



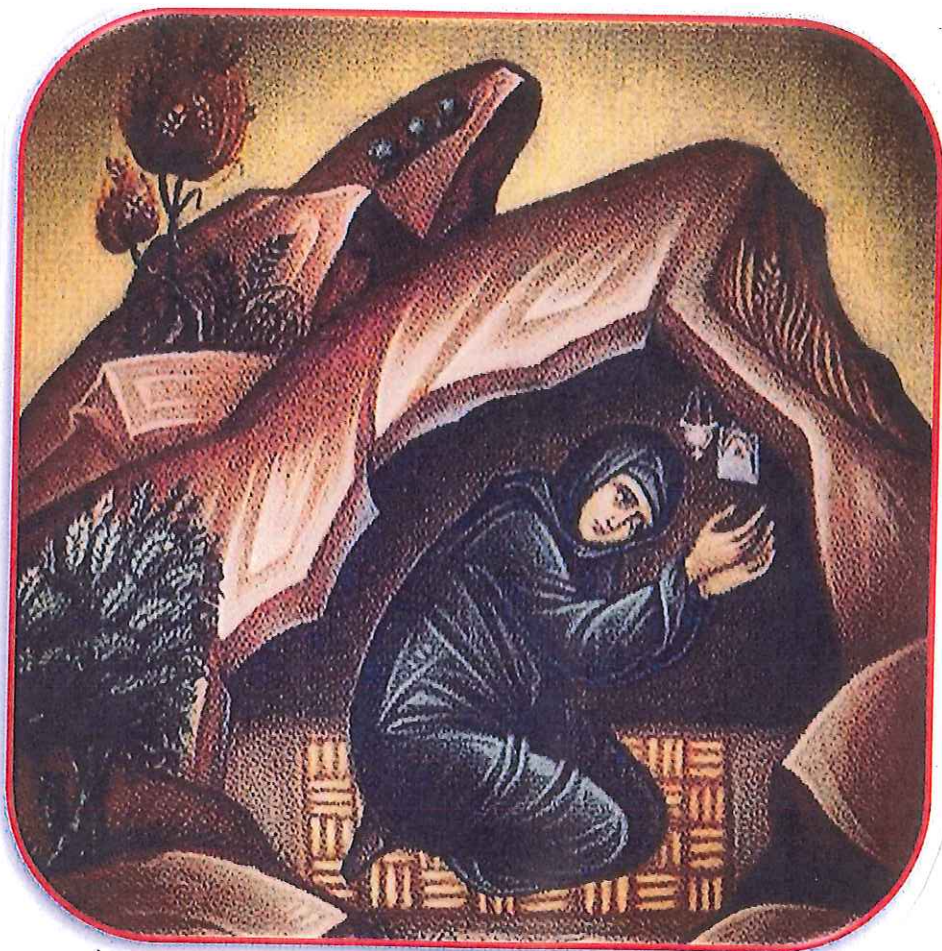
STUDIES IN ANTIQUITY & CHRISTIANITY

ASCETIC BEHAVIOR IN GRECO-ROMAN ANTIQUITY A SOURCEBOOK

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103. These are the teachings of the holy and all-virtuous Syncletica, rather more by actions than by words, but many and great things were made known by her for the use of those who heard and saw her. Such a plenitude of good things grew from her that the human tongue is at a loss for expressing them.

104. The good-hating devil, not bearing such abundance of good things, wasted away, and devised in himself so that he was able to confuse the origin of good things. And further he asks the oldest virgin to the final struggle [*agōn*]; and he took revenge against her with hatred, not caring to begin the blows²⁰⁵ externally, but grasping her internal organs,²⁰⁶ he deeply assigned to her bodily suffering, so that she became inconsolable from human succor.

105. He first smites the most necessary organ in life, the lung, and through illnesses that bring ruin, bit by bit he fastens his malignancy [*kakia*]. For he allowed in a short time through intercession to shorten her death; but just so the bloodthirsty executioner displays through

203. *Alpha. Syn.* 17.

204. *Alpha. Syn.* 9.

205. The term here is *plēgē*, which can mean either "blow" or "plague."

206. Literally, the text reads "grasping her entrails" or "her intestines."

many blows and much time his own severity. For breaking up the lung into small pieces by means of spittle that brought them up, he cast it out. Unceasing fevers were present, consuming her body after the manner of a file.

106. When she turned eighty years old, the devil transferred to her the contests of Job. For he made use then of the same scourges. But in the present he cuts short the time, making the sufferings more burdensome. The blessed Job endured in the plague thirty-five years; here, the enemy, as though stripping off some first fruits the time of ten years, to attach the plagues to the holy body of this one. For three-and-a-half years through famous sufferings, she battled against the enemy. Therefore on Job the devil made the beginnings of wounds on the outside; on her he added punishments from the inside. For her internal organs [entrails] having been struck by him, he assigned to her greater and more difficult sufferings. Thus I do not think that the oldest martyrs struggled more bravely than the famous Syncletica. For the abominable one attacked them from the outside. For whether he brought to them death by the sword, or fire, they were gentler than the present trials of Syncletica. For instead of a fiery furnace burning her inward parts from below, the fire is burning from the inside bit by bit. And in the manner of a file over a very long time, her body wastes away. And it is truly weighty and inhumane to speak about. For the ones entrusted with judicial powers, when they wish to set upon the more serious sinners punishments, they destroy them by means of the slightest fire; thus the enemy from the insides made her punishment by causing the smoldering fever unceasing night and day.

107. Nobly subjected to such a plague, she did not lapse in her spirit, but again the blessed one contested against the enemy. And certainly again by means of good teachings she healed those wounded by him; for she drew up the souls unharmed as if from a bloodthirsty lion. And she healed the wounded by means of the salvific remedies of the Lord. She kept safe some who were unwounded; for, showing them the treacherous traps of the devil, she made them free from sin.

108. The wondrous one said that it was necessary not to neglect the souls dedicated to God. For the enemy is especially hostile to these.²⁰⁷ For when these are calm, he gobbles them up,²⁰⁸ and the one who has been defeated is cured again; he retreats a little, and watches. And if

207. Athanasius *Vit. Ant.* 23.

208. This verb can be used to describe the course of a gnawing or consuming disease.

they fall asleep a little, thus he moves in beside them. For just as it is impossible for the very bad not to have a good spark, just so the opposite is true for the good. For the lot of those who struggle is in the opposing measure. Certainly often the human being is surrounded by every shameful thing and is confused by every licentiousness; but likewise he is merciful, and often in the zealous indwell chastity, fasting, extreme ascetic practice; but there are also the misers and the scandalmongers.

109. Therefore, it is necessary not to neglect the small things, although they were incapable of doing damage. For water dissolves a stone in time. Therefore the greatest of goods in human beings comes to them from divine grace. We have learned to scare away from ourselves the seemingly small things. Therefore the one who battles against the great thing by means of grace, overlooking the small, will be greatly harmed. For our Lord, like a genuine father, reaches out a hand to his children newly beginning to walk; and delivering us from great dangers of whatever sort, he allows us to move on our own, like on our own feet, showing our free will.²⁰⁹ For the one who is easily caught by small things, how will s/he be able to guard against the greater things?

110. Again seeing her confident affirmations against him, the hater of good was vexed. And seeing her destruction of his tyranny, he devised another type of evil; and he struck her speech organ, to cut off the spoken word, thinking that by this act he would starve of the divine words those who were with her. But if he deprived the hearing of use, he bestowed an advantage even greater. For perceiving with their eyes the sufferings, they strengthened further the will. For the wounds of the body of that one [Syncletica] cured the stricken souls. And one could see the caution and healing of those who saw the greatness of soul and patient endurance of the blessed one.

111. Therefore the enemy made this excuse for this blow against her: for having caused pain in one tooth, he made her gums putrid in like manner. And the bone fell out; the spreading passed into the whole jaw, and became decay of the body pressing on the neighboring parts; and in forty days the bone was worm-eaten. And within the space of two months' time, there was a hole. The surrounding spaces were all becoming black. And the bone itself was corrupted, and little by little wasted away; putrefaction and the heaviest stench governed her whole body so that the ones who served her suffered more than she did. Most of the

209. Compare John Cassian *Conf.* 13, 14, where God is compared with a nurse helping a child to walk.

time they withdrew, not bearing the inhuman odor; but when need called, the multitude approached, kindling incense, and again withdrew because of the inhuman stench. The blessed one clearly saw the adversary, and did not at all agree to have human aid brought to her, demonstrating again in this her own virility [*andreaia*]. But those who came with her exhorted her to anoint the places with unguent for their own weakness, but she was not persuaded. For she believed that through external assistance they would destroy the glorious contest. And the ones with her sent for a doctor, so, if he could, he would try to bring about a cure. But again she did not allow him to be brought, saying: "Why do you thwart this good battle? Why do you seek what is apparent, ignorant of what is hidden? Why do you concern yourself with what is, not contemplating the one who made it?" And the doctor, who was present, said to her: "We do not bring a remedy for the sake of cure or consolation, but in order to bury the alienated and dead part of the body according to custom, so that those who are here will not be corrupted at the same time. For they bring such to the dead, and we do it now; I put on aloe at the same time as myrrh and myrtle wet with wine." And she accepted receiving his advice, feeling mercy rather for those who were with her; for from this the excessive stench was destroyed.

112. Who did not shudder, seeing such a great plague? Who was not helped, seeing the patient endurance of the blessed one, and forming a notion in her of the fall of the enemy? For there he placed the plague, whence the salvific and sweetest source of words were sent, and his excess of terribleness dispersed the every comfort. For just as a blood-thirsty beast, he scared away all zeal from those who had come with her, for the tearing in pieces of the fallen prey. And seeking a feast, he became food. For she was offered as bait through the snare by the weakness of the body; seeing a woman, he looked down on her, for he did not know of her virile mind. He observed ailing members, for he was blind and not able to observe her strongest spirit. Therefore for three months she competed in this contest. Her whole body was strengthened by divine power. The completion toward her resting place was made less. Therefore she was without nourishment; for how was she able to take meals, when she was ruled by such putrefaction and stench? Even sleep was separated from her, cut off by her sufferings.

113. When the end of victory and the crown were near her, and she saw visions and the power of angels, and exhortations of holy virgins to the ascension, and being illuminated by ineffable light, and the land of paradise. And with the vision of these, she became as if one herself,

proclaimed to those with her to bear nobly, and not to esteem the present lightly. She said to them, "In three days I will depart from the body." Not only this, but she revealed even the hour of her departure from there. And when the hour was complete, the blessed Syncletica went to the Lord, receiving the kingdom of heaven, the prize for her struggles for him. In glory and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, with the Father as well as the all-holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

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