

WILLIAMS (M.S.) **Authorised Lives in Early Christian Biography. Between Eusebius and Augustine.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. 262. GBP 55. 9780521894906.

Early Christian biography, as Williams defines it, is characterized by ‘a shared network of concerns and approaches, both literary and historical’ [8]. More specifically, these texts stand out through typological references to the Bible: the authors of early Christian biographies present their subjects as re-enactments of the Scriptures, and thereby convey to themselves the authority associated with the Bible.

As Williams shows in Chapter One, Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine* presents Constantine not so much as the successor of good Roman Emperors such as Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius; rather, Constantine’s life is presented as a re-enactment of the lives of Moses and Christ. A number of striking parallels between Constantine and Moses are adduced, but parallels between Constantine and Christ are – as Williams himself admits – much less explicit and frequent. Whilst pointing out that this is Eusebius’ picture of Constantine rather than the emperor’s own, Williams says rather little about Eusebius’ agenda in doing so.

Chapter Two discusses two Christian biographies by Gregory of Nyssa. By linking Basil to Moses and other biblical figures in *In Praise of Basil*, Gregory portrays Basil as a biblical figure himself, and presents the world of the Bible in terms that are familiar to late antiquity. Likewise, the Moses of Gregory’s *Life of Moses* is not only a model for, but also bears close resemblance to late-antique bishops. Especially interesting is Williams’ analysis of the role Gregory attributes to Aaron: whilst largely ignoring Moses’ brother in *In Praise of Basil*, Gregory, who was, of course, the brother of Basil, uses Aaron in the *Life of Moses* to discuss his exegetical approach, and attributes a positive role to him.

The next chapter explores the lives of more ordinary figures. Antony is presented as a re-enactment of Elijah, Jacob, David, Joshua, and even Christ himself. Pachomius, Paul of Thebes, Malchus, Hilarion, and others are shown to correspond to these and other biblical leaders as well as to Antony. As Williams argues, however, these later lives ‘re-imagine [...] the role of the holy man: [...] the *Life of Hilarion* joins Jerome’s other biographies in modifying the image of the ascetic to promote more engagement with the world’ [132].

Chapter Four discusses the importance of Antony and his *Life* in Augustine’s account of his conversion in the *Confessions*. As Williams argues, Augustine read the *Life of Antony* in the indicative rather than in the imperative [183]: rather than inciting him to imitate every detail of Antony’s ascetic life, the text made Augustine realize God’s continuing intervention in contemporary world, and this insight in turn induced him to develop his own kind of Christian life.

Chapter Five offers a very different, at times even contradictory image of Augustine. Whilst the previous chapter stressed Augustine’s use of typological interpretations in the *Confessions*, this one argues that Augustine, in his *Confessions* as well as in the *City of God* and other works, saw an insurmountable divide between the Bible, divinely inspired and therefore authoritative, and all human literary creations, including his own.

Much of Williams’ book centres on the idea that early Christian biography distinguishes itself by merging Biblical with contemporary history. The point in itself is interesting, and the author finds passages that illustrate it in a great number of important texts from late antiquity, which should attract a readership of classicists, theologians, and historians alike. As it stands, however, the book risks to disappoint

these readers on two accounts. First, it lacks detailed discussion of any of the texts discussed, which at times makes it rather superficial for those with detailed knowledge of the texts under discussion, and difficult to follow for those who do not have such knowledge. Secondly, the reader is sometimes left wondering at the relevance and implications of the fact that yet another text is shown to contain a few passages displaying what Williams believes to be the defining characteristic of early Christian biography. The problem here is especially that the issue of authority is not only given much less attention than one would expect on the basis of the book's title, but also treated quite separately from the argument about typology. A more integrated account, like the one Williams offers regarding Aaron in Gregory's *Life of Moses*, would have made for an argument of greater strength as well as wider relevance.

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