the term "divine" was appropriate. But "divine" was a much-abused term. Comparison of the biographies devoted to these divine philosophers shows that there were two major types of divinity ascribed to philosophers. To call Pythagoras or Apollonius divine was to suggest that he was a son of god, possessed of miraculous, prophetic, and intellectual powers far beyond human capacity. To call Origen or Plotinus divine was to suggest that he was an especially gifted man, blessed by God, whose status was achieved by the purity and steadfastness of his devotion to philosophical tradition and to the reasoning faculty. It is apparent that there were two very different conceptions of a philosopher's holiness, and when these conceptions were applied in biographies, two different kinds of characterizations emerged. In biographies of sons of god, we have not an idealized account of the life of an historical personality, but impressions of a powerful, personal presence remembered and amplified through time. In biographies of godlike philosophers, in contrast, we have idealized accounts of men whose historical identity was at least partially protected by the survival of their written works in the very scholastic circles of which their biographers were a part.

CHAPTER THREE

# Literary Aspects of Biography

Biographies of holy philosophers were creative historical works, promoting models of philosophical divinity and imposing them on historical figures thought to be worthy of such idealization. The stereotypical traits that the biographies used to develop the models—in other words, the contents of the texts—were discussed in the preceding chapter, but an adequate understanding of these texts calls for an explication of their literary form also. Scholarship devoted to a literary analysis of biographies of Graeco-Roman holy men has focused primarily on attempts to define a genre that these biographies represent.[1] Unfortunately, the literary heritage bequeathed to Graeco-Roman authors by classical and Hellenistic authors has been largely neglected in this search for genre, since the search has concentrated on later biographies primarily to determine whether they are later representatives of a genre within which the gospels might be placed. For the most part, these discussions of genre have dealt with content, that is, with recurring details in biographies of divine men, and the question of form has been either neglected or assumed to be identical with content. Clearly form and content are closely connected, and neither can be discussed fruitfully in isolation. However, scholars have been so preoccupied with determining the provenance of materials about the divine man and with tracing the amazing proliferation of traditions that they have attempted to impose organizing patterns on the traditions concerning the *theios anēr* (holy man) without really considering the structural elements of the supposed literary form itself. If the question of literary form, and its function, is to be addressed

1. Older studies include Richard Reitzenstein, *Hellenistische Wundererzählungen* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1906); A. Priessnig, "Die biographische Form der Plotinvita des Porphyrios und das Antoniosleben des Athanasios," *Byz. Zeitschr.* 64 (1971): 1–5; and idem, "Die literarische Form der Spätantiken Philosophenromane," *Byz. Zeitschr.* 30 (1929): 23–30. For a list of more recent studies see ch. 1, n. 1.

seriously, a referent more stable than fluctuating details of content must be established. Scholars will undoubtedly produce more and more verifying examples to increase the number and complexity of Morton Smith's "mob" of divine or deified men.[2] What is needed, however, to clarify the genre discussions is not simple verification of the "divine man" phenomenon but a consideration of the ordering principles that governed the use of these traditions in full-fledged biographies.

Much of the recent scholarship devoted to generic discussions of such Graeco-Roman biographies represents a revival of the early twentieth-century search for literary precedents to the gospels.[3] Both the old and the new quests have looked for a Hellenistic genre that would elucidate the form (and to a great extent the contents) of the gospels. Briefly stated, the focus of scholars engaged in this quest has been on ancient collections of miracles, which they have hypothesized into a literary genre termed *aretalogy*. This supposed genre has been extended to include any story of a man to whom marvelous activities or capacities were attributed. The basic problem in aretalogy research is the attempt to substantiate the claim for the existence early in the Hellenistic period of a literary form that follows a fixed pattern for the life of a holy or supernaturally gifted man.

The use of the term aretalogy to describe lives of holy men written in the Imperial era is derived ultimately from the work of Salomon Reinach,[4] whose aim was to provide a corrective to the usual definition by lexicographers of *aretalogos* as a buffoon or joking philosopher who told quasi-intellectual or fabulous stories at banquets of the rich.[5] This conception of how the *aretalogos* functioned in antiquity was derived from its use by Suetonius *Augustus* 74, where dinner guests are entertained by such a person, and by Juvenal *Satires* 15.13ff., where Odysseus is described as a "lying *aretalogus*" presumably because of the tall-tale quality of his accounts of his adventures. The importance of Reinach's study was his discussion of an inscription found at Delos that linked the *aretalogos* with the oneirokritēs, an interpreter of dreams.[6] Reinach suggested that the *aretalogos* was, like

2. Smith, "Prolegomena to a Discussion of Aretalogies, Divine Men, the Gospels, and Jesus," *JBL* 90 (June 1971): 184.
3. Representatives of the earlier search are listed and discussed in ibid., pp. 188–92.
4. Salomon Reinach, "Les Arétalogues dans l'Antiquité," *Bulletin de correspondence hellénique* 9 (1885): 257–65.
5. Ibid., p. 258. See also Kee, "Aretalogy and Gospel," *JBL* 92 (September 1973): 403.
6. Reinach, "Les Arétalogues dans l'Antiquité," p. 260.



the dream interpreter, a functionary associated with temple cults who recited or interpreted the acts of a god.[7] This suggestion was strengthened by Reinach's complex semantic discussion that proved that *aretē*, virtue, could also mean "miracle" if it referred to the beneficent acts of a divinity toward mankind.[8] The *aretalogos* could thus be defined as one who interpreted or recited the miraculous deeds of a god, and his recitation, the *aretalogia*, could be defined as the narration of these divine acts.[9] Reinach's conclusions have been accepted by modern scholars, but the definition of the *aretalogia* has been vastly extended. Aretalogies properly so called, like the Isis aretalogy,[10] were recitations of the virtuous and miraculous acts of a divinity, but the term was used as early as the work of Reitzenstein in *Hellenistische Wundererzählungen* (1906) to include biographies of holy men written in late Roman antiquity.

This extension of the term aretalogy to include biographies of men whose lives are characterized by marvelous deeds and superhuman qualities is problematic for several reasons. First, there is no suggestion in any ancient source that an aretalogy was ever written to divinize a human being. Aretalogies were simply catalogs of the *aretai* of a specific god.[11] Second, even if the notion of aretalogy is broadened to include lives of divine men, it is impossible to define a stable pattern that the life of the holy man follows. In his essay, Moses Hadas offers this definition of aretalogy: "a formal account of the remarkable career of an impressive teacher that was used as a basis for moral instruction. The preternatural gifts of the teacher often included power to work wonders; often his teaching brought him the hostility of a tyrant, whom he confronted with courage and at whose hands he suffered martyrdom. Often circumstances of his birth or his death involve elements of the miraculous."[12] Hadas admits that none of the first aretalogies have survived, but he asserts that Plato's *Apology* for Socrates was both a "catalyst" and a "paradigm" for aretalogy, and he thinks its form is implicit in the parody of the *theios anēr*, *Alexander the False Prophet*, written

7. Ibid., pp. 260–61.
8. Ibid., pp. 261–64.
9. Ibid., p. 264. See also Kee, "Aretalogy and Gospel," pp. 403–404.
10. See the discussion by Smith, "Prolegomena to a Discussion of Aretalogies, Divine Men, the Gospels, and Jesus," p. 175 and n. 10 for bibliography.
11. Kee, "Aretalogy and Gospel," pp. 402–404.
12. Moses Hadas and Morton Smith, *Heroes and Gods: Spiritual Biographies in Antiquity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 3.

by Lucian of Samosata in the second century A.D.[13] Though he attempts to find a literary analogy in martyr literature, Hadas does not really specify the literary elements of the "form" of aretalogy. Rather, his argument shifts its focus to the hero on whom aretalogy concentrates, and he cites Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* as the only example of "the pattern in all its details."[14] However, a comparison of this *Life* to the pattern Hadas defines ("towering intellect," "wonderful works," "persecution by a tyrant," and "glorious martyrdom") shows that even his prime example does not quite fit: there is no martyrdom of Apollonius.

In his "Prolegomena" article, Morton Smith attempts a modified definition of aretalogy: "it is a literary form which has no precise formal definition but is determined by its content; it must have a hero whom it celebrates, by reporting one or more of his miraculous deeds."[15] Smith recognizes that the characteristics of the *theios anēr* were often identical to those of Graeco-Roman gods, and remarks on the difficulty of establishing "specific influences and relationships between stories of different holy men, since similar elements may always have come, not from another example of the pattern but from the general religious and intellectual milieu."[16] Yet he still attempts to use miracles as signals to identify both the form and the content.[17] If, as Smith notes, "Graeco-Roman antiquity knew many holy men of many different patterns," thus confronting us with a "mob of divine or deified men of many varieties,"[18] how are we to account for these biographies of divine men, from the gospels to later pagan and Christian *Lives*?

First, that older traditions on miracles existed does not tell us anything about the biographies into which they were incorporated; nor can the motif of the miraculous be equated with the concept of the divine man. As Kee points out in his critique of the aretalogy thesis, "the aim of a miracle story is a function of the use to which the story is put rather than something that

13. Ibid., pp. 17, 58, 63.
14. Ibid., pp. 71–72, 94.
15. Smith, "Prolegomena to a Discussion of Aretalogies, Divine Men, the Gospels, and Jesus," p. 196.
16. Ibid., pp. 186–87.
17. See the similar argument by Helmut Koester, "One Jesus," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 231, who also presupposes the existence of aretalogy prior to the gospels. The miracle stories are important because in them "Jesus appears as a man endowed with divine power who performs miracles to prove his divine quality and character."
18. Smith, "Prolegomena to a Discussion of Aretalogies, Divine Men, the Gospels, and Jesus," pp. 181, 184.



inheres in the miracle story as such."[19] Nor can any of the other common motifs, such as the conflict with established authority, be singled out as the organizing concept in biographies of the divine man. There are many motifs, and the authors of the biographies have used them selectively. Further, these biographies often use formally similar material to serve very different purposes. Different authors have adapted related motifs and styles for their own philosophical or theological ends.[20] One cannot isolate a single set of motifs, as proponents of aretalogy have done with miracle stories, and assume that this set defines the structure of texts that happen to include some of those motifs. In fact we have seen in the previous chapter that a biography of a holy man does not even need miracles to qualify as a member of the genre. It is simply not possible to define a stable literary pattern that such biographies follow if features of the textual content are taken as the organizing or ordering principles. The idea of an aretalogical form based on a textual motif creates a distorted view of the divine philosopher, a figure that cannot be defined by only one character trait; further, it ignores the question of true generic form by focusing only on the texts' descriptive contents.

While the most recent scholars concerned with aretalogy have pointed to the miracle story as the heart of Graeco-Roman biographies of holy men, an older generation of scholars adopted a much broader working definition of aretalogy. Reitzenstein found that biographies of holy men were organized around series of *praxeis*, collections of the hero's activities and sayings, that had no inner connection in the biography apart from the narrative setting provided by the author.[21] From his discussions of several biographies, it appears that Reitzenstein conceived of an aretalogy as a thematic assemblage of a man's deeds and speeches, always with an accent on the extraordinary or the supernatural. Thus he surmised that Apollonius' *Life of Pythagoras* (as reconstructed from Porphyry's and Iamblichus' *Lives*) was composed of material taken from a prophet aretalogy, a miracle aretalogy, and a voyage aretalogy.[22] Similarly, Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* was built up from a collection of the public works of Apollonius, which had been combined with travel and miracle aretalogies.[23]

19. Kee, "Aretalogy and Gospel," p. 412.
20. Examples are given by ibid., pp. 412–16.
21. Reitzenstein, *Hellenistische Wundererzählungen*, p. 97.
22. Ibid., p. 39.
23. Ibid., pp. 40–41.

Reitzenstein's source-critical use of the concept of aretalogy was developed in greater detail by Anton Priessnig.[24] He agreed with Reitzenstein that the only real limit in biography writing was the biographer's imagination, but he found that the author's literary art was usually not successful in erasing traces of his sources.[25] Again like Reitzenstein, Priessnig conceived of the sources as collections of legends or popular stories, which he called aretalogies because of the exaggerated quality of the individual tales. Analyzing Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*, he isolated three major types of aretalogy: the voyage aretalogy, which provided material for the numerous travel stories and which accounts for the formal structure of the biography; the miracle aretalogy, which Priessnig called an "unvaried mass" of miracles that included prophecies, healings, exorcisms, oracles, and revelations; the sermon aretalogy, which accounts for the discourses ("formal aretalogical excurses") that do less to characterize the hero than to provide information about such varied fields as aesthetics, natural history, and mythology. When these three kinds of aretalogy are combined in a single biography, the result is what Priessnig has variously called a mission aretalogy or a philosophical-religious instruction biography ("eine philosophisch-religiöse Belehrungsbiographie").[26] Other biographies from Late Antiquity are analyzed according to the same schema.[27] They are all, for Priessnig, biographies of philosophical-religious instruction, and his aretalogical classifications are intended as proof of his thesis that in biographies of this type the life history of the hero is simply a device, "a form of literary clothing," that facilitates explanations of particular philosophical world views.[28]

It is clear that Reitzenstein's and Priessnig's idea of aretalogy is more inclusive than the miracle-oriented conception of more recent scholars, but their discussions have only a limited usefulness for the questions of genre and literary form. Their value lies in their demonstration that several kinds of stories were basic to the makeup of Graeco-Roman biographies of holy men, and that it was the biographers' literary art and philosophical bias,

24. Priessnig, "Die literarische Form der Spätantiken Philosophenromane," pp. 23–30; idem, "Die biographische Form der Plotinvita des Porphyrios und das Antoniosleben des Athanasios," pp. 1–5.
25. Priessnig, "Die literarische Form der Spätantiken Philosophenromane," p. 25.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., pp. 26–27, Iamblichus' *Vita Pythagorica*; p. 28, Porphyry's *Vita Pythagorae*; idem, "Die biographische Form der Plotinvita," pp. 1–2, Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*.
28. Priessnig, "Die literarische Form der Spätantiken Philosophenromane," pp. 26–27.



rather than the literary elements themselves, that accounted for the finished literary product. Like recent scholarly work on biography, however, Reitzenstein's and Priessnig's analyses were really directed toward discovery of sources rather than to a consideration of the structure of the literary form. For example, Priessnig's description of the inner movement of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* as dependent upon the voyage motif[29] is not a sufficient comment on literary form; it does not do justice to the biography as a carefully crafted literary work. Also, the notion of aretalogy, even when expanded, has again led to concentration on the texts' contents rather than on their form—even though Priessnig claims to be discussing form.

Priessnig's remarks are more pertinent to literary form when he applies the structural theories of Friedrich Leo to biographies of holy men. Leo had arranged biographies into two types. The first, represented by Plutarch, was a chronological narration of those deeds and events that most clearly shaped and illustrated a man's character. The second, represented by Suetonius, was divided into two parts: a brief historical resumé, followed by a topical study consisting largely of systematic characterizations, each of which could range over the whole career to the neglect of chronological development. In Leo's view, the Plutarchian form was more subtle, since it drew the reader to make judgments about character based on the orderly narration of the hero's deeds. The Suetonian form, however, was more revealing of the biographer's own judgment on his subject, since the assessment of personality could come independently of, or in spite of, the character's actions.[30] As presented by Leo and adopted by Priessnig, this method of distinguishing between different biographical structures is very neat—so neat, in fact, that it breaks down immediately when Priessnig attempts to apply it to biographies of holy men.

Leo's clear distinctions seem to have suggested to Priessnig that there was such a thing as a "pure" *Life* which depicted only the hero's "Lebensgeschicke."[31] Thus he finds again and again that the Suetonian or the Plu-

29. Ibid., p. 25. He was not alone in this assumption. See Kee, "Aretalogy and Gospel," p. 406: "The *Life* [of Apollonius] reads like a combination of a travelogue and a compendium of popular philosophy." Ibid., p. 407: "The form of the *Life* is loose and unstructured, however, and reads like a cross between a Fodor travel guide and an extended version of a *Reader's Digest* 'Unforgettable Character' essay."
30. Leo, *Die Griechisch-Römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1901), pp. 147–48, 179–85 on Plutarch; pp. 131–44, 179, 187 on Suetonius.
31. Priessnig, "Die literarische Form der Spätantiken Philosophenromane," p. 26.

tarchian structures have been cluttered or obscured by the addition of "panegyrical schemas" and philosophical propaganda. Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*, for example, had a "formal" (structural) organization whose "model was the peripatetic-Plutarchian schema with a chronological arrangement of acts and numerous short, characterizing remarks." But the model has been corrupted by the addition of frequent learned discourses that, according to Priessnig, have little to do with the process of biographical characterization.[32] The Pythagoras biographies by Porphyry and Iamblichus both follow a Suetonian model, but in both, the form has been interrupted by the addition of philosophical passages having more to do with Porphyry and Iamblichus than with Pythagoras. This is especially true of Iamblichus' biography, in which nearly half the total length is devoted to the virtues of Pythagoras' students.[33]

There is something to be said for the distinctions that Priessnig draws with respect to Porphyry's biography of Pythagoras, which does have fairly distinct sections, one dealing with events in the life and the other with topical treatments of virtues, daily life in the Pythagorean community, and so on.[34] But there are no such clear-cut sections in Iamblichus' biography, which freely intersperses sections on Pythagoras' life with sections on his philosophy and virtues. And Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* is hardly what one would expect in a Plutarchian structure, for the chronological order is vague and the reader, far from being allowed to judge character from an orderly presentation of the hero's deeds, is informed in the very beginning of the narrative that the point of the biography is to demonstrate both the hero's practice of true wisdom and his divine nature.[35]

The impetus for Priessnig's determination to find the Suetonian form still flourishing in the Pythagorean *Lives* of Late Antiquity becomes clear in his second article,[36] which is based on his earlier study. Here he discusses Athanasius' *Life of Antony* in connection with the biographies of Pythagoras

32. Ibid., p. 25.
33. Ibid., pp. 26–28.
34. Porphyry's *Vita Pythagorae* deals with events (though not in any recognizable chronological order) of Pythagoras' life in sections 1–29. Beginning with section 30, there are topical treatments of Pythagoras' interaction with his disciples, accounts of his daily life, and long sections describing the Pythagorean symbolic teachings. The *vita* ends (54–59) with an account of the plot that dispersed the community and led to Pythagoras' death.
35. Philostratus *Vita Apollonii* 1.2.
36. Priessnig, "Die biographische Form der Plotinvita," pp. 1–4.



and Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* (also Suetonian in form) and finds that Athanasius' work, like its predecessors, has by its use of the form been able to depict the life of the hero as a step-by-step ascent to full virtue. The historical section chronicles the ascent, and the topical section illustrates the glory achieved by the hero.[37] Athanasius' biography is, however, superior to the others in form because it is not interrupted by long philosophical sections but concentrates entirely on the personal development of Anthony. Priessnig's point is that Christian hagiography had its roots in pagan, especially Neopythagorean, biography, taking from it the *praxeis* (history)/*ēthos* (virtue) structure and using it in a more concise manner to depict spiritual development.[38] While I agree that Athanasius may very well have been influenced by earlier biographies in his own writing and that his *Life of Antony* is divided into two distinct sections,[39] I cannot agree with Priessnig's treatment of earlier biographies. On the one hand, the form he imposes on those biographies doesn't quite fit, and the idea of "ascent" is certainly erroneous. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the heroes of biographies of holy men do not change in any way as their stories unfold. That they have reached the pinnacle of glory is evident from the beginning of their biographies, and the stories in the narrative serve to document their multifaceted perfection. To claim that these biographies show development of character is to miss one of the major dynamics involved in their composition, the portrayal of a man's character according to a preconceived ideal. On the other hand, comparison of Athanasius' *Life of Antony* with earlier biographies fails to take into account the social and religious conditions that

37. Ibid., pp. 3–4.
38. Ibid., p. 4.
39. A. J. Festugière, "Sur une nouvelle édition du *De Vita Pythagorica* de Iamblique," *Rev. Ét. Grec.* 50 (1937):472, and Richard Reitzenstein, "Des Athanasius Werk über das Leben Antonius," *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften* 8 (1914):26–27, both emphasize the *praxeis–ēthos* form, which, according to Festugière, became the "classic model of hagiographical composition." But Festugière (p. 471) and Reitzenstein (*Hellenistische Wundererzählungen*, p. 97) claim that in earlier biographies there is no "inner" or spiritual development of the hero. For them the earlier biographies—aretalogies—are simply series of acts in the hero's life, from birth to death, which, far from forming a picture of character development or spiritual ascent,are connected only by formal transitions ("one day," "another source reports," etc.). See, however, Karl Holl, "Die schriftstellerische Form des griechischen Heiligenlebens," *Neue Jahrbucher für Klassische Altertum* 29 (1912):413, 424–26, who states like Priessnig that aretalogies do show character development. But he was also arguing backwards from his convictions about Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*.

developed after Christianity's official Imperial recognition. Unlike Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Eusebius, Athanasius had no need to adopt an ideal of character whose appeal extended beyond sectarian boundaries. His biography, written for the Christian community, was a "sinner-to-saint" tale devoted precisely to a demonstration that development, spiritual ascent, was possible—possible, in fact, for "everyman."[40] Priessnig was correct to point to the motif of ascent in the *Life of Antony*, but his eagerness to find Athanasius' antecedents in earlier biographies led him to an incorrect view of their structure and aim.

The foregoing studies of biographies of holy philosophers shared a single approach. Both were interested in those biographies as stepping stones to, or models of, other literary phenomena. One type of study had a definition of the genre of the gospels as its goal; the other aimed at unearthing the antecedents of Christian hagiography. An alternative to those studies is one that considers the biography of the holy man as a literary phenomenon in its own right, although this does not mean that it should be discussed in isolated fashion. This type of biography should be treated as a stage in the history of Graeco-Roman biography, sharing certain features of that genre but also containing new ones that mark it as a unique part of the biographical tradition.

As the discussion of Priessnig's articles showed, the structures that Leo developed to characterize Suetonian and Plutarchian biography do not apply to our group of biographies. The composition of the latter does not lend itself to that kind of schematic analysis, which did not develop a conception of genre sufficient to account both for the continuity and the flexibility of the biographical medium. In order to define the genre of Graeco-Roman biography, we must abandon the notion that an intricate, standard biographical form was developed and passed on through the centuries. Attempts to discern a formal biographical pattern have failed because the biographies do not fit the abstract formulations. Analysis along formal

40. Note that in the monastic context of Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*, "everyman" appears to be first of all the monk. In section 94, he says, "Read these words to the brethren that they may learn what the life of the monks ought to be. . . ." A few sentences later, perhaps as an apologetic afterthought, he adds, "And if need be, read this among the heathen. . . ." For a discussion of the essentially Christian context of Athanasius' biography of Anthony, see Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh, *Early Arianism—A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).



structural lines would eventuate in a "genre" for each biography, certainly a defeat of the effort to reach an encompassing definition. In fact, the only structural statement one can make to characterize the genre as a whole is a very simple one: the Graeco-Roman biography of the holy man is a narrative that relates incidents in the life of its subject from birth or youth to death. The hero's activities provide points of reference for the insertion of material not always related in an obvious way to the narrative's presumed biographical purpose.

This structural definition provides at best only a skeletal sketch of the genre, although it is broad enough to provide a basis for associating several literary works while allowing for individual variations. But form, or structure, is only one aspect of genre, and thus should not be equated with it. Genre is a broader concept, best defined as an association of qualities that are standard features of the works under consideration.[41] In other words, genre is a "cluster of defining traits" that both shapes and distinguishes one group of literary works from another.[42] These traits, or qualities, include structure, formal literary units, sources, types of characterization and motifs, as well as social setting and the author's attitude and intention.[43]

The structural framework of ancient biography was, as we have seen, quite uncomplicated, resting simply on an account of events in a man's life. In our group of biographies of holy men, chronology did not play a very important part in determining the placement of events. Although the authors did give some indication of times for the births and deaths of their subjects,[44] they relied on only the vaguest chronological notices to provide narrative transitions from one event to the next. Such transitional devices as "once," "when," "after this," "it is reported that," and the like, abound in

41. R. S. Crane, *Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 8, and Alastair Fowler, "The Life and Death of Literary Forms," *New Literary History* 2 (1971): 202, both discussed by William Doty, "The Concept of Genre in Literary Analysis," in *Working Papers of the Task-Group on the Genre of the Gospels* (Missoula, Montana: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972), pp. 34–35.

42. Doty, "Concept of the Genre," p. 37.

43. Ibid., pp. 36, 55–56.

44. For example, in *Vita Pythagorae* 1–2, Porphyry does not give an exact date for the birth of Pythagoras, but at least an "era," if not a specific year, could be inferred from his discussion of patrimony. Similarly, the date of his death could be inferred from Porphyry's discussion of the persecution of the Pythagorean community by Cylo of Croton in sections 54–57. Porphyry gives more specific dates in his *Vita Plotini* 2: birth came "in the thirteenth year of the reign of Severus"; death in "the end of the second year of the reign of Claudius."

these biographies. Often there is no attempt at all to provide chronological links between events, the authors having been content, apparently, to set down bare lists of the hero's activities, unadorned by contextual setting.[45] The absence of a detailed, progressive chronological framework is, however, a significant feature of these biographies, because it divorces the portrayal of character from dependence on the historical minutiae of the hero's development.

As Leo showed in his *Die Griechisch-Römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form*, ancient biographers generally chose one of two modes for ordering their material: the chronological mode, which involved reporting events in the hero's career in the order of their occurrence, and the topical mode, which ignored the sequence of time and used instead a systematic arrangement of events designed to illustrate various facets of the hero's character. The choice of one of these methods made a significant difference in the way the *akmē*, the productive, creative period in the hero's life, was portrayed.[46] Chronological biographers like Plutarch were dependent upon historical order, and for that reason their judgments about *akmē* had to be tied to specific actions in the hero's career. Further, dependence on history led to a rather straightforward tracing of the life and hence to the convention of placing the *akmē* somewhere in the mature, "career" portion of the hero's life.[47]

Topical biographers were not dependent upon this kind of historical view and so did not portray their heroes' lives as a succession of events that gradually unfolded to bloom in maturity. They tended rather to view the

45. Porphyry's *Vita Pythagorae* provides the best examples of biographical lists:
sections 1–4: basically a list of patrimony stories;
section 12: list of sources of Pythagoras' sacred knowledge;
sections 23–26: list of Pythagoras' communications with animals;
sections 27–30: list of miracles;
sections 37–45: list of teachings and maxims.

46. In "Chronological Biography and AKMĒ in Plutarch," *Classical Philology* 69 (July, 1974): 169–177, G. H. Polman reviews the various divisions developed in antiquity to characterize the "stages" of human life. In some, for example, life was divided into seven-year stages (Aristotle *Pol.* 1225b32, *Rhet.* 1390b9; Plato *Laws* 6.722D), while in others the individual was thought to pass through four stages of twenty years each (Diogenes Laertius 8, 10; Plato *Laws* 12.950D). But whatever the schema, the *akmē* was considered to be the individual's mature stage, the time during which his contributions to society were made, and it was often assumed that the period of a person's *akmē* began at age forty. See especially pp. 170–172.

47. See Polman, "Chronological Biography," pp. 172–76.



entire career from the perspective of a single trait or ideal of character in the manner of Aristoxenus and Suetonius respectively, and so developed types rather than historical (and individually developed) personalities. For them the entire career could be treated as the *akmē* of the hero's life.

Biographers of holy men were essentially topical biographers, and their freedom from chronology gave them a broad view of the *akmē*. In fact these biographers portrayed the entire life as an *akmē*. The various aspects of the holy philosopher's perfection did not develop gradually but were persistent features of his personal *topos*. Thus Origen, famous for his allegorical exegesis of Scripture and infamous for his questionable theological positions, was characterized by Eusebius as an orthodox allegorist as a child.[48] And Pythagoras, according to Iamblichus, did not grow into or develop his famed asceticism and "daemonic" bearing; he possessed these qualities "while he was still a youth."[49] The idea of an extended *akmē* helps explain why biographers of holy men resorted so often to lists (of actions, virtues, treatises, disciples, and so on) as devices for characterization. The qualities and talents of ideal figures do not really need an explanatory narrative setting, since there is no causal connection between events in the hero's life and his character. Events are important only in so far as they depict character; they do not shape it.

However, the recitation of events, the *praxeis* of the hero, is crucial to the structure of biographies of holy men. We have just seen that chronology does not provide the structural referent for the narration of the holy man's life. A formal structure is practically nonexistent, apart from concessions to the convention of a birth-to-death envelope.[50] In fact the framework of these biographies is controlled by the ideal of character that the author is using. It is just at this point that form and content are inseparable, for the ideal is, of course, an abstraction, and it is brought to life in the biographies through an assemblage of acts in the hero's life that reveal facets of the ideal. The acts provide the only real structure in the biographies. Each act, whether it is an actual physical deed or a verbal act (a speech, a list of treatises), is a star in the hero's personal constellation; it illumines an aspect of the ideal that his life represents in the biography.

The hero's acts are depicted through the use of a variety of specific literary units (anecdotes, maxims, discourses, and catalogs). Structure has become not a literary pattern or skeleton but a pastiche of literary forms that the

48. Eusebius *HE* 6.2.9–10, 6.2.14–15.

49. Iamblichus *Vita Pythagorica*, 2.10–11.

50. See chap. 3, n. 44 above.

biographer uses to coordinate the elements of his ideal with the activities of his hero.

One of the most important of these forms is the anecdote, a brief biographical narrative that relates a striking or unusual feature of the hero's character. Anecdotes are the major vehicles of biographical characterizations. Not only do they suit the selective nature of storytelling in biographies; they also serve to focus the presentation of the ideal of the holy man by mediating between the stereotype and the historical figure who embodies it. By giving the ideal concrete form in colorful vignettes from the hero's life, anecdotes "demythologize" the ideal. This demythologizing, or personalizing, function of anecdotes is basic to the success of the biographical interplay between the mundane and the ideal. It creates the verisimilitude upon which that interplay depends.

In the early chapters of his "Life of Origen," Eusebius is concerned with developing two themes, themes that in fact relate Origen directly to the godlike model of the holy philosopher discussed earlier. These themes, which express two important aspects of Eusebius' ideal, are Origen's youthful devotion to divine word and deed (the notion of an extended *akmē*), and his special relationship with divinity, which Eusebius defines variously as "divine and heavenly providence," "divine aid," and "divine right hand."[51] Each aspect of the ideal is stated directly, and then is personalized by one or more anecdotes about Origen.

The first theme, the idea of an extended *akmē*, is expressed by Eusebius in the following ways: "In the case of Origen, I think that even the facts from his very cradle, so to speak, are worthy of mention"; and "It will not be out of place to describe briefly how deliberately the boy's mind was set on the divine word from that early age."[52] The young Origen's extreme fidelity is then brought to life in a series of four anecdotes, each of which suggests particular ways in which the ideal showed itself in the real. The first two anecdotes show Origen's eagerness to pursue the divine in deed. The anecdote in *EH* 6.2.3–6 describes Origen's desire to gain the martyr's crown, a desire that is frustrated by divine providence acting through his mother, who hides his clothes and so prevents him from seeking death. The following anecdote (*EH* 6.2.6–7) shows the irrepressible Origen writing to his father on the topic of martyrdom, urging him to seek the glory from which his child has been kept. Both anecdotes are then asserted by Eusebius

51. Eusebius *HE* 6.2.4, 6.2.13, 6.3.4.
52. Ibid., 6.2.2, 6.1.1.



to be "proof of Origen's boyish readiness of mind and geniune love of godliness."[53]

These anecdotes, however, do not simply illustrate Origen's youthful desire to act out the implications of fidelity to religious principle. Rather, they make fidelity real; the character Origen has become a living embodiment of a certain ideal. It is important to note further that the historical veracity of the anecdote is not an essential feature of the dynamic interaction between the character and the model. For example, in the first anecdote we read that Origen lost the chance to become a martyr because his mother hid his clothes "and so laid upon him the necessity of staying at home." The amusing story of the mother's trick and the eager child's modesty has a realistic, believable ring. But Robert M. Grant has pointed out that in an *Apology* for Origen written by Pamphilus and used by Eusebius this vignette is narrated rather differently: Origen was "zealous to strip himself for the stadium of the contests, but his mother, against his will, held him back from his purpose."[54] The stripping motif was originally an athletic metaphor, not a literal use of the word, which Eusebius has either transmitted in a garbled fashion—or reformulated for use in a historical context. In any case, the situation that the anecdote envisages is at least partially legendary. Yet this does not mar the anecdote's success in demythologizing the ideal. Verisimilitude stems not from historical accuracy but from giving the ideal a probable context in which it comes to life. This is not to say, of course, that a biographical hero represented for the biographer simply a personalized or demythologized version of an ideal of the holy man; certainly this is not the case for Eusebius. But with respect to the function that anecdotes serve in biographies, I think that all of our biographers would have agreed with Plutarch's statement: "We must not treat legend as if it were history at all, but we should adopt that which is appropriate in each legend in accordance with its verisimilitude."[55]

Obviously these two anecdotes convey not just the philosopher's active and youthful espousal of religious virtue but also his special connection with a holy force—in this case, providence—that acts as his caretaker (just as the philosopher will himself later be caretaker of his disciples). The two succeeding anecdotes also emphasize this special connection but view it

53. Ibid., 6.2.6.
54. Photius *Bibl.* 118, quoted and discussed by Robert M. Grant, "Eusebius and his Lives of Origen," in *Miscellanea M. Pellegrino* (1975), p. 19.
55. Plutarch *De Isis et Osiris* 374E.

from the perspective of inspiration rather than protection. The anecdote in *EH* 6.2.7–10 recounts the child's introduction to scriptural studies. Here his connection with divinity takes the form of an uncanny wisdom that leads the young scholar to pursue allegorical exegesis, somewhat to the amazement of his father, who thanks God for "such a boy." This anecdote actually finds its climax in the story that immediately follows it (*EH* 6.2.11): "And it is said that many a time he would stand over the sleeping boy and uncover his breast, as if a divine spirit were enshrined therein, and kissing it with reverence count himself happy in his goodly offspring." In the context of a realistic, and rather touching, scene of parental love, a revelation of the theocentric nature of the philosopher is given. The sage is not only inspired and protected by the divine, as in the foregoing anecdotes; he is also intimately connected with it. The kiss of Origen's father represents in fact a revelation, a kind of modified theophany that occurs again and again in different forms as the biography progresses. This story is an excellent example of the way anecdotes function in biographies of holy philosophers. The ideal takes concrete form within an historically framed situation or scene and thus receives credibility.

The biographers' concern for credibility, for the historical credence of their ideal heroes, can be seen not only in their use of anecdotes as literary tools but also in their use of documents. Further, the reference to historical documents helps explain the prominence of two more important literary units in biographies: discourses and maxims.

In the debate between Celsus and Origen over means for legitimating the "son of god" status of particular figures, both men resort to the following dictum: If something in a man's life has had influence on posterity, this lends probability to legends about that man's divinity.[56] This appears to be the kind of thinking that guided the use of sources by biographers who portrayed philosophers as sons of god. Both Porphyry and Iamblichus engage in source-critical discussions of previous historians' and biographers' accounts of the birth and patrimony of Pythagoras.[57] Iamblichus argues against accounts that had suggested Pythagoras' physical descent from Apollo. Porphyry appears concerned to give exhaustive accounts, from both biographies and chronicles, of information on Pythagoras' birthplace, parents, and education. Like Iamblichus, he weaves a reasonably coherent

56. Origen *Contra Celsum* 1.66–67. The point at issue here is divine birth.
57. Porphyry *Vita Pythagorae* 1–6; Iamblichus *Vita Pythagorica* 1.1–2.8.



whole from varied strands of earlier reports. They are, in other words, treating other biographical works as though they were historical documents, and seem to be attempting to distinguish between fact and legend in those documents, at least in so far as birth traditions are concerned.[58]

However, the apparent attack on legendary accretions to the birth story, especially in Iamblichus' biography, breaks down later in the biographies when the revelation of Abaris is recorded uncritically by both authors. That incident, which identified Pythagoras with the Hyperborean Apollo, is at least a partial confirmation of what Iamblichus earlier questions: Pythagoras' Apollonian birthright in a physical sense. What appeared to be, earlier, a critical assessment of legend is later overturned by an uncritical acceptance of the same kind of story. This suggests that both Iamblichus and Porphyry were source critics in a purely formal sense. For Graeco-Roman grammarians and rhetoricians analysed historical narrative on the basis of external or logical principles like "probability," "credibility," and "propriety." History was defined as "an account which sets forth events which took place or as if they took place," whereas myth was an account of something that could not take place.[59] Iamblichus' rejection of Pythagoras' physical Apollonian procreation is not, then, the rejection of a mythical story, since he clearly believes in the historical fact of Pythagoras' Apollonian nature. Rather, it is a technical analysis of an historical narrative, part of which is found to be inappropriate or incredible.[60]

The legacy of the rhetoricians' analysis of myths must have presented quite a problem for authors like Porphyry and Iamblichus because the rhetoricians' rational critiques, which found myths to be unsuitable, impossible, and inconsistent, "left no room," as Grant remarks, "for the operation of nonrational factors in historical events."[61] It is in this context that Por-

58. This obvious sifting and judging of sources also occurs in the reporting of the death stories. In *Vita Pythagorica* 35.248–64, Iamblichus reports the variant accounts of Nicomachus, Aristoxenus, and Apollonius without choosing among them. In *Vita Pythagorae* 54–57, Porphyry chooses the account of Dicaearchus and "the more accurate authorities" (apparently, Nicomachus, since the account Porphyry prefers agrees with Iamblichus' second version, which he attributes to Nicomachus, in *Vita Pythagorica* 35.252–53).
59. Robert M. Grant, *The Earliest Lives of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1961), pp. 121–22, 39–44.
60. See ibid., p. 41, on the following passage in Theon *Progymnasmata* 76.32: "the incredible is something which can take place or be said, but is not believed to have taken place or to have been said."
61. Ibid., p. 43; see pp. 45–46.

phyry's and Iamblichus' frequent assertions of the credibility and uniformity of their sources are to be understood. The two authors insist upon both the trustworthiness and the accuracy of their sources.[62] That this "probability index" is historical, rather than mythical, is indicated by their use of the verb *historeō*. Significantly, both authors use this verb to justify the historical credibility of Pythagoras' miracles.[63] Here they are clearly revising rationalist rhetorical literary criticism in order to provide a place for the supernatural within history. The "irrational" or supernatural quality of the source material pertaining to Pythagoras is to be accepted as historical because, as Porphyry insists, it is substantiated by uniform stories (*peri t'andros homalōs kai sumphōnōs eirētai*).[64] While he agrees with Porphyry on the issue of uniformity, Iamblichus takes the argument a step further: the supernatural in history is believable because "all things are possible to the gods."[65] The key to his argument is that his historical sources can be regarded as "divine dogma" (*theia dogmata*).[66] For him this is not an issue of interpretation; history has become dogma.

This perspective on sources enables both Porphyry and Iamblichus to call their sources *hūpomnēmata*,[67] memoirs or records, a term related to the use by other authors of *apomnēmoneumata* to denote truthful historical memoranda.[68] True historical criticism is not, therefore, a literary characteristic of these biographies. The success of the biographers' use of sources to validate their biographies in both a literary and a philosophical sense depends on a reinterpretation of the literary-critical view of history. That this reinterpretation is in keeping with traditional biographical techniques is clear in Porphyry's and Iamblichus' use of discourses and maxims. These are major literary components of their biographies that, like the use of documents, give the biographies the appearance of history. Again, the ideal becomes real when the hero's own words are quoted.

Long discourses and lists of Pythagorean maxims make up substantial portions of the Pythagorean biographies; they are important literary build-

62. Iamblichus *Vita Pythagorica* 13.60, 28.134, 29.157; Porphyry *Vita Pythagorae* 10, 28.
63. Iamblichus *Vita Pythagorica* 28.135; Porphyry *Vita Pythagorae* 23, 27.
64. Porphyry *Vita Pythagorae* 28.
65. Iamblichus *Vita Pythagorica* 28.138–39.
66. Ibid., 28.148.
67. Ibid., 19.94, 23.104, 29.157; Porphyry uses variations of the verb *mnēmoneuō* in *Vita Pythagorae* 5 and 29.
68. Grant, *Earliest lives of Jesus*, pp. 119–20 and 15–27 passim.



ing blocks in the construction of character.[69] As Fischel has shown, it is notoriously difficult to locate the origin of maxims historically since the same statement is often attributed to several philosophers from widely divergent cultures and eras.[70] This is also true of discourses. As early as Xenophon (in the *Memorabilia*), biographers attributed to their heroes speeches that they could have made, even if, historically, they did not.[71] That this process has taken place in Iamblichus' reports of discourses is clear from the obvious Neoplatonic cast of certain "Pythagorean" speeches.[72] They are convenient literary vehicles for representing the ideal in the historical figure. The literary-critical notion of historical probability, combined with the view that a man's later stature heightens the "believability" of his deeds, indicates why the conscious reference to sources and use of discourses were important literary tools for biographies of sons of god. They provided means for authenticating legend historically.

These tools were not available to Porphyry for his *Life of Plotinus* nor to Eusebius for his "Life of Origen" since they were writing about more recent figures and could not rely on earlier biographies or well-developed legendary traditions. Their sources were primarily letters and "eyewitness" reports. Porphyry, who in his biography calls himself "one of Plotinus' closest friends," knew many in Plotinus' circle and refers specifically to information that he has obtained from them.[73] Scattered throughout the biography are enigmatic statements of Plotinus', which Porphyry relates in anecdotal

69. Porphyry emphasizes maxims, whereas Iamblichus concentrates on the sage's moral, political, and philosophical exhortations.
70. Henry Fischel, "Story and History: Observations on Greco-Roman Rhetoric and Pharisaism," *American Oriental Society, Middle West Branch, Semi-Centennial Volume*, ed. Denis Sinor, Asian Studies Research Institute, Oriental Series 3 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 72. Fischel's focus is on *chriae*, which were borrowed and adapted from Greek literature by Jewish writers and used to characterize such sages as Hillel and Hanina ben Dosa. In *The Sentences of Sextus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 143–54, Chadwick has shown that Porphyry's maxims come from Epicurean aphorisms and an alphabetical collection of Pythagorean maxims.
71. See chapter 1, pp. 7–8.
72. See Festugière, "Sur une nouvelle édition du *De Vita Pythagorica* de Jamblique," pp. 470–94; Lévy, *Recherches sur les sources de la légende de Pythagore*, pp. 102–17; Bieler, *ΘΕΙΟΣ ANHP*, 1:126; and Armand Delatte, *Études sur la littérature Pythagoricienne* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1915), pp. 12–26. For an alternate view, see C. J. de Vogel, *Pythagoras and Early Pythagoreanism* (Assen, 1966).
73. Porphyry *Vita Plotini* 7; see, for example, 1,2 (Eustochius); 3 (Amelius); 10.

contexts, as well as descriptions of the proceedings of the school, part of which Porphyry has gotten from a collection of notes made by one of Plotinus' earliest and most favored students.[74] He quotes from two letters that he himself received from other philosophers and uses them as a defense of Plotinus' originality and clear thinking; both are part of the polemical accent of his biography, directed against the charge that Plotinus was a confused plagiarizer of Numenius.[75] It is interesting to note that it was after a series of debates with Amelius, Plotinus' apologist, that Porphyry came "to believe" (*episteuthēn*) in Plotinus' writings (*ta biblia*—does he mean "holy documents"?).[76] Porphyry's use of the apologist's letter is clearly related to the usual idealizing tendencies of biographies of holy philosophers.

A final, perhaps most interesting, source, which Porphyry identifies explicitly, is an oracle of Apollo given to Amelius upon Plotinus' death.[77] In it the godlike nature of Plotinus' soul is stated very clearly, and in the following chapter Porphyry indicates the truth of the oracle: "We knew ourselves that he was like this." Poetic truth has become historical fact, authenticated by eyewitnesses. What I find significant about Porphyry's use of documents is that even though his material has a more solid foundation in history (much of it stems from firsthand observation, in good Thucydidean fashion), the same factor of probability evident in his life of Pythagoras is operative here. The letters, anecdotes, Plotinian enigmas, and the oracle are not sources assembled in a haphazard way; they have rather been selected specially, for use in a carefully crafted idealizing portrait.

Like Porphyry, Eusebius also has used letters, though his are by the hero himself,[78] and eyewitness accounts. But the accounts incorporated into the text of his biography were apparently primarily written accounts. At one point he refers to a group of anecdotes as stories that "they tell" (*mnēmoneuousin*) about Origen; the verb here *could* mean either "recall" or "record."[79] This statement concludes the anecdotal series. However, the same section is introduced by Eusebius' admission that some of his material has come from "information" (*historia*) from Origen's pupils. The use of *historia*[80] seems clearly to indicate that his sources are written documents, and that *mnēmoneo* is also used to indicate records, not spoken recollections.

74. *Vita Plotini* 3, collection of notes; 2, 10, 15, enigmatic statements as anecdotal climaxes.
75. Ibid., 17, letter of Amelius. 76. Ibid., 18. 77. Ibid., 22.
78. Eusebius *HE* 6.2.1.
79. Ibid., 6.2.11. See Grant, *Earliest Lives of Jesus*, pp. 119–20 on *apomnēmoneuma*.
80. Grant, *Earliest Lives of Jesus*, pp. 120–21, on *historia*.



Again the notion of probability is relevant. We have already seen that the anecdotal section that is introduced and concluded by these source citations is a product of the biographical idealizing process. Like Porphyry and Iamblichus, Eusebius is certifying the credibility of the divine in the historical by using technical terms that indicate the formal (if not actual) historical provenance of his sources.[81] What the discussion of sources indicates is that, like anecdotes, explicit reference to sources provided biographers with a way to tie together their ideal of the holy man with the historical figure who embodied the ideal.

Thus far, three generic traits of Graeco-Roman biographies of holy philosophers have been discussed: structure, literary units, and source use. Those that remain to be considered—the type of characterization, social setting, and authorial intention—will form the basis for the final three chapters. It should, however, be clear from the foregoing discussion of some of the generic elements of biography that there is a definite continuity in the Greek biographical tradition.

Like earlier biographers of philosophers, those discussed here molded the lives of their heroes to preconceived models. The persistent feature of biography from Hellenistic to Graeco-Roman times was a literary process, the dynamic interaction of fantasy and historical reality whose intent was to capture the ideals suggested by the life of the hero. The specific characteristics of this process also persisted: the dichotomy between *praxeis* and *ēthos*, in which deeds, both physical and verbal, were utilized as a backdrop for the portrayal of character, since character was viewed as the essence of the life; the tendency to extend the *akmē* (developed as early as Xenophon in his *Agesilaus*); and the use of anecdotes and discourses not only as major literary means for depicting character but also as techniques for conveying historical verisimilitude. What was new in Graeco-Roman biographies of the holy man was that the idealizing process assumed a standard face, so that philosophers were depicted not only as superior men but also as figures of holiness. The idea that philosophers were divine represents the reigning mythology of Graeco-Roman biographies devoted to such figures. And, as we shall see, the biographers' adoption of this divine type in their works was directly linked to the social situation in which these biographies were produced, that is, the heated religious conflicts between pagans and Christians in the third and fourth centuries.

81. Eusebius' use of letters will be treated in detail in Chapter 4.

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# Biography in Late Antiquity

## A QUEST FOR THE HOLY MAN



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