

BOOK REVIEW

Richard Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). ix + 182 pp. Pbk. US\$28.71 (£17.99).

In this succinct work, Richard Finn aims to compare and contrast the various ascetic beliefs and practices in the Greco-Roman world and arrive at an agreeable definition of the term ‘ascetic’. Asceticism, as he defines it, is the voluntary abstention—for religious reasons—from food and drink, sleep, wealth or sexual activity. Such a comparative discussion is lacking in scholarship, and Finn takes on the task by carefully reporting several systems of practice and belief, exhibiting both his theological and classical expertise.

The contents are divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 outlines various idealized versions of asceticism in the pagan world, including Cynic, Stoic and Neoplatonist philosophy. Chapter 2 outlines those practices found in Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism, including Philo (his attempts to equate Jewish and Greek traditions and the potential existence of the *Therapeutae*), Second Temple Judaism, the Essene movement and Rabbinic Judaism. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss Christian asceticism before and after the time of Origen. Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of various monastic traditions that differed in both practice and socio-economic features.

Can these varying ascetic practices at all be compared and does the ethical framework established by one practice build upon another? Finn begins by considering the philosophical works of Porphyry (234–305 CE) who believed that strict training (*ascesis*) by way of diet, sexual abstention and physical exercise was a philosopher’s portal to discovering divine truth. Such divine truth would thus unite the practitioner with the divine. Ascetic practice would also nullify the passions that distract the philosopher’s mind, a proposition first put forth by Plato, who suggested that the body is mere clothing worn by the soul. Porphyry highlights not only examples from Greek traditions, but also

various ascetic schools ranging from certain Egyptian circles to Essenes, Josephus, Syrians and Brahmans. Finn's question is thus a good one: does Prophyry's erudite description reveal certain commonalities among the range of ascetic groups in the Greco-Roman world?

What seems to happen, as Finn points out, is that originally distinctive modes of asceticism merge by Late Antiquity to form a characteristic marker of the philosophical life; such asceticism was widely respected among the educated as a religious exercise. However, asceticism may not always have been linked to the divine. In Ancient Greece, the Cynics practiced a type of asceticism that developed one's character through a sense of shamelessness (*anaideia*), a lifestyle that commonly led to their being associated with dogs. Such *ascesis* trained the adherent's character through physical 'hardship and renunciation' (p. 19), and a rejection of wealth and material goods helped one to avoid 'rivalry, jealousy, fear, and conceit' (p. 19). It was not uncommon to see a Cynic begging for food, a practice that allowed the Cynic to experience rejection and hardship—a procedure, for example, perfected by the Cynic philosopher Diogenes, who would often be seen begging from statues. This type of ascetic practice appeared obscene to many in the Greco-Roman world. For the Stoics, material wealth was seen as 'morally indifferent' (p. 26). Their ascetic training was predominantly focused on the endeavors of the mind and its practical insight. Cynic 'shamelessness' was rejected, and self-control was practiced within socially acceptable boundaries. The Stoics also practiced frugality, which, according to Finn, can be understood in terms of ethics or meta-ethics.

Contrary to their Cynic and Stoic counterparts, Neoplatonists sought a life of moral and intellectual purity for union with the divine. They also drew heavily on the figure of Pythagoras, a Greek philosopher from the sixth century BC. However difficult it is to coalesce the beliefs of a Pythagorean group, certain elements of their ascetic practices are known. For some, restrictions on the consumption of meat may have been closely tied to the belief that souls transmigrated between species. Such texts as the *Golden Verses*, a text attributed to a Pythagorean movement in the period 350–300 BCE, stressed the importance of controlling one's anger, appetites for food, sleep and sex, as well as instructions to carefully examine one's daily conduct. Other texts, such as the *Pythagorean Notebooks*, specified how proper worship of the gods is achieved through keeping oneself from pollutants by restricting

certain aspects of one's diet. It is, perhaps, Pythagorean asceticism that is most closely linked to adherence to the divine. Finn notes a study by Ewen Bowie that states that by 160 CE, such works as Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius* began to fashion their protagonists after a model set forth by Pythagoras. Apollonius is projected as a hero who abstains from wine, spurns marriage, resists seduction by powerful officials, and whose voluntary poverty is endorsed by the Emperor Vespasian. Such 'Pythagorean' asceticism is also characterized by god-like powers such as turning away plague, stopping violent winds, and calming the sea. Finn even notes several stories in which Pythagoras may be set as an anti-character to Jesus, superseding or equating Jesus' character as found in the Gospel traditions.

In Chapter 2, Finn turns his attention to the ascetic practices in Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism starting with Philo. Noting Philo's work *Life of Moses*, in which Moses is depicted as a type of Philosopher King in the likeness of Pythagoras, Finn points out that the Jewish lawgiver is painted in the colors of Greek philosophical tradition. Moses thus exhibits ascetic virtue in 'food, drink, sexual pleasures, various trappings of wealth, where the virtues proper to kingship included self-control, prudence, and distain for pleasure' (p. 34). Accordingly, Finn compares this version of Moses to a Middle Platonist living a contemplative life and a Cynic loathing wealth. Likewise, Philo generalizes the Israelite as one who is without need of private wealth, who 'shares in all that is common' (p. 35). As Finn puts it, 'the distance between Jewish and Greek conceptions of the holy man was thus foreshortened' (p. 35). As is also noted, this does not mean that the Jew should adopt the ascetic practices characterized in some forms of Greek philosophical tradition, since Philo disregarded the Cynic pose of philosopher as homeless beggar; such a claim to self-control was thought to be 'spurious' (p. 36).

Did the Jews receive a Hellenistic education? Finn makes the claim that Philo, as well as other Jews who 'had received Hellenistic philosophical and literary education' (p. 36), would have been read in Hellenistic philosophy. Can we prove this assumption? Could it be possible that Philo was writing to a Greek audience in order to tell the Moses story, or were a number of Jews so familiarized with Greek literature that they could have understood the characterization?

Finn also points out a Jewish sect known as the *Therapeutae* who were highly regarded in terms of their ascetic practices. Philo calls

them a 'race of worshippers' (*therapeutikon genos*), who withdrew from regular urban life, taking solitude in outlying districts. These Jews devoted themselves to the contemplation of God, having left behind their families and friends. Finn notes that Philo may have exalted this group in attempt to surpass such Greek sages as Anaxagoras and Democritus.

Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned with Christian asceticism both before and after Origen. It seems that from the earliest days of the church, before Origen's influence, fasting was commonly practiced by Christians. The *Didache*, or teachings for the church, taught that Christians were to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays rather than on Tuesdays and Thursdays, a command based on Jesus' words in Mt. 6.6. Similarly, it was common for Christians to conduct an annual fast before Easter. Both Justin Martyr and Tertullian write that their respective congregations observed a fast, particularly those who were eligible for baptism. Fasting coupled with prayer is attested in such documents as *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a work highly regarded among Christians in Rome, Gaul, North Africa and Egypt. While fasting and prayer is promoted in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Gospel of Thomas* raises questions as to Christian opinion regarding the necessity of fasting. Finn engages with the opinions of Joseph Fitzmyer and Tjitze Baarda on whether Jesus' words in the *Gospel of Thomas* refer to withdrawing from the world or rejection of creation in a Gnostic sense. Finn also explains how some Christians in antiquity avoided wine while celebrating the Eucharist, and how many abstained from sexuality, even in marriage. This position was contested by other Christian groups at the time who suggested that sex within the confines of marriage served to purify each spouse.

By the time of Origen, sexual abstention and fasting were common ascetic practices in the Christian church. Origen was perhaps the epitome of sexual asceticism, having castrated himself in light of Mt. 19.12. Origen taught that the heart, together with words, thoughts and actions, had to be purified through asceticism; the starting point of such a process reflected the Greek philosophical tradition of self-knowledge. Finn briefly summarizes Origen's ascetic beliefs and practices, contrasting them with those of his contemporary Methodius, and points out that it is by Methodius's works that we understand just how widely Origen's ascetic vision was accepted. Finn notes an important detail by likening the works of both Origen and Methodius to the Greek

philosophical tradition of the rational soul; the soul, through contemplation of both itself and God, becomes more like the divine. The result of such a practice is a Christian who understands his or her dangerous sinful passions, and learns to tame them by rational speculation and not simply through abstention. This is not to say that ascetic abstention was not taken as seriously as before—in fact, it produced a more rigorous expectation. For example, virginity was held in such high regard, that by the time of the Council of Nicea, women who favored marriage over virginity could be denied access to the Eucharist. Trials, for Origen, were processes by which the soul is perfected. Thus the Exodus story could also be taken as an allegory: the soul is tested in the wilderness before it finally crosses over into the Promised Land. In essence, ascetic practices were a means to undo the Fall and return the body to its proper condition.

From here, Finn reflects on the lives and practices of Basil of Caesarea, Evagrius Ponticus and Cassian. Each of these men sought to achieve purity of heart through ascetic practices, closely following in the footsteps of Origen. This again exemplifies Origen's influence—why Finn aptly positions him as a crux in the development of ascetic tradition.

In the final chapter, Finn turns his attention to the evolution of monasticism in the fourth and fifth centuries so that holy men were reputed as protectors from evil. They lived in monastic communities (*asketeria*) and sometimes in complete solitude. Some of these sites were located near urban communities that would ensure goods for certain labors, while others were more solitary, being located on the outskirts of deserts and various other remote areas. Within each community (*koinonia*), various tasks were performed that led to the betterment of the group. Regular times for prayer and study were also kept, usually at dawn, and a monk's diet was restricted to bare necessities. Finn does well here to categorize the different sects within the monastic movement from Syriac monasticism and Messalianism to the practices of Augustine in Roman North Africa. The different sects produced various writings outlining their interpretation of Scripture and ascetic practices, often dictated by geography, economics and varying demographics. As the reputation of this ascetic movement grew, ascetic monks began to replace married bishops in the fourth and fifth centuries and rivalries sometimes ensued. Finn briefly outlines the sometimes troubled relationship between ascetic monasticism and

ordinary Christian life. Though Augustine attempted to bridge this gap by developing a type of asceticism that led to Christian unity, the tension remained.

*Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* is highly effective in its attempt to compare and contrast varying styles of asceticism in antiquity. It successfully argues that ideas about abstention from food, drink, sleep, wealth and sexuality could travel cross-culturally and even between religions. I would like to see a more in-depth pursuit of this topic, especially discussing just how important the geographic, economic and demographic elements of an ascetic group were, and how they impacted its beliefs and practices. I would also like to see Finn elaborate on Jewish education: how prevalent was it for a Jew to receive Hellenistic education, and how would that education have been conducted? That being said, Finn does a remarkable job of explaining the various concepts with brevity by engaging in a comparative study that has not previously been done. In addition to the text, Finn provides an extensive bibliography that lends itself to further work in the area of asceticism.

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