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## The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period by Yizhar Hirschfeld (Review)

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3. The prefaces to the various Cassiciacum dialogues are important as are the prefaces to various books of *De trinitate* and *De ciuitate dei*. A similar failure to treat prefaces in any detailed manner occurred in C. Boyer, *Christianisme et neoplatonisme dans la formation de saint Augustin* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1920), noted by J. O'Meara, *Against the Skeptics*, Ancient Christian Writers, 12 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1951), p. 20.

4. *Epistula XXI 2*: Sed arbitror Dominum meum propterea me sic emendare voluisse, quod multorum peccata nauarum, antequam expertus essem quid illic agitur, quasi doctior et melior reprehendere audebam.

*Frederick Van Fleteren, LaSalle University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

Yizhar Hirschfeld

*The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period*

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992

Pp. xx + 303. \$45.00.

Archeological excavations in Egypt during the past generation have added immensely to our knowledge and understanding of the early monastic world there. Yet until now there has been no thorough evaluation of the archeological evidence for early Judean desert monasticism. Hirschfeld's book admirably fills this gap, providing us with the most complete picture to date of Judean desert monasticism in the Byzantine period. The author's unparalleled first-hand familiarity with the archaeological evidence, the thoroughness with which he describes and analyzes it, and the sheer wealth of information he makes available (130 drawings and photographs and 14 maps and tables complement the text) mark this as a work of major significance.

In the introduction, Hirschfeld outlines the main literary sources for the study of Judean monasticism, describes the physical environment (noting such pertinent matters as the small size of the Judean desert, the relatively large number of water sources, and the concentration of monasteries in two main areas—the desert plateau and the Jericho plain), and gives a helpful historical sketch of the emergence and growth of monasticism in Judea (especially its expansion in the fifth century under the leadership of Euthymius the Great, Gerasimus, Sabas and Theodosius). Chapter 1 comprises an examination of the four main types of monasteries found in the Judean desert, the *Laura* (a community of monks who live in separate cells, spending most of the week in solitude), the *Coenobium* (where monks live a communal life with a daily routine of communal prayer, work and meals), the *Fortress monastery* (monasteries built in ruined fortresses erected during the Hasmonean and Roman periods) and monasteries built next to memorial churches (*coenobia*, generally intended to serve the needs of pilgrims coming to holy places from all over the Byzantine empire).

Chapter 2 focuses attention on *how* the monasteries were built. Hirschfeld notes that while some small monasteries, like that of Castellion, were built quickly (sometimes in a matter of months), larger *coenobia* such as the monastery of Euthymius took considerably longer to construct, up to three years. Nor was it uncommon for monasteries to be built in stages, with different "wings" being

added over the years. The archaeological evidence suggests (in a way the literary sources do not) that considerable planning went into the building of these monasteries; often there was a master plan with a carefully conceived layout and provisions for such matters as water drainage and storage—critical to the long-term survival of the monastery. Hirschfeld also notes the range of construction techniques that were employed in building the monasteries. Although the monks generally favored small, modest buildings and often used simple, crude techniques, the dimensions and the high quality of construction of some of the monasteries shows that occasionally professional builders were employed. Aesthetic considerations also figured into the building of the monasteries: in monasteries built on slopes, the doors and windows as well as the balconies were oriented toward the open landscape, a practice which assured the maximum penetration of light into the inner recesses of the monastery.

Hirschfeld draws upon both literary sources and archaeological evidence to describe in chapter 3 the daily life of the monks, including how monastic communities came into being (“the guru pattern”), how one joined a monastery, the internal organization of the monastic community, its size (Hirschfeld suggests that at its peak, the Judean desert was home to no more than three thousand monks), the daily routine of the monastery, and the monks’ diet (noting for example, how the monks traded fruit which came from their orchards for wheat from the Transjordan), dress and possessions. Chapter 4 examines sources of the monks’ livelihood, including donations (often the primary source), crafts (weaving of baskets, twining of rope, pottery), and agriculture.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the evidence for the architectural elements of the monasteries—both sacred and secular. The churches in the monasteries were of two main types, the monastic church (long narrow chambers directed toward a single apse) and the cave church, of which Hirschfeld cites several impressive examples. Burial sites in the monasteries reflect the hierarchical distinctions that were present in the monastic communities (the founder of the monastery of Khirbet ed-Deir as well as his successors are buried in a separate place from the priests; the ordinary monks were buried in yet another place). As for the secular architectural elements, Hirschfeld notes several fascinating details, including: the immense effort and ingenuity that lay behind the construction of water storage systems (cisterns not only collected water, but were used for flood control and for collecting alluvial soil to fertilize the garden), the role of the gate and gatehouse (used for security and as a place of social interaction) and the actual size of cells in a *laura* (some were quite large, with several rooms, and functioned as a separate unit, like a monastery within a monastery). Also of significance is the evidence Hirschfeld cites for the presence of a hospice at the monastery of Martyrius, the large and well-organized garden plots present in most monasteries and the monks’ efforts at building and maintaining footpaths throughout the desert (for use by themselves and by the pilgrims who visited the monasteries). Hirschfeld concludes his study with a survey of the evidence for the strictly eremitical way of life in the Judean desert and for the holy sites found there.

The great virtue of this work lies in its imaginative reconstruction, based on all the known archaeological and literary evidence, of the material dimensions of early

Judean desert monasticism. Throughout the level of scholarship is high and the author is measured in his judgments. It will prove indispensable to any future study of early Judean monasticism. I would simply note one methodological question which I think needs to be addressed more directly: throughout this study, Hirschfeld accepts the literary sources at face value, citing them especially where they appear to confirm the archaeological evidence. However, the study of early monasticism in recent years has shown how important it is to submit literary sources to careful critical scrutiny. One of the primary tasks for scholars who follow Hirschfeld (and this also holds true for those who study Egyptian, Syrian and Cappadocian monasticism) will be to develop a comparative methodology for examining both the archaeological and literary evidence with equal critical scrutiny.

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Garth Fowden

*Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993

Pp. xviii + 205; 14 plates, map. \$12.95.

Garth Fowden, the author of this provocative and well-argued study, sets out to develop an overall theory about empire in the Fertile Crescent from Cyrus to Islam. His central thesis is that universalism, the kind of political and cultural domination which underlies the ancient notion of *oikoumene* and *orbis terrarum*, is “more realizable in the context of monotheism” (p. 9). Fowden distinguishes among the components of universalism as a political force, and of monotheism as a determining theological principle, to explain how what we know today as the “Christian West” and the “World of Islam” came to be. At the same time, his work contributes significantly to the discussion of the role of Eurocentrism in the formation of historical perspectives.

The recurring focus of this book is on the ancient, perennial conflict between Iran and Rome, both of which aspired to world empire, and both of which generally succeeded in canceling out each other. The ongoing struggle between these two ancient superpowers made Cyrus and Alexander role-models of world conquest. Cyrus was the first in antiquity to realize the goal of world empire on a purely political level. But with the defeat of Iran by Alexander, cultural pluralism was replaced with the Hellenocentric vision of Greek domination. Building on this legacy, Constantine enlisted the strength and fervor of Christianity to give his quest for empire coherence and direction.

Chapter 1 opens with a topographical tour of the arena in which military and diplomatic confrontations between Iran and the West were played out. The author argues that world empire in antiquity required control of the eastern Mediterranean basin, the Iranian plateau, and everything in between. This unification was achieved twice: first under Cyrus, whose power base lay in the Iranian plateau, and second, with the emergence of the Abbasid Islamic Empire with its capital at Baghdad, the geographical nexus of this strategic area.