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**The Desert A City:
A Study of Antony the Great's Life**

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Between 356 and 358, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria in exile, composed the first biography of a monk, *Life of Antony*.¹ This remarkable work was so popular and influential that it drew attention not just to Antony the Great, but also to Egypt, its monks, and its ever-growing monastic communities. Athanasius wrote in *Life* that St. Antony's fame even reached the emperors because Emperor Constantine Augustus and his sons, after having heard of him, were eager to receive an answer from him as a Father.² Therefore, in this paper, I will address the following questions: who is St. Antony, what are the most important elements of Antony's ascetic life, and what is the legacy of Athanasius's *Life of Antony*?

According to Athanasius, St. Antony was a Coptic-speaking peasant. He was raised Christian and grew up in a village along the Nile River. His parents died when he just reached his adolescence, leaving him with weighty responsibilities: a younger sister to take care of and a family farm. One day, when he walked into a church while the Gospel was being read, he heard the words "If you would be perfect, go, and sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matt. 19:21). Antony was moved deeply by these words and saw himself in the reading as the man whom Jesus was speaking. Thus, he acted immediately: he gave away his lands and goods to the poor, made an arrangement for his sister to be raised in virginity, and then left to live an ascetic life.

It is interesting that Athanasius did not depict him as the first monk who pursued the ascetic life but as the one who really brought asceticism to the next level and made his ascetic life a real model and standard for the later monks. He pointed out that even though there were not yet monasteries in Egypt, the ascetic doctrine was being practiced already, and those who

¹ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, translated by Robert C. Gregg, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980).

² Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 84.

wished to discipline themselves lived in isolation. According to *Life*, there has already been a recognizable class of Christian ascetics who chose to live on the fringe of the villages and whom Athanasius called “men of Zeal.”³ In other words, the population of Egypt has been in contact with ascetic teachings for centuries and some of them were taught to look upon the world through ascetic eyes. For instance, during the second century in Alexandria, there was a Christian ascetic sect called Enkratite, meaning “self-controlled,” who held the conviction that the fallen state of humanity could be most vividly witnessed through sexuality. Thus, in order to return to a “natural state,” they forbade marriage for it supported acts of sex and advocated abstinence from meat.⁴ However, in response to the Enkratites’ heavy charges on sexuality, Clement of Alexandria, a Christian theologian, and philosopher who taught at the Catechetical School of Alexandria, began to develop the theory of body and self around the notion of a Christian sage. He put forward that human beings were unable to avoid some “urges” such as hunger, fear, and sensations since humans were born with these urges, which Peter Brown called “the muted creaking of the biological self.”⁵ They were like vapors and, if not checked by vigilant reflection, could mist over the entire mind so that human beings would lose their rationality. Thus, in order to maintain a lucid and serene vision and state of mind, it was necessary to conduct a “meticulous rhythm of life.”⁶ And only through a disciplined life, human beings were able to obtain discernment. However, to “form” a life, from Clement’s perspective, involved no harsh mortification of the flesh. It was rather a process as meticulous and “as long as the attention that a literary man must give to the right placing of every word.”⁷

³ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 3.

⁴ Peter, Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 131.

⁵ Brown, 129.

⁶ Brown, 129.

⁷ Brown, 130.

Antony was definitely influenced by this notion of cultivation of self, which was traceable both in *Life* and in his letters to his disciples. However, what made him special, who eventually earned the epithet “father of monks,” was not his ascetic lifestyle but where he practiced asceticism. Earlier Christian thinkers such as Clement did not advocate a complete retreat from society. Rather, he maintained that the Christian sage should discipline himself while remaining a full member of the society and engaging in “God-given importance of every moment of daily life, and especially of the life in the household.”⁸ Thus, one of the significant developments in early monasticism that separated it from earlier ascetic traditions is that Antony decided to make a total break from his surrounding environment. Instead of practicing it at the fringe of the village, he chose to practice it in the desert, which was not a friendly place to live. Brown wrote that the antithesis between the desert and settled land in Egypt was stark enough that Antony’s life in the Egyptian desert was a social equivalent of living on the Antarctic continent.⁹ Other than the hostile environments, the desert itself provided many other facets for the early monks themselves. It should be noted that there was a general tendency in Egypt to flee to the desert to avoid worldly troubles. For example, early Christians tended to flee to the desert in order to escape the persecution under the pagan Emperor; others tried to avoid the heavy taxes imposed by the emperor. Another important aspect of the desert is that biblically it has been associated with the dwelling place of demons. Christ was tempted in the desert and Israelites, the chosen people, was also tested in the desert. Thus, in my opinion, Antony, being fully aware of the existence of evil demons in the desert, purposely chose to retreat to the desert in order to strengthen his mind and cultivate himself.

⁸ Brown, 128.

⁹ Peter, Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 83

It is interesting to notice that asceticism actually comes from the Greek word *ασκεσις* which was used by Greeks to describe anyone who enters into strict training and disciplined practice in order to achieve a certain goal.¹⁰ Originally, it was applied to athletes who followed strict training in order to win the contest. Subsequently, this concept was incorporated into the Christian settings as strict training in order to toughen one's body and mind for the preparation of the final moment of death in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, Christian martyrs were often referred to as athletes or fighters of Christ, who played out their devotion in the arena in the midst of a hostile unchristian Roman Empire. For example, Clement of Rome, writing in the late first century A.D., spoke of martyrs as the "noble athletes" persecuted and engaged in the "contest of death."¹¹ Moreover, it should not be considered solely a coincidence that both martyrs and gladiators fought and died in the same arena. One of the most famous persecutions was the death of St. Perpetua.¹² Vibia Perpetua, a member of a high-ranking Roman family, was arrested along with four other fellow Christians under the decree of Emperor Septimus Severus. On the day of the persecution, they were led to the amphitheater "joyfully as though they were going to heaven."¹³ One of her fellow Christians Saturninus insisted that he wanted to be exposed to all different beasts so that he might receive more glory in heaven. At the same time, when Perpetua fought with the heifer, she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair because she insisted that she should die with modesty and dignity. In the end, she, fearless and proud, took the "trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat."¹⁴ (56). Thereafter, in the minds of early Christians, martyrs were the glorious fighters of Christ and needed to be venerated. Antony was also deeply moved by this concept. In *Life*, Athanasius described how Antony, after hearing of

¹⁰ Gabriel Daly, "Prayer and Asceticism," *The Furrow*, 22, no. 11 (1971): 676-678

¹¹ Daly, "Prayer and Asceticism," 678

¹² Andrew S. Jacob, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas in Late Antiquity*, edited by L. Stephanie Cobb, 1st ed (University of California Press, 2021).

¹³ Jacob, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas in Late Antiquity*, 56.

¹⁴ Jacob, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas in Late Antiquity*, 56.

the brutal persecutions of Maximin Daia in 313, decided to come out of his cell and go to Alexandria that he “entered the combat or look upon those that do.”¹⁵ He attended the trials of Christians and also accompanied those who were to be martyred to the place of execution. In *Life*, Athanasius depicted him as bold, yet restrained enough that he would not be accused of seeking voluntary martyrdom. He then withdrew again to his cell and “was there daily being martyred by his conscience, and doing battle in the contests of the faith.”¹⁶ Rather than “a single final battle,” Antony was “daily martyred” by his own conscience since he put himself under a constant threat of being lured both by demons externally and by the human desire for food internally.

In *Life*, the demons were usually visible. They could be seen and heard. They could take the form of “a beguiling seductive temptress” or disguise themselves as “beasts—lions, bears, leopards, snakes, scorpions” and even beat ascetics.¹⁷ For instance, in *Life*, Antony was badly beaten by demons disguised as a wild beast and was found motionless, speechless, as if dead, by his friend.¹⁸ However, in some cases, some devils were even not visible bodily. In the *Seven Letters of St. Antony* ascribed to him by St. Jerome in 392 C.E, Antony warned his disciples of all the “secret contrivances” and “manifold crafts” of the devil’s work.¹⁹ For they were not visible bodily, they took the bodies of human beings and poured all their wickednesses into souls. Then, he told his disciples that only through “a spirit of discernment” that is bestowed by God could all the secret devils be revealed. In *Life*, Athanasius wrote: “the Lord did not forget the wrestling of Antony.”²⁰ He appeared and assumed a human voice: “I was here, Antony, but I waited to watch your struggle. And now, since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be

¹⁵ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 46.

¹⁶ Athanasius, 47.

¹⁷ Athanasius, 5.

¹⁸ Athanasius, 5.

¹⁹ Antony, *Letter 6*.

²⁰ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 10.

your helper forever, and I will make you famous everywhere.”²¹ In such a way, Antony was given the spirit of discernment and was able to see the fiercest evil spirit.

Antony believed that all the burdens that devils had poured both in soul and body should be purged. Thus, according to Athanasius, he maintained a simple diet of bread and salt, only drank water, and on many occasions only ate every second day. It was believed in Late Antiquity that the human body was an “autarkic” system that was capable of running on its own “heat.”²² Ideally, the body would only need “enough nourishment to keep that heat alive.” Ascetics tended to identify the bodies of Adam and Eve as the “natural” state, a state in which the body acted as a “finely tuned engine” capable of idling indefinitely.²³ However, the twisted will of fallen men had crammed the body with all these extra and unnecessary foods, thereby generating “a dire surplus of energy” that manifested itself in “physical appetite, in anger, and in the sexual urge.”²⁴ Therefore, as Antony believed and later instructed to his disciples, only through strict ascetic disciplines could the body return to its original, natural, and “uncorrupted” state, free from anything alien that belonged to the spirit of the enemy. Contemporaries liked to think that they had sensed this state in Antony. In *Life*, when he emerged from his cell after twenty years, his friends and villagers were amazed to see that “his body had maintained its former condition and not emaciated from fasting and combat with demons.”²⁵ Even upon his death, Athanasius claimed that Antony's body had not been conquered by old age, but remained free of injury. Upon his death, he was sound in his hands and feet, and “none of his teeth was lost.”²⁶ Thus, through strict regulations of fasting and the intake of food, Antony released himself from the need for food and remade his body into perfection.

²¹ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 10.

²² Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 223.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 14.

²⁶ Athanasius, 96.

Even though this new form of martyrdom, “daily martyrdom,” created by Antony did not draw much attention during his lifetime since the worst and bloodiest Christian prosecutions were yet to come. Under the emperor Diocletian, martyrdom reached its highest point since it was firmly believed among the Christian community as the noblest way to attest one’s faith and resolution. However, after Constantine came to power and he himself converted to Christianity, the prosecution was halted and during this relatively peaceful period, Antony’s life drew lots of attention from the Christian community. Under the reign of Constantine, it was observed that there was a sudden spike in the conversions among the pagans, many of whom allegedly converted to Christianity due to political interest. This sudden expansion of the Christian community aroused anxiety among the more earnest Christians because they were worried that the quality of believers was declining. Moreover, they could no longer attest their faiths through once the noblest and most revered way-martyrdom. Under such circumstances, what Antony expounded, monasticism filled the gap and provided an outlet for the enthusiasm of the more earnest Christians. In other words, he made himself, later on, the monks, the successor to the martyrs. And this surge of interest in monasticism and the life of Antony was traceable in *Life*. In the preface, Athanasius addressed to those who had requested the biography that each of their questions, such as who Antony was before his monastic career, how he began this journey, and how he disciplined himself, was given ample treatment in the text.²⁷ In other words, Athanasius, himself as a devoted Christian, wanted to spur his readers to action and follow the steps of Antony. Moreover, he wanted his portrait of Antony to be ideal to be imitated as well as an archetype to measure oneself against.

²⁷ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, Preface.

Toward the end of the *Life*, Athanasius suggested the story of Antony was a confirmation of the promises in the Bible and this added another layer of credibility to the accounts of

Antony's life:

Such is the story of Antony [...] For it is the promise of the Saviour who says: *If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain: 'Remove hence!' and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible to you. And again: Amen, amen, I say to you, if you ask the Father anything in my name, He will give it to you... Ask and you shall receive.* And it is He who said to His disciples and to all who believe in Him: *Heal the sick; cast out demons; freely have you received, freely give.*²⁸

By telling a story of a fearless hearer who retreated to the desert, acquired the spirit of discernment from God through his incessant prayers and fasting, whose touch could heal the sick and whose magical power could ward off the fiercest evil spirit, Athanasius provided the monks with a detailed and sufficient picture of ascetic practices. As is known, Athanasius's *Life* turned out to be a huge success since it inspired countless imitators and monasticism really flourished over the next 1000 years. The elements of Athanasius's narratives, such as the dramatic conversion, the battle with demons, unending battle with fasting, also became recurring themes and the standards in the later literature of monasticism and medieval hagiography. In the end, as Athanasius famously said, "the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for citizenship in the heavens."²⁹

²⁸ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 89.

²⁹ Athanasius, 14.

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