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James E. Goehring. *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999. Pp. xxxii + 287. \$29.65 (Paper).

[1] In the past twenty years a dramatic change has taken place in the study of early Egyptian monasticism, a movement that still dominates the modern imagination of the ancient Christian landscape. James Goehring has been a leader in this enterprise. The present volume brings together twelve of his major essays, written over a period of seventeen years. Ten of these have appeared in journals or edited volumes, but are here revised and updated; two have not been previously published. In a substantive introduction, Goehring traces the trajectory of his scholarship by following the questions that have impelled his investigations. The results are not only a useful volume of collected studies - although it is certainly that, and scholars may rejoice at the convenience of having these important articles now so easily at hand. More importantly, here we have a volume whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

[2] The first article, "The Origins of Monasticism," serves as the entry into the re-assessment of modern scholarship and ancient sources that characterizes the rest of the volume. Time and again, Goehring will take the favored literary texts that have shaped our modern understanding of early monasticism - Eusebius' account of the earliest Christian ascetics in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 2 (in fact taken wholesale from Philo's *On the Contemplative Life*), the *Life of Antony*, the various hagiographies that comprise the Pachomian sources - and subject them to close historical scrutiny. Goehring brings to these texts a wealth of little known documentary evidence: papyri letters, tax records, deeds of sale, wills, monastic inventories, business transactions; archaeological findings and material remains; technical and legal vocabularies in Coptic, Greek, and Latin. From such practical bits of realia, a picture of ancient monasticism emerges very different from that of the isolated anchorite living in the far reaches of an empty desert.

[3] To begin with, asceticism seems to have been an impulse from Christianity's earliest days and not a development that came several centuries later in response to any "complacency" or "corruption" that followed legalization and the end of persecution with the reign of

Constantine. Its sources were multiple, as opposed to a monolithic moment or extraordinary person from whom all else came (such as is sometimes posited by scholars engaged in a reductive "quest for origins"). Furthermore, Christian asceticism had its roots and its earliest location in urban spaces. It sprang into the public sphere throughout the Mediterranean world, wherever Christian communities were found. Egypt was neither source nor model for the developments that followed in the wider Christian world, but it would gain that reputation with the unparalleled impact of Athanasius' *Life of Antony*.

[4] Written soon after the saint's death (c. 356), the *Life of Antony* set off a kind of revolution through its depiction of this solitary desert hero and his legendary battles against the forces of evil (demons that assaulted the inner life of the ascetic through temptations and trials, or that savaged the body of the church through the insidious presence of heretics). But as Goehring demonstrates repeatedly, the *Antony of the vita* was precisely that: a literary construction that served various agendas within the church, and that went on to dominate the larger discourse of asceticism, monasticism, and the life of devotion that was prevalent throughout late antique Christianity (and beyond). Its rival model was enshrined in the equally idealized memory of that other legendary Egyptian monastic founder, Pachomius, whose name became synonymous with coenobitic monasticism in contrast to the anchoritic model associated with Antony. Neither model, as Goehring shows, does justice to the complexity and diversity of monastic forms and practices that flourished in late antique Egypt (or elsewhere, for that matter).

[5] The desert recluse (alone or in community) was, for the most part, a myth. As a literary construction, this myth served to locate - and confine - the immense charismatic authority of the ascetic to an imaginal space that was distinct from, and markedly isolated from, the urban or civic space under the institutional authority of the bishop. The myth provided a literary resolution to a battle of competing authorities that was all too common in late ancient Christian communities: it delineated boundaries appropriate to different forms of Christian leadership, and it subjugated the ascetic's task to the service of the bishop.

[6] By contrast, through the riveting array of evidence Goehring has gathered from material and documentary sources, we begin to piece together another history of Egyptian monasticism. It was located within and among civic communities (villages, towns, cities). A tight relationship of economic interdependence tied its practitioners to the lives of these communities. Industry, commerce and trade were basic vehicles for this interaction; tax obligations and family issues were prominent concerns. Deserted or sorely depressed villages were revitalized as monastic activity took root in such locales; towns and cities found ascetics and monastic practitioners an often useful resource through which to address the poor, the sick, and the troubled who filled urban streets. Women as well as men pursued ascetic vocations with varying degrees of renunciation: not everyone abandoned all their property, nor absconded from their worldly obligations. A rich spectrum of monastic possibilities emerged, with varieties of ascetic disciplines and organizations, of community practices, and of intellectual activities (remember that the Nag Hammadi library of "gnostic" literature was found nearby an "orthodox" Pachomian monastery!). Indeed, the richness of variety dazzles the modern mind as much for the social and religious vitality it evidences, as for the changed historical understanding it necessitates.

[7] All this Goehring presents with a lucid eloquence, at once accessible to the student and engaging for the scholar. Best of all, we may be sure that there is more to come: Goehring continues his patient probing of ancient Egyptian monasticism. New directions and surprising results are by now his trademark. We the readers benefit at every turn.

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