

5-3-2019

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

Blechle, Alexander. 2019. Macrina The Younger: A Silent Prophet. *Obsculta* 12, (1) : 108-114.
<https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol12/iss1/10>.

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MACRINA THE YOUNGER:

A Silent Prophet

Macrina the Younger has been recorded as one of the most influential Christian women in 4th century Cappadocia. Her life, and much of what we know of Macrina, was written by her brother Gregory of Nyssa and was recorded in *Vita Sanctae Macrinae*.¹ Modernity does not have a recorded letter that Macrina penned, but this does not mean Macrina has nothing to say. Macrina the Younger should be regarded as a 4th century prophet, whose story contains nuanced, but evident literary parallels with the recorded stories of Christ Jesus.² This hermeneutical approach to the *LSM* illuminates the significance of Macrina the Younger's life. Although her story is certainly embellished by her brother Gregory, nothing should be detracted from the character of Macrina. The *LSM* should not be regarded as an historical account, though it may contain some historicity.³ Gregory records her entire life on earth from birth until death in the *LSM*.

Macrina was given two names according to her brother Gregory. She was given the name of Macrina, after her grandmother, Macrina the Elder, who was a martyr in the Church (*LSM*, 22). Her second name was Thekla, and it was given to her mother, Emmelia, in a dream. Gregory believed that her second foreshadowed the young girls' future vocation (*LSM*, 22-23). Christ was also given two names, and one of his names was given to his mother in a dream. The angel instructed the virgin Mother Mary to give Jesus the name Emmanuel, which means "God with us" (Luke 1:26-38). Similar to Macrina, Christ's alternative name was not commonly used, but spoke volumes about his future ministry and vocation. The obvious distinction is that Macrina's birth did not fulfill an ancient prophecy found in the Old Testament.

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- 1 References to the *VSM* will be done through an English translation, which is entitled, *The Life of Saint Macrina*. It will be abbreviated as *LSM* in this paper.
 - 2 It should be clear that this is not the only lens to interpret the story of Macrina. There are many socio-economic, literary, and linguistic factors that could also influence the interpretation of the text.
 - 3 Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008) 103-104.

Macrina the Younger fulfills her prophetic office in an inspiring manner. Walter Brueggemann has an excellent perspective on the role of prophets, which he records in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*. “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”⁴ After evaluating what is known about the life of Macrina, her lifestyle coincides with Brueggemann’s definition on the role of prophets. She expresses a criticism of the dominant consciousness of her time with her choice of being a virgin, insistence on equality, self-imposed poverty, and her familial role in her own nuclear family.⁵

Virginity plays a crucial role in the life of Macrina. Gregory sets up the enormity of her decision by insisting upon her beauty (*LSM*, 24). Gregory is reinforcing the fact that her choice of virginity was her own; In a time when marriage would have been the cultural norm, she did not lack suitors or the ability to find a husband. In fact, at one point in her life, Macrina was betrothed to a man (*LSM*, 24). After he died, Macrina insisted she would never consider marriage again, because she did not want to commit digamy, which was unpopular in the Church. Macrina insisted that he still lived on, because of the hope of the resurrection (*LSM*, 25). Her decision on following the Church’s preference on digamy helped solidify her commitment to be a life-long virgin.⁶ Macrina’s virginity was countercultural, but the role she played in the community which she would establish would be even more countercultural.

After all the children in Macrina’s family had grown up, Macrina convinced her mother to live in equality with her servants (*LSM*, 26-27). This is a criticism of the dominant consciousness, because Macrina’s family was very wealthy. Regardless, Macrina and her mother

4 Walter Brueggemann. *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 3.

5 To understand the role and status of women, especially widows, in early Roman antiquity, see: Mathew Kuefler. “The Merry Widows of Late Roman Antiquity: The Evidence of the Theodosian Code.” *Gender & History* 27, no. 1 (April 2015): 29.

6 Silvas, 30.

gave up their possessions and lived a life of community (LSM, 48). This proto-monastic community would eventually flourish, and become two monastic communities of men and women during the life of Macrina.⁷ Sharing possessions was also a sign that Macrina and her family no longer had possessions, which was contrary to her upbringing. Gregory, probably embellishing, brings to light the level of Macrina's poverty while he is preparing her funeral. When preparing for Macrina's funeral, he asks for one of Macrina's cloaks to cover her body. He was informed that she did not own a single piece of clothing, other than what she died wearing (LSM, 46). Raymond Van Dam brings to light the grand statement Gregory is making about his sister, "Despite the presence of these extensive production facilities, in Cappadocia nevertheless often risked being inadequately clothed. Basil repeatedly insisted that the poor included many 'naked' people, and that the failure to clothe a naked man was similar to the outright theft of a garment."⁸ Macrina's explicit poverty was a symbol of her speaking out against the dominant consciousness that power lies with money. Macrina denied herself her inheritance, and put the community and the Church before all else (LSM, 38). She even led a peculiar role in her nuclear family.

The LSM records Macrina as having a unique relationship with her youngest brother Peter. "She became everything for the child, father teacher, guide, mother, counsellor in every good..." (LSM, 31). Macrina became everything to the boy, father in the place of his deceased father, and mother because of her role as the matriarch of the family. Macrina took the role of matriarch from her mother, when they decided to live in community. Van Dam has an excellent point about Macrina's role, especially as her mother's mentor.⁹ Though debated, Silvas argues that Basil would have certainly learned about the aesthetic life from Macrina. She writes, "Macrina's trajectory as a virgin aesthetic, a teacher, and a spiritual mother pre-empted, inspired, and illustrated the maturation

7 Silvas, 45.

8 Gregory Van Dam, *The Kingdom of Snow: Roman Rule and Greek Culture in Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2002) 41.

9 Gregory Van Dam, *Families and Friends In Late Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2003) 99.

of Basil's own cenobitic teaching. She was the mother and preceptress of that monasticism that has come down under Basil's name."¹⁰ Her expertise as a philosopher¹¹ was autonomous from her brothers, and she influenced Basil and his brothers greatly. Gregory also records the influence that Macrina has on Basil, believing that Macrina reordered the trajectory of his life by winning him to the ideals of philosophy, which would in turn make him famous (*LSM*, 26).

Gregory also painted his sister's persona as being larger than life. Although this is not explicitly prophetic, Macrina's presentation parallels biblical languages and shares a certain nuanced continuity with other Christian writings. Gregory presents the superiority of his sister's life when comparing Macrina with his mother. Upon hearing the news of her brother, Naucratius, death, Emmelia is so moved, even though she was perfect in virtue, that she fainted, while Macrina stayed strong (*LSM*, 28). Gregory is obviously pitting Macrina's superiority as a virgin, against her mother, who was unable to stay a virgin (*LSM*, 22). Macrina's virginity set her apart from her mother, even though they were both perfect in virtue. Later, upon hearing of the death of Basil, Macrina was once again strong, almost inhuman in her way of handling the news (*LSM*, 33). Gregory also records a powerful statement about Macrina in his 19th letter, "We had a sister who was for us a teacher of how to live, a mother in place of our mother."¹² Macrina was the ultimate embodiment of a superior woman and of matriarchy.

The Life of Macrina shares another strong parallel with that of Jesus Christ. Gregory records a rather bizarre healing story, in which Macrina heals herself of an ailment, which many hypothesize to be breast cancer. Gregory writes, "she went into the sanctuary and remained there all night long prostrate before the God of healing, weeping a flood of tears to moisten the earth, and she sued the mud from her tears as a salved to put on the effected place" (*LSM*, 48). Christ Jesus heals a blind man

10 Silvas, 48.

11 For an explanation of "philosopher" in the context of 4th century Cappadocia, see: Silvas, 164-167.

12 Gregory of Nyssa, Letter 19. As recorded in: Silvas, 87.

in a similar way, mixing his saliva with mud in John 9:1-12. Gregory also uses Macrina's healing story to demonstrate her modesty; she was unwilling to let any physician look at her ailment, but believed God was sufficient. Her healing was not as holistic as Christ's, though, because she was left with a mark (*LSM*, 44).

Gregory seems to mimic the literary elements of biblical texts in two other places in *The Life of Macrina*. Firstly, both Macrina and her mother Emmelia seem to decide their own deaths after being deep in prayer with God (*LSM* 32 & 43). Christ behaves similarly upon the cross, according to the Gospel account found in John 19:30.¹³ Gregory also gives an explicit explanation for the reason of his writing about the life of his sister, which resonates strongly with the redacted epilogue of John. Gregory writes, "... I have declined to make a complete record here of the greater miracles, since I think that what I have already said is sufficient to complete Macrina's story" (*LSM*, 54; c.f. John 21:25).

Macrina the Younger was a spiritual force of nature, according to the testimony of Gregory of Nyssa. Although her story may be embellished, her prophetic disposition and pastoral qualities, coupled with her nuanced literary parallels to Christ are both inspiring and edifying to modern ears. Many authors suggest that Macrina should be regarded as the fourth Cappadocian father. Regardless of her title, Macrina has greatly influenced Christianity through her role as a prophet, monastic leader, mother, father, teacher, and philosopher.



13 C.f. Luke 23:46 and Matthew 27:50.

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