves for literacy and education among the monks, leads Rubenson to conclude that “a large number of the first monks had a fairly high social background and some education and cannot have been strangers to the philosophical and religious ideas around them” (121). And this is more consistent with the picture presented by the *Letters* than by either the *Apophthegmata* or the *Vita Antonii*.

Rubenson tackles this question directly by arguing for the unreliability of the *Vita* and the *Apophthegmata* as sources for a historical reconstruction of Antony’s life (and by implication for early monasticism as a whole). Rubenson asks, for instance, whether Athanasius’ strong hagiographical and theological interests in composing the *Vita*, especially his desire “to enhance the concept of Antony as taught exclusively by God” (40), undermines the historical credibility of the document. The *Apophthegmata* has other weaknesses: the collection and recording of the sayings as late as the second half of the fifth century, the complicated manuscript tradition, the variants in different languages, and the likely presence of theological and ecclesiastical tendencies at work in the sifting and transmission of the material over more than a hundred years should make us cautious, he says, about using the sayings as literal and authentic reminiscences of the mid-fourth century. These perceived weaknesses in the other primary sources for Antony’s life further strengthen Rubenson’s main contention, that the *Letters of Antony* present us with the most plausible and coherent picture of Antony’s life and of monastic origins. Implied in this conclusion is the conviction that some of our conventional assumptions about the social, cultural and religious world of the early monks will need to be reevaluated.

This is a major work of scholarship on monastic origins and deserves a close reading by anyone interested in the numerous and complex expressions of early Christian asceticism. Still, I would note three areas where a more careful treatment of the issues could lead us toward a more nuanced and satisfying portrait of the culture of the early monks. First, Rubenson is too dismissive of sources other than the *Letters*. Research by scholars like Lucien Regnault, Graham Gould and Ruth Frazier has shown the extent to which the *Apophthegmata* can provide us with reliable access to the early monastic experience. Rubenson’s argument that the information in the *Apophthegmata* is suspect because of the later (theological and ecclesiastical) editorial interests that shaped the sayings into collections does not reckon with how much of the sayings material retains the ragged edges of its early, informal and spontaneous process of transmission from one monk to another. Second, regarding the apparent divergence of views of education and literacy in the *Apophthegmata*, the *Vita* and the *Letters*, Rubenson may be oversimplifying the

tensions and differences that existed between the so-called simple Coptic monks and those with greater education. These differences can be explained in part as arising from tensions between two cultures, oral and literate. Oral culture permeates early desert monasticism. A greater attention to its formative influence, as William Graham has shown in relation to Pachomian monasticism, could help to nuance the extreme distinction proposed by Rubenson and others between learned and unlearned, literate and illiterate.

Finally, regarding Antony's use of the Bible, it must be asked whether the allegorical method presented in the *Letters* was Antony's (and the other monks') preferred method of interpretation. In emphasizing Antony's preference for the allegorical and denigrating what he calls simple, literal interpretation, Rubenson neglects the importance of two basic aspects of the early monastic hermeneutic. First, there is the monks' use of sacred texts in battling the demons and in the process of discernment, something that is evident throughout both the *Apophthegmata* and the *Vita*, a practice that is both sophisticated and profound and which fits well with the understanding of the power of spoken language found everywhere in oral cultures. Second, and even more important, is the attention given by the monks toward fulfillment or realization of the sacred texts in their lives, their adherence to the commands of scripture. This practical attitude toward language (which is not the same as literalism), especially toward the language of sacred texts, can be seen throughout the early monastic sources. It signals not so much an inability or unwillingness to plumb the depths of scripture allegorically as a positive respect for praxis, a sense that understanding of Scripture was inseparable from engagement of the text through one's life. The ubiquitous and all-encompassing question heard on the lips of monks throughout the *Sayings*, "what am I to do?," suggests a tenacious attention they gave to "performance" of the sacred texts. Their embodiment of these texts in their lives is one of the qualities that their contemporaries found so compelling. The portrait of Antony as sacred exemplar, presented in the *Vita* and in the *Apophthegmata*, is consistent with this view.

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Owsei Temkin

Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991

Pp. xiv + 315. Cloth \$48.50; paper \$19.95.

Galen's Methods of Healing: Proceedings of the 1982

Galen Symposium

Edited by Fridolf Kudlien and Richard J. Durling

Studies in Ancient Medicine, 1

Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991. Pp. viii + 205.

Once upon a time it seemed possible to give an account of ancient Greek philosophy in both its classical and hellenistic expressions without mentioning the word "medicine." That time has passed. First of all, this last decade has seen the fruition of many years of the production of the necessary critical editions and modern