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Rebecca Krawiec

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# “From the Womb of the Church”: Monastic Families

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REBECCA KRAWIEC

This article presents a scrutiny of four major monastic texts (Augustine’s letters to Laetus and Ecdicia; Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Macrina*; and the Egyptian monk Shenoute’s sermon, “On Cleaving to Profitable Things”) to argue that a “profamilial” attitude existed alongside the widely-recognized “antifamilial” one. Overall I wish to argue that even within an ascetic discourse, “family discourse” could be used to transform the notion of “family” into one cohesive Christian category. Together these texts show that in late antique Christianity the spiritual and fleshly families could be linked, rather than opposed, to attain salvation for all.

The Roman family, in the period before the “rise” of Christianity, is an entity that still requires careful definition in modern scholarship. So too the Christian Roman family defies easy description, but for different reasons. The tangle of family and asceticism, of flesh and spirit, of “shifts” in family discourse has led some scholars to propose confused and sometimes contradictory arguments about “the family.” Scholarship tends either to focus on how Christianity changed the family or, conversely, to emphasize continuity between “Roman” and “Christian” families.<sup>1</sup> On

My thanks to John Dugan and Andrew S. Jacobs, as well as the two anonymous readers for *J ECS*, for their criticisms and insights.

1. Some scholars do note the coexistence of continuity and change. See, for example, Lynda Coon’s description of Jerome’s hagiography of Paula: it is “structured both to evoke recognition of continuity between Roman values and Christian commitments and to force the reader to contemplate the abyss between the old way of life and the new dispensation” (Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997], 109). Likewise, D. O’Roark, “Parenthood in Late Antiquity: The Evidence of Chrysostom,” *GRBS* 40 (1999): 53–81, concludes that from the supposedly “harsh” ascetic rhetoric of John Chrysostom emerges a picture of familiarity and even sympathy with familial affection.

the one hand, for example, it has often been maintained that Christian leaders changed the morality associated with the family, removing the double standard of the definition of adultery, insisting on no contraception, abortion, or exposure of infants, frowning on divorce, and outright condemning remarriage.<sup>2</sup> In her examination of Constantinian marriage legislation, however, Judith Evans Grubbs has argued that Christianity largely did not vary from earlier values associated with the family, in particular examining non-Christian antecedents for such “Christian” values as requiring sexual fidelity from husbands.<sup>3</sup> Evans Grubbs does note two areas where Christianity did make a difference: the disinclination for divorce and the option of chastity, either within marriage or as an alternative to it.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, even with an emphasis on continuity, the concerns of asceticism are still recognized as a potential disruption in any alignment of Christian values and family values. Specifically, the increasing valorization of “spirit” over “flesh” in the thought of the ascetic Fathers has been claimed, by modern scholars, to have severely limited and constrained classical notions of the family. In concluding his survey of the body from early Roman Empire to early middle ages, Peter Brown comments, “In Byzantium and in the West, the family tended to turn inward. Its simpler structures proved more resilient, in a less certain age, than did the more complex, more abstract solidarity offered by the ancient city.”<sup>5</sup> Some scholars of

2. Carol Harrison, “The Silent Majority: The Family in Patristic Thought,” in *The Family in Theological Perspective*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 89–97, and Gillian Clark, “The Fathers and the Children,” in *The Church and Childhood*, ed. Diana Wood (London: Blackwell, 1994) are two examples of scholarship that focus on the difference of Christian morals. Peter Brown creates a more varied picture when he notes that “certain restraints that came to be advocated in Christian circles rested lightly on upper-class males . . . fidelity to one’s wife remained a personal option” (Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Lectures on the History of Religions, n.s. 13 [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], 23).

3. Judith Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity: The Emperor Constantine’s Marriage Legislation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). She argues that Christianity did not make a significant difference for Constantine, and therefore for the early fourth-century understanding of the family and its role in society (see esp. 318–21 and 330–42). She herself notes, however, that more changes are evident in later legal codes, namely Justinian’s in the sixth century.

4. Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family*, 68.

5. Brown, *Body and Society*, 439. Contrast his earlier assertion: “It appears that the nuclear family, and with it a tendency to lay stress on the affective bonds between husband and wife and parents and children, was already a well-established feature of Roman society, at least in the West” (Brown, *Body and Society*, 16).

the family in later antiquity and the middle ages have even argued that the central trope of “flesh versus spirit” led to a shift in how the family was constructed.<sup>6</sup> From the broad-based *familia* of the Roman era, including many members who were “created kin” (such as slaves), the limits of the family came to lie more firmly in the flesh, in blood ties. The “experience” of Augustine of a “kin-core” family, over against more traditional notions of *familia* and *domus*, is invoked as an early sign of this shift.<sup>7</sup> “Fictive” ties (some scholars have argued) were increasingly reserved for the metaphorical expressions of membership in Christianity.

This divided understanding of *familia*—fleshly families and spiritual communities—finds expression in the fact that “when the Fathers describe and celebrate the spiritual life, the life of virginity and asceticism, it is more often than not in language and imagery derived from marriage, sexual intercourse and the family.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the most asceticized of Christian institutions, monasticism, often patterned its language and its structure on the family.<sup>9</sup> In its most ascetic manifestations, then, Christianity seems to be “antifamilial” insofar as it has become “antiflesh.” Ascetic Christians did not argue against family *per se*, but for a hierarchy of the spiritual family—the Christian community—over its fleshly counterpart—the biological family. Ascetic Christianity, from this perspective, transferred to its own ideas and institutions all that was valuable and transcendent about the family, while leaving the “real” family—of flesh and blood and bone—to wallow in its valueless corporeality.

6. Most notably Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), especially his arguments concerning Christianity’s use of a hierarchy of spirit over flesh to place constraints on family-building other than through biological procreation (adoption, concubinage, widow remarriage), 68, 74–84, and 95. See also, for example, Kristin Gager who, although disagreeing with Goody’s arguments about adoption, nevertheless follows his claim that, following the advent of Christianity, the family became more biologically based (Kristen Gager, *Blood Ties and Fictive Ties: Adoption and Family Life in Early Modern France* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996], 39).

7. Brent Shaw, “The Family in Late Antiquity: The Experience of Augustine,” *Past and Present* 115 (1987): 3–51.

8. Harrison, “Silent Majority,” 101. Also, “[b]ut we have found that various things can be heard above the deafening clamour for virginity, and even within it, it is in the language of love and marriage that the Fathers advance the ascetic, virgin ideal” (105).

9. For an example of the relationship between family structure and monastic structure, see chapter 7 of Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery* (New York: Oxford, 2002). For examples of biological family members joining monasteries in other geographic locations, and a later time period, see Alice Mary Talbot, “The Byzantine Family and the Monastery,” *DOP* 44 (1990): 119–30.

Such an argument is indeed upheld in much ascetic writing. Yet closer scrutiny of a variety of monastic texts suggests that this view overlooks the simultaneous possibility of transforming biological ties into more binding, eternal ones precisely through the new renunciatory valuation of family ties. For many of the most ascetic of Christians, the Christian spiritual family, writ large, could include biological family members. At once family and “family,” of flesh and spirit, these relations would now be appreciated on multiple levels.<sup>10</sup> Despite the antifamilial, indeed the anticorporeal, tendencies of ascetic Christianity, positive portrayals of the biological family, even within specifically monastic contexts, reappear throughout Christian writings.<sup>11</sup> I have argued elsewhere that although the Egyptian monastic leader Shenoute routinely insisted on renunciation of biological familial ties (both for monks who leave their families to join, and for those monks who have biological family alongside them in the monastery), these bonds remained areas of negotiation both for the monks, and for Shenoute himself.<sup>12</sup> Here I wish to examine a wider range of monastic literature to investigate this seeming overlap of family and “family,” of flesh and spirit, in the institutional context of monasticism, to examine the role of the biological family *within* the ascetic movements of late ancient Christianity. There, despite the “default” mode of renunciation of biological kinship, we still find “profamilial” calls for family loyalty. The visibility of biological families alongside, and overlapping, spiritual families of monks suggests that the value of “family discourses” in the definition of Christian identity was not limited to those arenas where the biological family was already entrenched. That is, the ascetic Fathers did not preach profamily sermons from the pulpit, while reserving their true, antifamilial sentiments for the cloister. The overlap of ascetic and family discourses—of flesh and spirit—was equally complex in the monastic setting.

The monastic discourses of family take several forms, and three genres

10. Harrison, “Silent Majority,” 102, notes this possibility in her examination of patristic writings on the family: “In any case, it is worth noting that although, for many of the Fathers, the family represented man’s fallen condition, it can also be used as a paradigm for man’s highest calling and achievement, underlining the fact it was thought to be a good, albeit lower one; not something to be ultimately rejected in favour of asceticism, but something to be transformed.”

11. A good example of exploring these positive portrayals in eastern hagiography is Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in Early Syriac Hagiography,” *J ECS* 4 (1996): 27–56.

12. See Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women*, 156–59, 162, and 172–74.

comprise my major examples: letters (Augustine, in North Africa); hagiography (Gregory of Nyssa, in Cappadocia); and homily (Shenoute, in Upper Egypt). All three writers, despite their disparate geographical locales, signal that the biological family does not have to exist as a stumbling block to ascetic practice, but rather that it can be included alongside that practice. This inclusion, however, could take a number of forms: the subordination of the fleshly family within the spiritual monastic family; the celebration of the fleshly family within the spiritual one; and the redefinition of the fleshly family to be compatible with asceticism. I start with Augustine's letter to Laetus as a "typical" example of the expected response to a monk under pressures and objections from his biological family, namely a subordination of those concerns to the "higher" monastic life. Even here, however, this letter cannot easily be categorized as "antifamilial." Moreover, elsewhere Augustine problematizes this hierarchy of spiritual family over biological for other familial members, namely wives.<sup>13</sup> Gregory's well-known hagiography of his sister Macrina presents an example of the ideal spiritualization of the biological family, thus allowing those biological bonds to remain as a support for asceticism rather than as an impediment to it. My final example moves from monastic literature *per se* to a sermon preached by Shenoute within his monastery but to a mixed audience of monks and nonmonastics. This sermon gives specific advice to the nonmonastic families about how their relationships should exist to achieve the same salvation the monks gain through their renunciation. In other words, this last example allows us to see most clearly that monastic leaders were able to use "family discourse" with remarkable consistency between potentially divided audiences, neither praising the superiority of the one nor castigating the inferiority of the other but transforming "family" into one cohesive Christian category. While significant differences exist among these authors and these texts (beyond genre and geography) together they show that in late antique Christianity the spiritual and fleshly families could at times be linked, rather than opposed, in the new Christian goal of creating not an earthly lineage, but a heavenly one by attaining salvation for all.

13. Though it should be noted that Ecdicia did not join a monastery but used asceticism to transform her personal familial circumstances.

“WE BELONG TO CHRIST”:  
PROPER FAMILIAL RELATIONS

Despite the abundance of scholarship on Augustine, there is relatively little on his role as a monastic leader and his attendant views of asceticism.<sup>14</sup> His monastic Rule, itself a subject of scholarly debate in terms of authorship and original audience,<sup>15</sup> does not delineate the relationship monks should have with the families they have renounced. Rather, monks are enjoined to obey their monastic superiors “as a father,” or, in the case of female monastics, a mother.<sup>16</sup> Augustine’s own account of his struggles to convert to the monastic life never raises the issue of needing to renounce his biological family as part of an embrace of asceticism; no despair of separation from mother or son appears alongside his concerns about professional ambition and, (in)famously, sexual chastity.<sup>17</sup> The major piece of evidence that Augustine gives for such renunciation comes from his letter to Laetus, and there it is occasioned by Laetus’ mother’s interference with her son’s commitment to the monastic life. Augustine’s arguments to Laetus in favor of the eternal, spiritual ties between a Christian and God over against the limited, temporal ties of the biological family fit both with the general arguments of Christian leaders and Augustine’s own overall theology.<sup>18</sup> For Augustine, “The transitory always succumbed to the eternal.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, as elsewhere in Christian thought, this argument was not consistent for women who wanted to embrace the monastic life. Augustine’s letter to Ecdicia upbraids Ecdicia for her ascetic actions, one of which was undertaken independently of her husband and without apparent thought for its impact on her son. This letter in some ways gives the opposite advice of that to Laetus, to submit to the family rather than

14. Notable among the exceptions is chapter 5, “Marriage and Monasticism,” in Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford, 2002), 158–93.

15. See George Lawless, O.S.A., *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 126–48.

16. Both Latin text and English translation are available in Lawless, *Augustine: for the male command*, see 100 and 101; for female, 116 and 117.

17. E. Ann Matter, “Christ, God, and Woman in the Thought of St. Augustine,” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000), 166–67.

18. In an overall review of several late antique male Christian writers, Harrison concludes that in general “spiritual relations and the fruits of the spirit are infinitely preferable to physical relations and their fruits” (“Silent Majority,” 100).

19. George Lawless, “Augustine’s Decentering of Asceticism,” in *Augustine and His Critics*, 156.

standing against it; yet both letters suggest the goal of asceticism is not to abandon the family but to transform it. This discursive transformation—giving spiritual meaning to physical ties—reinscribed the familial ties and, for some, bound them more tightly, not less.

In his letter to Laetus, Augustine seems to make familial renunciation a central tenet of conversion to the ascetic life.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in much of its language, this letter reveals the role of the biological family in ascetic writings, including many contemporary hagiographies, that scholars have proclaimed as typical: it appears as a hurdle of resistance which the individual ascetic must overcome in order to follow the higher devotion to God.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, much of Augustine's language depends on a trope which opposes the flesh to the spirit.<sup>22</sup> He argues, for example, that Jesus took on the flesh so that humanity could be released from it.<sup>23</sup> He contrasts the fleshly family—and all it represents in terms of limited, individual, temporal ties which ultimately do not survive death—with the spiritual family, with its implications of universality and eternity.<sup>24</sup> More precisely, physical motherhood, and its contrast with the spiritual motherhood of the church, takes center stage. Laetus' mother, as a biological mother (markedly described as such in clear fleshly terms)<sup>25</sup> was limited to a relationship with Laetus, since "because a certain woman is your

20. Harrison uses this letter as an example of Augustine's stress that the monastic family is superior to the "natural" (*Augustine*, 173).

21. Elizabeth A. Clark, "Antifamilial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1995): 372, lists many of the late ancient hagiographic examples. For medieval hagiography, see John Kitchen, *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 27.

22. Here my reading is similar to Andrew Jacobs' in that none of the following examples lead Augustine to conclude Laetus should "hate" his mother, only that he should not value the physical basis for her appeals to loyalty. See Andrew S. Jacobs, "Let Him Guard *Pietas*": Early Christian Exegesis and the Ascetic Family," *J ECS* 11 (2003): 265–81.

23. Augustine, *ep.* 243.8 (CSEL 57:575).

24. "For all these are his own [ties], and they generally entwine him and impede him from attaining, not his own things which will pass away with time [*propria temporaliter transitura*], but those things held in common which will abide for eternity [*in aeternum mansura communia*]" (*ep.* 243.3 [CSEL 57:570]). Translations are modified from Adolar Zumkeller, O.S.A., *Augustine's Ideal of the Religious Life*, tr. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 376–81.

25. For example, "that she conceived you, carried you in her womb, gave birth to you, nourished you with her milk" (*ep.* 243.3 [CSEL 57:570]) and "What does she say, or claim? Perhaps those ten months during which she burdened her organs [*viscera eius onerasti*] and the pains of childbirth, and the agonies of childrearing?" (*ep.* 243.7 [CSEL 57:574]).



mother she is necessarily not mine.”<sup>26</sup> In contrast stands her more expansive spiritual familial role as “a sister in Christ” where “she is a sister to you and to me and to all those to whom is promised one heavenly inheritance with God as father and Christ as brother . . . these ties are eternal.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, what would be a demotion—from parent to sibling—in the biological family becomes a promotion.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the church’s motherhood, although having the attributes of conception, gestation, birth, and breastfeeding, is transformed: conception is Christ, gestation is the blood of martyrs, birth is into the eternal light, and breastfeeding produces the “milk of faith.”<sup>29</sup> Laetus’ mother’s error lies in placing her worth in her female body, considering “it of greater value that she bore you from her own womb [*ex utero suo*] than that she was born, along with you, from the womb of the church [*ex utero ecclesiae*].”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Laetus’ biological mother, with her merely fleshly womb, has hindered Laetus’ spiritual progress, but mother church has borne all through her spiritual womb. In short, the family, in Augustine’s letter, symbolizes all the earthly attachments which tie people to “the words of the flesh [*carnalia uerba*].”<sup>31</sup> As is typical for ascetic literature, Laetus is being assured that his renunciation of one family does not make him disloyal to his biological family, but loyal to a larger (numerically) and better (spiritually) family.

Yet even within this standard “antifamilial” letter, Augustine struggles to redefine, not reject, the family. Significantly, despite his entreaties for Laetus to forgo his earthly family lest he be deserting his true mother,<sup>32</sup> Augustine ends his letter by making clear that Laetus still had a duty to provide financially for his household (his biological family and his dependents). Thus, even for the ascetic who is allowed the “extraordinary condition” of familial renunciation, a degree of family loyalty can still

26. Augustine, *ep.* 243.3 (CSEL 57:570).

27. Augustine, *ep.* 243.3 (CSEL 57:570).

28. Laetus and his mother share a mother: “The mother church is also the mother of your mother” (*ep.* 243.8 [CSEL 57:574]). Also, both Laetus and his mother do not receive solid food yet “since you are still little toothless children who only want to squall” (*ep.* 243.8 [CSEL 57:575]).

29. Augustine, *ep.* 243.8 (CSEL 57:574–75).

30. Augustine, *ep.* 243.4 (CSEL 57:571).

31. Augustine, *ep.* 243.8 (CSEL 57:575).

32. Augustine describes the grief “mother church” feels over the “laziness and inactivity” of “certain individuals whom she holds in her lap . . . Is she not offering you a more loving heart [literally, inner organs, *viscera*] and a heavenly breast [*ubera*]?” (*ep.* 243.8 [CSEL 57:575]).

be required.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Augustine's biblical familial models make it possible for him to transform familial relationships, specifically the mother-son relationship. He notes that Jesus, "your ruler [*imperator*]," also had a mother, but then cites Matthew 12.47–50, where Jesus defined familial relationships based on whoever was doing "my father's will." Thus, says Augustine, "the best and divine teacher, with regard to the name 'mother' (which [the disciples] had announced to him, so to speak, privately and personally [*proprium*]) rejected even it because it was of this world, in comparison with the heavenly relationship."<sup>34</sup> Jesus can nevertheless still claim Mary as his mother, since she fits his definition of spiritual familial relationships: "and in the midst of his disciples, calling to mind this same heavenly relationship, he revealed by what association of birth [*consortio generis*] that virgin was bound to him, along with the other holy saints."<sup>35</sup> In other words, the relationship between Jesus and Mary did not depend on her womb, her ten months of pregnancy, her labor, her breastfeeding—those things Augustine linked to Laetus' mother—but rather on the fact that Mary did God's will. Thus this mother-son relationship, and apparently any others that followed this model, could be maintained rather than renounced. Laetus' mother's continued valorization of the physical means that rather than having become Mary, she remains Eve:

She does not want to follow? Then let her not hinder you. She does not want to change for the better? Then be on your guard that she does not corrupt you. . . . What difference does it make whether a man is on guard against Eve in a wife or in a mother, as long as he is on guard against Eve in any woman?<sup>36</sup>

Spirit versus flesh remains the dominant theme for Augustine's appeals, but Laetus' mother is not to be renounced simply because she is his

33. See Jacobs, "Let Him Guard," 278, for the point about the ascetic's "extraordinary condition." Augustine is clear that it would be inappropriate for Laetus to continue to be involved in the management of his (former) household; rather his point is that Laetus has an obligation to give whatever wealth he has to support his mother and dependents, and not impoverish them by giving away his goods to the poor (citing 1 Tim 5.8) (Augustine, *ep.* 243.12 [CSEL 57:578–79]).

34. Augustine, *ep.* 243.9 (CSEL 57:576). Augustine's label of a "private" revelation is important, since he also makes a distinction between the private nature of the biological family, and the public nature of the spiritual family of the church; Laetus' "ties of blood" should allow for private conversation for his mother to realize that her private love should be killed. In contrast, "we all love her, because she is sister"; however, not privately but "with a public love in the house of God" (*ep.* 243.4 [CSEL 57:571]).

35. Augustine, *ep.* 243.9 (CSEL 57:576).

36. Augustine, *ep.* 243.10 (CSEL 57:577).

(biological) mother but because of her error in choosing the wrong female role model (Eve) rather than the correct one (Mary). She, like all mothers, has the opportunity to remain a mother, albeit a different sort than the traditional matron.

If Laetus is to be “on guard” against Eve, as a representation of female error in general and not simply of sexual temptation, against what were ascetic women to be on guard in their relations with their families? Augustine’s arguments that Laetus’ mother needed not to be a hindrance, even if she did not want to become an ascetic herself, are nearly, but not completely, reversed in his chastisement of Ecdicia.<sup>37</sup> There Ecdicia’s asceticism is a sin against her husband since she undertook certain actions without his consent. The letter is complicated because Augustine examines not only what has occurred, but also hypothetical situations. Ecdicia, wanting to pursue an ascetic lifestyle even within marriage, eventually convinced her husband to take a vow of chastity (apparently after refusing him sexual intercourse for some time);<sup>38</sup> later, however, she independently gave away family goods (to wandering male ascetics, themselves suspect for encouraging a wife to act without her husband’s knowledge or consent)<sup>39</sup> and, shedding her matron’s garb, took to wearing more ascetic garments.<sup>40</sup> These financial actions (and not her insistence on sexual abstinence) were the apparent cause of her husband’s adultery. Augustine

37. E. Ann Matter discusses this letter, and much feminist scholarship on it, in “Christ, God, and Woman,” 172–73. See also Claudia Kock, “Augustine’s Letter to Ecdicia: A New Reading,” *AugStud* 13.2 (2000): 173–80, esp. her summary of Elizabeth Clark’s arguments that Augustine “contradicts himself when, on the one hand, he praises the ascetical lifestyle, and, on the other, he does not allow Ecdicia, as a married woman, to take up this lifestyle without her husband’s consent” (175). Kock’s “new reading” counters the feminist interpretations of Clark, as well those of Kate Cooper and Kim Power (see Kate Cooper, “Insinuations of Womanly Influence: An Aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy,” *JRS* 82 (1982): 159–60; eadem, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996], 106–8, and Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine on Women* [New York: Continuum, 1996]), with an emphasis on the letter’s eschatological content.

38. After examining spouses’ conjugal obligations, Augustine comments, “But as I said, I pass over this point [that wives and husbands should accede to the other’s sexual desires, especially wives] because you were unwilling to consent to render him this marital debt [*debito*], and he himself afterwards agreed to the same pact of continence” (*ep.* 262.3 [CSEL 57:623]). Here the translation consulted, and modified, is *St. Augustine: Select Letters*, tr. James Houston Baxter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 500–521.

39. Augustine, *ep.* 262.5 (CSEL 57:625).

40. Augustine, *ep.* 262.9 (CSEL 57:628).

holds Ecdicia responsible for the husband's double sin (breaking his vow and committing adultery) because she did not act as a wife, that is, submissive. In addition, Augustine explores (at the beginning of the letter) what would have been the case had Ecdicia's husband not taken a vow of celibacy, that is, what had earlier been the case when Ecdicia was refusing intercourse against her husband's wishes.

The differences between the two letters arise, in large part, because of the different familial relations, with their attendant varying familial obligations, at stake: son/mother versus husband/wife. The model for both female roles, however, is Mary. Just as Mary remained Jesus' mother because she did God's will (and not because she bore him), so also she remained Joseph's wife, despite their lack of sexual intercourse.<sup>41</sup> So too, since both Ecdicia and her husband were "members of the body of Christ" Ecdicia, despite "no longer mixing in carnal intercourse [*carnali consortio*]" with him, was still a wife and so still required to be subject to him.<sup>42</sup> Their relationship was spiritualized by the removal of sex, but the result was not a removal of their tie: "Therefore he had not stopped being your husband because you both equally were abstaining from carnal intercourse [*commixtione carnali*]; in fact, your marriage was a more holy one since you, with one accord, were abiding by more holy agreements."<sup>43</sup> That is, sexual abstinence did not free Ecdicia from her familial duties but bound her more tightly to them, in large part because she had a specific role as a wife.<sup>44</sup>

As with his letter to Laetus, Augustine spends much of the letter to Ecdicia negotiating a balance between the call for asceticism and biblically-based familial obligations, especially the Pauline arguments regarding spousal duties. The solution, for Augustine, lies in letting God judge these relationships. In his exploration of hypothetical possibilities, Augustine includes one where Ecdicia did not want celibacy (and took no vow), but her husband did. In these circumstances, Ecdicia's husband

41. See Harrison, "Silent Majority," 95, who cites E. Clark's quotation of *Against Faustus* in "Adam's Only Companion: Augustine and the Early Christian Debate on Marriage," *RecAug* 21 (1986): 139–62, at 151 n. 92 (not, as Harrison cites, 150 n. 32).

42. Augustine, *ep.* 262.1 (CSEL 57:621).

43. Augustine, *ep.* 262.4 (CSEL 57:624).

44. These arguments about the permanence of the marital bond are in accord with Augustine's discussion of the marital tie as a "sacramental bond" in his 401 treatise *On the Good of Marriage*. There he teaches that couples cannot divorce, even in the case of adultery by either spouse (see *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Clark [Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1996], 6).

would have been bound to continue having sex with her “and God would credit his account [*imputariet*] with chastity.”<sup>45</sup> That is, the desire for chastity was sufficient and needed to co-exist with the debts husbands and wives owe each other, including the debt of the body (relying on 1 Cor 7.1–5) of which Ecdicia had defrauded her husband (though Augustine later notes Ecdicia’s absolution by her husband’s subsequent vow).<sup>46</sup> Augustine’s financial imagery—chastity as credit and the body as debt—underscores how familial obligations remained in place even within asceticism. While Ecdicia is absolved of fraud with regard to celibacy, her choice to add poverty to her ascetic practices is a misappropriation of family funds, since she undertook these actions independently of her husband. Moreover, the financial imagery here of the husband/wife relationship recalls the similar advice to Laetus, namely, that he still had financial obligations to his household that mitigate against a desire to give everything to the poor. Similarly, Ecdicia, in addition to her sexual and financial mistreatment of her husband, has also defrauded her son, by giving away family property without a care about how the son might support himself in the future.<sup>47</sup> It is not a given for Augustine that, although his parents were “holy,” the son would also choose such a path. An individual choice of asceticism, therefore, did not mean neglecting one’s financial obligations towards nonascetic familial members; for husbands and wives, those obligations included their bodies.

Augustine does grant that, with regard to Ecdicia’s vow of celibacy, she “at least” should “persevere most constantly” despite her husband’s breaking his own.<sup>48</sup> Here again she is in a similar position to Laetus in that her ascetic vow takes precedence over returning to her earlier familial status. It is only once she too hastily, in the view of Augustine, forces poverty on both husband and son (rather than persuading them, so that all could follow the same path) that Ecdicia missteps. And even then, Augustine, while holding Ecdicia responsible, is careful to make clear that asceticism and family are not incompatible:

45. Augustine, *ep.* 262.2 (CSEL 57:622).

46. “For he should not have been defrauded of the debt you owed him of your body (*neque enim corporis tui debito fraudandus fuit*)” (*ep.* 262.2 [CSEL 57:622]). For a full treatment of patristic exegesis of 1 Cor 7, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 261–329. She discusses this letter in particular at 276.

47. Augustine, *ep.* 262.8 (CSEL 57:627–28). Augustine stands in contrast to Jerome’s praise of Paula’s similar actions. See Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 106–7, for a discussion of Paula’s “impoverishment of her heirs” in her hagiography.

48. Augustine, *ep.* 262.3 (CSEL 57:623).

Now, by this I do not mean that if our good works put a stumbling block [*scandalizatus*] in anyone's way, we should imagine that we must cease from them; but there is one case involving strangers [*alienarum*] and another involving persons connected with us in some partnership [*necessariorum in societate aliqua personarum*]; one for the believer, another for the unbeliever; one for parents towards their children, and another for children towards their parents, and finally the case . . . of a husband and a wife [*uiri et uxoris*], where the married woman [*mulierum*] is not permitted to say, "I am doing what I want with my own." She is not her own, but belongs to her head [*capitis*], that is, her husband.<sup>49</sup>

Again, it is Ecdicia's position as wife that makes control over any goods, or her own body, impossible; others, intent on following "good works" might have another "case" to follow. One wonders, given the different relationships Augustine outlines, what his advice to Laetus would have been if Laetus' father, rather than mother, had demanded his return home or, perhaps more intriguingly, a wife who did not want to pursue asceticism and demanded the "debt" of Laetus' body. Despite their obvious differences and seeming contradictions, these two letters both make the simultaneous claim that ascetic vows were to be taken seriously (especially against the claims of family members) and so could transform the family although, as Augustine delineates, in different ways for different family members. Thus asceticism was not strictly and simply "antifamilial" in either Laetus' or Ecdicia's case; rather both had new families that had varying points of continuity and discontinuity with their old ones.

The possibility that the family could exist within ascetic practice, if family members placed their spiritual relationship above their biological one, was not unusual in monastic circles. Philip Rousseau has examined this same transformation of familial bonds in the context of Egyptian communal monasticism.<sup>50</sup> He notes that there are numerous examples from the monastic literature of separation from biological family, and a resistance to attempts for reunion by biological family members; that despite the ubiquity of this trope, there are also many instances of "blood-kin" among the monks in the Egyptian villages and desert; and that "the chief guarantee [of the "survival" of biological "family associations"] seems to have been the ability of those concerned to change the basis of

49. Augustine, *ep.* 262.7 (CSEL 57:626–27).

50. Philip Rousseau, "Blood-Relationships among Early Eastern Ascetics," *JTS* n.s. 23 (1972): 135–44. For a discussion of proper biological relationships in one monastery in late ancient Egypt, see chapter 8 of Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women*.

their relationship,” namely to accept the new values and goals offered in Christianity, especially ascetic Christianity.<sup>51</sup> Examples of monastic leaders’ tests of their followers regarding whether this transformation is possible among them, or whether it has been achieved, appear in Clark’s study.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, even as leaders like Jerome became estranged from their biological families due to the changes wrought by Christianity,<sup>53</sup> other leaders, such as Augustine, Ambrose,<sup>54</sup> and, perhaps most famously, the Cappadocian family of Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Macrina, retained familial closeness within their shared religious commitments.

As noted earlier with Augustine’s letter to Laetus, the usual role of biological family members is to appear as a hurdle to be overcome by the determined ascetic. But in some cases, family receives a more positive evaluation based on the possibility families will undertake similar spiritual paths.<sup>55</sup> Gregory of Nyssa’s hagiography of his sister, Macrina, provides an example of a biological family that has been thoroughly transformed in its embrace of asceticism.<sup>56</sup> This embrace does not, as elsewhere

51. Rousseau, “Blood-Relationships,” 138.

52. Clark, “Antifamilial Tendencies,” esp. 365–66, with its story about a monastic leader’s near-killing of a son to test the father’s ascetic resolve.

53. J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 34.

54. John Moorhead, *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman World* (London: Longman, 1999), 36–38. The brother in question died after Ambrose was bishop. We have only funeral orations, however, and not any evidence of a type of closeness that is typical of the Cappadocians, or the opposite: a refutation of relations more typical of literature from Egypt.

55. The role of the family, in general, lies in their response to the conversion to asceticism. For example, Melania the Younger’s father, despite being a Christian, is opposed to her asceticism and her husband needs persuading. Paula, despite being described by Coon as a woman who “abandons her children” (*Sacred Fictions*, 103) had (at least) one daughter accompany her into asceticism (as Coon also notes at 106).

56. There has been a fair amount of scholarship that studies Macrina and her relationship with her family. Besides works that appear in other notes, see Averil Cameron, “Virginité as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity,” in *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History*, ed. Averil Cameron (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 181–205; Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 78–105; Elena Giannarelli, “Macrina e sua Madre: Santità e Paradossio,” in *SP* 20 (1989): 224–30; and Arnaldo Momigliano, “The Life of St. Macrina by Gregory of Nyssa,” in Arnaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 206–21. Most of these studies examine the evidence for her familial relations, but none question the positive portrayal of that family even as the household became asceticized. Momigliano comes closest when he notes that “it is exceptional that the eyewitness biographer should be her brother” (Momigliano, “Life of St. Macrina,” 211–12) but here his point is about the genre of

in ascetic literature, lead to a conflict between family members, and thus a rejection of biological family in favor of a spiritual one; rather, it leads to an enrichment through the spiritualization of those biological bonds as all family members work together towards salvation. Gregory can, then, lay claim to these biological relationships without fear of sullyng his sister's memory. Indeed, he begins the hagiography by asserting that his ability and authority in writing the life stems from their biological relationship.<sup>57</sup> One reason why Gregory, in particular, might negotiate the continued bonds of kinship differently than Augustine lies in his general attitude toward the flesh. While Gregory adopts flesh versus spirit language and imagery his "Christianity—his liturgical practice—celebrates the materiality of the logos, the Word made flesh."<sup>58</sup> Within this celebration, the flesh can be positive, rather than negative, if it, and attending dichotomies, are understood and prioritized correctly. With reference to one such split Derek Krueger notes, "Aware of a tension between rhetoric and piety, the *Life of Macrina* adopts an ascetical approach to literary aesthetics, a style appropriate to its subject."<sup>59</sup> So too, Gregory, throughout the work, places repeated positive emphasis on Macrina's sustained biological relationship with their mother, with their brother Basil, and with himself, and he does so in clearly physical terms.<sup>60</sup> When Gregory feels the

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biography (versus funeral oration). Throughout he argues for the closeness of the family, and for Gregory's continued pride in his heritage (e.g., "Gregory speaks of his sister as a sister but does not speak of his brother [Basil] as his brother" [212]; "Macrina can teach immortality and resurrection to her far more educated brother because she remains the sister who talks to him about her own life and asks about his own life" [216–17]; Gregory "does not even remotely attempt to disguise that he is proud of his ancestry" [219]). But while Momigliano examines this exceptional familial relationship, he does not question its place within monasticism, only, at best, alongside an ideal of "Christian humility" (218).

57. *Vita Macrinae* 1.22–24 (SC 178:140). Citations follow Maraval's chapter and line numbers from the SC edition; Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae*, ed. Pierre Maraval, *Grégoire de Nysse: Vie de Sainte Macrine*, SC 178 (Paris: Cerf, 1971). Quotations are modified from two translations: Virginia Woods Callahan, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, FC 58 (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1967), 159–91, and *Handmaids of the Lord: Holy Women in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Joan Petersen (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 51–82.

58. Derek Krueger, "Writing and the Liturgy of Memory in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*," *J ECS* 8 (2000): 483–510, at 495.

59. Krueger, "Writing," 496.

60. Krueger notes that it is "this peculiarly intimate knowledge of his sister's body" that "empowers Gregory" and "gives him authority to describe her in narrative" ("Writing," 504). Georgia Frank also explores the close relationship between Macrina and her mother, based on knowledge of the scar from a miraculous healing (Georgia Frank, "Macrina's Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*," *J ECS* 8 [2000]: 511–30, at 518–19).



impulse to visit his sister, he, as the nonmonastic family member, acts on it and is welcomed as a brother (rather than being ignored or rejected, the more common response in Egyptian monastic literature).<sup>61</sup> Gregory signals the intimate familial link he has with Macrina when he declares that Macrina had a secret name, known only to her family. By revealing that name, Thecla, at the beginning of the hagiography,<sup>62</sup> Gregory also reveals Macrina's destiny as a leader in female asceticism, but links that destiny with the (biological) family, the only people who knew her secret.<sup>63</sup>

Several aspects of this hagiography fit the paradigm of "sacred bonding" that Susan Ashbrook Harvey has explored in Syriac hagiography. Harvey notes that one impact of the Christianization of the family was that "the ascetic life provided women a means to remain together as mother and daughter rather than being separated into different households by fathers and husbands."<sup>64</sup> The threat of Macrina's separation from her mother was removed when Macrina's fiancé died, and Macrina could then claim the status of widow in order to circumvent a second attempt at marriage. Gregory admires his sister's redefinition of her engagement as actually a marriage, but he also attributes her ability to do so to her relationship with their mother: "she decided on a safeguard for her noble decision: never to be parted from her own mother, not even for a single moment."<sup>65</sup> Gregory emphasizes that neither woman found the relationship a burden, although it gave rise to a family joke about their mother's life-long gestation of Macrina;<sup>66</sup> rather, "between the two of them, there was a certain noble exchange: the one cared for the soul of the younger woman, the other for the body of her mother."<sup>67</sup> Here, in contrast to Augustine's denigration of Laetus' mother's pride in her womb (which stands in the way of his asceticism), Macrina's mother's womb can be praised for its biological and spiritual procreativity. Elsewhere, Gregory uses similar physical, bodily terms to show the ascetic benefits of

61. *Vita Macrinae* 15.5–6 (SC 178:190).

62. *Vita Macrinae* 2.23–26 (SC 178:146).

63. Others have also commented on the use of "Thecla" to indicate that Gregory was writing "much more than just a biography of his sister" (Philip M. Beagon, "The Cappadocian Fathers, Women, and Ecclesiastical Politics," *VC* 49 (1995): 168, and see 176, n. 15).

64. Harvey, "Sacred Bonding," 51.

65. *Vita Macrinae* 5.16–10 (SC 178:156).

66. The joke, made by their mother, is that she carried all her other children the usual ten months, but Macrina she carried her entire life (*Vita Macrinae* 5.20–23 [SC 178:156]).

67. *Vita Macrinae* 5.27–28 (SC 178:158).

their familial relationship; after Macrina's death, he learns that it had been his mother's touch that had conducted a miracle of healing a tumor in his sister's breast.<sup>68</sup> Like the mothers and daughters in Syriac hagiography, Macrina's and her mother's relationship, both spiritual and biological, is not opposed to "that of devotion to God; instead the one supports the other."<sup>69</sup>

Macrina eventually becomes the dominant partner in this relationship, becoming spiritual mother to her biological mother.<sup>70</sup> While their mother trained and oversaw Macrina in a life of purity, Macrina in turn developed a philosophical antiflesh ideal and "drew her [mother] little by little towards a more simple and immaterial way of life."<sup>71</sup> When Naucratis, the brother Gregory identifies as Macrina's favorite, dies, it is Macrina who, despite feeling grief, teaches her mother (whose own grief had, for a moment, overwhelmed her ascetic abilities) that the biological family has been transformed spiritually.<sup>72</sup> Gregory states clearly that Macrina is still human, and still has "natural" feelings for her biological family, but that those "natural" feelings were now dominated by "reason"; Macrina "transcending her nature [φύσις], lifted her mother by her own reasonings [λογισμοῖς]."<sup>73</sup> Despite this conquest of "nature," in the end the two women are bodily united by being buried in the same tomb, "for, throughout their whole lives, they both had asked God in unison that their bodies

68. Macrina had, according to a story Gregory repeats from a monastic sister, refused to see a doctor for her illness, due to modesty, even against their mother's wishes. One evening, after physically caring for her mother ("after she had fulfilled for her mother the services customarily performed with her hands"), she prayed. Then, after more pleading from their mother, Macrina declared that a cure lay in her mother's making a sign of the cross on the affected area; when her mother did so, "the sign worked, and the illness was no more" (*Vita Macrinae* 31.13–33 [SC 178:242–46]).

69. Harvey, "Sacred Bonding," 51.

70. A similar example comes from the legend of Irene in Harvey's study ("Sacred Bonding," 45–47), where Irene's mother had "become daughter to her own child; not physically birthed from her womb but re-created by her" (46).

71. *Vita Macrinae* 5.48–50 (SC 178:160).

72. Macrina also advises her mother to regard all their former servants as "sisters and equals" (*Vita Macrinae* 7.7–8 [SC 178:164]), in effect becoming head of the "new" household of the monastery. This relationship, then, also fits Harvey's description of "a parallel but alternative course to the family institution, one that assumed structurally some of the same social and political obligations" (Harvey, "Sacred Bonding," 42).

73. *Vita Macrinae* 10.17–19 (SC 178:174). Despite this momentary loss, Macrina's mother, due to Macrina's influence, was able to curb the natural impulse to grief before she indulged in "womanish" actions such as tearing her garments (*Vita Macrinae* 10.6–13 [SC 178:172–74]).

might be mixed with each other after death” in order that their fellowship (κοινωνίαν) might continue.<sup>74</sup>

Macrina’s religious influence extends beyond the “sacred bond” with her mother to affect her relationship with her brothers, especially the prominent and influential Basil. It is, according to Gregory, Macrina who recognized Basil’s pride in his “gifts of oratory” and instead “persuaded him also towards the object of philosophy so rapidly that he defected from earthly renown.”<sup>75</sup> In addition, the relationship between Macrina and Gregory is depicted in both biological and spiritual terms.<sup>76</sup> When Gregory arrives at Macrina’s deathbed, Macrina responds in generic Christian terms, claiming God has “caused your servant [οἰκέτην] to visit your handmaid [παιδίσκης].”<sup>77</sup> Macrina later addresses Gregory as “brother” but Gregory responds by describing Macrina as “my teacher.”<sup>78</sup> Yet in eulogizing her after her death, he identifies her as “the common boast of all our family [τὸ κοινὸν καύχημα τῆς γενεᾶς].”<sup>79</sup> The mixing of these claims in this text shows how thorough the spiritual transformation of the family was, but also how enduring those biological familial bonds remained.<sup>80</sup> In creating the new monastic household, Macrina had increased her family members, not replaced them. Perhaps the best example of the tension between spiritual and biological comes near the end of the *Life*, when Gregory is working with Lampadion, a leader of the monastery, in preparing Macrina’s body for burial. Gregory’s inclusion in this process, including the provision of burial clothes, was allowed by Lampadion because

74. *Vita Macrinae* 35.17–19 (SC 178:256).

75. *Vita Macrinae* 6.8–10 (SC 178:162). Here Gregory’s emphasis on familial bonds is noteworthy, since it stands in contrast to Basil’s own account of his spiritual influences (see Beagon, “Cappadocian Fathers,” 168–70).

76. Macrina also, according to Gregory, raised their youngest brother, born at the time of their father’s death. Her childrearing is described in spiritual terms, and Peter becomes head of the male portion of the domestic monastery: see *Vita Macrinae* 12 (Peter’s upbringing), 13 (their mother’s dedication of him to God), 14 (his ordination as a priest), and 37.12 (Peter as head of the men’s monastery) (SC 178:180–90, 258).

77. *Vita Macrinae* 17.11–12 (SC 178:196).

78. *Vita Macrinae* 19.2, 6 (SC 178:200).

79. *Vita Macrinae* 22.18–19 (SC 178:212). Gregory uses a similar, but significantly different phrase, to describe his brother Basil earlier, who is “the common honor of our family” (τὸ κοινὸν τῆς γενεᾶς καλόν) (*Vita Macrinae* 14.25–26 [SC 178:190]).

80. At the same time, Gregory praises the female members of the monastery because, after Macrina’s death “they did not mourn the loss of an intimacy or an attachment to the flesh or any misfortune such as affects humankind, but wept as if they had been separated from their hope in God and from the salvation of their souls” (*Vita Macrinae* 26.17–22 [SC 178:230]). He might here be comparing their grief with his own, although that remains unclear.

if [Macrina] were alive, she would have accepted this offering [τιμὴν] from you on two accounts: due to your priesthood, which she always honored [τιμίαν]; and, due to your kinship [κοινωνίαν τῆς φύσεως], she would not have considered her own brother's property as the property of a stranger. For this reason, she directed that her body should be laid out by your hands.<sup>81</sup>

In other words, both Gregory's spiritual status (as priest) and his biological (as brother) are the basis for his role; this duality, where spiritual and fleshly relationships work in tandem rather than opposition, is typical of familial language in the text as a whole.<sup>82</sup> Gregory does not present the asceticized household as in conflict with itself, but rather as a new coexistence of "family" and family.

The examples from Augustine and Gregory look at the role of the family within asceticism and monasticism, where there is a hierarchy of spirit over flesh typical of ascetic discourse. Egyptian monastic literature also gives evidence of the permeability of the boundary separating the monastery from "the world" with visitors, economic interaction, and public preaching all providing opportunities for contact between the two populations. Part of this negotiation including recognizing the "enduring bonds of kinship" even as "leaving the world meant, perhaps more than anything else, leaving one's family."<sup>83</sup> As with Augustine's advice to Laetus and Ecdicia, so too "duty, as well as sentiment, retained its hold over those who had 'left the world'—at least the duty of respect for elders, of material concern for living relatives, of remembrance of those dead."<sup>84</sup>

But what of those families who did not, either in part or whole, join a monastery? What was the proper relationship among biological family members, and how is it defined through prevailing discourses of asceticism? Andrew Jacobs' examination of exegesis of Luke 14.26 provides some answers to these questions: that family discourse functioned to

81. *Vita Macrinae* 29.24–29 (SC 178:238).

82. Cf. Harvey, "Sacred Bonding," 55: "These stories portray the Christianization of the family as an occurrence in which a traditional, physical bond acquires spiritual significance when that bond is sealed by shared piety and irresolute faith. Christian rhetoric privileging the spiritual family over the biological family does not, in these stories, succeed in removing or replacing a relationship whose strength is shown to belie its 'social vulnerability.'"

83. Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 153 and 151. My thanks to the anonymous reader for recalling this source to me.

84. Rousseau, *Pachomius*, 153.

fashion and transform the Christian self.<sup>85</sup> A sermon of the Egyptian monastic leader Shenoute (who led the White Monastery in Upper Egypt from about 385 to 465) provides a further voice to this family discourse and to the role of the biological family in the period when asceticism became the dominant language of Christianity. This sermon, “On Cleaving to Profitable Things,” presents us with a different audience for monastic literature than the audience for either Augustine’s letters or Gregory’s hagiography.<sup>86</sup> While Shenoute routinely preached to monks and laity alike, here the nonmonastic portion of the audience consisted of some twenty thousand refugees who, having come to the monastery during a foreign invasion, had been living alongside the monks for some three months.<sup>87</sup> In addition, the monks themselves, who were also part of Shenoute’s intended audience, had complex family and “family” relations. Some monks had left their biological family to join the White Monastery, while others joined along with their kin; yet all were expected to live with each other without concern for these biological ties.<sup>88</sup> In other words, we have a diversity of familial relationships in Shenoute’s audience, a diversity which allows us to see that Shenoute’s view of family,

85. Jacobs, “Let Him Guard,” 278–79.

86. Shenoute, “On Cleaving to Profitable Things,” tr. David Brakke, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 20 (1989): 115–41. I have here followed Brakke’s translation throughout. The Coptic can be found in Émile Chassinat, *Le quatrième livre des entretiens et épîtres de Shenouti*, Mémoires publiés par les Membres de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale 23 (Cairo: Imprimerie de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1911), 153–209. References to the Coptic follow Chassinat’s page and line numbers. The sermon is alternately titled, “God Is Blessed.”

87. Stephen Emmel, “The Historical Circumstances of Shenoute’s Sermon *God Is Blessed*” in *ΘΕΜΕΛΙΑ: Spätantike und koptologische Studien Peter Grossmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Martin Krause and Sofia Schaten (Wiesbaden: Richard Verlag, 1998), 82 and 87–88.

88. A portion of this sermon (the exact portion that includes the familial imagery I examine below) has been excerpted from the *Discourses* and placed in *Canon* 7. The general distinction between these two collections pertains to audience: the *Discourses* are Shenoute’s “public” works and the *Canons* are directed to a monastic audience. This excerpt is the only point of overlap between the two collections, which are otherwise distinct (see Emmel, “Historical Circumstances,” 82). The reason for including the excerpt in *Canon* 7 seems to lie in its relevance to the two previous works, which also discuss this period when the monastery served as a refugee camp. The excerpt contains one of the sermon’s few references to “barbarians” (Emmel, “Historical Circumstances,” 91). Future studies of Shenoute’s writings should, as Emmel notes (95), examine this excerpt alongside the two previous works in *Canon* 7. My thanks to Stephen Emmel for correspondence on the vexed issue of the reason for excerpting this sermon.

although shaped by his own ascetic tendencies, remained remarkably consistent for both monastic and biological families. In his sermon, we can hear a monastic leader use family discourse to shape Christian identity both within the monastery and without and can so gauge further the ways in which family discourse might emerge in an age of asceticism to form various identities all under the rubric of “Christian.”

As head of the White Monastery, Shenoute had already had occasion to use family discourse to shape the Christian identity of the monks under his care. Family life in this monastery, I have argued elsewhere, “was a point where spirit was supposed to discipline flesh, not just by renouncing former biological ties in favor of spiritual allegiances” (whether or not families joined in whole or in part) “but also by shaping of the new spiritual family to be like, yet unlike, the old biological family.”<sup>89</sup> Throughout his instructions to the monks, Shenoute uses family language in a variety of ways, from simple indications of rank to more complex imagery as part of his overall arguments about conflicts within the monastery. Family language was paramount in three such monastic conflicts: Shenoute’s definition of monastic life, the role of corporal punishment in that life, and creating a proper view of Shenoute’s own authority over that life. These expectations would already have been familiar to the monastic members of Shenoute’s audience.<sup>90</sup> His point in this sermon was not to remind his monks of these relations, but to explain to their nonmonastic visitors how the fleshly family could be as sacred as the monastic and achieve the same goal, namely salvation. The family can realize this status if they are willing to undertake the actions which will make them identifiably “Christian.” These actions lie in sexual discipline and corporal punishment, two elements important to the monastic family as well. Just as Shenoute can employ “family language” in order to define the proper monastic family—family language which is made more immediate, and yet more problematic, by the presence of fleshly families among the monks—so he can in turn use monastic language to define the proper Christian family. Family discourse and monastic discourse achieve an elaborate complementarity in Shenoute’s sermon.

89. Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women*, 134. The paragraph that follows has been informed overall by my chapters 7 and 8, on the role of family, spiritual and biological, in the White Monastery. I discuss other aspects of this sermon (namely, its evidence and imagery of corporal punishment in biological families) at 169–70.

90. Especially if, as Emmel suggests, the invasion took place between 435 and 465, that is, several decades after Shenoute became head of the monastery (Emmel, “Historical Circumstances,” 94).

Part of the sermon consists of Shenoute's guidelines for proper child-raising for those families who "are saying, 'We belong to Christ.'"<sup>91</sup> Rather than the complete sexual renunciation of monasticism, Shenoute counsels against sexual impropriety. He claims to have learned about "fathers, mothers, and brothers who . . . make an agreement with the man who commits adultery with their daughters and sisters."<sup>92</sup> Rather than these sexual errors, mothers, like Macrina's mother, should both guard their daughters to protect their sexual reputations and present themselves as role models; and all parents must not "endure unclean sons and daughters," because to do so is to be like a husband who stays with an unfaithful wife. In addition, Shenoute advocates the correct use of corporal punishment of children, saying that a father who "educates his sons, daughters, and siblings with every lashing" is merciful because thus do the children escape "God's condemnation." So too parental love consists of doing whatever is necessary to lead one's children to salvation, even including "smear[ing] the flesh and blood of ignorant sons and daughters and siblings on the rod." Along with actions, words matter; parents should testify "about the afflictions and sufferings of the coming wrath."<sup>93</sup> Shenoute thus links both sexual propriety and corporal punishment with the ultimate goal of child-raising, to lead the children to salvation. Finally, along with these behaviors, parents must also have the right attitudes towards their children and "become like barbarians toward their sons and daughters,"<sup>94</sup> a phrase than seems to imply opposition and lack of communication rather than closeness.<sup>95</sup> In this way, "salvation then [will] come to many people."<sup>96</sup> Through proper definition of familial roles, the use of corporal punishment, and strong leadership—that is, the cornerstones of Shenoute's *monastic* communalism—the family can achieve true Christian sanctity.

The biological family, therefore, need not be inherently inferior to the spiritual family, if the biological family members treat each other prop-

91. Shenoute, "On Cleaving," 125 (Chassinat, *Quatrième livre*, 168.50–51).

92. Shenoute, "On Cleaving," 126 (Chassinat, *Quatrième livre*, 169.40–50).

93. Shenoute, "On Cleaving," 126 (Chassinat, *Quatrième livre*, 171.45–47).

94. Shenoute, "On Cleaving," 125 (Chassinat, *Quatrième livre*, 167.50–55).

95. Shenoute uses similar imagery in a letter to a female monk with whom he was having a sustained argument: "Shenoute writes to Tachom as one barbarian to another, not as a father to a mother, nor as a brother to a sister" (see Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women*, 49 and 173–74 for a discussion of this letter). In addition, Emmel notes Shenoute's language, to an audience "composed largely of victims of genuinely barbaric behavior," "might have seemed harsh" (Emmel, "Historical Circumstances," 91).

96. Shenoute, "On Cleaving," 125 (Chassinat, *Quatrième livre*, 168.7–9).

erly (that is, quasi-monastically) and so lead each other to salvation. The burden for this leadership lies on parents (and in some cases, elder siblings). Shenoute seemingly does not require all families to embrace the monastic ideal, but he does require changes within the biological family for it to be recognized as “Christian.” If transformed, the biological family can be as sacred as the monastic life itself, connecting all Christians rather than separating them between lay and monastic: “But we dwell with Jesus and his angels, not only in his church, his [holy] places [i.e., the monastery], and every place in which people gather, but also in our houses—we ourselves and our children, parents and siblings.”<sup>97</sup> Since Shenoute elsewhere defines the monastery as reflecting life among “God and his angels in heaven,” a common trope for the ascetic life, the connection between biological families and the angelic life thus creates a link between biological and spiritual families. This advice, to actual biological families, emblemizes the viability of “profamilial” discourse in both Christian exegesis and monasticism. The family itself is not rejected, abandoned, “hated,” or even undermined. Rather a discursive transformation has taken place, such that tensions within Christianity—between this world and the next, between ascetic and non—can be explored and, if not resolved, at least balanced.

## CONCLUSION

This survey of examples from literature that is emblematic of the ascetic discourse of late antique Christianity illustrates that “family discourse” was not limited to a flat declaration of (biological) familial hatred in favor of (spiritual) allegiances. Monastic leaders were likewise careful not to praise one choice, renunciation, as correct and so denigrate another, continued biological families, as wrong. Jerome might famously have praised marriage for the virgins it produced for further ascetic practice, but in many cases monasticism had a “profamilial” attitude alongside its standard “antifamilial tendency” no matter whether monks or laity were being addressed. Even in the case of a typical “hate your family” argument like Augustine’s to Laetus, the biological family was not wrong but limited; and Laetus’ mother’s wrongness lay more in her attempts to have Laetus break his vow than in her relationship with her son. However divisive the language of familial renunciation might often have sounded, Christians as different as Gregory (who, as a married man, necessarily

97. Shenoute, “On Cleaving,” 122 (Chassinat, *Quatrième livre*, 159.47–160.4).



observed his family's monastic endeavors as an intimate "outsider") and the monk Shenoute also used this language to create a vision of a united Christian family, with an attendant complexity of familial relationships for its various members, monk and layperson. The monastic family discourse, then, could be a discourse that transcended whatever boundaries existed between the monks and the world in order to create a bridge, a moment of commonality between them.

In examining these "profamilial" aspects of monastic literature, I am engaged in a process that has points of similarity to some recent arguments James Goehring has made about the power of the "myth of the desert" in monastic literature.<sup>98</sup> Using landscape theory that examines the Enclosure Period (18th–19th century England), Goehring articulates how descriptions of the desert in monastic literature created an artificial world (linked to the "real" desert) that, through its "effective equation . . . with the spiritual separation of the ascetic and the world" came "to shape a new Christian identity" and so "played a major role in the Christian transformation of late antiquity." Part of the myth's power lay in its "erasure of alternative signs . . . [it] does not altogether dispense with urban ascetics . . . [but] their brief appearance helps to facilitate the working of the illusion." Likewise, I suggest, the dominant antifamilial discourse of ascetic literature creates a similar myth, the myth of the ascetic's ability to attain near perfection by living out the injunction of Luke 14.26 to an extreme degree of "hatred" and not merely a prioritizing of one "family" over the other.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, as much as the "myth of the desert" persists in scholarship, so too this "mythical" perception continues to "foster assumptions" about monasticism's demands on families. In order to understand how this particular myth might create its illusion, however, it is necessary to pay attention to those figures who are "so small as almost to escape our notice."<sup>100</sup> In my investigation here I

98. All the quotations which follow are from James E. Goehring, "The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert," in *Rereading Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Durham: Duke University Press = *JMEMS* 33 [2003]: 437–51). My thanks to the author for his willingness to allow use of this material in advance of publication.

99. In his survey of characteristics that contribute to the myth which "held forth perfection as a worthy goal," Goehring includes familial renunciation; that "if the average Christian interpreted the demand of Luke 14.26 to hate one's father and mother as a warning not to put family before God, the ascetic perfected that path by refusing contact with her or his relatives" (Goehring, "Dark Side").

100. This phrase appears in Goehring, who in turn is quoting John Barrell, *The Dark Side of Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 6.

have been less interested in detecting “figures,” that is, actual biological family members. Rather I hope to start to redraw late antique “family discourse” in order to note the inclusion of “family” and family in one Christian landscape. By so doing, we might gain a clearer understanding of the integration of the social and rhetorical category of “family” in late antiquity.

*Rebecca Krawiec is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Canisius College*