

Ville Vuolanto: *Children and Asceticism in Late Antiquity. Continuity, Family Dynamics and the Rise of Christianity*. Farnham/Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2015. VIII, 263 S. £ 80.00. ISBN: 978-1-4724-1436-6.

Few have made a more signal contribution to the study of childhood in antiquity than Ville Vuolanto (hereafter VV), whose online, regularly updated, bibliography on childhood has become a foundational tool of research for anyone interested in the topic of children in the Ancient World and the Early Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

VV's new study forms a perfect fit to the scholarly trend that has been cautiously evaluating the impact of Christianity on family structures in late antiquity. Did Christianity make a difference in the lives of children, and of their families, in late antiquity and if so how and to what extent? Studies, such as Horn and Martens, responded largely in a reserved affirmative.<sup>2</sup> VV's study unequivocally insists that deviation from, as well as continuing affirmation of traditional familial patterns mobilized a Christian theological discourse that reformulated concepts of the family by focusing on children, specifically on their removal, via ascetic vocation, from predictable life courses. Admittedly, already Jesus and Paul opted for celibacy, thus challenging both the Jewish establishment's insistence on procreation and the Augustan campaign against voluntary abstinence. Whether such defiance was aimed at children per se is another question. Like the biblical "Children of Israel", the new extended community of Christ was open to anyone willing to follow its rule and to leave their birth family. Perhaps, then, the legalization of the creed inevitably led to the re-opening of the case, with an added emphasis on children qua children.

VV's well-crafted study intertwines two seemingly separate strands, child-asceticism and familial preferences of procreation and patrimony. It sensibly asks how the two could sit side by side and it surveys a panoply of strategies which offered solution precisely to this dilemma. In two parts VV discusses the ideology of child asceticism as gleaned from patristic pages of the late

1 Cf. <https://www.hf.uio.no/ifikk/forskning/prosjekter/barndom/bibliography---endelig-september-2015.pdf>.

2 C. Horn/J. Martens: *Let the Little Children Come to Me. Childhood and Children in Early Christianity*. Washington, D.C. 2009.

fourth/early fifth century, and how this ideology was applied in specific cases.

We do not have statistics that can lend numbers to the phenomenon of child's ascetic-vocation in late antiquity. Peter Brown has commented on a seeming paradox – the shrill tone of the rhetoric advocating asceticism and virginity on the one hand, and the nurturing of ascetic values and vocation in private, in the fold of familial seclusion.<sup>3</sup> VV correctly notes, and amply illustrates, the role of mothers in fashioning ascetic sons. My own studies of aristocratic female asceticism dealt with familial opposition and theological support for female asceticism, pointing to the assets accrued by the intense engagement of female members of a noble family in ascetic pursuits, including a dazzling display of mastery over the biblical text.<sup>4</sup>

In a well plowed field VV's study holds its own exceptionally well, not the least by offering a comprehensive survey of such advantages, showing how families of ascetically inclined youngsters embarked with gusto on preparing, primarily their sons, for ascetic careers. Precocity counted. It was an early mark of more to come. The adulating biography of Barsauma (early/mid fifth century), a notorious Mesopotamian ascetic, insisted that already as a child (precise age undisclosed) the protagonist undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This was clearly a feat that served as a fitting prelude to a career that included no less than four pilgrimages to Jerusalem and several stormy appearances in ecumenical councils. The precocity of child's asceticism need not be underestimated because, as VV correctly insists, it ran counter to expectations but at the same time such choices also forged a new trail of childhood.

The shift is especially detectable in contemporary theological discourse that set out to broaden and modify traditional concepts of the family that now boasted intimacy with Christ and God as profoundly acceptable members of one's family. Children could therefore be viewed as belonging to both their biological family as well to newly constituted family based on vocational ties.

3 P. Brown: *The Body and Society*. New York 1988, 325.

4 H. Sivan: *On Hymen and Holiness in Late Antiquity. Opposition to Aristocratic Female Asceticism at Rome*. In: *JbAC* 36, 1993, 81–93, and ead.: *Anician Women, The Cento of Proba, and Aristocratic Conversion in the Fourth Century*, *VChr* 47, 1993, 140–157.

A comparable development may be traced in rabbinic concepts of identity that that set out to replace father-son relations with a teacher-disciple module. While sages were identified in a traditional manner as sons of x/y/z, they spoke solely in the name of other sages, masters or colleagues or rivals. This new rabbinic “family” instituted an unbroken fictitious chain of authoritative transmission which relied not on semen but on Scripture. The domestication of Christianity, as VV correctly claims, has added strategies of familial continuity to those that had been already practiced for centuries. Spaces of asceticism functioned along distinct gender lines. Female asceticism was practiced primarily at home; males joined or were joined to structured communities. These substitute families infused childhood with a new meaning of propagation not of biological propagation but of ascetic heritage.

VV’s two part study of ideology and of its application keep in sight throughout the twin questions of continuity versus asceticism precisely by highlighting their malleability. His careful analysis of the relevant primary sources serves to support the arguments. Indeed, this study is a model of clarity, comprehensiveness and organization.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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