



# Journal of Religion & Society

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The Kripke Center

Volume 2 (2000)

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Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, eds. *Asceticism and the New Testament*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Pp. xii + 444. No Price Listed.

[1] This collection of essays resulted from a conference on "Asceticism and the New Testament" convened in October 1996 at Emmanuel College, University of Toronto. Its purpose is to explore how asceticism, generally understood in very broad, cross-cultural terms, can contribute as a hermeneutical tool for the interpretation of the New Testament and early Christianity, despite its being relatively ignored as such in the past. Individual contributions are not intended as exegesis papers or commentaries, but rather essays that "use asceticism as a heuristic point of entry or methodological wedge into the different symbolic worlds" of the New Testament (6). The Introduction reminds the reader that "there is no effort to force asceticism onto or out of any text" (5-6), and yet, one is left to wonder if we are not occasionally flirting with Procrustean beds.

[2] As is noted throughout the book, there is no consensus about how best to define asceticism. L. William Countryman states in his essay, "whether one finds asceticism in any given document will depend partly on how one defines the term" (371-72). Each author included his or her own working definition, which created a varied, and at times incoherent discussion of the topic. Many contributors relied heavily on the work of Richard Valantasis, who defines asceticism as "performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations and an alternative symbolic universe" (213). While such a description liberates asceticism from the narrowly defined praxis and motivations of desert monasticism in the fourth and fifth centuries (a paradigm that seems to dominate much Christian interpretation of the phenomenon), it nevertheless is so broad and abstract that it allows for a host of new categories. For example, we have "political asceticism" that emerges from Paul's period of imprisonment and leads to his withdrawal from the world's dominant political structures (Robin Scroggs on Philippians); "household asceticism" that subdues an individual's will for the good of the community and thereby upholds the status quo (Margaret Y. MacDonald on Colossians and Ephesians); an "asceticism of resistance" that critiques Roman social structures and especially the institution of patronage (Alicia Batten on the Letter of James); a "discipline of work" that counters the complacency of those who exhibit a realized eschatology (Jennifer Wright Knust on 2

Thessalonians); and an "*askesis* of peace" that transforms the war motif of Jewish Messianism into a Christian hope for justice and peace (William Klassen on the Apocalypse).

[3] A difficulty with performance definitions like that of Valantasis may be that they describe more what asceticism *does* than what asceticism *is*. Other explanations, however, may just as easily account for the themes and behaviors encountered in the New Testament that are identified here as "ascetic." In her insightful discussion of Mark, Mary Ann Tolbert underscores how many of that gospel's key themes will find their way into the ascetic practices and literature of the Christian tradition, yet in their original context they must be understood as the incumbent risks and by-products of discipleship. Withdrawal from the world, purification, renunciation, and suffering are associated in Mark with burdens that must be willingly embraced and endured by those who choose to follow Christ. To label discipleship as asceticism misinterprets the social context and the personal motivations of the evangelist and his constituents. Similarly, a very broad definition of asceticism that incorporates all forms of *askesis* gives far too much latitude, permitting the inclusion of any goal-oriented acts of perseverance under the umbrella of asceticism. Again it is Tolbert who comments that many ways of life "from thievery to farming" require discipline or training; this does not necessarily make them "ascetic."

[4] Some contributors do adopt a more cautious approach and define asceticism in more traditional terms. Several note that in order for an action to be deemed ascetic it must be voluntarily undertaken and that asceticism separates its practitioner(s) apart from the world, others around them, or from what is perceived as "ordinary." At least one essay insists that asceticism still must include "demanding bodily praxis," thereby maintaining the link with physical self-denial. These authors generally conclude with more tentative and qualified assertions about the presence and/or influence of asceticism in the New Testament. Nevertheless, definitions and assumptions that allow for what John S. Kloppenborg calls a "fairly generous" understanding of the term dominate the book.

[5] It is perhaps unfair to suggest that this collection of essays looks for asceticism where none is to be found. Its goal after all, is not to identify examples of asceticism as it has been traditionally defined, but to use the theme of asceticism as a new lens for the reading and interpretation of the canonical texts. An example of the fruitfulness of this approach can be found in the analysis of the Deutero-Pauline letters. The authors of these epistles advocated self-control, self-discipline, and adherence to established social norms as articulated in household codes. They encouraged accommodation to the world and preservation of the status quo with well-regulated, moderate behavior. Some of the letters also targeted opponents who disrupted normal social relations with chaos and disorder, and quite frequently, aberrant or excessive behaviors. By traditional accounts, it would appear that these rival Christians were ascetic but the letters (and their authors) were not. If, however, asceticism is "performance intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity and different social relations" then the world-view and behavior encouraged by the Deutero-Pauline letters can be dubbed "ascetic," despite their rejection of overt displays of renunciation. The frequent presence of "competing asceticisms" in early Christian communities provides evidence and justification for the "new" theories of asceticism and their appropriation by students of the Bible.

[6] While some readers of this volume will be skeptical of the more unconventional definitions of asceticism and their application to the New Testament, others will find the book enticing. The editors' suggestion that asceticism as an interpretive tool will revolutionize biblical scholarship may be too ambitious and optimistic, yet the volume contains several essays that open the reader to new exegetical possibilities. It also paves the way for a reassessment of the role of asceticism throughout the entire Christian tradition.

Kenneth D. Snyder, University of St. Thomas