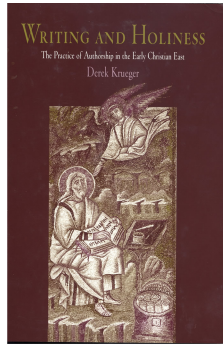


## ○ REVIEW OF DEREK KRUEGER'S *WRITING AND HOLINESS: THE PRACTICE OF AUTHORSHIP IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN EAST*

Katrina Van Heest, Claremont Graduate University  
Correspondence to Katrina Van Heest: [Katrina.VanHeest@cgu.edu](mailto:Katrina.VanHeest@cgu.edu)

Katrina Van Heest reviews *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East*, by Derek Krueger (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).



In *Writing and Holiness*, Derek Krueger makes the case that late antique hagiography constitutes a distinctly Christian literary form, one marked by a novel approach to authorship. In the Christian east of the fourth through seventh centuries, the performance of writing itself became imbued with salvific value, indicating that Christian worship practices were shaped through cultural production. Drawing primarily from Greek texts, Krueger straddles the divide between patristics and social history; his work relies as much upon performance theory as late antique primary texts. Ritual studies, literary theory and textual exegesis are also deftly woven into the fabric of his argument. Texts and figures exemplary of hagiography's many rhetorical strategies form the organisational structure of the book, thus affording Krueger the space to treat his chosen topic in some depth and with sufficient breadth to buttress his wider claims about the emergence of the Christian author in the eastern Mediterranean. He frames hagiographical composition as performance capable of constructing particular forms of identity. He also lays the groundwork for thinking of hagiographical authorship as a kind of scripturalising practice insofar as it is a text-based strategy for socio-cultural formation.

Krueger's first chapter introduces the main concerns of the study: the development of a specifically Christian authorial identity and the formation of ideas about that identity. To grasp the intricacies of the argument, one must shed any notion of authorship as a proprietary right and think of it instead as an act that is socially and culturally freighted. As is evidenced by the texts that Krueger dissects later in the book, authorship began to enjoy a presence in the Christian imaginary as a theologically rife, ritualistically productive and piously legitimate act. Hagiographies were understood to encapsulate the essences of saints, which meant that the texts themselves held authority within Christian social worlds. Throughout *Writing and Holiness*, Krueger calls attention to the paradox of such authorial identity construction: the self born of venerating

subjects who likely derived their spiritually authoritative status from ascetic practices of self-denial. Because ‘authorship included reflection on the writing self’, hagiographers, whose identity was constructed in and through the act of writing, were able to confer authority upon themselves as well as the saints that they memorialised (6).

To transform events and persons into authoritative cultural moments and heroes of holiness, Christian hagiographers imitated the Bible. Krueger here foregrounds Theodoret of Cyrillus’s *Religious History* because it borrowed heavily from scriptures for aesthetic effect. Assuming his readers’ familiarity with biblical typology, Theodoret extended the sheen of biblical literature over his subjects through implicit and explicit referencing. His project seems to be one of unifying history: both bringing his contemporaries into a textually-bounded biblical world and extending the reach of the scriptural realm. In so doing, he positions himself as an author-creator whose work is congruent with that of God. From here, Krueger commences a dissection of late antique representations of the evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – as holy persons. Because the early Christian idea of divine inspiration allowed for human agency, church fathers like Irenaeus and John Chrysostom were captivated by the personalities and circumstances of the evangelists. Their lives and work began to be understood in terms of sacrifice; that writing was menial labor in comparison to the option of dictating ideas to a scribe gave it a paradoxically exalted status. Composition became a route to what Krueger calls ‘valued self-abasement’, conforming to an ascetic, Christian ideal of humility (61).

The next three chapters highlight social roles of hagiography: devotion, asceticism and liturgy; each will be considered in turn. First, collections of miraculous accounts, written almost as advertisements for holy shrines, highlight hagiography’s devotional function. For Krueger, the *Miracles of Artemios* and the *Life and Miracles of Thecla* illustrate the point that a saint’s cultural capital depended upon the texts in much the same way that his or her glorification rested with the ability to perform for devotees. Further, hagiographies are not just records of legendary events and ideas; they are objects of material culture, like relics, that reference the cults of saints. Second, asceticism makes a particularly suitable analogue to the writing of saintly lives in that both signal the creation of controlled selves. In the seventh century, John Moschus and Leontios of Neapolis affirmed that writing actually substituted for bodily asceticism and that text itself can become a virtuous body. Hagiographies exhibit a ‘rhetoric of longed-for humility’, a strategic refashioning of oneself achieved vicariously by association with holy lifestyles (98). In shows of debasement, hagiographers disclaimed their writing abilities and ascribed any authorial success to God. Such posturing represents an attempt to circumvent the problem of publication, whereby a writer may appear hungry for fame and glory. Clearly, such a desire would destabilise the performance of selflessness at the center of asceticism. Third, hagiography is liturgical in the sense that narrative lends itself to performative revisitation, allowing the ritualistic re-membering of saints and promising spiritual gain. For instance, in the *Life of Macrina*, Gregory’s ‘liturgical theology of authorship’ converts troubling emotions about the loss of a sister into spiritually gratifying narrative (110). Like the Eucharist, a saint’s written vita is suitable for dissemination and replication. Hence, written work makes permanent that which is fleeting in time and space. Krueger connects this function of early Christian literature with the politics of imitation: just as the human figure of Christ embodies the earthly mark of the otherwise ephemeral divine, hagiography makes tangible and fixed the past lives of holy persons.

The Platonic dichotomy of the ideal and the material permeates the ascetic impulse, and as the biographers of ascetics, hagiographers found that they must contend with this tension as well. Their written representations of saintly virtue transformed the valued piety of the saint into a body of words, problematic because it concretised a life that strove to transcend embodiment. But the text's ability to inspire others – either to adopt an ascetic orientation or to venerate those who have – rescues hagiography from its materiality. By positioning scripture as a guide for principled behavior, the *Life of Synclitica* resolves the tension between writing and bodily performance. On the other hand, *The Teaching of Addai*, another fifth-century text, posits that the body records the soul's deeds. Such symbolism renders people *as* texts; this rhetorical move manages the dichotomous relationship between text and body by collapsing them. In his subsequent chapter, Krueger presents Romanos the Melodist as one who exemplifies the extension of that logic: he used acrostics to insert his name into his scripturally imitative poems, thus becoming the writer and the literary production.

A central thesis of *Writing and Holiness* holds that concepts of Christian authorship developed precisely as avenues for gaining spiritual authority were increasingly tied to controlled Christian selves. As evidenced by the rise of monasticism and the pervasiveness of ascetic morality, the problematics of embodiment deeply concerned late antique Christian society. Krueger interprets the act of writing saintly lives as an innovative way of conceiving of and reflecting upon troubling relationships between body and mind. His proposal leads me to consider the psycho-social grounds and ramifications of hagiography as a text-based response to a collective crisis. The deployment of what we call 'scripture' is a strategy – evidenced in a strikingly wide range of societies – to resolve communal anxieties, and this study appropriately dissects the ways in which hagiographers borrowed from and built upon scriptural reserves to assuage cultural unease. But Krueger's work also demonstrates that because hagiography arose as a distinct genre that supplemented 'scriptures', it situated authors as a new spiritual elite. I would be interested in Krueger's account of the social and political conditions that prompted the rise of a new authoritative class. Christian communities must have been struggling to find their centers and in need of effective authorities (texts and persons). It seems that hagiography, attended by the construction of Christian authorship, may stand as an example of a scripturalising practice quite connected to the societal needs that it addresses – and one that holds much promise for further inquiry into the politics of religious writing. Because Krueger properly spotlights textual production and social formation as mutually reinforcing phenomena, *Writing and Holiness* makes for a provocative read for all of those committed to critical historiography and the academic engagement of 'scriptures' – canonical and otherwise.