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READING HAGIOGRAPHY

How to Engage with those Astonishing, Perplexing, Archaic, and Stunningly Grace-Filled Saints' *Lives*

For readers who intermittently wrestle (like Jacob and his angel) over the vagaries of saints' *Lives*, Byzantinist Dr. Maria Kouroumali explains how to value some of the oldest and most sublime literature in Christendom.

RTE: Dr. Kouroumali, will you tell us about yourself?

DR KOUROUMALI: I was born in Athens, Greece, and spent several years of my childhood in the United Kingdom. I attended a British school for the first years of my education, so my first reading and writing language was English, alongside Greek which was spoken at home. We returned to Greece in mid-1981 and, after completing my studies at a Greek secondary school, I entered the University of Athens in the Department of Classical Philology where I studied for my first degree in Classics—Ancient Greek and Latin language and literature. I had had a passion for Byzantium [or, more accurately, the Eastern Roman Empire] since I was a child because it combined all of the things I love about ancient Greece with the addition of the Orthodox Christian faith. I chose to study Classics as I knew it would provide me with a solid grounding in Ancient Greek and Latin which I felt was important for the postgraduate studies I wished to pursue. As you know, Byzantine texts are written in a variety of ancient Greek dialects as well as Koine Greek.

Opposite: Dr. Maria Kouroumali.

After graduation I was accepted at the University of Oxford, where I studied for an M.Phil. [a two-year taught and research-based Masters of Philosophy] and continued on to the D.Phil. in Byzantine Studies [Doctor of Philosophy, aka Ph.D.] where I researched and wrote on Procopius of Caesarea, the main historical source for the reign of Justinian, and Justinian's campaigns against the Ostrogoths in Italy in the sixth century AD. After my doctorate I remained at Oxford for a further four years as a post-doctoral Research Fellow and a member of the Faculties of Classics and History, primarily teaching and researching. In January 2010, I arrived at Hellenic College and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts, as the Director of the newly established Mary Jaharis Center for Byzantine Art and Culture, and as an assistant professor of Byzantine Studies.

RTE: Thank you. Many Orthodox have feelings of ambivalence when they read a saint's *Life* with historical problems or fantastic miraculous elements. Because Christianity is founded on the historical truth of the Lord's birth, life, miracles, and resurrection, we feel that the *Lives* of the saints should be equally true.

DR KOUROUMALI: This is a common issue in our contemporary world with so much emphasis placed on 'objectivity' and historical truth, particularly with the recent publications concerning the historicity of the gospels and the birth of Christ, and I can certainly understand where this ambivalence comes from. As part of my Masters degree I did a course on Byzantine hagiography, which was the first time I encountered this problem. As an Orthodox Christian I had read every existing Synaxaristes and all the *Lives* of the saints, and I was very familiar with the texts from the perspective of a devout person. In my studies, I saw these same texts treated and taught in a different way than I had experienced as a simple lay person with faith, and I remember myself having some of those doubts.

I discussed this with my spiritual father, of course, and he told me, "Well, our God is a God of Truth. When we are engaged in anything, we should always seek the Truth and not be afraid of Truth however it manifests itself." This did help me think about the matter in a slightly different way and it also helped me be more conscious of asking for God's help in discerning what is true. I should add that another thing that we should all keep in mind with history, literature, and theology is that none of these is an exact science nor is every scholar dedicated to the pursuit of truth. We are all human and

subject to error, to misunderstanding, to personal bias, to distortion and misperception. So the ‘truth’ that is presented in scholarship is not always the Truth.

It is not just the Humanities and Social Sciences that are not exact. Even the so-called STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Medicine) are not as exact as some of their adherents like to present them. So once we reach higher education and begin to realize that things are not as simple as what we are taught as schoolchildren, we have to remember that this is what university education is all about; teaching us that few certainties exist and that things are not always black and white.

Now, for someone who has faith, there is one certainty: that of God. God is Truth and He is everywhere. In this fallen world though, there are many things that are not absolute, that are not necessarily true, but this does not mean that they are also purposefully false.

So, when it comes to a saint’s *Life*, I would not characterize a miracle as “fantastic” because a miracle is extraordinary, it defies the natural, human order of things. By nature, a miracle is an irrational thing and it is accepted on faith. Now, we may have a miracle that relates to an historical event, such as the conversion of Constantine, where we have two historical accounts on the event, the appearance of the sign of the Cross, which influenced his conversion: one from Eusebius of Caesarea and the other from Lactantius. One account is of a vision he had when he was awake, the other reports that Constantine had a dream. Personally, I certainly believe that Constantine witnessed something which left a deep impression on him, but given that I was not there and did not witness the manifest miracle first-hand, I can only choose to accept what my sources tell me. We will just have to wait until the other side of death to know what really transpired. In other words, only those who witness miracles themselves can speak to the truth of a miracle; everyone else has to accept it on faith. This – to some extent – is true for historical events, where we accept what witnesses or chroniclers tell us of events we did not experience for ourselves. This is the perspective of a scholar who is also a person of faith. A non-believer, a secular person will doubt anything out of the ordinary and automatically place such occurrences in ancient or contemporary texts in the category of the fictional and fantastic. They may seek to find rational explanations for some miraculous occurrence, based on science or nature, but they will not accept miracles as actually taking place.

Therefore, I think that there should not be ambivalence for an Orthodox

person who has faith and believes in miracles. For one who disputes miracles in general, the problem really is one of lack of faith; it is not a problem of any particular saint's life.

As for historical truth, no one will ever convince me as a scholar that the authors of hagiographic texts woke up one day and decided to 'create' a saint. They wrote at a time when education was not a given right. It was a privilege and required a great deal of time and expense. There was very little in the way of organized or state-supervised education. One had to find a teacher and one had to have the financial resources to pay for many years' worth of education if one wished to attain the equivalent of higher education in those times. Even the basics of reading and writing required several years and substantial funds. We should also consider the process of writing itself: we often forget, accustomed as we are to computers and the abundance of stationery, that writing implements and materials were also expensive and scarce in those times. The very task of writing, as those of us who still write by hand know, is far more arduous than just typing away at a computer. Therefore, I find it hard to believe that the authors of hagiographical texts set out to create fictional characters. I believe that, in every case, however historically inaccurate the detail, there is a genuine core of historical truth in these accounts. Their sources may be distorted, they may have made errors, they may have conflated details from several accounts, but they were not intentionally describing a fictional person.

History and Hagiography in Byzantium

RTE: A recent book about Orthodox thinking says that the problem of modern history writing is that it draws much clearer lines between history and story, myth and fact, than ancient authors did. Would you agree with this, and how do you think that the Byzantine authors and Church Fathers looked at hagiography? Is there a difference between our modern desire for historical accuracy in hagiography and theirs, or would they have subscribed to the post-modern view that you sometimes hear from Orthodox: "It doesn't matter if these accounts are literally true or not, because they still teach us spiritual truths"? Because Christianity is founded on the historical fact of the Incarnation, as your spiritual father said, don't we need to hold to a strict standard of historical truth in our ecclesiastical chronicles and in hagiography?

DR KOUROUMALI: Historical writing in the Byzantine world is a direct continuation of the Greek historiographical tradition which was later picked up by the Romans and continued until the end of the Byzantine Empire. History writing was naturally concerned with truth, but not the truth as we define it today. There was no sense of the kind of ‘objectivity’ that we aim for in our time. In fact, there is no real objectivity even in our own world, because whoever writes history is writing from their subjective perspective. The idea of total objectivity is a myth for any world, but particularly for these historical periods, which were not preoccupied with issues of ‘objectivity’ as we are. What did concern them was that simple plain view of the world where one says, “I want to know the truth about something, and I want to try to find out exactly what happened.” I think that the ancient and Byzantine worlds were far simpler in terms of thought and understanding because they were not as complicated, relativistic or as technologically enhanced as our world is.

Historical writing was of course distinct from poetry, fables and other literary genres, and this is where I disagree with the author you quoted. Even ancient authors would certainly make distinctions between what is an historical text and what is not. The quest for the truth and the distinction between fiction and reality is a common theme that appears in the proems [introductions] of most ancient historians. They were very conscious of this difference.

RTE: Can you give an example?

DR KOUROUMALI: Yes. There is a difference between Eusebius’ *History of the Church*, which is an ecclesiastical history, and Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*, which is a kind of hagiography, a panegyric or laudatory type of text, in this instance praising the emperor. Byzantine literary critics, such as St. Photius the Great, who in his *Bibliotheca* gives a summary of all the books he had read, makes distinctions between authors: “This is an historian, this is a rhetor, this is a poet, this is a philosopher.” The fathers of the Greek historical tradition, Herodotus and Thucydides, did not think they were writing an epic like Homer. The ancient historians certainly distinguished these differences, and in their works they attempted to present as accurate an account as possible, whether from their own eye-witness account or from second-hand accounts of others who had witnessed events or from other written sources. It is true that their silence about the details of their sources is frustrating to



contemporary scholars, but the ancient historians did have different standards than those authors composing more literary, fictional material.

Certainly our contemporary approach to historiography tries to draw even clearer lines between those things than the approach of the ancient world because our perspective is different. In the Western world we have been influenced by the Renaissance, the revolutions in Europe and in the U.S., industrialization, technological advance, rationalization, and the relativism that has sprung up as a result of these historical changes. On the theoretical and philosophical level, everything that exists has been disputed in one way or another. This is where the relativistic mindset comes in, where almost everyone argues that there are many truths and that there are always two (or several) sides to a story. This rationale, in some respect, goes back to the sophistic approach of the ancient world, where you could argue issues from several different perspectives. The difference in our world is that this approach is encouraged, whereas in the ancient world sophistry actually drew a lot of negative criticism and was not really encouraged in daily life but was primarily used as a pedagogical and rhetorical tool.

RTE: Was sophistry criticized because it obscured the truth?

DR KOUROUMALI: Yes, Thucydides is one example of an ancient author who was very critical of sophists and there was an ongoing dispute between philosophers who were representatives of the first sophistic period and other philosophical movements and representatives in the ancient world. It was actually the first sophists that developed rhetoric and rhetorical education which later became the pinnacle of higher education. The renaissance of sophists and the prominence accorded to rhetorical training in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds influenced Byzantine literature more than any other approach because higher education concentrated chiefly on rhetoric as an academic discipline in the Byzantine period. Yet it was never prized above truth. That is different from our world where if one claims they have the truth, they are criticized by others who will say, "What about my truth?" Certainly our world does not accept the Truth as residing in only one religion as was the case in the Christian Byzantine Empire.

Of course, the Byzantines were aware of people of other religious traditions, but they saw them as foreign and barbarian and their beliefs as false.

Opposite: Roman Emperor St. Constantine the Great (280-337). Head of colossal statue that stood in the west apse of the Basilica of Maxentius. Capitoline Museums, Rome.

There was obviously no political correctness. In the contemporary world, even amongst some Orthodox, one can be criticized if one accepts certain things as true without examination. With our mindset of relativism we even criticize the Fathers. We dispute anything, sometimes just for the sake of disputation, and this was not as widespread or as acceptable in ancient societies.

For Byzantine authors and Church Fathers hagiography was one of a number of Byzantine literary genres: an historical account, a biography of a holy person, and not fiction. The people who wrote these texts wrote them for the edification of those listening to or reading these works, as examples of Christians who had led a life worthy of emulation. However, contemporary people, particularly in the West, often feel comfortable with the approach you mentioned above: “The historical reality is not necessary because, at the end of the day, what is most important is what the text teaches us spiritually.” But historical reality is also important and there is no need to resort to this line of reasoning as an excuse to avoid textual problems. We will speak more about this below.

Classicizing Historiography, the World Chronicle, and Ecclesiastical Histories

RTE: Can you describe these Byzantine literary genres, and the purpose of each?

DR KOUROUMALI: There are many literary genres in Byzantium and it would take up too much space to discuss them all in detail. Since we have mentioned historiography, I will say a few more things about historical texts in Byzantium. History writing in the Byzantine period can be divided into three separate sub-genres. The first was classicizing historiography; history writing in the manner of the major Classical authors, such as Herodotus, Thucydides and other ancient historians. It was continued by the Romans throughout the Byzantine period until the Fall of Constantinople. Examples of this style of history writing are authors such as Procopius of Caesarea, his near contemporary, Agathias of Myrina, and the seventh-century Theophylact Simocatta. These historians used a language which attempted to imitate Attic Greek primarily and to be reminiscent of the language of the great historians Herodotus and Thucydides. They focused on contemporary events

that, ideally, they had been an eyewitness to, a prized quality of this type of historiography. The works usually covered events over a brief time span contemporary to the author's lifetime or even just a few years in his lifetime.

Procopius, for example, chronicles the military campaigns of Justinian, in some of which he himself participated. While he was not present at all of the events he wrote about, he certainly lived during that period. These classicizing writers concentrated on specific contemporary events, not religious, but political and military in nature because they were consciously imitating ancient historians who lived in a pre-Christian world. They also used particular narrative techniques, such as digressions and speeches by the key historical figures, again in imitation of ancient authors. So this was a type of historiography predating the Byzantine period which was continued by the Byzantines.

Then there are the two new contributions of the Byzantine period to the genre of historiography: the world chronicle and ecclesiastical history. The "inventor" of both of these was the fourth-century Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea and, although we no longer have his chronicle, we know that he wrote one. Even though the world chronicle as we have it is a Byzantine creation, it also has its roots in the ancient world because it drew on attempts by ancient authors to place world events in chronological order. The creation of this type of historiography in Byzantium is also uniquely Christian as the chronicles begin with the creation of the world by God and the first humans, Adam and Eve. For the Byzantines, creation was an historical moment in which they firmly believed. It was the beginning of history, although there are numerous ways of calculating that moment chronologically even in Byzantium. All world chronicles start with the creation of the world, Adam and Eve, and then proceed to cover all the historical events up to the author's own lifetime. This involves many centuries of history, and, since the Byzantines believed that their historical past spanned all of Greek and Roman antiquity, and the Judeo-Christian past from the moment that Constantine introduced Christianity as the official state religion of the Roman Empire, this includes a great deal of information and numerous historical events. They saw themselves as Romans and never called themselves Byzantine. The term 'Byzantine' at that time meant a citizen of Constantinople, and that is how one finds it in the sources of that time before it was given to the entire period by seventeenth-century scholars.

The first extant world chronicle is that of John Malalas in the sixth century and this form of historiography continued almost uninterrupted until the Fall of Constantinople. I should clarify that, despite the vast amount of material to be covered, the world chronicles do not consist of fifty or more detailed books; there are numerous books in which events are briefly related and analyzed, using different chronological systems, depending on the author. Usually what one will find is something like, "In year X from the creation of the world, this and this happened...". The world chronicles are usually more representative of contemporary spoken language. They include not only political or military events, but all types of events that are not to be found in classicizing historical works, such as religious events, miraculous occurrences, natural catastrophes, edicts, any number of interesting events that caught the attention of the author. For this reason they are often a treasure trove for the researcher. The authors of the chronicles tend to draw their material from many sources, and they are clearer sometimes as to their sources of information than classicizing historians. Also, they often reproduce source material without any editing on their part and this is invaluable for scholars as many of these original sources are no longer extant.

The third type of historical writing is ecclesiastical history and the term is self-explanatory. It is a historical account of ecclesiastical events and major Church figures. The first such history is that of Eusebius of Caesarea. It was a popular form of writing although not as popular as the chronicle and there are many ecclesiastical historians until the end of the Byzantine period. It also allowed more flexibility in content and the inclusion of source material than classicizing historiography, so the content is not limited to Church history alone even though, of course, that is the focus of each work.

Apart from historiography, we find almost every form of literature known from the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. Poetry, divided into secular poetry, which continued the development of most of the genres of the ancient world, and sacred poetry. This would include hymnography with all of its variations: *kontakia*, *kanons*, sacred epigrams and so on. This poetry drew on the Old and New Testament for its material and content, but was certainly not viewed as history. Rhetorical works, particularly rhetorical handbooks, were very popular. There were philosophical treatises, mathematical and scientific writings, legal works, epistolography (the art of letter-writing) and, of course, theological genres, such as homilies and the *Lives* of the saints. There was a type of fiction writing, primarily romances dealing with



11th-century parchment leaf of a menologion from Gospel lectionary from Kastramoni, Asia Minor.

separated lovers who have to endure all sorts of adventures in order to be reunited with each other as well as biographies with fictional elements.

The Hagiographical Genre

RTE: How was hagiography classified within these schemes?

DR KOUROUMALI: To answer this, I have to say first that hagiography is not a monolithic type of genre, it is made up of different types of hagiographical accounts. The usual narratives that people are familiar with are the biography-type that I spoke about earlier, the genre of *Vios kai Politeia*—which we could translate as *Life and Conduct*. This is often used to chronicle the lives of ascetics, confessors, or saintly kings, such as *The Life of Constantine* by Eusebius. Then there is the generally shorter *martyrion*, which is a far more epic and focused account of the events that led to the martyrdom of individual Christians, and would not necessarily include details of their earlier life. There is also a third type: the hagiographical *encomium*, which is a written laudation, or praise of a saint or saints, and you sometimes find these as prefaces to Lives or *martyria*. Another example would be the *mirabilia*, which is a collection of miracles of a particular saint, such as the famous *Miracles of St. Demetrius of Thessalonica* that record miracles and miraculous interventions of the saint that occurred long after his martyrdom.

Genre theory, a theory which argues that each literary genre has its own set of narrative characteristics and form, used to be quite rigid in the 19th and 20th centuries. Each type of *Life* was thought to possess its own specific set of characteristics, much like other literary genres. From what I have read, I feel that genre theory is now more fluid. The definitions are not so rigid and we see some mixing of various genres. As someone who has worked extensively with literary texts, I argue for this fluidity and I cannot believe that authors had sets of rules, a checklist of characteristics by which they wrote. Almost all authors mix their genres to some extent, I would say, and this is especially true in hagiography because these accounts were written specifically for edification, for didactic purposes, but also because they wished to chronicle significant events in the lives of these holy men and women.

When we say “*Lives of Saints*”, we often mean collected narratives of saints’ lives in a single or several volumes. The most famous of these collections is the *Menologion* of St. Symeon Metaphrastes, whose contribution to

the hagiographical genre is important. He compiled ten volumes of saints' *Lives* that covered the entire year—hence the term *menologion*, meaning “the account of (each) month.” The Byzantines were generally very fond of encyclopedias of all sorts and there were particular periods when there was a great deal of literary activity creating encyclopedias and compilations of various subjects. A famous example of this is the legal codification under the Emperors Theodosius II (mid-fifth century) and Justinian (sixth century), that were attempts to collect all previous imperial legislation and present them in a codified and useful way. Similar things happened in hagiography where we have compilations of saints' *Lives*, of *martyria*, and of *mirabilia*. Theodoret of Cyrrhus' collections of *Lives* of the Syriac Fathers, or Palladius' *Lausiaca History*, or *The Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschus are also examples of this.

St. Symeon Metaphrastes compiled one of the most popular collections of saints' *Lives*, though his *menologion* was not the first. There were several before him and several after him, but his compilation proved to be one of the most successful (in terms of popularity) works in Byzantium. Of a total of about 2,500 – 3, 000 Greek manuscripts that survive today, 697 of these are copies, including fragments, of the Metaphrastic *Menologion*. It is no surprise that with that many manuscripts available, it is almost impossible to provide a critical edition of Symeon's work. However, his contribution to hagiography is significant.

Another important point to be made is that in Byzantium there was no difference in education. Christians and pagans alike received the same form of education and the highly educated Church Fathers studied the same texts as their pagan counterparts. Even in the middle and late Byzantine period where paganism was almost obsolete, the fundamentals of education were never 'reformed' to reflect a Christian approach. Christians and pagans read and venerated the same ancient authors. The Cappadocian Fathers are excellent examples of this approach. Many readers may know that St. Gregory the Theologian and St. Basil of Caesarea studied alongside the emperor Julian the Apostate in Athens. St. John Chrysostom was the pupil of the famous pagan rhetorician Libanius in Antioch. They all read and appreciated the same works but the three became paragons of Christian sanctity while Julian and Libanius were vehemently anti-Christian. In fact, Julian's attempt to forbid Christians 'pagan education' is the only moment in the long history of the Byzantine Empire when Christians were forced to limit themselves only to

Scripture and Christian works as a source of education. His reign, however, was very brief and there was never another attempt to exclude Christians from the study of ancient literature.

Lives of the Saints

How would these genres have worked with the *Lives* of the saints? I mentioned above that there was a literary genre of biography in the ancient world. A good example is the Alexander Romance, a type of fictional biography of Alexander the Great. There was a literary tradition in the Greek and Roman worlds of narrating the events of a particular person's life, especially of prominent figures such as emperors. Undoubtedly, these biographies influenced the genre of hagiography and there were certain narrative conventions and themes that were hallmarks of the genre. This included inserting panegyric elements into the narrative of the life. *The Life of Constantine*, the biography of Constantine the Great by Eusebius of Caesarea, is primarily a panegyric account. A panegyric, for those who are not familiar with the Greek term, means an oral or written account of a person or subject in a praiseworthy manner. It developed from one of the basic rhetorical exercises that taught one how to write or speak about a person or subject in a laudatory way. All *Lives* of saints have laudatory elements included because they were written with the specific purpose of celebrating the person, their deeds and their way of life and providing an edifying example for other Christians. There is the interplay between these genres. It is interesting to note also that there were biographies of major philosophers, especially of Neoplatonists, that were written in a similar vein to the *Lives of the Saints*, replete with pagan miracles.

The primary reason that leads scholars to believe that many saints are fictitious or historically inaccurate is exactly this appearance of conventional rhetorical themes and features in the *Lives*. However, repetitive features or narrative conventions do not necessarily imply that the texts are untrustworthy; any more than the appearance of rhetorical conventions in historiography negate the veracity of the account.

RTE: Don't we still see remnants of panegyric at official gatherings when guest speakers are introduced? Their accomplishments and characters are praised, and it would be extremely out of place to say anything negative, however true.

DR KOUROUMALI: That is an example of the persistence of the panegyric in our contemporary world and shows the strength of certain conventions of expression and speech that have not changed since antiquity. One may know unsavory, or at least, negative aspects of the guest speaker but it simply would be frowned upon to give voice to them in this context. The same was true in the past.

RTE: How then would you read passages in *Lives* of the saints that seem overly fanciful—such as St. David of Evia floating Celtic-like across the channel separating the island of Evia from the mainland on a rock, or a future saint speaking from the baptismal font as an infant, and so on. We know that God can do anything, but we also know that people can and do elaborate.

On the other hand, when I first traveled through Greece I stayed at a women's monastery on the island of Zakynthos, where I mentioned to a Cypriot nun (also Oxford-trained as a matter of fact) about my problem with the story of St. Nicholas refusing to nurse from his mother on Wednesdays and Fridays. She looked startled, then smiled and told me that fortunately she could help me with that. Her great-uncle was the Greek Hieromartyr Philoumenos, brutally murdered in Jericho in 1979 by Israeli Zionists. He and his twin brother, who became an abbot in Greece, were the seventh and eighth of eleven children, and in their infancy, both babies refused to nurse from their mother on Wednesdays and Fridays. The whole island knew about it and many relatives and friends unsuccessfully tried to entice the babies to eat on fast days. They simply refused. Her aunt later verified this story for me. It was eye-opening, and I realized that you have to be careful in assessing such things.

DR KOUROUMALI: Again, we go back to the beginning of our talk. These are miracles. You either accept them or you do not and doubt. There are many *Lives* which have identical miracles or identical behaviors of saints in different parts of the Christian world. I can certainly tell you that the author of the *Life* of St. David of Evia had probably never even heard of Ireland and would have been unaware of the Celtic or other traditions of people floating on rocks, so it is not a question of direct borrowing. But I would be hesitant to even discuss whether this happened or not because how does one know what happened and what did not? As you mentioned above, you doubted whether a baby would refuse to nurse on Wednesdays and Fridays. However, there were people who had witnessed such a thing and could verify it for you. The



ΟΝ ΚΑΙ ΤΟ
ΕΝΟΛΟΓΟΝ
ΟΥΤΙΝΟΝ
ΧΗΡΑ ΟΝΟΝ

real question is one of faith in miracles. They may or may not have happened in the manner in which they are described, but you have to ask yourself: Is this event really what makes this saint important? Even when it is a very crucial event in the saint's life, is that really what the saint is all about? The miracles are not the most important aspects of the saint. For instance, you may have doubted whether St. Nicholas fasted as a baby on Wednesdays and Fridays, but you didn't doubt that St. Nicholas is a saint.

As many of us know, the recently reposed Greek elders Paisios and Porphyrios have plenty of spiritual children still living who witnessed them perform miracles and have written accounts of them. Those miracles are the same types of things we read in the *Lives* of saints from centuries ago. I do not find that strange because God's Grace—for those of us who believe – will naturally exist and manifest itself in ways that people with little or no faith will always call fanciful. So, I would say to believers that they should not be at all concerned with miraculous occurrences in the *Lives* of the saints, even if they seem extremely fanciful, and should not be quick to deny them as we cannot know the way in which the Grace of God operates in the life of any given saint. God can indeed do anything and He may have allowed something to happen in this extreme way—floating across the channel on a rock rather than just walking across the water like Jesus did. We do not know why something happens the way it does and why God manifests His power in that way. And why would that concern us? Why would that be an issue? When I read the *Lives of the Saints* for edification, I read them with faith and I'm unconcerned about textual inaccuracies or historical errors.

RTE: How then do you read them as an historian?

DR KOUROUMALI: When I read these *Lives* as an historian, I note the historical information which is useful to me or the narrative patterns that I can relate to the author's level of education, his language and his stylistic influences. St. David floating on a rock or any other miracle would be of little help to me as an historian since it is an extraordinary event, outside human nature. This may have happened to this particular saint but it obviously is not something that happened to everybody who lived in that period, therefore it is of no historical account to me.

Opposite: Detail of icon of St. John the Theologian writing on an open scroll. Benaki Museum, Athens.

If someone finds himself scandalized or doubting whether this happened, that is a problem of faith. God does not force anyone to accept these things, and it is not essential if they accept them or not. But to question the validity of the existence of a saint because one finds, let us say, ten miracles that one has trouble believing in within the narrative of that saint's life, speaks more to the person reading than to the problems with the saint's historical existence.

Undoubtedly there have been hagiographers who made mistakes, who did not research their sources, or were unsure of certain details and maybe even copied information from an older known *Life* of a saint. Does this mean that the saint they are writing about and have portrayed in a historically inaccurate manner did not exist? Or should we lose faith in all of hagiography because of these questionable accounts? We have other accounts of holiness that manifest in exactly the same way, so why would we dispute these? In some cases we do not have any information about these saints historically corroborated by other sources. Again, this should not lead us to doubt the existence of the saint immediately. These texts may have historical elements, they often make claims of adhering to the truth, but they were not written as historiographical works. They were there to provide an historical chronicle of a saint's life in some respects, but not in the way that we, or even the Byzantines, thought about history.

Of course there are times in hagiography when the accounts of a saint are actually of two different people, or the historical details are erroneous. I have come across this. A very good example is that of the *Life of St. Andrew, the Fool for Christ*. Many Byzantine scholars claim that he is fictitious, that he never existed because of the major historical and literary difficulties with his *Life*. Well, I am afraid that I personally venerate St. Andrew the Fool for Christ highly. I loved him when I was a child; I still love him and believe in him despite having read the original account which, yes, is historically problematic. We do not know exactly when he lived, whether it was the sixth, the ninth or another century. This has never affected my personal faith. In fact, I argued as a graduate student in an essay about him that he certainly existed. I believe that the person as he is portrayed existed, whichever period it may have been, and I do believe in the miracles that are mentioned there. I can explain the discrepancies because I can tell you of very many instances of scribes miswriting or miscopying a *Life*, or of one being lost and then rewritten later on. There are plenty of actual explanations for all of these things, and we have these same issues with all sorts of literary texts in Byz-

antium, so why would these problems lead me to immediately doubt the existence of a saint?

RTE: Also, historical premises are often revised. The example that comes to mind is that for some decades 19th- and 20th- century biblical scholars (mostly Protestant) were saying that the Holy Sepulchre Church in Jerusalem could not be the site of the Lord's resurrection because it was not outside the city walls, as the Gospel says. In time, they uncovered another set of city walls that completely revised their ideas of Jerusalem's boundaries, and verified the location.

DR KOUROUMALI: Yes, of course, there are always many historical possibilities. Remember that when Schliemann set out to discover Troy based on his reading of Homer, he was ridiculed, as the Homeric works were largely considered fictional epic poetry, not historical. He proved his critics wrong. I have often thought that there is usually a kernel of historical truth in fictional works that deal with history. We should accord a greater respect to ancient sources rather than display our contemporary arrogance and rational way of perceiving the world by quickly denigrating anything that does not fit into our understanding of the world.

This is speaking from the perspective of someone with faith who also happens to be a scholar. When one is a scholar, there are ways one can argue about these things and still preserve what is true; I am not saying that one blindly accepts everything and does not question or doubt. For example, I am not sure if you or your readers are aware that there is an academic dispute as to whether St. Helen discovered the True Cross. Many of the contemporary sources do not mention this discovery and her name was linked to it several centuries later, which has led many scholars to doubt that she was the one who discovered the Cross. However, because this is a tradition of the Church which has influenced even iconography, for many people it is scandalous to even insinuate she did not. I have not really researched the topic myself, so I cannot give you a scholarly opinion. I do believe though that there is no conclusive proof, one way or the other. I have no problem accepting the Church's tradition but I can also add that my veneration of St. Helen is not linked to her discovery of the True Cross. I venerate her because she was a remarkably devout woman, who as an elderly lady embarked on an arduous pilgrimage to the Holy Land, which even in this day of convenience many do not undertake, and she promoted the Christian Church. She

built several churches on holy sites and she was the mother of the emperor responsible for elevating Christianity to the state religion. Now, whether she also discovered the True Cross does not affect my veneration and love for St. Helen. It does not detract from her sanctity if it is proved that it was someone else who discovered that Cross. But, as I said, I am also happy to accept the tradition of the Church and the portrayal of this Church tradition in iconography, because at the moment I venerate that icon, I am not concerned about the historical realities, nor do I doubt. If I ever undertake to research the topic, perhaps I will be able to give a more ‘scholarly’ answer.

RTE: Frankly, many of us are not quite sure how to deal with the modern critical mind.

DR KOUROUMALI: That is why those of us who have faith and who happen to be in fields other than theology have a role to play, because this is the kind of mindset that is damaging for the Church and the faithful.

RTE: It’s also helpful to have believing Orthodox who have run the gauntlet of study in secular institutions.

DR KOUROUMALI: It is true that we have been tested and we have experienced all these doubts, these criticisms, even contempt and ridicule at times in institutions where reason is worshipped and faith is dismissed or allocated to one’s ‘personal’ life. I could not stand up at Oxford and say, “Oh, well, that is just what I believe” or “How dare you doubt the existence of this saint?” They did not care about my beliefs or convictions. I had to find acceptable arguments to support my position, arguments that they would understand, even if they did not accept them. One can support one’s faith using the same academic language and argumentation that is acceptable and understandable to non-believers. Often agnostics criticize Christians of being gullible but one would be surprised to discover how much those who do not believe in any God accept on faith or without sufficient argumentation. The important thing is to be clear of one’s own position and beliefs, to be respectful of others even when they disagree or insult one, and to seek the truth in a serious, prayerful and committed way. I believe that it all goes back to the fact that our God is a God of Truth. There is nothing that the secular world can imagine or create that God Himself does not already know. Therefore if we pray and ask for God’s guidance as we should do in everything, then



*Early 14th-century icon of Doubting Thomas.
Ohrid Museum, Lake Ohrid, Macedonia.*

somehow that truth will be revealed, even if we think the odds are stacked against it.

RTE: We sometimes think of Western hagiography as having many fanciful elements, but since the 17th century Roman Catholic scholars, such as the Bollandist Order, have tried to sift through these hagiographical texts to get to a reliable core. Were they successful?

DR KOUROUMALI: You can have extreme and fanciful elements in both eastern and western *Lives* and the work of the Bollandists covers both eastern and western Christian hagiography. While I acknowledge the scholarship of these and other, mostly western, scholars, I think the introduction of the analytical rational approach they brought to these texts has done more harm than good, especially since most Orthodox scholars are influenced by it and follow this approach slavishly. Of course, I should note that today the old distinctions of East and West are blurred. One can be born in a historically Orthodox country, be Orthodox only nominally, and have little or no faith and one can be born in a non-Orthodox country and be truly Orthodox with great faith. I do not consider this obsession with historicity or logic to be particularly successful, or even an appropriate scientific way of reading these texts, because it imposes expectations of how those *Lives* should be written and what they should reflect in order for these scholars to be convinced that these people actually existed or that the accounts are true. That would not be an acceptable methodology in any other form of literature, and I do not see why it is acceptable in hagiography.

RTE: Why is it unacceptable?

DR KOUROUMALI: Because you cannot distort a text to make it read as we want it to read. I dispute that even with my colleagues in historiography who try to impose very modern literary theories, opinions and projections onto an ancient text; I certainly reject it in hagiography. I argue that we, as scholars, should always try to embrace the mindset of the period and divest ourselves of contemporary frameworks of reference. Some of the most ludicrous scholarship on hagiography I have read introduces notions of sexuality that were non-existent in the early and Byzantine Christian world. However, these and other equally flawed approaches are very popular in recent scholarship.

To conclude, I would say that for me, as an Orthodox scholar, sensitive

texts should not be a cause for confusion, distress, or doubt for those who have faith. The problems can often be explained logically, and even if we cannot find an explanation for everything, there are plenty of issues with other texts that cannot be explained satisfactorily either. For example, no one disputes the existence of Emperor Justinian, just because we have almost no information about him directly except what other people have written about him. Yes, he was an emperor and, therefore, his name survives in legislation, in coins, inscriptions, monuments, but the person of Justinian is as much an enigma as any disputed saint. This also applies to other historical personages. To my mind, this insistence that people need to have everything narrated accurately and historically about a saint in order to believe in him is paradoxical.

I often think of the Apostle Thomas and his doubting Christ's resurrection, asking for hard proof in order to believe. We can all resemble a doubting Thomas at one point or other in our lives, but we should make an effort to accept some things on faith alone. So I think that most of these problems really refer to our own spiritual immaturity and we need to strengthen our own faith. There is nothing wrong with being a doubting Thomas, because, of course, he was one of the great apostles despite his doubts. We are all different people and St. Thomas spoke for those who are always going to doubt, who require the proof of their eyes. The apostles, like the other saints, are examples of the diverse manifestations of unique personhood and there are as many ways to God as there are people. But, as Christ said, 'Blessed are those who believe without seeing.' (John 20:29)

We should also think of the Holy Mother of God. We know very little, historically speaking, about her life. Yet the Church did not feel it was necessary for us to have exhaustive personal details of the Lady Theotokos. We have and know what we need and she is the supreme example of sanctity above all other saints, second only to Christ our God. Does this lack of historical and personal detail detract from our love and belief in the sanctity of the Theotokos?

Compilations of *Lives* of Saints

RTE: I've often heard people ask why so many *Lives* of saints (especially those in collections) seem so bland and formulaic? I was once told that this is because these *Lives* are a mirror of what the saint is in heaven (thus, without failings) but this isn't a particularly satisfying explanation because it is

difficult to admire uniform abstract virtue. On the other hand there are a handful of amazing *Lives*, such as those of St. Theodore of Sykeon, St. Philaret the Merciful, St. Mary of Egypt, or St. Simeon the Stylite, full of human detail that captures the mind and satisfies the soul. How can we look at this?

DR KOUROUMALI: I think this is often a reaction to the compilation of saints' *Lives*. St. Symeon Metaphrastes who, as we mentioned above, created one of the most popular compilations or *menologia* received a lot of negative criticism from western scholars, particularly the Bollandists, who believed that in compiling and editing these *Lives*, he had removed many interesting details. However, it is very difficult to determine which details he removed as we do not have all the sources he was working from. A recent, more sympathetic approach to his work is a book by Christian Høgel where Symeon's approach is studied and it is argued that he may not have removed as many details from the *Lives* as previously thought. Symeon's work consists of ten books covering the calendar year (September—the beginning of the Church year—to August) and includes 148 *Lives*. His primary task consisted in 'purifying and elevating' the language of these texts, for which he was praised extensively by Michael Psellos, the 11th-century intellectual, who wrote a laudatory account of St. Symeon and his work. It is quite possible that he simply refined earlier compilations. Obviously, he selected certain saints to include, but it is also quite clear that he did not suddenly destroy all of the pre-existing *Lives* that he worked from. And in fact, other versions of some of these *Lives* still exist, so we do have those details elsewhere.

Once again, the negative criticism stems from our own contemporary expectations rather than any attempt to understand what was the intent of the authors during their own time. How did they approach hagiography and how did they perceive it? We may find Symeon's language boring, repetitive, convoluted, or the narrative technique of successive accounts too similar. We may also hesitate to believe various accounts if they seem to have been constructed to conform to a pattern, but, in fact, Symeon's work proved to be extremely successful and I very much doubt that he distorted anything purposefully.

Hagiographical texts were continuously redacted, edited for publication, and we do not know what may have been changed or omitted or incorrectly copied by the various scribes producing later copies. A certain *Life* may have been originally fifty pages long, but some compilers—due to lack of materials or because they deemed certain details more important than others—chose

to limit it to, say, twenty pages. You also see that today, when we have both detailed editions and shorter, less detailed versions for children. If we were to lose the full version and a century down the road, they discover the child's version of the *Life*, they may say, "Oh, what is this? Why is it so uniform?" And everyone will think, "What did these people do, how could they have distorted this?"

RTE: Also, for reading in church, or during monastic meals, you could not read fifty-page *Lives* for each of the saints of the day. These necessitated shorter readings.

DR KOUROUMALI: Yes, it is very important that we are aware that this compilation and redaction effort happened and that it was well within the spirit of the tenth-century 'Macedonian renaissance'. Encyclopedic compilations were appearing in other genres as well, and this was also the period in which the handwriting style changed from uncial to miniscule—uncial being the ancestor of the capital Modern Greek letters today, and miniscule being smaller, rounder and more connected letter forms, closer to the our lower-case letters. Many of the earlier manuscripts were transcribed into the new script, but many were also lost because patrons and copyists had to pick and choose what they were going to copy, and miniscule writing covered far more space. They made selections of what they thought was important to be preserved. Later compilers, such as the Russian menologia of St. Dmitry of Rostov, or the 20th-century Greek compilations of *Lives of Saints* according to months are much more stylized than if you or I sat down to write an individual *Life*. They may also appear too uniform or similar in style and expression because one or two people have edited the entire collection, but this should not make the account suspect. We should also be able to distinguish rhetorical features and narrative techniques, which were purposefully employed.

RTE: When people complain that they can't feel the saint through the blandness of the *Life*, I usually suggest that they try to pray to the saint and see what happens. We can forget that they aren't confined to the pages of a book.

DR KOUROUMALI: We also do not know how successful we would be in conveying the reality of, not only a person, but events we have witnessed or experiences we have had. Not everyone is blessed with a scintillating or poignant style of writing, but that should not reflect on the event itself or the



saint. We have to remember always that these were living, breathing, multi-faceted human beings and that we are only seeing one or two sides of them from an author who is usually compiling an account several decades or centuries after their death. For example, if you had met the Apostle Andrew in your youth, and then decided to write something about him fifty years after he was gone, you do not know what your capacity of recall would be. Again, these *Lives* were copied and recopied, so mistakes, omissions, and distortions happen, but there are explanations and we should not be too quick to immediately suspect the *Life* because we do not like the style of writing or the language, or because we feel it is too pietistic.

Representing Saints

RTE: Something else that people find troubling is when contemporary writers of our own time, with real historical material in the way of letters and eye-witness accounts at hand, do not make use of these sources and instead give us a glossed-over Disneyland type of *Life*, such as we see in several of the biographies of New Martyr Elizabeth of Russia. These authors selectively use only the “pretty” parts of their sources, frequently make her into a fairy-tale princess and deny us the inspiration of a very human woman who did not always negotiate the pitfalls of her life successfully, but who nonetheless died as a passion bearer. This is unacceptable when we have access to real contemporary sources, many in English, including the memoirs of a niece who lived with her and her own letters in the Russian archives.

DR KOUROUMALI: I agree with you but I also understand why this happens. It is because of the mindset that certain devout Orthodox have that a saint is someone perfect, flawless. They cannot reconcile the image they have of what a saint should be to the reality of the saint in life. I am sure the same was true in earlier periods and some of the ‘fairy-tale’-like elements of saints’ *Lives* derive from this attitude. I tell my students repeatedly, “Saints are human beings, just like the rest of us. You cannot imagine them as some rarefied, artificial beings. They had flaws, weaknesses, sins. You have to realize who these people are and that it is only God’s grace, coupled with their effort to overcome their fallen human nature, which enables sanctity.”

Opposite: 13th-century unidentified evangelist with manuscript from Cilicia. Folio 69v. Bible Society and Cambridge Univ. Library.

The Grand Duchess was a political persona as well as being very human, but people become saints in spite of their human frailty and weakness, not because of them.

As for the authors who whitewash these details thinking that they are not edifying—and, as I said, the same things undoubtedly happened in the Byzantine period as well—this is what I call pseudo-piety because it is a disservice to that saint to not show that, yes, they erred, they sinned, they were human, but they are not saints because of that, but because they overcame it. They became something else, a true Likeness of God as we are all called to be. I think this depends on the author and their approach. There are plenty of examples where the ‘problematic’ details are retained in the account.

Also, God’s judgment is often different from our own. For instance, St. Nicholas the Wonderworker was imprisoned by the other hierarchs and the emperor who witnessed him slapping Arius in the council. According to the Christian commandments, anger is not encouraged, neither is physical violence, and Christ stopped St. Peter from cutting off the ear of the high priest’s servant, but, on the other hand, He justified St. Nicholas above all of the other hierarchs at the council who had acted in the “right” Christian way.

Another example is St. John of Kronstadt, whose own diaries record his often uncharitable feelings towards his wife. Many are shocked by this and say, “How can he possibly be a saint?” Well, as I said, saints are human, and he struggled with this. At the end of the day, God’s judgment of each person is a mystery to us and the important factors that outweigh the bad are His to determine alone. One may be a disciple, having lived and seen miracles next to Christ, like Judas, and fall at the end, or one may be the Thief all his life and be saved at the very last moment. Nothing is certain in this life until the end when we cross over to the other side.

And I think it is this knowledge that leads those who become saints to forgive the people who act against them or to struggle with their shortcomings. They are aware of their own failings, and their humility enables them to actually experience what Christ said: “Forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Luke, 23:34). So I think we all need to keep the above in mind when we are judging saints, or if we are trying to hide negative aspects that we discover in historical texts, or explain them away. I have no problem accepting that St. Constantine executed his son and wife because it does not diminish St. Constantine for me. In his case there was an historical explanation as well as his human weakness. Through deliberate false accusation his

wife influenced him to execute her stepson, Constantine's son and the heir to the throne, wrongly in order to make her own children his heirs. Constantine was furious when he found out that she had lied to him, and had her executed as well. It was not a saintly action by any means, but it was a very human action especially of a Roman emperor with the absolute power of life and death over all his subjects. Everyone will be judged according to their own particular circumstances, historical, social, mental and emotional. Our God is a just God. The important thing is whether we strive to know ourselves, whether we repent of our errors, whether we struggle to love God and others until the end of our earthly *Lives*.

RTE: Do you think that this kind of doubt is particularly a problem for converts?

DR KOUROUMALI: Certainly not. This is not just a problem for converts; it can happen to any believer. I think it is a sign that we do not yet have correct and deep faith or sufficient love; we ourselves do not know who we are or how to be.

Even in regard to contemporary Greek elders, there are books that are good and books that are not. I know this for a fact when it comes to Elder Porphyrios because my parents happened to have had him as their spiritual father and my mother can still comment, "This person has distorted this particular event" which she had witnessed herself. But this happens everywhere in everyday life, not just in the biographies of elders, and it happens in every kind of writing. Not everyone is as accurate, and although sometimes it is intentional, at other times it is unconscious. Some people are not as observant as others and are incapable of reproducing the exact truth.

I would say to people who are scandalized by some things that saints do or say, that first of all, they have to remember that saints are people. They are not perfect. Many faithful forget that and think that to be a saint you have to be perfect. There is no perfection apart from God. Even the Holy Mother of God had Adam's sin – although apart from that she was perfect. But there has been no other human being who can claim that perfection. It is true that God chooses some people from birth who remain pure, but equally, there are saints such as St. Moses the Ethiopian, who was a murderer and a thief, but is also one of the greatest desert fathers. There are plenty of examples of people who did not live perfectly moral or saintly *Lives*, repenting and becoming saints, including St. Paul.

RTE: What about instances where veneration springs up on faulty evidence, such as the young doctor who died in Athens a few years ago, and whose unbalanced mother began spreading tales to the neighbors after his death. Rumors of his “miracles” quickly went out of control via internet, even in North America, until the priest she claimed had been his spiritual father stepped forward and denied it, and then her whole story unraveled.

DR KOUROUMALI: A very holy spiritual father once told my mother that when we hear of these events, if we do not know whether they are true or not, the best thing is to pray to God. If He chooses to enlighten us, that is fine. If He does not, then perhaps we should not continue to be concerned with that particular occurrence, because there are plenty of other saints who do embody what we need and who we do not doubt. Saints are only helpers in our journey towards God. The focus should always be Christ. We do not need to search endlessly for miracles and extraordinary events to help us in our relationship with Christ.

This is true even when we speak of texts written centuries ago in totally different conditions, when some of these issues were not even being thought about. Contemporary historians criticize those ancient historians negatively because they have not done this or that, but I and some other colleagues keep saying, “But, you know, these authors were not concerned with all the things we today deem important about an event or about the location or the people involved in the events”. For the Byzantines certain things were self-evident and they would not even think to describe them because they would have assumed that everyone knew. If we turn that around, we can think of technological advances in our lifetime that never would have been dreamt of centuries ago. We take them for granted and we do not think to describe them when we write. We also record events differently now, as we mentioned above.

RTE: How would you explain attraction to a certain saint? We want to honor all saints, but most of us honestly feel closer to some than to others.

DR KOUROUMALI: Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of blessed memory used to say that when we feel ourselves drawn to a particular saint it is because, to some extent we have those characteristics of that saint, no matter how undeveloped, and that is why we love or venerate them more. We should just focus on those things that speak to us in each saint’s life, because all

saints are wonderful examples of the grace of God. The saints embody all of the ways in which God manifests Himself in this world, but their *Lives* are not dogma. We do not all have to do what St. Nicholas did, and we do not all have to do what St. Athanasius or St. Mary of Egypt did. All of the saints are there to bear witness to Christ's power, to God's presence in the world, and to encourage us in all of our ways and walks of life. All of these millions of saints who have appeared from the beginning of the world give us examples of what each of us is called to be. All of us who have espoused Orthodoxy are saints in the making. We are called to become shining and true examples of the Likeness of God as we are all made in His Image. And, however distorted the account of their historical existence, every saint is unique. There is no requirement to honor one particular saint over another; we all have our own individual preferences. The only Perfect Person and Example is our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the wealth that the Church has offered us; that we can all find somebody who can give us courage for our own individual circumstances and help us as we struggle to live and grow in Christ. ✦