A Family in Crisis: Religion, Separation, and Traditional Values in Early Byzantium

Fotis VASILEIOU

The *Narrationes*, one of the most interesting texts of the fifth century that bridge the gap between the Greek novel and the Byzantine hagiography, was traditionally attributed to Neilus of Ancyra.[1] Neilos was an ascetic and writer: under his name have survived some ascetic treatises we now know they were written by Evagrios Pontikos, commentaries to the *Song of Songs*, as well as many letters that deal with various theological questions and provide advice on practical problems.[2] The attribution of the *Narrationes* to Neilos of Ancyra has been rejected by most scholars. An interesting theory about the authorship was formulated by D. Tsames, who suggested that the author was actually his namesake, Neilos of Sinai, a fifth-century anchorite who impressed two educated pilgrims with his knowledge of the Old Testament.[3]

Διήγημα, as is the Greek title, is a first-person account of the adventures of an unnamed father and his son, Theodoulos, who were attacked by nomads, while they were visiting the Sinai Peninsula, before the construction of the famous monastery by Justinian. The story goes like this: Nomads – they are called "Barbarians" – attacked the anchorites, took their belongings, destroyed their convents, killed some of the elders and captured others; among those was Theodoulos. The narrator and some other prisoners were released, and he walked to Pharan that was the only town of the Sinai Peninsula, which is 50 km from the Holy Mountain. There he met with a group of citizens, and with their support, he started a quest for his son. During this effort, he crossed the desert and visited the camp of the barbarian king Amasses, he questioned the Divine Providence, lost and found his hope and faith, and, finally, met his son at the town of Elousa, where Theodoulos was bought by the local bishop. After they were

1 I use the edition by F. Conca, *Nilus Ancyranus. Narratio*, Leipzig 1983 and the English translation by D. F. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, (*Translated Texts for Historians* 53), Liverpool 2010, pp. 73-135. Another edition with a German translation, in M. Link, *Die "Erzählung" des Pseudo-Neilos. Ein spätantiker Martyrerroman. Einleitung, text, übersetung, kommentar*, Leipzig 2005.

2 On Neilos of Ancyra and the works that were attributed to him, see B. Baldwin and A. Kazdan, "Neilos of Ancyra", *ODB*, vol. 2, p. 1450.

3 D. G. Tsamis, "Εἰσαγωγὴ εἰς τὸ Διήγημα τοῦ Νείλου", in D. G. Tsamis and K. A. Katsanis, *The Martyrology of Sinai*, Thessaloniki 1989, p. 238 [in Greek].

consecrated as priests, father and son left together.

The Sinai Peninsula was rather indifferent for the Greek and Roman authors of antiquity but it stood as a very important sacred place for both Jews and Christians, as God revealed Himself to Moses there. At the beginning of the fourth century, the first anchorites from Egypt settled in the area, bringing their way of life and ideas on ascetism. But, while the Egyptian desert was a huge uninhabited area, certain Nomad tribes were living in the desert of Sinai, who often raided, robbed and executed the monks. Thus, a martyr tradition was created. Moreover, the region acquired strategic importance during the fifth century and it was the first byzantine territory to be occupied by the Arabs in the seventh century.[4]

The *Narrationes* describes the difficult cohabitation between the Bedouins and the anchorites providing information on their way of life. The third chapter is a long ethnographic segment on "Barbarians" and monks, while elsewhere the author is giving an account of the function of the cities of the Peninsula and the role of the bishop. Nonetheless, the data about the nomads were put under the microscope of the scholars: Henninger[5] and more recently Link[6] suggest that Pseudo-Neilos' descriptions are elaborated motifs of the Greek novel and consequently untrustworthy; on the contrary, Christides believes that the reports of Bedouins' cult are accurate.[7]

Much less attention was paid on the information provided on sinaitic anachoretism, which is in fact quite accurate.[8] For example, the description of the hermit-cells is very similar to the remains found in the area.[9] The anchoretic life-style agrees with what we learn from other sources, like the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and *The Spiritual Meadow*. In addition, the description of the area, the roads, the distances are very close to reality; Egeria, for example, followed the same path from Sinai to Pharan.[10]

Consequently, the truth seems to lie somewhere in the middle. Pseudo-Neilos had some

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4 On the history of the Sinai Peninsula in Late Antiquity, see W. D. Ward, *The Mirage of the Saracen: Christians and Nomads in the Sinai Pninsula in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley & Los Angeles 2015; R. Devresse, "Le christianisme dans la peninsula sinaïtique", *RevBibl* 49 (1940), pp. 205-223; also Caner, *History and Hagiography*, pp. 4-69. For Sinai in Christian imaginaire, see V. della Dora, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium*, Cambridge 2016, pp. 147-158.

5 J. Henninger, "Ist der sogenannte Nilus-Bericht eine brauchbare religiongeschichtliche Quelle?" *Anthropos* 50 (1955), pp. 81-148.

6 Link, *Die "Erzählung"*.

7 V. Christides, "Once again the 'Narrations' of Nilus Sinaiticus", *Byzantion* 43 (1973), pp. 39-50.

8 On early Sinaitic monasticism, see B. Flusin, "Ermitages et monastère. Le monachisme au mont Sinaï à la période protobyzantine", in *Le Sinaï durant l'Antiquité et le Moyen âge: 4000 ans d'histoire pour un desert*, (Actes du colloque Sinaï qui s'est tenu à l'UNESCO du 19 au 21 septembre 1997), D. Valbelle et C. Bonnet (ed.), Paris, 1998, pp. 133-138.

9 On the archaeological remains, see P. Figueras, *From Gaza to Pelusium.Materials for the Historical Geography of North Sinai and Southwestern Palestine (332 BCE - 640 CE)*, Jerusalem 2000; Uzi Dahari (with contributions by R. Calderon, W.D. Cooke, Y. Gorin-Rosen and O. Shamir), *Monastic Settlements in South Sinai in the Byzantine Period. The Archaeological Remains*, Jerusalem 2000.

10 On Egeria's visit to Sinai, see Z. Rubin, "Sinai in the *Itinerarium Egeriae*", *Atti del Convegno internazionale sulla Peregrinatio Egeriae*, Arezzo 1990, pp. 177-191.

first-hand knowledge on the nomads, the monks, and the Sinai Peninsula in general, which was appropriated according to Christian ideals and the norms of the Greek novel. He wrote what we call today a "historical fiction", based on his experiences and the actual situation in Sinai Peninsula, but he also wanted to meet the expectations of his contemporary readers, so he made a good use of his knowledge of the Greek novels (especially Achilles Tatios' *Leukipi and Kleitophon*).[11]

The major narrative axes of the *Narrationes* are family and fatherhood on the one hand, and ascesis on the other. The narrator was married and had two sons.[12] His family and especially his wife was an important part of his life, as he underlines that the union of marriage is not just symbolic or a sentimental, but natural. Husband and wife are indeed one flesh, thus separation hurts like the knife that ablates.[13]

The *Narrationes* point out the reasons for having children. The narrator argues that Christians should become parents in order to "perpetuate our race and nurse our old age".[14] In consequence, children are prisoners of fate and servants of their parents; they do not have the right to set their own goals in life or accomplish their own dreams. Their existence is connected with their obligations as members of a community and their parents' needs and wishes and obsessions. Other early byzantine hagiographies do not share the same view; instead, they consider children as self-defined human beings and the ascetic life-style or even the martyrdom is often a way to achieve their emancipation and self-realization.[15] For example, a female martyr, St. Siri, states: "Every human being is sensible and can realize his or her own good; we do not have to follow our parents without questioning them, as the irrational beasts do".[16] But in these hagiographies the main character is not the parent, but the child. Pseudo-Neilos' *Narrations* is one of these exceptions where the father is the real hero and not just an obstacle in the spiritual advancement of his son.[17]

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11 On this subject, see J. Henninger, "Ist der sogenannte Nilus-Bericht eine brauchebare religionsgeschichtliche Quelle?" *Anthropos* 50 (1955), pp. 81-148; Heussi, Untersuchungen zu Nilus dem Asketen; Conca "Les Narrationes di Nilo e il romanzo Greco"; Link, Die Erzahlung, pp. 4-24.

12 On late antique and early byzantine family, see K. Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household*, Cambridge, 2007; G. Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity. The Rise of Christianity and the Endurance of Tradition*, London & New York 2000.

13 ὃν ποιεῖ μάχαιρα πόνον τέμνουσα σῶμα, τοῦτον ποιεῖ τῶν εἰς σάρκα μίαν γενομένων διάζευξις, *Narrationes*, 2.5.

14 *Narrationes*, 2.1.

15 On children in byzantine hagiography, see B. Chevallier-Caseau, "Childhood in Byzantine saints' lives", in *Becoming Byzantine. Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, A. Papaconstantinou and A. M. Talbot (eds.), Washington 2009, pp. 127-165. On Christian attitudes towards children, see O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People. The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, Minneapolis 2005.

16 Ἕκαστος εἴδησιν ἔχει διακρῖναι τὸ συμφέρον· καὶ οὐ καθάπερ τὰ ἄλογα τοῖς γονεῦσιν ἀνεξετάστως ἀκολουθεῖ, P. Devos, "La jeune martyre perse sainte Sirin (+589), *AB* 112 (1994), 12. 120. For a disusssion of this text, see F. Vasileiou, *Ποιμένας ἢ τύραννος. Ὁ πατέρας στὴν Χριστιανικὴ Λογοτεχνία τῆς Ὑστερης Ἀρχαιότητας*, Athens 2013, pp. 66-71.

17 On father-figure in Byzantine hagiography, see Vasileiou, *Ποιμένας ἢ τύραννος*.

Since the narrator decided that two children were fulfilling the purpose of his marriage, he refrained from any sexual activity. According to his view sexual intercourse, even within marriage, is only for reproduction. Anything else is "inappropriate for any rational being", as God "ordained marriage for the increase of our race and not as comfort for our passions".[18] This view is on the antipode of St. Paul's teaching. In the 1st Corinthians we read that "every man should have his wife and every woman have her own husband" (7.2) and that "they should not deprive each other" (7.5).[19] Moreover, Jesus never said anything about abstinence within marriage. Apologists of the third century, like Clement of Alexandria, were the first to formulate such ideas.[20]

The narrator is certainly not worried that this stance may create any emotional or communicational gap between him and his wife. This kind of partnership was outside his system of values and his mentality. While erotic passion was not part of his marital life, he pictured with lively colors his desire to visit the anchorites of Sinai:

> But I was seized by a great desire for the places in which I have now been ruined. So swept up was I by the thought of tranquility that I was unable to see or think about anything else. For when ardour for anything takes hold of a soul, it is forcibly torn from everything else, even from those of greatest import, and is unabashedly borne towards its object of yearning, giving no thought of pain, trouble or disgrace (2.2-3).

The narrator describes his feelings in the same way the Greek novels depicted the passion of the lad for his lady. He fell in love with the desert, but he was facing a major problem: He was married; he had a family. He was not free to follow his impulse. So, he decided to come clean and took his two sons to his wife announcing his irrevocable decision to leave for Sinai accompanied by one of the boys, and left the other with her.

> She already had been trained not to refuse me (…) although she could not stand the constraint, not hold back her tears, she consented to my journey, ceding to necessity more than agreeing by choice (2.4).

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18 *Narrationes*, 2.1. On sexless marriages in early Byzantine hagiography, see A. P. Alwis, *Celibate Marriages in Late Antique and Byzantine Hagiography. The Lives of Saints Julian and Basilissa, Andronikos and Athanasia, and Galaktion and Episteme*, London & New York 2011.

19 For st. Paul's teaching on marriage, see C. S. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives. Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul*, Grand Rapids 2004. On First Corinthians, see Br. S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5-7*, Leiden 1994. M. M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation. An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*, Louisville 1991. W. Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy. The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7*, Cambridge 2004.

20 On Clement of Alexandria, see C. Osborne, "Clement of Alexandria", *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, vol. 1, E. P. Gerson (ed.), Cambridge 2010, pp. 270-282.

Once again the narrator is taking a decision and his wife follows it, despite her own feelings. Her obedience and patience bring Homeric Penelope to mind, the classic model of female virtue. This stance though is very different from the heroines of the Greek novels, who prove themselves just as powerful and effective as their male lovers.[21] In the *Narratione*s though, the tormented couple is the unnamed narrator and Theodoulos, not a lad and a maiden. In consequence, we can detect an unusual symmetry of power between father and son, and not among the couple.

The wife's attitude though is the key element in this dramatic scene. Whereas the husband is a screaming and demanding desire, the wife is the silent and mourning acceptance. In this way, the author sketches a kind of *concordia* founded on his own piety and his wife's silent obedience. This exemplified conversation left no room for practical matters, like how his wife and son were suppose to survive. Both spouses are very emotional, even if they do not say much to each other about their feelings. The narrator actually seems to confess to his readers what his wife meant to him, while he never revealed anything to her. In the end, the very elements that this highly idealized Christian version of marital happiness was built on were those that destroyed their marriage or could not prevent the dissolution: His piety and her obedience.

So, father and son left together for Sinai.[22] They visited the anchorites and spent some time there, before the nomads raided and took Theodoulos to be sacrificed to the Morning Star. This Star is identified either with the Fallen Angel from the Bible, or Aphrodite, the pagan goddess of lust. So, while the author and the monks harness their passions, the barbarians worship them. From this point of view, the constant fear for Theodoulos' virginity is justified. Yet, there is no direct mention of homosexuality; the narrator never mentioned that the Bedouins rape young men. Theodoulos, in his recounting of the events said that they ordered him to "dally with their women", which he had denied.

But *Narrationes* has a happy-ending. Father and son meet again in the town of Elousa, in one of the most important scenes of the novel.

When the narrator arrived there, he went straight to the church to thank "the responsible of his joy",[23] i.e. the bishop, who bought Theodoulos from the Nomads, but also God, who helped him despite his weak faith. The citizens had already heard of him and his attempts to find his son, and he was guided to the bishop's house. Theodoulos got out and the two of them saw each other for the first time after the raid. No sign of happiness was evident in either of

21 On this subject, see D. Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres*, Princeton 1994.

22 On pilgrimage to the Sinai Peninsula, see D. Caner, "Sinai Pilgrimage and Ascetic Romance: Pseudo-Nilos *Narrationes* in Context", in *Travel, Communication and Geography in Late Antiquity: Sacred and Profane*, L. Ellis and F. Kidner (eds.), Aldershot 2004, pp. 135-47.

23 *Narratones*, 6.22.

them. Instead they both started crying. While their reaction was the same, the motivation was different. Theodoulos did not recognize his old man, but he trusted the assurances of the crowd. The narrator, on the other hand, recognized him immediately, "despite the crowd surrounding him: for his face still had those same features that were etched so deeply in his memory".[24] So, the gathered played a different role for each of the protagonists: While they were an obstacle for the father to overcome, they functioned as assistance for the son. This was the result of the recent events, which transformed the narrator, but did not alter Theodoulos.[25] This must be a rare, perhaps even unique, case in early Byzantine hagiography: the child cannot recognize the parent after their long separation. In other texts, like the *Life of St. Alexios, the Man of God*, or the *Life of St. Euphrosyne*, it is the parent who is unable to recognize the descendant. As it was mentioned earlier, the main character in these stories is the child, and it is him/her who was going through transformative events who changed him/her internally and externally.

In addition, this scene of recognition echoes the Parable of the prodigal son (Luk. 15.11-32). There, when the father saw his son coming back after squandering his part of the inheritance, run towards him, fell on his neck and kissed him. Hugs and embraces between the father and the son are also found in Pseudo-Neilos, but above all, we read here of a loving father who, like in the Parable, did not lose faith in his son. The recognition in the *Narrationes* also includes a fainting; the narrator collapsed after the hugs and many thought that he died. In Greek novels we find similar responses to great joy as well.

By the end of the novel, the father revealed that he promised God that, if Theodoulos would be alive, he "would assume the harsh servitude of abstinence and other austerities" and he wished to fulfill this commitment. Theodoulos, on his part, answered that he also wished to "take part in what was promised", "since he took part in His grace and have reaped most of its benefits".[26] So, according to the tradition, the narrator and his son became monks –after all the text was attributed to Neilos of Ancyra, a saintly ascetic. Daniel Canner though, the English translator and an expert in the *Narrationes*, underlines the fact that there is no direct reference on adopting the anchoretic life-style in the text. The narrator, he argues, said that after resting, they would travel οἴκαδε, homeward. So, after their adventurous pilgrimage and an ordination as "honorary priests", they returned back to the world.[27] Nonetheless, this οἴκαδε could be equally referring to their new home, the desert. In addition, strong argument cannot be built on the lack of mentioning anything. For example, there is only one reference to Jesus in the sixth chapter, when the narrator is referring to the Bishop of Elousa, who bought Theodoulos from the Bedouins, and there is not even one reference to the New Testament; the narrator

24 *Narrationes*, 6.23.

25 On recognition scenes in byzantine hagiography, see P. Boulhol, *Anagnorismos. La scène de reconnaissance dans l'hagiographie antique et medieval*, Aix-en-Provence 1996.

26 *Narrationes*, 7.13-14.

27 Caner, *History and Hagiography*, p. 135.

only quotes the Old Testament.[28] This, of course, does not mean that he and his son are not Christians.

Moreover, the lifestyle they intended to follow is described in terms appropriate to a sporting contest: στέφανος (victory), αγών (fight/match), έπαθλον (prize), άθληση (contest). It was a common place for early Byzantine Christians to describe ascetic devotion in this fashion – the Greek word "ascesis" means exercise – and Pseudo-Neilos used similar vocabulary earlier in the text, when he was describing the lifestyle and the martyrdom of the anchorites. Finally, if they intended to go back to their hometown, the farewell scene between husband and wife is pointless. It seems that the author deliberately did not give any definite answer to what happened to his heroes. Only some hints for their future are offered and the readers are allowed to give their own answers according to their cultural backgrounds and the mentality of their era.

Nevertheless, it was rare for a father and a son to become monks together, because monastic devotion required cutting off any relationship or bonding with the world including one's family; but it was not unique.[29] Abba Karion was also married with two children, a boy and a girl. When he departed for the desert he left his children with his wife. After a while, though, she visited him with the two children and asked him: "So, you became a monk, but a famine broke out. Who would feed your children?" Abba Karion then took the boy, Zacharias, to live with him. The story of abba Karion is in *Apophthegmata Patrum*, a collection that is highly aware of everyday difficulties and dilemmas.[30] By contrast, the family in *Narrationes* is highly idealized and the spouses do not seem to be concerned with similar problems.

To sum up, *Narrationes* give us the opportunity to have a glimpse on the inter-familial relations of an early Byzantine family. This family is highly idealized, yet we can come to some interesting conclusions about the marital and familial *imaginaire* of some Christian circles. To achieve this, we concentrated on two important scenes of the novel: the separation of the married couple, which stands at the beginning of the story, and the recognition scene at the end. The protagonist of the *Narrationes*, but also in this family is the unnamed father, the narrator. He is the one who is taking decisions that affect everybody without consulting anyone, just like the traditional *paterfamilias* we know from the Greek novels or the Passions of the Martyrs. Yet, he is insecure, emotional and passionate, qualities that traditionally were not associated with the father-figure, but with women and children. Consequently, his silent wife and passionless, stable-on-his-faith son seem in many ways stronger, more stable, and more mature than him, even though they did not make the decisions.

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28 ὃ γὰρ πριαπάμενος ἐστι τῶν κατὰ Χριστὸν θείων μυστηρίων ἱερεύς, *Narrationes*, 6.20.

29 On this subject, see C. Schroeder, "Children in Early Egyptian Monasticism," in *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, C. Horn and R. Phenix (eds.), Tubingen 2010, pp. 317-38; V. Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism in Late Antiquity. Continuity, Family Dynamics and the Rise of Christianity*, Farnham 2015.

30 Karion 2, PG 65.