

## INTRODUCTION

### I

This collection of saints' Lives has been prompted by two concerns: first, that the heritage of the Syrian churches should be more easily accessible to the wider public, and second, that needed sources on women should become available.

Why the Syrian Orient? Historians have sometimes emphasized the Greek and Latin backgrounds of Western Christianity to the exclusion of other contributions. A "mainstream" church is often presented as though Christianity in its earliest centuries exhibited a homogeneity that has never characterized it since. Unity of faith, even unity of confession, has always been present for Christianity but always in the context of a diversity of religious experience, expression, and spirituality. In earliest Christianity no less than now, the spread of the church brought with it much interaction and intermingling of cultural influences from all parts of Christendom.

One of the major cultures contributing to the Christian mainstream was that of the Syrian Orient, which lay along the eastern Mediterranean Sea and inland into Persia. Syriac Christianity made a profound impact on the religious culture of early Christendom. We do not speak here of a long lost tradition: the Syriac-speaking churches are very much a part of our contemporary world, their heritage very much a living one. In the Middle East, in southern India, and now, too, in Europe, Great Britain, and North America, the Syriac churches continue—the Syrian Orthodox, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Maronites, the Syrian Catholics, the Chaldeans, the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches in India (sometimes popularly called "Mar

Thoma Christians”<sup>1</sup>), to name the primary representatives. Today we affirm our society as a pluralistic one. But history calls upon us to acknowledge that our heritage, as well as our present, is born out of and composed of many diverse strands.

Why women? Again the redress of an imbalance is needed. In the past history books have concentrated on a particular segment of society: men, and usually those men of the dominant class and culture. Such accounts have thus tended to omit mention of women, especially those of the lower or peasant class and minority groups, and to overlook their significant experiences and contributions to recorded history. Recent years have brought a welcome awareness of this oversight. Excellent work is being done on women’s history, but much remains to explore. For the time of Late Antiquity, in which the texts of this collection are set, work has focused primarily on women in the Greco-Latin sphere. With this collection we are widening the parameters a bit. The women whose stories we have included are generally little known today even to scholars, though some were major figures in their own day or figures of great popularity in the medieval cult of saints. Some of their stories are legendary in character, some are historical; both instances reveal the variety and frequency of women’s contribution to the religious life of their communities and the larger Christian sphere.

Our collection comprises fifteen texts drawn from the fourth to the seventh centuries A.D. They represent various degrees of historical value. The Lives of Mary, Euphemia, and Susan by John of Ephesus (5) and the story of Shirin by Martyrius (Sahdona) (8) are personal reminiscences by the authors, incorporating information they learned about these women from others who also knew them. The accounts of the Najran martyrs (4) are based directly on eyewitness reports, and so, too, are those of the Persian martyrs (3), though not so immediately. The latter are slightly more removed in time from the events portrayed, and their presentation reflects a more stylized form. At the far end of the historical spectrum would stand the stories of Mary the niece of Abraham of Qidun (1), Pelagia the Penitent (2), Anastasia (6), and Febronia (7)—in each case probably built round a histori-

1. “Mar” is the title formed from Syriac *Māryā*, “lord” or “sir,” used in addressing superiors and especially saints. These Churches in India traditionally date their origin to the mission of the apostle Thomas.

cal kernel, but in these texts embellished into the form of romantic legend.

Such variation in historicity does not detract from the worth of these texts as social documents for their period of composition, offering us insight and information on the world from which they come. From personal accounts we have the always precious glimpse of individual lives: of the persons, habits, and contours of life in Late Antiquity. The remembrances, whether sooner or later, of the experience of martyrdom in Najran and Persia give us not only a view of events that happened but also reactions and reflections of those who lived with the memory of those events. The time lag between the martyrdoms and their recording by others does mean that we should read these texts cautiously in terms of their accuracy of detail. But that time lag also enables us to see the writers' view as a reflection of how the community dealt with these events in their aftermath. For instance, they sometimes show a more hardened attitude toward the "other side" than seems indicated by the background to the martyrdoms, so that the persecuting officials are portrayed properly as villains ought to be portrayed. Such developments in a community's attitudes are significant; they are an important kind of historical evidence about how a given group understands its own history.

Even the romantic fictions of Pelagia or Febronia cannot be dismissed as historically worthless. We may or may not be able to identify the actual persons and events behind the stories. But the stories themselves are pieces of history. To be meaningful to the society for which they were written, the stories had to share the values and assumptions of that society. They had to be true to the thought world of their time, as well as to the ordinary manner of people's lives, their way of doing things and seeing things. So these stories reveal to us not the individuals of their day but rather something of the world in which they lived and moved. From this view these stories offer us a rich harvest of historical depth.

Each text is supplied with an introduction to its particular circumstances and concerns. In the interests of a wider audience we have kept notes and commentary to a minimum, supplying instead the classified bibliographies in the Appendix. Those who wish to pursue matters further should find adequate information there. As for a general introduction, some remarks on the Syriac

Orient of Late Antiquity, the nature of literature about saints, and the problems of literature about women may help the reader with the larger setting of these stories.

## II

Syriac developed specifically as a language of Christian peoples.<sup>2</sup> It originated in the region of Edessa (modern Urfa, in southeast Turkey) as a dialect of Aramaic, the language of first-century Palestine. During the first and second centuries A.D., Syriac spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean realm as the language of the Christian community. By the Syrian Orient, then, we mean those places where Syriac was a primary written and spoken language. In late Roman times (the period of our texts) these areas were known as the provinces of Mesopotamia, Osrhoene, and Syria and their Persian neighbors, particularly eastern Mesopotamia and Adiabene (modern Iraq).

The Syrian Orient has always been a divided region politically. During Christianity's first two centuries the authority of the Roman Empire held sway in its western areas, and that of the Persian Empire in the east.<sup>3</sup> Yet it maintained a certain degree of cultural autonomy and unity, perhaps due to its organization into semi-independent city-states (or small kingdoms). From the mid-third century the Romans took over direct control as far as the Persian borders beyond the Euphrates River. But the area became a battleground, as both empires vied repeatedly in the following centuries for extension of their territories. In Persia the early third century saw the overthrow of the Parthians by the Sasanian dynasty; to the west, the Roman Empire was turning

2. On the Syriac language and literature, see, for example, S. P. Brock, "An Introduction to Syriac Studies," in *Horizons in Semitic Studies: Articles for the Student*, ed. J. H. Eaton (Birmingham, 1980), esp. at 11-13; R. Duval, *La Littérature Syriaque: des origines jusqu'à la fin de cette littérature après la conquête par les Arabes au XIIIe siècle*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1907; repr. Amsterdam, 1970); A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte* (Bonn, 1922; repr. Berlin, 1968).

3. The best and most readable history of the Syrian Orient is still J. B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City* (Oxford, 1970), although it focuses mainly on one area. For the eastern Syrian Orient, see J.-M. Fiey, *Jalons pour une histoire de l'église en Iraq*, CSCO 310/Sub. 36 (Louvain, 1970). Less helpful is W. Stewart McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Chico, 1982).

toward its fourth century transformation to the Christian Roman Empire, later known as the Byzantine Empire. These changes perpetuated a hazardous state of affairs for the Syrian Orient.

Whether governed by Romans or Persians, the Syrian Christians were in a minority position (and their language was always overshadowed by the dominant language of their rulers). While the eastern Syrians were a religious minority in an empire largely Zoroastrian, the western Syrians were a minority of a different kind. They shared the faith but not the culture of their rulers, and in the heated christological debates of the fifth century they found even their faith to be at odds with that of their government. The struggle of the western Syrians was thus of a more bitter kind. Christians within the Christian Empire, they were nonetheless set apart.

The religious crisis centered around the Council of Chalcedon held in 451 and its credal definition of the relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ.<sup>4</sup> The debates on how precisely to define this relationship affected, and disrupted, the whole of Christendom both prior to the Council and in the years following its decisions. The problem lay in maintaining the full integrity of the incarnation, as well as the crucifixion and resurrection, in such a way that neither the divinity nor the humanity of Christ was diminished or undermined. The Chalcedonian definition proved unacceptable to most Syrian Christians. To this day the Syriac churches are not in agreement with those of the Chalcedonian Orthodox traditions, although dialogue between the two groupings (Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian, Orthodox and Oriental-Orthodox) is now taking place with greater success than at any earlier time.<sup>5</sup> The religious disputes led in the fifth century to the exile into Persia of some Syrian Christians (those who would help shape the Church of the East);<sup>6</sup> and in the sixth century to persecutions against most of the remaining

4. Primary studies are: A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition from the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. J. S. Bowden (London, 1965); A. Grillmeier and H. Bacht, *Das Konzil von Chalcedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3 vols. (Würzburg, 1951–54); F. M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (Philadelphia, 1983).

5. P. Gregorios, W. H. Lazareth, and N. A. Nissiotis, eds., *Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite?—Towards Convergence in Orthodox Christology* (Geneva, 1980).

6. A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, CSCO 266/Sub. 26 (Louvain, 1965); O. Hendriks, "L'activité apostolique du monachisme monophysite et nestorien," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 10 (1960): 3–25, 97–113.

Syriac-speaking Christians (those who would build the Syrian Orthodox, or Jacobite, Church) by the Byzantine government.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time renewed battles between Byzantium and Persia were being fought in the area. The enormous suffering that ensued heralded the hardships to follow. The Syrian Orient was seized afresh in the early seventh century, first by the Persians and then by the Arabs. The Byzantine Empire regained part of the western Syrian Orient during the tenth century, and Crusaders also held part of the western area during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Both times, the areas were reconquered by Muslim Turks. Each time the change in authority took place, it did so with great devastation to the people and their lands.<sup>8</sup>

The Syrian Orient has rarely known periods of peace, and the Syriac churches have held through most of their history the position of an endangered, marginal grouping. Precisely because of their religious differences, the Syriac churches have sometimes been better tolerated by Muslims than by Christians (whether Byzantine Orthodox or Catholic Crusader)—a sober lesson on the nature of religious conflict. Yet their security has not been long lasting at any time. As modern history testifies all too tragically, the Syrian Orient has continued to suffer repeated buffetings at the hands of opposing political powers.<sup>9</sup>

Because this collection is concerned specifically with holy lives (and holy deaths), the religious activities of early Syriac Christianity are of particular relevance for understanding these texts. Certain distinctive features of early Syrian spirituality bear significantly upon these stories; it is to these features we now turn.

Christianity first emerged in the Syrian Orient out of the Jewish communities, largely independent of the Greco-Latin churches to the west, and with a powerful spirituality born of semitic tradition rather than that of classical Greece and Rome.<sup>10</sup> Of course,

7. W. A. Wigram, *The Separation of the Monophysites* (London, 1923; repr. New York, 1978); W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, England, 1978); Hendriks, "L'activité apostolique," 3-25, 97-113.

8. Cf. Segal, *Edessa*, 192-257.

9. E.g., P. Dib, *History of the Maronite Church*, trans. S. Beggiani (Detroit, 1971); J. Joseph, *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbours* (Princeton, 1961); J. Joseph, *Muslim-Christian Relations and Inter-Christian Rivalries in the Middle East* (Albany, 1983).

10. R. Murray, "The Characteristics of the Earliest Syriac Christianity," *East of Byzantium*, ed. N. Garsoian, T. Mathews, and R. Thomson (Washington, D.C., 1982), 3-16 provides an excellent summary of the overall picture. Cf. also

in its basic sense Syriac Christianity shared the faith of the wider Christian sphere: this was not a difference of religious conviction but a divergence of orientations or thought-worlds, revealed in the texture and tone of spirituality developed in response to the Christian message.<sup>11</sup> From its semitic roots Syriac Christianity inherited biblical tradition directly from Judaism. That is to say, where the Greek and Latin churches dealt with Judaism in its Diaspora form, with the influences of Hellenic thought and culture and particularly the impact of philosophy, Syriac spirituality was based in a biblical grounding formed less in dialogue with external pagan religions than with Hebraic Judaism itself.

As was the case elsewhere in early Christendom, various forms of Christianity flourished in the Syrian Orient.<sup>12</sup> The region has become notorious with scholars for fostering groups of gnostic inclination; Marcionites most notably, Valentinians, Messalians, and the curiously syncretistic Manichaeans all made deep marks on the face of Syriac Christianity. What these groups shared, and what would emerge as a peculiarly poignant trait of Syriac spirituality, was an ascetic understanding of religious faith. For the extremist groups the understanding was based on a dualistic view of the cosmos—that the temporal, physical world is inferior to the spiritual one, if not an outright channel for evil, and that the spiritual world is the only true and good realm of the divine.

But an ascetic understanding of Christianity in the Syrian Orient was fundamental from its earliest times, even in that sphere of the Syriac church that would emerge as “orthodox” in the course of Christianity’s consolidation.<sup>13</sup> Syriac spirituality called for a life of renunciation and above all of celibacy not simply for its elect but for all its faithful. Thus into the third century (and pos-

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R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge, England, 1975), 1–38.

11. R. Murray’s *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* is one of the finest studies to date in this regard.

12. See esp. W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. and trans. R. A. Kraft et al. (London, 1972); A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 2 vols., CSCO 184/Sub. 14 and 197/Sub. 17 (Louvain, 1958); H. J. W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden, 1980).

13. S. P. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” *Numen* 20 (1973): 1–19 (or, see S. P. Brock, chap. 1 in *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London, 1984); and J. Gribomont, “Le monachisme au sein de l’église en Syrie et en Cappadoce,” *Studia Monastica* 7 (1965): 7–24, remain fundamental.

sibly into the fourth) baptism and the Eucharist were reserved for the celibate alone.<sup>14</sup> The life of virginity, or of continence in marriage (the practice of spiritual marriage), represented the basic Christian commitment. The models underlying this view were biblical: the models of the prophets, especially Elijah and Elisha, and the New Testament examples of John the Baptist, Jesus himself, the disciples once chosen, and Paul. All of these “chosen ones of God” had lived the life of renunciation in order to pursue God’s work with single-minded devotion. They had lived in the open countryside, conducted their public ministries by traveling without concern for shelter or food, and abandoned society’s comforts of family, home, and relative security for a life of witness to God. If the Old Testament gave the sense that renunciation was called for only on the part of the elect, the New Testament openly demanded the imitation of Christ by all believers. “Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Luke 18:22); “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23); these and other such statements by Jesus left no middle ground for those who would be disciples.<sup>15</sup>

Syrian spirituality shared with that of early Christendom as a whole the tendency to literalize symbols.<sup>16</sup> There was no separation of spiritual symbol and physical activity in the realm of religious behavior. However, the Syrian Orient lived out this tendency to a greater extreme than the Greco-Latin churches to the west. Thus, if the life of renunciation was called for by scriptural model and injunction, then that was the life that must be lived by all believers. But the sense is perhaps better seen in the force of imagery. The New Testament presented the image of Christ the Heavenly Bridegroom,<sup>17</sup> to whom the believer is betrothed. The relationship evoked by the image is one of compelling and absolute devotion. The Heavenly Bridegroom was a favorite epithet for Christ in the Syrian Orient<sup>18</sup> but as far more than an image.

14. A. Vööbus, *Celibacy: A Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm, 1951); Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*; R. Murray, “The Exhortation to Candidates for Ascetical Vows at Baptism in the Ancient Syriac Church,” *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974–75): 59–80.

15. Cf., e.g., Matt. 10:37–39; Mark 10:39; Luke 14:26–27, 33.

16. Cf. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism.”

17. Esp., Matt. 22:1–14.

18. Murray, *Symbols*, 131–42; Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, 1, 78–83.



If this was the relationship between Christ and the believer, then earthly marriage simply had no place. Celibacy was again the resulting action, and once again not because of a dualistic understanding that the flesh is evil or inferior but because the believer is utterly devoted to Christ, given to Christ, “betrothed” to Christ. The religious image and the physical action are inseparable and witness to the making literal of the symbol.

In its extreme form this literalizing of symbols led to striking behavior on the part of the Syrian believer. The redeeming work of Christ, the Second Adam, had made salvation possible for humanity and brought the promise of a return to Paradise, to the perfect life as it was lived by Adam and Eve before their Fall. In anticipation of that return, and indeed to hasten its coming, some believers adopted a life of stunning physical symbolism: going naked in the wilderness, surviving on wild fruits and water, living among the wild beasts, exposing themselves to the elements, and leading an uninterrupted life of prayer and devotion to the divine as indeed Adam and Eve had done.<sup>19</sup> They acted out with their bodies the spiritual truth of their faith.

Nowhere else in Christendom does one find so profound a sense that religious behavior is equivalent to religious belief. The believer’s very life, in the most mundane sense, manifested the essence of faith. Thus the early fourth-century bishop and ascetic Aphrahat the Persian wrote a treatise on faith in which he listed the following practices to be necessary for Christian life: pure fasting, pure prayer, love, alms, meekness, virginity, holiness, wisdom, hospitality, simplicity, patience, long suffering, mourning, and purity.<sup>20</sup> Aphrahat here speaks of the vocation of all believers as demanding a manner of life that in Western Christianity (and a little later in Syriac Christianity) was restricted to monastics. The believer sought to live according to the model of the life of Christ (well-summarized by Aphrahat’s list of practices) and to live in total devotion to God, giving one’s whole body as well as one’s whole mind and heart. Such a life was, necessarily, a life of renunciation from the luxuries of the secular world; it was necessarily ascetic.

19. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism”; Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, I, 90–154.

20. Aphrahat, *Demonstration I: On Faith*. Text: ed. I. Parisot, *Patrologia Syriaca*, ed. R. Graffin (Paris, 1894) I, cols. 5–46. ET: J. Gwynn, *SLNPNF XIII* (Oxford and New York, 1898), 345–52.

In the course of the fourth century, Christianity achieved its triumph: first, its legalization in the Roman Empire with the Edict of Milan in 313; then the defining of the creed at the first ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325; and finally in 392 the declaring of Christianity as the state religion of the empire, followed by the outlawing of paganism and heresy in 395. A tremendous movement accompanied these events to bring the various areas of Christendom into conformity with the mainstream orthodox church (largely Greco-Latin) as defined at Nicea. In the Syrian Orient, changes under this movement were slow to come but deep in impact. One of the most significant changes was conforming to a structure in which asceticism was a separate vocation within the church, apart from and exclusive of the life of the laity.<sup>21</sup>

While efforts were undertaken to tone down the ascetic sense of lay Christianity, the major developments of this change for Syrian asceticism continued within the traditional Syrian ethos.<sup>22</sup> It is this distinctive tradition that the saints' Lives of this collection reflect. So, for example, the tradition of the lay ascetic, the layperson who lives a life of continence, simplicity, and prayer without taking formal vows remained, as our texts of Mary (the Pilgrim) (5A) and Shirin (8) illustrate. Furthermore, the marking off of the ascetic life and the growth of the monastic institution retained certain distinctively Syrian features:

1. The conviction that the ascetic life was integral to the life of the worshipping community was maintained. The ascetic did not lead a life of isolated withdrawal but was intimately involved with the larger Christian community, advising, exhorting, healing, exorcising, and guiding the faithful. Our stories of Mary and Euphemia (5A), Susan (5B), and Febronia (7) describe such interaction.

2. There continued an appreciation for the individual virtuoso of ascetic practice, seen most clearly in this collection in the legends of Mary the niece of Abraham (1) and Pelagia the Penitent (2). Like the earlier virtuosi who took to the wilderness, these

21. Cf. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, 1.

22. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism"; Gribomont, "Le monachisme"; Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*. See, too, P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity" (with author's revisions in the notes), *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), 103-52.

were persons whose pursuit of the perfect life took them on singularly symbolic paths of action, most notably found in those notorious practices of the Syrian ascetic movement—the wearing of iron chains, confinement in cages, or living in trees or on top of tall pillars as the famous stylites did.

The stylites are the best example of what the Syrian ascetic tradition meant. Simeon the Stylite (389–459) stood for forty years on top of his narrow pillar, sixty feet high. Everyone, whether peasant, king, or bishop, sought his teaching, judgments, and healings for affairs private, civil, and ecclesiastical. But in the long hours when people watched Simeon stand motionless in prayer, his arms outstretched in supplication, midway between earth and heaven, they saw, too, a living crucifix of the Savior. They saw a living image of Christ. In the most radical sense Simeon symbolically fulfilled the call to imitate Christ; in the most radical sense he had given himself utterly to God, body and soul.<sup>23</sup>

Modern scholars are sometimes uncomfortable with the ascetic nature of early Syriac Christianity and the startling extent of Syrian asceticism, which may seem alien to what our society understands a religious life to involve. However, what must be remembered is the drenching power of symbolism for Syriac spirituality and its breathtaking pursuit of biblical imagery. The complement to Syrian religious behavior was the literary expression of that same spirituality: Syriac literature, especially poetry, mirrors Syriac asceticism. Indeed the delicacy and vibrancy of Syriac poetry in Late Antiquity made a lasting impression on the hymnography of the orthodox churches. Most exquisitely rendered by Ephrem Syrus and Jacob of Serug, the poetry of the Syrian Orient blends a fine craftsmanship with an exploration and celebration of imagery that can only be described as sumptuous.<sup>24</sup> It is here in the play of biblical symbols and images that we face the heart of Syriac Christianity. It was not in the subtleties of philosophical discourse but in the subtleties of the lyrical spirit

23. H. Lietzman, *Das Leben des Heiligen Symeon Stylites*, TU 32,4 (Leipzig, 1908).

24. Tremendous strides have been made in our understanding of this facet of Syrian spirituality. See, above all, R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*; R. Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6/7 (1975/6): 1–20; S. P. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: 18 Poems of St. Ephrem*, 2d ed., SSTS 4 (London, 1983); S. P. Brock, "The Poet as Theologian,"

that Syriac writers came into their own. Most importantly, Syrian poetry and Syrian asceticism sprang from the same source: the understanding of religious symbolism as all-encompassing.

For the Christian world of Late Antiquity these were the greatest and most far-reaching of the contributions offered by the Syrian Orient—the beauty of her hymns and the jarring translucence of her ascetic practices. The Byzantine *kontakion* owes much to Ephrem's hymnography; and long after Simeon Stylites died, the Byzantine Empire nurtured his practice (indeed, the last known stylite was seen as late as the mid-nineteenth century).<sup>25</sup> Poetry and asceticism were the inner and outer modes of expression for Syrian spirituality, a spirituality of symbolism as literally lived as it was figuratively understood.

Still the political and cultural dominance of the Greco-Latin sphere inevitably made its mark. In the wake of the post-Nicene move toward theological conformity and ecclesiastical consolidation, the christological controversies of the fifth century were born. The disputes that led up to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and followed on from it were fought with a bitterness that eventually split Christendom apart and seriously altered the shape of the Byzantine Empire. It was in the fighting of these disputes that Hellenic influence began to press on the Syrian Orient with real impact.<sup>26</sup> Syriac writers of the late fifth and sixth centuries sometimes show cultural syncretism at its best,<sup>27</sup> but it was a brief moment. Although Syriac literature continued to produce great writers into the Middle Ages, the combination of religious and political warfare impaired its autonomy and energy. With the seventh century, the so-called golden age of the Syrian Orient came to a close.

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*Sobornost* 7:4 (1978): 243–50; S. P. Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh," *Symposium Syriacum 1976*, OCA 205 (Rome 1978): 325–48; S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem* (Rome, 1985).

25. H. Delehaye, *Les Saints Stylites*, Subsidia Hagiographica 14 (Bruxelles, 1923).

26. S. P. Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning," *East of Byzantium*, ed. N. Garsoian et al. (Washington, D.C., 1982), 17–34 (or, see Brock, *Syriac Perspectives*, chap. 5).

27. For example, in the fusion of Hellenic and Semitic thought by Philoxenus of Mabbug, as in R. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies* (Oxford, 1976); or in the elegant *Life of John of Tellia* by Elias the Monk, ed. E. W. Brooks, CSCO 7/7 and 8/8 (Paris, 1907).

## III

For the Christendom of Late Antiquity it was holy lives that most often transcended differences of language, culture, and time. As in the cases of Mary the niece of Abraham (1) and Pelagia the Penitent (2), stories of Syriac saints or legends of Syrian origin are found in every language of the medieval Christian world, and many hold places in both the Orthodox and Roman liturgical calendars.<sup>28</sup> What do the stories of this collection share in common with the larger frame of Christian hagiography—the literature about saints? Our collection includes martyrs' passions and saints' Lives, pious romances and personal reminiscences. What are the primary concerns that bind these diverse forms of hagiography together?<sup>29</sup>

In its most basic sense Christian hagiography is about the intersection (however brief) of the human and the divine. The hagiographer seeks to reveal holy presence in human life and uses the saint's story to accomplish that purpose. For the writer, the holy person was neither angel nor demon, despite the cosmetics of literary license, but a human being through whose actions the divine works in human life. Through the holy one God acts in, participates in, and is present in the world in which we live. Although saints' Lives sometimes give the impression that the holy one was born in this state of perfection or born destined to it (as in our story of Febronia [7]), there are many saints' Lives that tell of persons who achieved this state after the most unlikely beginnings. Here, for example, in the story of Pelagia, a prostitute turned penitent (2), or Mary the niece of Abraham (1), who fell from the ascetic life into the most degrading of circumstances, we are told that the furthest reaches of human weakness can yet be turned and cleansed to achieve holiness. For the sanctity of the saint lies in this very paradox—that the human itself can be rendered holy. Hagiography echoes the promise of the incarnation: humanity *can* be worthy of the divine, and the divine can and does deign to meet us within ourselves.

28. P. Peeters, *Orient et Byzance: Le Tréfonds Oriental de l'Hagiographie Byzantine*, Subsidia Hagiographica 26 (Bruxelles, 1950).

29. See Appendix: General Bibliography (a) for the major references on hagiography. The following discussion is meant as an overview, stressing those features of primary importance for our texts.

Hagiography is only rarely biography.<sup>30</sup> The task of the hagiographer is to articulate the processes of the divine and the human in the actions of the holy person, or to make visible to the ordinary eye the inner truth of such a person's work. That is, the hagiographer is concerned with interpreting what happened. Physical events themselves are not always revealing of their true significance and are indeed secondary to the import of their larger meaning. Hagiographers knew well their purpose. Accordingly, they wrote the meaning they wished to be understood rather than straight historical narratives, and they wrote to edify and exhort the faithful and unfaithful alike.

Yet hagiography does contain much of historical worth, simply because its subject is that of human lives even as its intent is to see beyond them. To be sure, the perceptions and presuppositions of hagiography are hard for the historian to use, let alone to measure. What is tangible in the recognition of sanctity, then, is that the person perceived as holy is one who can accomplish deeds of power and meaning where people perceive themselves to be helpless. The holy one can heal the sick, teach wisdom such that the vicissitudes of life make sense, sway the heart of the most ruthless debt-collector, or cause an emperor to change his mind. These are actions that count, for people who have no other succor.

The hagiographer's model was that of the Gospels. Since the primary call for Christians was the imitation of Christ, the life and death of the believer were understood as meaningful always in relation to the Gospel model: in all circumstances, hagiography is based on the life and death of Christ. The given historical situation determines the emphasis of the story. In times of peace it is the saint's Life that is shown to mirror the work of Christ, usually with asceticism providing the means of imitation. In times of persecution it is the saint's death, or rather the manner of the saint's death, that proves significant; martyrs' passions pivot on that event and what led up to it—we may be told nothing else about the saint's prior life. But in both cases, what is critical (or, for the hagiographer, what is holy) are the actions of the saint, those things that are actually done. The substance of sanctity is thus made tangible, even if seen to be transcendent.<sup>31</sup>

30. And even then, biography of a particular kind. See P. Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983).

31. See Appendix; but esp. E. Patlagean, "A Byzance: ancienne hagiographie et histoire sociale," *Annales: e.s.c.* 23 (1968): 106–26, repr. in E. Patlagean, *Struc-*

The story of Euphemia (5A) by John of Ephesus illustrates how the writer could put the substance of a person's life together with the life of Christ. Euphemia was a woman John of Ephesus knew well; we know about her from no other source. She is presented by John as a "saint" in an informal (noncanonized) way, but his conviction as to her sanctity is unshakeable. Without the embellishments of legend or cult, then, he tells us about her: her private vows of chastity, poverty, and asceticism; her tireless efforts among Amida's poor, hungry, sick, and homeless; her dangerous work for the refugees of religious persecution; and her shameless determination to do what she saw God's purpose to be, even in the face of public disapproval or censure. After thirty years of such efforts Euphemia died of exhaustion, a death John tells us was equal to the martyr's crown. Because of the manner of John's portrait, we cannot fail to see Euphemia's life as the perfect imitation of Christ's ministry and suffering. But John has not imposed this interpretation on the story he tells, so much as he has used the model of Christ to understand the meaning of Euphemia and her work. Further, by using the model of Christ to this end, John grants particular force and significance to her actions—the work of this woman was God's work.

However, because the saving work of Christ lay in his crucifixion, it is the hagiographer's assimilation of Christ's life to that of the martyr that provides the clearest view of how the model of Christ functioned for the understanding of sanctity. More than half the texts in our collection are concerned with martyrs, running the spectrum from the painfully authentic to the elaborately wrought as literary accounts. We have here the memory of Christians torturously put to death at the hands of Roman pagans (Febronia [7]), Zoroastrians (the Persian martyrs [3]), and Jews (the Najran martyrs [4]). What was martyrdom about, and why were Christians martyred?

Historians are agreed on two primary points. First, Christian literature has painted the experience of martyrdom and persecution as far more extreme than generally happened—perhaps not so surprising in terms of the romantic appeal of religious propaganda, but an important feature even so. Second, contrary to the literary portrayal, Christians were put to death not because they

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*ture sociale, famille, chrétienté à Byzance: IVe–XIe siècle* (London, 1981); ET now in S. Wilson, ed., *Saints and their Cults* (Cambridge, England, 1983), 101–21.

represented an overt threat or danger to their persecutors but because certain actions of Christian life proved deeply offensive to the basic moral structures of their persecuting societies. The standard charges against Christians were those of impiety and atheism (refusal to recognize any God but their own).<sup>32</sup>

These two points indicate the major motifs that characterize the literary forms of martyrs' passions.<sup>33</sup> There is a standardized script behind our texts, which may be followed more or less, depending on the writer's prerogative.

1. The charge against the Christian involves an action: refusal to sacrifice to the patron deity of the empire (Persian or Roman), as when the Persian martyr Martha (3A) fervently declares that she will pray on behalf of the empire but not to the imperial deity;<sup>34</sup> or refusal to marry, for the common Christian practice of virginity was unsettling in its social impact, eroding as it did the most fundamental aspect of the social and economic order, the family. The martyr responds with words that disallow any outcome to the incident except death. Often the persecutors themselves seek some alternative course—marriage (for the Persian martyrs) or flight (for Febronia)—but to no avail.

The resonance between the historical episodes and the legendary ones on these events raises deeper issues. It is clear from both the Najran accounts and from the background to Febronia's conflict that Christians could and did live in a pragmatic harmony with their non-Christian neighbors most of the time. Yet the passion narratives set up a situation of absolute conflict between Christian and non-Christian in which no mutual coexistence seems possible. From the speeches of the Persian martyrs we glimpse the symbolism of the Christian life-style that proved

32. A helpful survey is found in G. Bonner, "Martyrdom: Its Place in the Church," *Sobornost/E.C.R.* 5:2 (1983): 6–21. The Persian situation was more complicated still, as will be seen in the following. There, in addition to questions of moral offense, the concern about religious and political loyalties played a part once Christianity was affirmed in the Roman Empire; that is, the question was raised as to whether Christians in Persia would remain loyal subjects or align themselves with the Christian Roman state. See S. P. Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," *Religion and National Identity*, ed. S. Mews, SCH 18 (London, 1982), 1–19 (or, see Brock, *Syriac Perspectives*, chap. 6).

33. See Appendix: General Bibliography (a).

34. This was in fact the standard Christian apologetic when faced with this charge.



most distressing. The stories of the martyrs reinforce the values of an ascetic Christian life-style. The Christian lives as if spiritually dead to the world—indifferent to secular luxuries and unwilling to participate in society's perpetuating institutions of family (marriage) and state (sacrificing to the patron deities). The martyrs underscored the consequences of this life-style by physically dying for it—not forcing their own deaths but holding to a mode of life whose consequences could be fatal, both for the individual and for society.

2. In our stories tortures follow the interrogation and are described with a violence that still stuns the reader's sensibilities. It is this violence that is the *sine qua non* of the martyr's story. While historians have generally viewed the extent of this violence to be a literary exaggeration, our experience of torture in the twentieth century has taught us the extremes that can in fact be administered and suffered. Our modern experience indicates that the exaggeration in these stories may not always be as great as has been supposed. Still, in the martyrs' stories a religious motive is present in the literary depiction of this violence. The hagiographer's stylized portrayal of the martyr's interrogation, torture, and death represents these events as containing a greater significance than their physical occurrence would indicate: the battle between good and evil is here at work. For literarily the violence is such that it moves all participants beyond the realm of humanity. In the stories' view, no human could endure such torture, but neither could a human inflict such torture. The martyr transcends human weakness, filled with the power of the divine whose presence is manifested by virtue of the martyr's capacity for endurance. The persecutors, however, have descended beyond the ranks of human sin.

3. Lest the reader doubt the import of this battle and how it occurs, miracles of a particular kind accompany the martyr's death. A common feature in martyrs' passions is that the martyr can be killed only by an actual beheading; fire and wild beasts fail to bring death.<sup>35</sup> Since we know for a fact that Christian martyrs died by such means, the writer's purpose in altering the cause of

35. Compare, for example, the martyrdoms of Polycarp, or Perpetua and Felicitas; or, what happens to the legendary Thecla when she is sentenced to death in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Even Eusebius of Caesarea reports this phenomenon, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII. 7, and the *Martyrs of Palestine*, XI.

death demands our attention. As the writer presents the event, the deed must be done by human hands, whereon the full responsibility then lies. Nature, God's created order, refuses to participate in the death, but once the act is done, Nature reacts with a breaking of her own laws. From the blood of the martyred women of Karka d-Beth Slokh (3C) springs a fig tree with miraculous healing powers; a terrifying cloud of wasps protects the sacrilegiously exposed body of Anahid (3F). So, too, had the sun darkened at the death of Christ, and an earthquake rent the temple veil.<sup>36</sup> The death of the martyr is a crime that transgresses the created order of the universe.<sup>37</sup> Harsher still is the hagiographer's clear implication that this battle between good and evil is humanity's own affair.

To see the martyr as the imitator of Christ is to see the starting assumption of the audience for these stories. Salvation had come through the suffering death and resurrection of the incarnate Lord. By their suffering deaths, the martyrs accomplished a perfect imitation of that event. The hagiographer shows the reader that the martyrs became a channel through which God's grace could work, by offering themselves thus in perfect purity of heart. The disproportionate components of our texts—the extremity of violence given and received—remind the reader that the simple historical event is not what it appeared to be. The death of one person by another could yet contain salvific import far beyond what was intended or known by those involved.<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, the glorification of martyrdom presents a problem. This measure of human greatness, even if possible only by means of God-given endurance, depends upon the supreme measure of human wrong in another person. The historical basis to these stories belies so simplistic an understanding. As the case of the Najran martyrs reminds us most vividly, in its stories of Jews massacring Christians, the roles of oppressor and oppressed have been interchangeable in our history all too often.

The salvation brought by the action of Christ was, after all, about the redemption of humanity from its fallen state. For our hagiographers, the battle between good and evil is finally that

36. Matt. 27:45, 51; Mark 15:33, 38; Luke 23:44-45.

37. In Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, IV and IX, sea and earth alike are unable to bear these crimes.

38. Compare P. Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations* 1, no. 2 (1983): 1-25.

which must take place within humanity itself. The saints' Lives that are set alongside these martyrs' stories indicate that this is the real issue at hand. In the hagiographical texts that deal with holy lives, the forces for good and evil, or the capacity for heroic steadfastness and treacherous wickedness, are contained within each individual. In the end the real battle is that to be fought within each human soul.

The hagiographers in these texts also call their readers to task. The audience cannot escape their own complicity in the demonic or their call to the holy. When Euphemia refuses to take charity from others to support her work among the sick and destitute, she vehemently declares that she will not carry the sins of others for them, for her own sins are black enough. Perhaps the reader might quake at such a rebuff in the face of Euphemia's tremendous power of spirit. But her challenge is against complacency: all are called to account for their own lives. Our hagiographers soften Euphemia's bluntness by teaching that all can bear this responsibility even as the martyrs did, if only they open themselves to the grace of God.

What binds the stories of this collection is the fact that holy lives and holy deaths are about the same thing. What is at stake is not the idea that asceticism might be an alternative form of martyrdom or vice versa, but that martyrdom and asceticism are two forms of the same event: humanity's encounter with the divine.

#### IV

One final issue remains. These texts are about women, but with the possible exception of Febronia's story they are written by men. The reader must be alert to the presence of the author's eye in the depiction of the subject and her experiences.<sup>39</sup> In the

39. As was the case throughout the Greco-Roman world of Late Antiquity, women in the Syrian Orient were very much a subservient group. Wealthy women had some mobility and social stature, as was true for the wealthy matrons of the Roman nobility, but real influence in the political and economic sphere was rarely possible unless exerted through a man. See J. B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City*, 38–39, 152–54. It does appear that the radical forms of early Syrian Christianity did enhance women's status for awhile, but by the fourth century the Syrian Orient was earning its reputation for extreme misogyny. See S. Ashbrook Harvey, "Women in Early Syrian Christianity," *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (London, 1983), 288–98. For the larger parallel,

more legendary accounts the reader is clearly being offered more than a “good story”; strong undercurrents of what the society or the church would like to say about women, or what they would like women to be, are at work.<sup>40</sup> In the more historical accounts we can sometimes see severe discordance between what the author says about women and what he tells us women are actually doing. Thus John of Ephesus describes the holy woman Susan (5B) as a “weak, feeble, frail woman,” but at the same time he tells us about her astonishing career, which includes deeds of tremendous physical and mental exertion and fortitude that would defy the strength of either gender.

To be sure, women’s voices have been largely missing in the history of literature until relatively recent times. That is what makes the case of Febronia’s Life (7) the more intriguing. Here the author claims to be the nun Thomais, Febronia’s spiritual sister who became abbess of the convent after the saint’s death. It is a standard feature of hagiography that the writer claims to be a close companion of the subject, whether or not they ever met, lived in the same time period, or even both existed as historical persons. The writer’s claim with regard to Febronia could thus be for literary protocol, especially since the nature of Febronia’s story is such that no man could have plausibly functioned as a witness to the events portrayed. But there are other features of the story that make a woman author a likely possibility. The description of convent life as one of strenuous physical labor and high education; the nature of women’s friendships as earnest, loving, philosophical, and intellectually inquisitive; the bonding between women lay and religious, married and unmarried, in common recognition of the hardships of their lives—all of these are unusual features in hagiography about women. The text is a compelling one, and not least for the dignity and love shared among the women that pervade the entire account.

For a portrait of women more aligned with early Christian writings,<sup>41</sup> we can turn to the (largely legendary) stories of Mary

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E. Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, 1983) is indispensable.

40. For a finely textured presentation of the standard patristic view, see E. A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, vol. 13 of *Messages of the Fathers of the Church* (Wilmington, Del., 1983).

41. *Ibid.*

the niece of Abraham, or Pelagia the Penitent. Here women are portrayed as weak-natured, wantonly sensual, darkly sexual beings. Saved from the error of their ways by the grace of God (and by men wiser and stronger than themselves), they live out their holy careers with a penance of violent proportions. Mary, in keeping with one whose life of sin had reached such degrading depths, fulfilled to the limit that life of penance most often deemed fitting for women in patristic literature: living in silent withdrawal shut off from the world around her, weeping ceaselessly in compunction until her death.<sup>42</sup> In Pelagia's case the story carries an almost sinister edge; when this proud prostitute abandons her life of sin, she leaves behind not only her former career and former self but even her former sex. Disguised as a eunuch monk, Pelagia lived out her life in self-mortification as a hermit on the Mount of Olives, to be discovered at her death. The story ends with wonder and bemusement at the thought that women as well as men could live as God's holy ones.

Some measure of reality can be gained from the more historical accounts, particularly those related by personal acquaintances—in our collection, the accounts of the Najran martyrs (4), those by John of Ephesus (5), and Martyrius' (Sahdona's) remembrance of his childhood mentor Shirin (8). In these cases, however heavy-handed the presentation may be in terms of patronizing attitudes toward women (and they can be very heavy-handed), something of the women themselves bursts through. We see women who are strong of character and strong of faith; who are assertive and even aggressive when they need to be; who are leaders of men and women both, and of religious and lay communities; who are courageous, firm, compassionate, honest, unassuming, creative, and wise. We see women whose actions speak far louder than the words said about them.

Hence we see Euphemia taking the wealthy nobles of her city to task over their luxurious life-styles, upbraiding them "until they became a bit peeved with her." Nonetheless, they responded by giving generously to those in need. We see, too, Maḥya, a woman of Najran, whose "impudent and abusive manner" had exasperated the town for years. Willful and "disagreeable," Maḥya responded to the massacre of the town's Christians like a

42. Compare the famous story of another reformed prostitute, Thais. *BHO* 1137; *BHG* 1695–97.

storm unleashed. Striding through the streets calling the Christians to take their stands and challenging the Jews on their lawless actions, she met her death with a rare dignity and a respect by others that had eluded her all her life. From the other extreme the Najran noblewoman Ruhm had always conducted herself with impeccable decorum, “a woman whose face no one had ever seen outside the gate of her house, who had never walked in the town in broad daylight.” Hearing the news of the massacre, she walked to the public square “with her head uncovered,” encouraging the Christians and condemning their persecutors; the very scandal of her actions lent power to her death.

These are women who show us how awkward the restraints of society on women could be, and how little women really fit the mold that was supposed to be theirs. The stereotype of pious women as passive, subservient, and unobtrusive is simply unfounded in the face of these women whose actions are acclaimed as inspired even while they disconcert the popular sensibilities. If there is a common factor across these stories, both legendary and historical, it is the courage that women could display on behalf of the faith. This is an important point: these women do not act in forceful ways out of their own assertiveness (as we might call such behavior today) or their own sense of self-respect but because they are compelled by that which is beyond themselves. It is because they can lose their own sense of self, as women or as individuals, that they can act in ways that break the social norms. What enables that letting go is their devotion to the higher purpose at hand: God’s purpose. One must not mistake this behavior for what it is not; women were not “breaking out” through their own self-awareness. They were empowered by the conviction that it was God who called them to action, and God who would sustain them in that action.

Religion justified the restriction of women to a subservient position,<sup>43</sup> but religion also empowered women to break through their subservience.<sup>44</sup> Because Christian teaching underlay both the restriction and the empowerment, the breaking of social mores by women was not seen to endanger the basic societal

43. For the doctrinal basis, see Clark, *Women in the Early Church*; and G. Tavard, *Women in Christian Tradition* (London, 1973).

44. A thematic paradox in Christian history. See E. McLaughlin and R. R. Ruether, eds., *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York, 1979).

structure. That is, even if a woman like Euphemia acted in ways that scandalized the people around her, she was not seen to undermine society's stability since her behavior was called forth by divine authority. Again, the enormous capacity for leadership that women like Euphemia or Susan displayed was not taken to indicate that women deserved such positions in either the religious or social sphere.<sup>45</sup> The duty of the Christian to act according to God's will thus allowed a continual but anomalous position of authority for holy women. Holy women were seen to be the exceptions that proved the rule on women's inferiority, no matter how many such exceptions there were. John of Ephesus, like many hagiographers, feels compelled to apologize every time he tells a woman's story.

The hagiographies do, however, indicate clearly how tight the confines on women's lives could be. What kinds of choices for women did in fact exist? With Mary the Pilgrim (5A), Euphemia's sister, we find a woman of deeply private spirituality, whose vocation was that of a solitary. The acceptable routes available to her as a woman of religious vocation were either the convent or the life of service. She refused either, choosing instead a life of anonymous pilgrimage; her sanctity was clear from the fact that miracles were wrought merely "by her presence, and not by her will or her word." Her life involved no abrasive breaking of rules, no overt confrontation with standard expectations of women. Indeed the self-effacing manner in which she pursued her career almost veils the striking independence of her actions. Here was a woman who left her family, refused the relative security of marriage or a home, and rejected even the security of a religious community. Since the society made no place for women alone, the simplicity of her course is the more startling for its radical import.

In similar manner the holy woman Anastasia (6) found herself seemingly without recourse in a situation of grave tribulation. Called to a spiritual vocation, pursued with suspect intent by the emperor Justinian upon the death of his wife Theodora, Anastasia fled in fear. But who had the means to resist the will of an emperor? And where could she, a woman of religious vocation, safely flee? In this desperate state she journeyed to the innermost

45. For example, familiar arguments against the ordination of women are heard: Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 173–81.

part of the Egyptian desert, taking on the disguise of a eunuch monk; there she lived many years until her death, a solitary whose identity was known only to those two monks who tended her. Was her religious career a matter of choice or one born out of necessity?

Anastasia's story brings us to what is perhaps the most disturbing element of hagiography about women—the theme of sexual violence against women. This theme, which appears a number of times in our collection, is overtly present here in two forms: the sexual abuse and/or mutilation of women as a means of torture in the martyr accounts, and the annihilation of sexual identity in the stories of the “transvestite motif”—Pelagia in particular and Anastasia—where the women do not simply deny their gender or render themselves genderless but destroy their identity as women and take on that of men. In either instance, the texts describe the actions with disturbingly graphic detail. This is not a matter of insinuation.

The use of women's sexuality as a religious symbol for the poles of perdition and purity is a commonplace in early Christian and patristic literature, so much so that it colors how women are written about in all circumstances. So, for example, in the case of Pelagia, her prostitution measures the extremity of her sinfulness. Her conversion to Christianity is spectacular and awesome, but it does not provide equal measure to the degree of sinfulness her previous life had shown. The successful taking on of her male identity—or, as the writer implies, the achievement of a life so holy that only a man could have lived it (hence the shock of the crowd at the realization that Pelagios was not a man)—this deed alone suffices to measure the degree of her achieved grace in proportion to her former sin. Her sexual identity functions metaphorically for the moral of the tale.

For a more historically based treatment of this usage we have only to look at the Persian martyrs, where the Christian women, who here are consecrated virgins (*bnāth qyāmā*),<sup>46</sup> are bribed with the offer of marriage as an alternative to a tortured death. Metaphorically, these stories present Christian purity (the women's virginity) in opposition to their persecutors' lust (the concern for marriage). But these accounts, historically based as they are, ring too strongly of what is really happening in such a situation—the

46. See the discussion that follows, accompanying the texts.



violation of these women through their identity as sexual persons. The matter is confirmed by turning to the graphic accounts of sexual mutilation—for example, in the cases of Anahid and Febronia. It is rare for sexual mutilation to make its appearance in martyr accounts involving men,<sup>47</sup> though not in those of women. Indeed this mutilation of women is common to iconography of martyrs as well.<sup>48</sup> The specifically sexual character of some of the tortures imposed on women martyrs reflects on the fact that men were the torturers. But the gratuitously detailed manner in which these incidents are described (in fictional accounts as well as historically accurate ones) reminds us further that men are also doing the writing.<sup>49</sup>

The sexual mutilation of women by torture and the sexual annihilation of women by the taking on of a male identity are both about the same issue—namely, power and dominance in the relationship between men and women. And these events are found in hagiography about women, both legendary and historical. The events described in each given instance may or may not be true. But men are telling these stories to women as their audience and to men about women, and they tell them as if they were true. What are we to hear?

In the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke grants women a prominent place and a portrayal notably sympathetic to women's lot. Yet Luke's Gospel also shows such literary treatment for the poor, the sick, and the outcast. It is Luke who measures the extent of Jesus' purpose by emphasizing the place in his ministry of these "marginal" groups. The place Luke grants to women may not be due to his respect for women so much as it highlights Jesus' compassion for the unfortunate. So, too, in hagiography women often represent the extremes of sinfulness or sanctity. Above all, because they are women, not men, they reveal what our writers see as the astonishing greatness of the Lord's grace and mercy. Deserving these gifts less than men by virtue of their

47. For a notable exception, see Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, VII.

48. E.g., the martyr Agatha is often depicted carrying her severed breasts on a platter; Catherine of Alexandria is sometimes portrayed carrying a severed breast in her tunic.

49. Eusebius' reference to some men suffering emasculation (*Martyrs of Palestine*, VII) is brief—one sentence—and in this instance could even be interpreted as a figurative rather than literal description. Such brevity, and indeed such ambiguity, are a far cry from what we find in the women's stories.

gender, they thus display them all the more. As the bishops who bury Pelagia cry, "Praise to you, Lord; how many hidden saints you have on earth—and not just men, but women as well!"

Even so, in our hagiographies, as in Luke's Gospel, the women carry a dignity properly shown. Despite the author's hand, this is true for the scandalous Pelagia no less than the majestic noblewoman Ruhm. Even the most biased of writers could not escape altogether the fundamental injunctions of scripture. Thus John of Ephesus defends his decision to include stories of women in his collection of holy lives on the basis of the apostolic exhortation "In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female, slave nor free" (Gal. 3:28). More pointedly, the "disagreeable" Maḥya castigates her torturers with a mighty freedom in the Spirit all would do well to seek. Publicly stripped naked at the orders of the king, Maḥya yet holds to her dignity, boldly stating, "It is to your shame . . . that you have done this; I am not ashamed myself. . . . I have been naked in the presence of men and women without feeling ashamed, for I am a woman—such as was created by God." Had she finished her scriptural allusion, Maḥya would have added, "created by God in His own image" (Gen. 1:26).

The paradox is that in the society from which our hagiographies came, not different from others of its time, women were not valued as women. Yet some people of value were women. Christianity rested on a vision of humanity that called all to the grace of redemption. But in its early centuries it did not understand its teachings to have tangible impact on the societal perceptions of gender in its world. Socially, politically, and religiously women remained persons of little worth, viewed with little respect. But no Christians disputed that women had value in the eyes of God and that women performed actions of worth for the Christian church as a whole. Our hagiographers thus glorify their women's actions as true followers of Christ while diminishing the integrity of their identities as women.

We return to the discrepancy between what our writers say about women and what they tell us women actually did. Stripped of their writers' editorial additions, these hagiographies tell us that women could do and did do the work of God on their own terms. That is powerful witness indeed.