PORTRAITS
Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire

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This collection of essays illustrates the growth of interest in the representation of individuals, which resulted from the changed environment within which Greek and Latin authors worked in late antiquity. The subjects all fall within the period of the Roman empire, and illustrate the importance of individual personality in literature for an age in which few individuals could hope to achieve political significance.
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ancient Antioch Antony Apollonius apologetic Arianism ascetic Athanasius Augustus Averil Cameron Barnes biographical biostructuring century character characterisation Christ Christian Church Claudius Constantine Constantinople context Council of Nicaea Daniel death Delehaye demons Dio's Dositheus earlier early Eleazar elite emperor emphasis Empire epitome Eusebius evidence Favorinus favour Festugiere Forster Fronto Gaius Gellius genre Germanicus Greek hagiography Herodotus Hippolytus historians Holford-Strevens holy Ibíd imperial important individual interest Irenaeus Jewish Jewish-Greek labarum late antiquity later Latin literary literature lives Maccabean Maccabees martyrdom martyrology martyrs Moses narrative Nero organized Origen pagan panegyric persecution philosophers Philostratus pillar Plutarch Polemo present recognition reign relation relics role Roman saint Samaritan Sejanus Simeon the Younger Simon Magus social Socrates sources story stylist's Suetonius suggest Syracitus Taurus theme Tiberius tradition translation V.Ant V.Dan Verina words writing Zeno

The Christian Empire required new models of identity, power and authority that could replace the traditional models of Roman civilization. Moreover, the expansion of the Church meant that questions of defining Christianity and Christian leadership became highly controversial and explosive. Suddenly new groups such as Roman administrators and courtiers or uneducated upstarts also applied for the influential posts as bishop. In this struggle, the figure of Moses turns up as an extremely suitable figure intimately connected with questions of authority and power and, related to this, with the risk of dissension and discord.

Contemporary literature and cinema has long been characterized by a (auto-)biographical trend. In Scandinavia, for instance, the Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard's six-volume autobiographical novel My Struggle (2009-2011) has generated an enormous interest. His autofictional project is, however, not a novelty, but is part of a widespread phenomenon that has become increasingly more popular, since the French writer, Serge Doubrovsky, coined the term "autofiction" in 1977. Biographical works in diverse media have also for long been extremely popular. The biographical trend is also noticeable in Biblical films which are usually directed as biopics. Think of big-screen retellings of the life of Moses such as The Ten Commandments (1956) by Cecil B. DeMille and the animated Prince of Egypt (1998) by DreamWorks. Report has it also that both Ridley Scott and Steven Spielberg are set to direct new biopics of Moses. The "biographical readings" of the Moses narratives are, however, not as obvious as usually assumed when one reads the Pentateuch. Here Moses is not as central as we might expect in light of the modern biographical interest in the figure.

The biographical interest is, however, not new. As Simon Swain has argued, Greek and Latin literature of the Roman Empire also displayed a marked biographical trend (Swain 1997:1). Ancient culture was a culture of imitation. Great men of the past were repeatedly presented as representative types of virtues or vices, and ancient authors often made use of comparison as an important means of moral characterization. This practice features heavily in encomia (a genre meant to praise the subject) such as Isocrates' Evagoras and Xenophon's Agesilus, where the subjects are compared to their advantage with a past or contemporary Persian king; and both Aristotle, Quintilian and later Menander Rhetor recommended that comparison be used in encomia. Comparison was also normally included in the Greek textbooks of rhetorical exercises. Biographical interest was, however, not restricted to encomia. It was found in many other types of writings: most noticeably in the lives of philosophers, kings, politicians and generals, but also in other genres such as funeral orations, historiography, martyrlogy and hagiography. A great many imperial biographies were produced in which comparison also became an important rhetorical device, as for instance in Plutarch's Parallel Lives.

This process of Christianisation did not of course happen without a shot being fired. Pagans still took exemplary figures from their own past and turned them into literary models for a pagan life.2 Christians and their rivals were thus engaged in an intricate competition, which Averil Cameron has labelled a "war of biography" (Cameron 1991:145).
As is often noted, the transformation of the Roman Empire into a Roman Christian Empire called for new literary responses. If, in the early Christian era, “to be a Christian was to suffer,” as Judith Perkins has claimed in her analysis of martyr narratives (Perkins 1995:32), 3 the reign of Constantine required new representations of what it meant to be a Christian. With the Peace of the Church, the martyrs won and their persecutors lost. Though the discourses of martyrdom were adapted to fit the new circumstances and accordingly continued to play a major role in the post-Constantinian church (cf. Grig 2004:25-26), these discourses were now also supplemented by other Christian discourses that did not aim at giving an account of the ideal death or of suffering as the proper expression of Christian faith, but rather at presenting the ideal life. 4 While one of the literary techniques employed in the martyr acts was to present the martyrs as imitators of Christ in his suffering and death, 5 the authors of the 4th century gradually began to find models in the Bible for life as a whole. 6

In this struggle, the figure of Moses turns up as an extremely suitable figure intimately connected with questions of authority and power and, related to this, with the risk of dissension and discord. While the biographical portrait of Moses as a political figure of authority and power was hardly applicable in Christian discourses of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, it became the centre of interest during the 4th-century. For Eusebius, Moses as a political figure was extremely convenient as a Christian peer of the emperor. Gregory of Nazianzus also used the figure of Moses to establish his own model of leadership and he applied the figure to himself in order to justify himself as the right metropolitan bishop of Constantinople. Gregory makes use of the figure of Moses at several points in his life, but his use of the figure seems to culminate in his orations during the tumultuous years of 379-381 in Constantinople and in his autobiographical writings about those years. In these writings, he bases his own authority more on a personal vision (which is described as resembling that of Moses) than on any institutional ordination, and similarly to Moses, he is troubled by an ever-present fear of inadequacy. However, with the description of his own contemplative experience as resembling Moses' ascent he actually claims that he himself lives up to the high standard of personal sanctity which he finds is required for holding the office of bishop. Gregory of Nyssa also used the figure of Moses in his encomium on Basil in order to portray the true Christian bishop. However, he does not restrict his use of Moses to Basil alone, but claims that Moses is a figure to be imitated by all. Gregory stresses Moses' ascetic qualities and connects these qualities with the fact of their leading a contemplative life, probably in a polemic against Helladius, the new metropolitan bishop of Caesarea, whose spiritual qualities fell short of Gregory's ascetic ideal.

However, as I argue in my book Recasting Moses, the new emphasis on Moses as a figure of authority and power that is relevant to contemporary situations was no more new than that it actually revived traditions of 1st-century Jewish biographical and autobiographical narratives. The political focus on Moses and his relation to the issue of factionalism and unity was extremely important for the biographical and autobiographical uses of Moses in 1st-century Judaism. For Philo and Josephus, the figure of Moses embodied the true qualities of leadership: in the Life of Moses, Philo portrays Moses as a king, the true philosopher-king, who surpasses even the Roman emperors, and he depicts Moses as a model to be imitated by his own Jewish, Alexandrian Diaspora community. Josephus, by contrast, recasts Moses in his Jewish Antiquities as a mild and successful general who time and again overcomes factions and discord. In portraying Moses in this way, Josephus creates numerous parallels between his portrait of Moses and his self-portraits in the Jewish War and the Life. The Moses narratives are also employed in relation to the issue of factionalism and unity by Paul in 1 Corinthians, and he implicitly appeals to Moses' leadership when he puts himself on a par with him in 1 Corinthians and Romans 9-11.

The intertextual relationship between the 4th-century Christian and 1st-century Jewish biographical uses of the figure of Moses cannot, however, be explained only as a matter of influence. The resemblance rather demonstrates that the character of Moses and the political and biographical potential of the Moses narratives had been overlooked since it was not really applicable in the intervening centuries, most likely because it contradicted the Christian self-image as one of suffering. By contrast, the figure of Moses was part of certain other Christian discourses in the 2nd and 3rd centuries such as Christology with its comparison of Jesus to Moses and the
historiographical discourse concerning the antiquity of Christianity with its claim that Greek culture had been dependent on Moses.

Usually, the emergence and evolution of early Christian biographies is seen as an innovative fusion of martyr-acts, philosophical lives and other secular panegyrics and encomia with Biblical biographical narratives (Wilson 1998:107). In fact, it seems likely that a synthetic approach is the more profitable one for understanding the emergence and evolution of early Christian biographies and hagiographies, and I think we should add even one more set of intertexts into this melting pot, namely the interpretative tradition within Jewish biographical and autobiographical narratives. Though the Pentateuchal Moses narratives were not really a biography of Moses, the figure became important for later biographical thinking, and it seems therefore appropriate if we soon again will meet him in grand biopics on the big screen.

In the last decades there has been an important discussion concerning the proper use of the term åœtypologyåœ. Whereas the term was earlier seen as indicating the use of a diachronic, historical method (primarily used by the Antiochenes) in contrast to Alexandrian allegory, most scholars now agree that the term should only be taken åœas a heuristic term to distinguish interpretative or compositional strategies which highlight correspondences, not just at the verbal level, but at the level of mimetic signåœ (Young 1997:200).

This does not mean, of course, that all who read the martyr acts thought of themselves as preparing for death at the hands of the Romans. The martyr acts rather allowed Christians to internalise the ideals exemplified by the martyrs, i.e. to cultivate a particular kind of self which Perkins has coined a åœsuffering selfåœ.

A statement in Divus Claudius 25 involves the agitations in the Roman Jewish community which led to the expulsion of Jews from Rome by Claudius in AD 49, and may be the same event mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (18:2). Scholars are divided on the value of this reference in the biography of Claudius. Some scholars see it as a likely reference to Jesus, while others see it as referring to an otherwise unknown person living in Rome. Louis Feldman states that most scholars assume that in the reference Jesus is meant and that the disturbances mentioned were due to the spread of Christianity in Rome.

The Nero 16 passage refers to a series of rulings by Nero for public order, one of which being the punishment of Christians. These punishments are generally dated to around AD 64, the year of the Great Fire of Rome. In this passage Suetonius describes Christianity as a superstition (superstitio) as do his contemporaries, Tacitus and Pliny.

The first indicates that Claudius only expelled those Jews who were making disturbances. Boman (2012) uses the following translation, which he "consider[s] non-committal and adequately close to the original Latin": "From Rome he (Claudius) expelled the perpetually tumultuating Jews prompted by Chrestus."

James D.G. Dunn states that most scholars infer that "Suetonius misheard the name 'Christus' (referring to Jesus as Christ) as 'Chrestus'" and also misunderstood the report and assumed that the followers of someone called Chrestus were causing disturbances within the Jewish community based on his instigation. R.T. France says that the notion of a misspelling by Suetonius "can never be more than a guess, and the fact that Suetonius can elsewhere speak of 'Christians' as members of a new cult (without any reference to Jews) surely makes it rather unlikely that he could make such a mistake." The term Chrestus (which may have also been used by Tacitus) was common at the time, particularly for slaves, meaning good or useful.

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was an agitator in Rome.[24] Later, Van Voorst explains that in the passage Chrestus is most likely an error for Christus.[25] E. M. Smallwood states that the only reasonable interpretation is that Suetonius was referring to Christianity.[26] Edwin M. Yamauchi states that "A growing number of scholars, however, have accepted the argument that the "Chrestus" mentioned in Suetonius was simply a Jewish agitator with a common name, and that he had no association with Christianity."[27] Among recent classical scholars there does not seem to be the certainty that is found among many biblical studies scholars. Barbara Levick comments, "To claim that Suetonius, writing in the second century, misunderstood a reference to Christians in his source is unconvincingly economical", concluding "The precise cause of the expulsion remains obscure."[28] J. Mottershead in his commentary on the Claudius states that if Suetonius "had included a reference to Christ one would not have expected him to have simply used Chrestus/Christus unqualified." This points "towards the conclusion that Suetonius did not have in mind a religious dispute involving Christians."[29]  

Chresto (ablative of Chrestus) is the most trustworthy spelling in Suetonius' work. William L. Lane states that the confusion between Chrestus and Christus was natural enough for Suetonius, given that at that point in history the distinction between spelling and pronunciation was negligible.[30] Lane states that this is supported by the spelling of Christians in Acts 11:26 and 26:28 and in 1 Peter 4:16 where the unical codex Sinaiticus reads Chrestianos.[30] Raymond E. Brown states in the second century, when Suetonius wrote, both Christus (Christ) and Christianus (Christian) were often written with an "e" instead of an "i" after the "r".[31] In Suetonius Nero 16 the word "Christians" is spelled christiani (see below). 

Most scholars assume that the disturbances mentioned by Suetonius in the passage were due to the spread of Christianity in Rome.[8] These disturbances were likely caused by the objections of Jewish community to the continued preachings by Hellenistic Jews in Rome and their insistence that Jesus was the Messiah, resulting in tensions with the Jews in Rome.[19][30] 

Some scholars think Suetonius was confused and assumed that as the leader of the agitators, Chrestus, was alive and lived in Rome at the time of the expulsion.[4][30] The notion that Chrestus was instigating Jewish unrest suggests that the Chrestus reference is not a Christian interpolation, for a Christian scribe would be unlikely to think of the followers of Christ as Jews, or place him in Rome at the time of Claudius.[32] This problem weakens the historical value of the reference as a whole.[19] Scholars are divided on the value of the Suetonius reference; some see it as a reference to Jesus,[6][7][33] others see its historical value as a reference to disturbances by an unknown agitator.[34][35][36] 

Dating the expulsion provides some challenges because Suetonius writes in a topical rather than chronological fashion, necessitating the use of other texts to establish a time frame.[37][38][39] The dating of the "edict of Claudius" for the expulsion of Jews relies on three separate texts beyond Suetonius' own reference, which in chronological order are: Cassius Dio's reference in History 60.6.6-7, Paulus Orosius's fifth century mention in History 7.6.15-16 of a non-extant Josephus reference and the reference to the trial of Apostle Paul by Gallio in the Acts of the Apostles (18:2).[38] Scholars generally agree that these references refer to the same event.[39] Most scholars agree that the expulsion of some Jews mentioned by Suetonius happened around AD 49-50, but a minority of scholars suggest dates within a few years of that range.[4][40][41] 

"During his reign many abuses were severely punished and put down, and no fewer new laws were made: a limit was set to expenditures; the public banquet were confined to a distribution of food; the sale of any kind of cooked viands in the taverns was forbidden, with the exception of pulse and vegetables, whereas before every sort of dainty was exposed for sale. Punishment was inflicted on the Christians,[43] a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition. He put an end to the diversions of the chariot drivers, who from immunity of long standing claimed the right of ranging at large and amusing themselves by cheating and robbing the people. The pantomimic actors and their partisans were banished from the city." 

Apart from the manuscripts and printed editions of Suetonius' Lives, the sentence about Christians is first attested in an inscription by the Senate and People of Paris from 1590.[44] K.R. Bradley
notes that the verb in the clause "Punishment was inflicted on the Christians" (Latin: afflicti suppliciis christiani) should be corrected to "affecti", based first on the frequent use of this verb with the word for "punishment" and second on that Orosius, according to Bradley, uses this verb in material dependent on the Suetionius Nero 16 passage.[45] These words in combination indicate that the punishment was capital; cf. e.g. Suet. Augustus 17.5 (death of young Antony), Claudius 26.2 (death of Messalina) and Galba 12.1 (death of officials).

In Roman usage, the word superstitio refers to any type of religious observance that could not be incorporated into traditional Roman religious practice. To Suetonius this superstition was new and mischievous. This may have been the case in Suetonius' time, but Marius Heemstra thinks he was backdating the accusation to the time of Nero.[46] The passage shows the clear contempt of Suetonius for Christians - the same contempt expressed by Tacitus and Pliny the younger in their writings.[2] Stephen Benko states that the contempt of Suetonius is quite clear, as he reduces Christians to the lowest ranks of society and his statement echoes the sentiments of Pliny and Tacitus.[47]

The punishment of Christians by Nero are generally dated to around AD 64.[10] Unlike Tacitus' reference to the persecution of Christians by Nero, Suetonius does not relate the persecution to the Great Fire of Rome. Church father Tertullian wrote: "We read the lives of the Caesars: At Rome Nero was the first who stained with blood the rising faith."[48] Mary Ellen Snodgrass notes that Tertullian in this passage "used Suetonius as a source by quoting Lives of the Caesars as proof that Nero was the first Roman emperor to murder Christians", but cites not a specific passage in Suetonius' Lives as Tertullian's source.[49] Other authors explicitly add that Tertullian's words are a reference to the passage in Suetonius' Nero 16,[50] while others hold that they refer to the Tacitus passage,[51] or both passages.[52]