

ALWIS (A.P.) **Celibate Marriages in Late Antique and Byzantine Hagiography: the Lives of Saints Julian and Basilissa, Andronikos and Athanasia, and Galaktion and Episteme.** London and New York: Continuum, 2011. Pp. xii + 340. £65. 9781441115256.

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Readers of this interesting collection of saints' lives and discussion of them are advised to start at the end. Here they will find the Greek texts concerned – the *Vitae* of Saints Julian and Basilissa (*VJB*); Andronikos and Athanasia (*VAA*) and Galaktikon and Episteme (*VGE*) – followed by an English translation and notes. Non-Greek readers will have a tough time with the notes, but nonetheless are urged to persevere and to enjoy the fluent and lively translations. The first part of the book is a detailed study of the texts, which date from a period ranging from the sixth to seventh century (*VJB*, though it had an earlier Latin prototype, and *VAA*) to the ninth to tenth century (*VGE*) and which all have the theme of celibate marriage in common. This gives the author some common ground on which to work and the result is a wide-ranging study of this peculiar phenomenon, which, though seeming to contradict Christian teaching on the purpose of marriage – procreation – yet clearly exerted a fascination over a Byzantine audience.

After a short summary of each *Vita*, discussion of the texts follows thematically. There is much here to interest the literary scholar: the placing of the *VAA* in the tradition of the 'edifying tales' of the Desert Fathers, for instance, or the characterization of the *VGE* as a 'hagiographical romance', an exciting tale of celibate 'adventure', the very opposite of the sexual romance of the late antique novel. Alwis has a sure touch in following up parallels and tracing traditions and ranges widely across both Greek and Latin hagiography.

For the theologian, these tales present a treasure trove of important themes and their working out in a way which would appeal to a wide secular and even monastic audience. How were teachings on marriage, chastity and virginity dealt with by hagiographers? What existing texts and reference points did they use? Biblical citations and parallels, of course, abound in these works, but Alwis is particularly sure-footed when tracing precisely which were deployed at any given moment and for what effect. The echo of the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* with its view

of the corrosive effects of marriage in the *VJB* testifies, she feels, to the early date of the latter; the importance of the eschatological vision of the *Book of Revelation* to the virginal protagonists of the *VJB* and the *VGE* testifies to the lasting attraction of its portrayal of the rewards for chastity in the afterlife. Such texts and teachings have histories and lives of their own.

The social historian, particularly one interested in the history of gender, will find her discussions particularly rewarding. Alwis subjects late antique sexuality and marriage to forensic scrutiny. Why did couples want to enter into what many saw as an unnatural state? What difference did it make to this experience if they had previously consummated their marriage and had children? What did their parents, families and neighbours think about it? How could it successfully be done (the discussion of the motifs of 'secrecy', 'hidden identity' and 'transvestism' is particularly interesting)? All this is placed against a wider canvas of late antique society, peopled with pagan priests, stern governors, desert holy men and anxious parents trying to do the right thing. An exotic world of eastern locales such as Emesa, Antioch and Sinai is evoked with gusto and was one of the undoubted attractions of these works. But the reason for their continuing popularity was, she argues, their role as *lieux de mémoire*: their themes were just as relevant to the audiences of the middle Byzantine period as they had been to earlier ones. They survived in a 'continuum of time' from the 'fabled past' to the 'eternal present' and to future commemoration.

This is a scholarly, well-written and, above all, humane study. Alwis never loses sight of the fact that she is writing about the most fundamental aspects of the human condition: the urge to love and support, if not to procreate. She is not afraid to empathize and, indeed, sympathize with the subjects of these tales in their striving to achieve a higher form of life, even at a terrible cost to themselves. Her major success is that she compels her readers to do so, too.

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VERHEYLEN (J.) and TEULE (H.) *Eds. Heretics and Heresies in the Ancient Church and in Eastern Christianity. Studies in Honour of Adelbert Davids* (Eastern Christian Studies