

Lived religion in rural Asia Minor, 400-700 CE

By

Elizabeth R. Davis

B.A., Carleton College, 2016

M.A., University College London, 2017

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Jae Hee Han, Advisor

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Introduction and research questions

For decades, the “urban thesis” of early Christianity has posited that the church in the first few centuries of its existence was based primarily in cities, which has resulted in a preponderance of scholarly interest in urban Christians at the expense of rural ones. Despite recent scholarship that has begun to push back on this notion, there also remains a lingering view of the countryside as a last holdout of polytheism. Rural Late Antique Christianity remains little understood in general, for reasons partly to do with evidence. Many literary sources speak primarily to urban audiences about urban concerns and were written by bishops of metropolitan areas whose names and epithets are inextricable from these urban settings (e.g. Augustine of Hippo, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan, Clement of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa—although Nyssa was not a huge city, it was certainly not rural). When rurality is featured in literature, it is largely in the context of monasticism and asceticism. Despite estimates that place the proportion of rural inhabitants hovering between 80 to 90% of the Roman Empire’s total population (Grey 2011; MacMullen 1974; Robinson 2016; Sarris 2011; Scheidel 2007), the lived experiences and particularly the religious experiences of rural people are often overlooked.

This project therefore places the lived religious experiences of rural Christians in Late Antique (c. 400-700 CE) Asia Minor at the forefront to better understand how Christianity operated in rural space. The questions are twofold, concerning both the experiences of rural people themselves and their interactions with church leaders and holy people:

1. How did urban Christians, especially clergy and ecclesiastical leaders, think of and administer to rural congregations?
2. How were rural peoples' lives materially impacted by Christianity? What did rural populations stand to gain from interaction with the church?

Ultimately, I argue that although urban church leaders displayed an awareness of and interest in rural congregations, the relationship between urban and rural was often complex and even tense at times. However, on the local level, adherence to Christianity functioned as a means to manage risk for rural people, who were often living in precarious and uncertain conditions. Rural holy men and bishops of rural origins were uniquely positioned to provide assistance, even though urban ecclesiastical and civic leaders were not always able or willing to. Through a close reading of textual sources, the lived religious experiences of rural Christians can be better understood, especially those that may have been previously considered heterodox or vernacular.

It is important to recognize from the outset that this is not a study of rural monasticism, asceticism, or pilgrimage. Monasticism and ascetic movements have featured prominently in studies of rural Late Antique Christianity in the eastern Mediterranean, for example in Egypt (*The Life of Antony*, *The Lausiatic History*, *The Life of Syncletica*, *Apophthegmata Patrum*; Blanke 2019; Brooks Hedstrom 2017; Harmless 2004), Asia Minor (the Cappadocian Fathers), Syria (Simeon the Stylite, Theodoret of Cyrrhus's *History of the Monks of Syria*, John of Ephesus's *The Lives of the Eastern Saints*; Caner 2002; Harvey 1990), and Palestine (Cyril of Scythopolis's *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*; Binns 1994; Patrich 1995). Scholars have begun to take notice of the everyday economic circumstances of monasteries, with increased attention paid to the logistics of rural life for the monks (e.g. Brooks Hedstrom 2017; Wipszycka 2020); however, the lay inhabitants of the countryside receive scant mention. The focus of this work is accordingly on

rural lay populations rather than monastics or ascetics, whose experiences tend to be exceptional rather than generalizable. Additionally, although pilgrimage narratives and *itineraria* often feature rural space as glimpsed by the traveler (e.g. Egeria, the Piacenza Pilgrim, John Moschus), again the focus here is on the people dwelling in these places rather than passing through them, placing their lives, concerns, and lived Christianities at the forefront. While fully integrating considerations of asceticism and pilgrimage with rural laypeople would present a more complete picture, it is beyond the scope of the present study.

Historiographical and theoretical background: the long shadow of the urban thesis

The thorough discussions of the urban thesis by Naerebout (2021) and Robinson (2016) are briefly summarized here. The urban thesis of early Christianity asserts that from its earliest days, Christianity was primarily an urban phenomenon: the vast majority of Christians at the time were city-dwellers and the religion was eventually popularized in these urban settings. Only in the post-Constantinian period did Christianity at last reach the countryside. This view was advocated by many of the twentieth century's most prominent scholars of early Christianity: A.H.M. Jones (1940, 298) wrote that Christianity became "very rapidly an essentially urban religion," W.H.C. Frend (1979, 34) wrote "With few exceptions, the Christian groups in the second century were found in cities," Robin Lane Fox (1987, 46) argued that Christianity did not spread into the countryside until the mid-fourth century, and Ramsay MacMullen reiterated this view throughout his career: "Everyone is agreed that the church started as an urban phenomenon and continued in that tendency throughout our period of study. [...] So everyone assumes, and surely they are right, that the countryside lagged far behind the cities in degree of Christianization" (1984, 83) and "In estimating the place of Christianity in the whole empire, the

weight of representation must fall on the cities, not the countryside. Almost everyone agrees that the new faith only very slowly reached out into the farming population” (2009, 101–2).

Subsequently, Robinson and Naerebout both argue that Wayne Meeks’ (2003) monograph *The First Urban Christians* was largely responsible for cementing the urban thesis; Rodney Stark’s influential sociological study of early Christianity (2007) relies heavily upon Meeks’ work.

However, as Robinson argues, from a purely demographic perspective the urban thesis simply cannot be true. Estimates of the population of the Roman Empire at the time typically posit a figure of around 60 million and the proportion of Christian adherents to be about 10%, or 6 million. However, if 80-90% of people lived in the countryside, that would mean that urban areas must have been overwhelmingly Christian in order to make the numbers work, which is highly improbable unless there were far fewer Christians than are generally accepted. Instead, Robinson argues that Christians must have had a much earlier presence in the countryside than has traditionally been thought. The evidence for this, both textual and archaeological, he admits is scanty; a handful of writings reference rural Christians or the spread of Christianity into the countryside in the pre-Constantinian period, and epigraphic evidence from Phrygia indicates the presence of a rural Christian (Montanist) community. However, despite this dearth of evidence, Robinson argues that this early rural Christian contingent must have existed in order to support the numbers and proportions of Christians in the Empire that are commonly agreed upon. Robinson is also critical of a scholarly tendency to dismiss early Christianity in rural areas as either abnormal/heterodox or as mere offshoots of urban Christianity rather than as a legitimate movement with unique qualities.

Even as the field has begun to recognize the presence and importance of early rural Christian communities, the urban thesis has cast a long shadow into studies of Christianity in

later centuries: interest in rural Christianity has lagged behind discussions of Christianity in monumental urban cores. Of course, this is partly to do with the nature of available textual and archaeological evidence, which tends to privilege insights into urban areas. As stated previously, when rural Late Antique Christianity is discussed, it tends to be in the context of monastic or ascetic movements, as many literary sources from the period are hagiographical descriptions of rural saints. Frank Trombley, who wrote extensively on the persistence of polytheism and the Christianization of rural Asia Minor and Greece in Late Antiquity, long espoused the view that rural villages were either pagan holdouts or “nominally Christian but so badly instructed that earlier pagan cult practices persisted” (1985, 327; see also Trombley 1981; 1995). It is certainly important to acknowledge the long afterlife of polytheism, even after its being officially outlawed by Theodosius (*Cod. Theod.* 16.10); indeed, a recent discovery from Aphrodisias indicates continued worship of Cybele in that city as late as the 7th century (University of Oxford 2024). However, such approaches run the risk of dismissing rural Christianity on its own merits as a unique practice. David Frankfurter’s 2018 monograph *Christianizing Egypt* problematizes the idea of the “pagan survival” in the context of rural Egypt, arguing that to speak of pagan holdouts in rural areas relies upon stereotypes of shoddy doctrinal instruction, episcopal blind spots, and “uncomprehending village folk” (11). Syncretistic practices, too, have been oversimplified; Frankfurter calls for an approach to syncretism that instead focuses on expressions of religious agency on multiple sides (*ibid.*, 20-21).

It is also worth asking the question, as Naerebout (2021) does, whether the division between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ is even applicable in the Roman world. Naerebout argues: “For the ancient world, it seems to be plain wrong to think in terms of an urban-rural dichotomy” (*ibid.*, 26). Urban cores (*urbs*) were closely integrated with their territories (*ager, territorium*) on

economic, political, and administrative matters; to imply a de facto separation between the two risks retrojecting modern understandings of the divisions between town and country. This assumption especially risks stereotyping rural areas: as Van Oyen (2019) writes, the countryside is frequently thought of as either a static backwater or a bucolic paradise. It is important to attend to the ways in which modern understandings of urban and rural tinge the analysis of such categories in the past.

While I do not wish to reify the assumed ontological separation between urban and rural, for the present study, ‘rural’ is used as a shorthand for places outside of city walls with low population density that derive most of their economic activity from agriculture, horticulture, viticulture, and pastoralism. These areas are comprised of a range of settlement types, including villas, farmsteads, hamlets, and villages; the people living in each of these also have differing modes of occupation and relationships to labor, ranging from wealthy landowners to tenant farmers to enslaved laborers (Foxhall 1990; 2004; 2020; Launaro 2011; McHugh 2017; Zuiderhoek 2017). Archaeological evidence indicates that in the eastern Mediterranean, rural areas generally see continued settlement and prosperity, Pettegrew’s (2007) so-called “busy countryside.” Evidence from surface surveys, the primary means of understanding rural settlement patterns, shows expansions in villages and farmsteads across Asia Minor, including in Lycia, Pisidia, and the Konya plain (Bowes and Gutteridge 2005; Lewit 2004, xiv). Rather than the depopulated ‘dark ages’ once imagined, rural areas in the centuries of Late Antiquity are increasingly understood as dynamic places with much continuity.

In light of this rural dynamism, this project uses the theoretical concept of lived religion to approach rural Christian populations. Initially popularized in the late 20th and early 21st centuries by scholars of religion such as David Hall (1997), Robert Orsi (1997), Nancy

Ammerman (2007), and Meredith McGuire (2008), lived religion puts a critical focus on individual religion actors, experiences, and relationships. Orsi argues in his 1997 chapter “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion” that religion cannot be understood as separate from history and culture—they are not merely something that religion is *in*, but rather they are the media through which religion *is*. By extension, religion cannot be separated from the daily life and activities of the practitioner, as religion is dynamically consubstantial with the “realities of everyday life” (ibid., 7). Orsi elaborates by laying out four things that scholars must have which are essential to understanding lived religion (ibid., 7-8):

1. An awareness of the range of “idiomatic possibility and limitation” within a culture;
2. A sense of a culture’s range of available embodied and corporeal religious experiences;
3. An understanding of its social structures (marriage and kinship, morals and ethics, economic systems, etc.); and
4. An awareness of the tensions that arise within the above realms.

Orsi and the above scholars’ work focuses mainly on the study of modern lived religion. Lived religion in the ancient world has been explored by scholars including Markus Vinzent (2016), Nicola Denzey Lewis (2021), Eric Rébillard (2016), Kim Bowes (2011), and Jörg Rüpke (2016; see also the edited volume with Gasparini et al. 2020). In his 2016 article “Embodied Early and Medieval Christianity,” Vinzent (ibid., 113) builds upon Orsi’s themes to similarly outline three guidelines for approaching lived religion in the ancient world:

1. Scholars must attempt to address the “individual religious agent;”
2. Religious actions must be looked at in a non-essentialistic framework¹; and
3. Evidence beyond canon law and doctrinal statements, such as archaeological and iconographic evidence, must be considered, especially that which exhibits deviance from supposed norms or orthodoxy.

Denzey Lewis (2021) outlines further suggestions for approaching lived religion in the ancient world, including attending to sensory experience, giving voice to individuals who have traditionally been marginalized or overlooked, acknowledging the rich inner life and varying relations to power structures of all people, and engaging in “methodological promiscuity”.

This study takes the above suggestions to heart in posing the stated research questions about rural peoples’ interactions with and experiences of Christianity. The desire is to meet people at their “daily task” (Orsi 1997, 7) of religious experience while being attentive to the fact that one will never truly be able to discover the true inner life of anyone else, past or present. Rural Christianity (which, as Denzey Lewis (2021: 108) acknowledges, is in itself a limited term, as there was certainly no single united Christianity writ large) operated through a web of relations to ecclesiastical and civic authorities, wealthy landowners, weather, harvests, grain disbursements, topographical features, and the built environment. Applying the lens of lived religion allows a more holistic view of these facets as they interoperated with one another, granting a richer understanding of rural Christian life during these dynamic centuries.

¹ It is acknowledged here that ‘experience’ is itself an extremely loaded term. Attempting to view lived experience in a non-essentialistic framework requires careful examination of those elements considered to shape daily life, both individually and in aggregate, a topic which deserves further scrutiny and theorization beyond the scope of the current project.

Sources

In order to approach rural Christian lived experience from a holistic angle, and especially to understand the relationships between the relevant power structures, a wide variety of textual sources must be considered. However, as this project is geographically constricted to Asia Minor during Late Antiquity, it is essential to choose these sources carefully. As Grey (2011) notes, the richest textual evidence for the details of Late Antique rural life comes from Egyptian papyri, which provide a wealth of details about the lives of (albeit mostly wealthy) villagers and farmers in the Fayyum (Bagnall 1993; Brand and Scheerlinck 2022); however, there is no such corpus for Asia Minor. For related inquiry about rural life in other places, Grey suggests utilizing three types of sources: Christian literature, including hagiographies and “moralizing and theological tracts,” imperial legislation, and historical or epistolary sources written by local elites and bureaucrats (Grey 2011, 5). The selections for each category that can provide specific insight into rural Christianity in Asia Minor are outlined here.

Christian literature

Rural Asia Minor is well represented in hagiographical literature, with a number of sources providing details on rural life (Rizos 2018). Of course, there are important considerations to bear in mind when reading such texts. Sarris (2011, 213) argues that hagiographies were primarily written for consumption by highly literate, elite, urban audiences, to whom the stories told about the countryside would reflect their social and financial anxieties about rural landholdings. More generally, in their introduction to a new translation of the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, Whitby and Price (2024, 12-13) emphasize the need to pay attention to the possible

agendas and intended audiences of hagiographies (as with all texts) before drawing conclusions about the accuracy of any events or indicators of social history. Harvey (1990, xiii) states that hagiographies can certainly be treated as historical texts, but only through first recognizing the literary tropes and trends inherent to the genre.

Despite these rhetorical issues, hagiographies are still a valuable source of information about rural Christianity from the perspectives of both clergy and lay people. This study primarily draws from two hagiographies that are largely set in and around the villages of 6th century Asia Minor: the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* and the *Life of Nicholas of Sion*.

The Life of Theodore of Sykeon (henceforth *VTS*) was written a few decades after his death in the early 7th century by one of his followers, a disciple named George. Theodore was born in a village named Sykeon, about twenty miles away from the larger city of Anastasiopolis in Galatia. The *VTS* details his rural upbringing and turn toward asceticism as a teenager, when he retreated to live in a shrine of St. George in the hills surrounding his village and later to a cave nearby. Theodore later founded a monastery, made several journeys to the Holy Land, and eventually became the bishop of Anastasiopolis. Although Theodore was well-connected and had personal relationships with the Patriarch of Constantinople and with Emperors Maurice and Phocas, and Heraclius, the *VTS* focuses largely on his relationships with rural Christians dwelling in the villages of Galatia and shows him attending to their concerns.

The Life of Nicholas of Sion (henceforth *VNS*) was written sometime after his death, which occurred in 564. Nicholas hailed from a village named Pharroa in Lycia. The *VNS* gives details on the foundation of his monastery of Holy Sion near the city of Myra, his journeys to the Holy Land, his travels through the hinterlands of Lycia and Pamphylia to visit villages, and his eventual ascension to the position of Bishop of Pinara in western Lycia. The *VNS* provides many

close accounts of Nicholas's encounters with rural and mountain dwellers, particularly those who exhibit adherence to a Christianity that might be described as heterodox or, following Trombley's view, people who were "imperfectly—or not at all—Christianized" (Ševčenko and Patterson Ševčenko 1984, 17). Together, the *VNS* and the *VTS* give a sense of the role that the church and Christianity had to play in the lives of rural people in Late Antique Asia Minor, thereby serving as entry-points for glimpsing lived religion.

In addition to hagiographical literature, the writings of ecclesiastical leaders are valuable sources of information for how church authorities thought about and ministered to rural peoples. While the literature is vast, the present study primarily draws from authors who spent some portion of their lives in Asia Minor during Late Antiquity. The first author is John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), who was born in Antioch and subsequently became a presbyter of that city and later the unwitting archbishop of Constantinople (Allen and Mayer 2000). As his epithet suggests, John became known for his eloquence in public speaking, as well as his prolific corpus of writings, which include transcriptions of homilies and sermons delivered over the course of his career, theological treatises, and liturgical works. Certain of these reference rural issues, although he himself spent most of his life in urban areas.

The writings of John of Ephesus (c. 507-588) also provide occasional glimpses into Late Antique Asia Minor. John hailed from northern Mesopotamia and spent a long career in the church, traveling throughout the eastern Mediterranean (Harvey 1990). His two major works are the *Ecclesiastical History*, which details the history of the church from Julius Caesar through his present, and the *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, a collection of short stories concerning holy men, ascetics, and bishops in Mesopotamia and Syria. Although most of the latter focuses on regions further east than this study, they can be used as salient points of comparison.

Sources pertaining to the so-called Cappadocian Fathers are of relevance here as well. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus lived and worked in the region of Cappadocia in the mid- to late-4th century; their writings often reflect the practices and operations of the many Christian communities of the region, both urban and rural. In particular, various letters provide evidence for the role that the *chorepiskopos* (the bishop of the countryside) had to play in the lives of rural Christians, as well as the interactions between urban and rural clergy (Cooper and Decker 2012). Their writings also point to class tensions and issues of poverty, particularly for agriculturalists (Holman 2006).

A final source for rural Christian experience comes from synodal records, particularly those that define the role of the *chorepiskopos*. The existence of the *chorepiskopos* is attested in records from multiple ecclesiastical councils (Cooper and Decker 2012; Wood 2012). These sources provide additional insight into how rural congregations were managed. Two of John of Ephesus's eastern saints (Addai and Harfat) served as *chorepiskopoi* in Mesopotamia, which can offer a 'real life' example of a *chorepiskopos* in action.

Imperial legislation

The second category of textual sources used to glimpse lived religion in rural Asia Minor is imperial legislation and codices of law. The two sources primarily used in this study are the *Codex Theodosianus* (*CTh*) and the *Codex Justinianus* (*CJ*). Produced in 438, the *CTh* is a compilation of imperial legislation from Constantine until the reign of Theodosius II, bringing together over a hundred years of legal writings into the same place for the first time (Harries and Wood 2010). The *CTh* is especially important for its insights into the increasingly active role that

Christianity played in the Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th centuries; relationships between ecclesiastical and imperial leaders were clarified and the role of the bishop was expanded (Rapp 2005). The *CJ* is a compilation, revision, and expansion of Roman law produced in 529 under the auspices of the emperor Justinian I (Blume et al. 2016). Justinian was intimately entangled with the Church, exercising nearly unlimited control over ecclesiastical affairs (Sarris 2011, 167); as such, the *CJ* sheds light on dynamics of ecclesiastical and imperial power, which in turn can reveal how rural congregations operated.

Although these sources demonstrate the imperial government's attempts to influence religious behavior, late Roman law tended to proceed from social practice rather than control it, as Cameron (2012, 89) points out. There was also a notable gap between a law being issued and it being enforced, making legal material difficult to rely upon for clear evidence of social practice (Fowden 1978, 53). And, of course, laws merely reflect the desires and priorities of the highest government authorities. However, imperial legislation is still a useful source for considering pragmatic and bureaucratic matters pertaining to rural Christian populations.

Other sources

Grey's final category comprises historical or epistolary sources written by elites, implied to be non-Christian. This study expands the category to mean any sources written by non-Christians. An example is the writings of Libanius of Antioch. Born in 314, Libanius was a rhetorician hailing from Antioch. He worked and studied in Athens, Constantinople, Nicomedia, and his native city until his death in 393. During his time in Constantinople, he became close with the emperor Julian, who would later be known as Julian the Apostate in the Christian

imagination. Although Libanius himself never converted to Christianity and remained devoted to Hellenic philosophy and sophistry his whole life, he taught rhetoric to several Christians, including John Chrysostom (Cribiore 2007). Despite not being Christian and living most of his life in urban areas, his many writings can be read for contextual information about both rural life in general and Christians in particular during the 4th century in Asia Minor. Other sources in this category include the works of the 6th century scholar Procopius, such as the *Secret History* which describes the supposed inner workings of the emperor Justinian and his court.

Relationships between urban and rural Christians

This section addresses the first of the research questions outlined at the outset of this study: How did urban Christians, especially clergy and ecclesiastical leaders, think of and administer to rural congregations? The evolving role of the bishop, especially vis-à-vis the countryside, is first explored, followed by an analysis of how urban-rural relations are viewed in textual sources.

From the 4th century onward, the Church became increasingly wealthy and powerful, growing to own large amounts of property and was granted tax-exempt status, a financial boon in the taxation-heavy 5th through 7th centuries (Wickham 2005, 62). Accordingly, the bishop also rose to increasing social and political prominence in society. While in the first few centuries CE the bishopric seems to have been primarily an administrative role, it subsequently grew in importance and social standing, becoming enmeshed with secular administration to form a close-knit “web of control” (Brown 1992; Rapp 2005). By the 5th century, all major urban areas were assigned their own bishop; from this time onward, the bishopric became a desirable career path

and most bishops were drawn from the curial class of elite landowning families (Rapp 2005, 183–85). Additionally, bishops and other clerics were exempted from civil service posts, a further enticement to the role (*CTh* 16.2.1-3).

The direct jurisdiction that an urban-based bishop would have had over rural areas is a bit opaque. Perhaps in recognition of the need for increased episcopal oversight of villages and the countryside, a special type of bishop known as a *chorepiskopos* was instituted in the 4th century (Leclercq 1913; Métivier and Destephen 2007; Wood 2012). *Chorepiskopoi* are attested in synodal records from the Council of Ancyra (314) through the Second Council of Nicaea (787), though their function evolved greatly over these centuries. Initially, *chorepiskopoi* seemed to simply have jurisdiction over rural areas and acted more or less the same as an urban bishop. However, throughout the 4th century the role was gradually restricted until it basically disappeared: Canon 13 of the Council of Ancyra in 314 forbade *chorepiskopoi* from ordaining presbyters or deacons without the permission of a nearby bishop; Canon 6 of the Council of Serdica (343) prohibited the appointment of a *chorepiskopos* in a village or “petty town” if a priest could do the job so as to not dilute the power of the bishopric; finally, Canon 57 of the Council of Laodicea (380) replaced *chorepiskopoi* with visiting presbyters and forbade existing *chorepiskopoi* from doing anything without the express consent of the urban bishop. The *chorepiskopos* therefore seems to have been entirely subordinate to the bishop, with an increasingly limited scope of jurisdiction over rural space—at least in the eyes of the Church’s central administration (Métivier and Destephen 2007).

John of Ephesus’s *Lives of the Eastern Saints* describes the lives of two *chorepiskopoi* in Syria, that of Addai (chapter 8) and Harfat (chapter 11). These passages describe the *chorepiskopos* as especially concerned with the welfare of the poor in their areas. Addai is

described as “visiting the poor, and caring for the orphans, and providing for the widows.” When Addai is expelled from his monastery during the Monophysite persecutions, he is greatly troubled by not being able to help the poor until he creates a vineyard that allows him to provide for them: “The anxieties of the holy Addai that had been troubling him because he had nothing in his possession wherewith to provide for the poor were much relieved, since he would send from forty and fifty denarii, and as many as came in from that vineyard, and buy clothes and distribute them to the needy, and similarly also corn and oil.” Harfat the *chorepiskopos* was born into a wealthy landowning family and subsequently divided his inherited estate among the rural poor. These episodes indicate that the *chorespiskopos* had an important role to play in safeguarding the wellbeing of those living outside of urban areas, especially when (as it seems) no other assistance would be coming their way.

Other evidence for the roles that the *chorepiskopos* played comes from the letters of Basil of Caesarea, who would have been served by around fifty *chorepiskopoi* (Wood 2012). Basil writes of using *chorepiskopoi* as his personal emissaries to conduct church business. He sends his *chorepiskopoi* to ingratiate themselves with a local prefect’s accountant to gain tax-exempt status for a “hospital for the poor” that they look after (*ep. 142*); similarly, when illness prevented him from meeting with another accountant, he sends one of his *chorepiskopoi* in his stead, again to gain support for a hospital overseen by the *chorepiskopos* (*ep. 143*). Basil uses adulatory language when describing these *chorepiskopoi*, describing them as worthy to be sent in his absence: “...for his truthfulness and sagacity qualifies him to advise in such matters” (*ibid.*). *Chorepiskopoi* thus seemed to have functioned as trusted subordinates to bishops, tasked not just with overseeing rural districts, but running church-sponsored hospitals and acting as envoys for urban clergy.

Aside from the *chorepiskopos*, saints and holy men also seemed to play important roles in the countryside. The *Lives* of Theodore of Sykeon and Nicholas of Sion described previously detail the interactions and tensions between urban and rural clergy and people in general. As indicated in these sources, the clergy of urban churches displayed an awareness of and interest in rural happenings. Bishops based in cities seemed to keep an eye on rural populations. When Theodore of Sykeon's mother became pregnant with him, she had a prophetic dream that her son would one day become a bishop. After visiting a holy man in a nearby village to confirm her dream, the news of her vision quickly spread throughout the area, eventually reaching the bishop of Anastasiopolis, who also confirms the dream's interpretation: "The woman, who became pregnant as a result, saw in a dream an enormous, brilliant star descending from heaven into her womb. [...] When Theodosius the bishop of the city of Anastasiopolis, who was also divinely inspired, heard this, he made the same judgment" (*VTS* 3-4). Later, when Theodore was a teenager and beginning his practice of asceticism by moving into a cave, word of his piety reaches the bishop, who praises his holiness: "Theodosius, who was then bishop of the city of Anastasiopolis, heard about [Theodore], rejoiced over him, and praised him in the presence of all, saying that he was being inspired by God to accomplish these things" (*VTS* 16). Similarly, in the *Life* of Nicholas of Sion, Nicholas's uncle petitions the archbishop to consecrate a shrine in the small village of Pharroa, which he does: "When the holy Nicholas, his uncle, saw the strivings and earnestness of the child with respect to God the Founder of all things, he directed a request to the most holy and blessed Archbishop Nicholas that he consecrate the site of a shrine in Pharroa. At this request, the aforementioned most holy archbishop agreed to consecrate the site of a shrine in that place" (*VNS* 4).

These passages demonstrate that bishops and church leaders who were based in cities demonstrated a keen interest in rural goings-on. There did not appear at first glance to be a theological, spiritual, or administrative prejudice against rural Christians – they just lived far away. Word still traveled fast, indicating the highly networked nature of Christian populations at the time, which will be discussed in more detail later. As John Chrysostom wrote in his *Baptismal Instructions* to Christians coming into the city from the countryside:

Let us not look to the fact that their speech is different from ours. Let us note carefully the true doctrine of their soul and not their barbarous tongue. Let us learn the intention of their heart and that they prove in deeds the things we, in our love of true doctrine, strive to teach by words. [...] Here you see this simple rustic who knows nothing but farming and tilling the earth. Yet he takes no heed of the present life, but sends his thoughts winging to the good things that lie stored up in heaven, and he knows how to be wise about those ineffable blessings. He has exact knowledge of things which the philosophers who take pride in their beard and staff have never been able to imagine. (*Baptismal Instructions* 8:2-6)

If taken at face value, this passage hints at the neutral to positive view of rural Christians that some urban church leaders held, albeit in a somewhat condescending manner. John Chrysostom even seems to believe that “simple” agrarian Christians possessed some kind of innate wisdom regarding religious matters, foreshadowing 20th century liberation theologies that assert the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed (e.g. Cormie 1978).

Despite this demonstrated interest in rural populations and apparent belief in their spiritual prowess, people living in villages were frequently vulnerable and taken advantage of. The treasurer of a church in a nearby town comes to Theodore for advice after he had deputized

someone to collect the taxes from the villagers and he absconded with the money, making it all the way to Nicaea with the stolen gold: “‘Have pity on me, servant of God, at the tragedy that has befallen me, for I sent my assistant to collect taxes from the villages of the church, but he has taken all the revenue and fled’” (*VTS* 34). Later, after Theodore became the bishop of Anastasiopolis, he is frequently “gripped by great distress and dismay with regard to the villages belonging to the church” (*VTS* 75). Theodore apparently delegated the administration of rural churches to “men of the city” and “leading citizens” (*protectors*) who, despite their civic accolades, frequently defrauded the villagers. After one particularly egregious incident in which a *protector* “mistreated and exploited the peasants,” the rural inhabitants took up arms against him and blocked his entry into the village. The man blames Theodore for the peasants’ uprising, resulting in a violent quarrel: “He overturned with his foot the chair on which Theodore was sitting and caused him to fall to the ground in the audience chamber, flat on his back in front of everyone” (*VTS* 76).

Basil of Caesarea seemed to run into issues with his *chorepiskopoi* as well. *Epistles* 53 and 54 recount two episodes of corruption within these offices, both addressed simply “To the *chorepiskopoi*.” In the first letter, Basil says that he has heard a rumor that the *chorepiskopoi* have been taking bribes from candidates seeking ordination as clergy. Basil cleverly avoids directly accusing the men of accepting this money: “My soul is deeply pained at the enormity of the matter on which I write, if for this only, that it has caused general suspicion and talk. But so far it has seemed to me incredible. [...] Do not, by defiling your hands with such bribes, render yourselves unfit to celebrate holy mysteries. But forgive me. I began by discrediting; and now I am threatening as though I were convinced.” Attributing his pain primarily to the effects of this gossip on the broader community indicates the close attention paid to appearances and perhaps

the destabilizing potential that a corruption scandal would bring. Basil evidently needed to project an image of control, order, and moral uprightness through his *chorepiskopoi*, indicating their importance not just as aides and emissaries but also as bastions of orthopraxy in rural areas.

Ep. 54 similarly recounts a scandal among his *chorepiskopoi*. In the letter, Basil directly admonishes them for bypassing ecclesiastical customs that required the bishop's approval to ordain new ministers. Traditionally, ministers were "received after careful examination" by the presbyters and deacons, who then brought them before the *chorepiskopoi*, who in turn brought them before the bishop. Basil laments, "Now, however, you have quite passed me over; you have not even had the grace to refer to me, and have transferred the whole authority to yourselves." According to Basil, worse than this insubordination is the introduction of disreputable clergy into the church: "The consequence is, that in every village, there are reckoned my ministers, but not one single man worthy of the service of the altars." Basil exhorts the *chorepiskopoi* to reexamine these rural ministers and to "purge" them if they are found to be unworthy, as well as reminds them to always consult with him before ordaining new ministers in the future. This passage hints at the trouble that urban clergy had in ensuring that proper protocols were observed, as well as their desire for control over rural space. It can also be read as evidence for *chorepiskopoi* recognizing the need or opportunity to put their own systems of administration in place. Rather than evidence of insubordination against Basil, this is instead a sign of rural resilience: *chorepiskopoi* perhaps had a good reason to subvert the central administrative apparatus and establish their own systems.

Direct conflicts could also arise between urban and rural clergy. When the Justinianic Plague arrived in Lycia, the farmers and rural inhabitants collectively avoided traveling to the city of Myra to avoid exposure to the disease, thereby starving the city in the process as they

stopped bringing in their harvest to sell (*VNS* 52). The city dwellers believed that Nicholas of Sion had directly ordered the farmers to avoid the city, leading to an altercation: “A rumor spread in the metropolis of Myra, and they said: ‘The Abbot of Holy Sion does not let any of the farmers go down to the city.’ [...] [The archbishop, governor, and magistrates] grew angry and sent two clerics to the Monastery of Holy Sion to the servant of God Nicholas, with the command to make haste and have the servant of God brought in chains” (*VNS* 53).

Taken together, the above sources indicate that the administration of rural areas may have proved a consistent source of strife for urban ecclesiastical leadership. Although urban clergy did seem to keep an eye on rural congregations, there was always the potential for tension and even outright conflict between urban and rural clergy and congregants. Despite John Chrysostom’s assertion that the “simple rustics” were on equivalent or even elevated spiritual ground, it seems as though both clergy and laymen appointed for administrative purposes were capable of abusing their power against them. No matter who is doing the exploiting, the rural populations are the victim, indicating the vulnerability of this population to outside disruption or interference. However, the story of the Justinianic Plague reveals some degree of rural resilience that exposed a vulnerability of urban life: their reliance upon agricultural surplus from farmers. The farmers needed to protect their own first and foremost, although according to Procopius, they were not spared from the ravages of the plague in the end; Justinian even forced individuals to pay the taxes of their neighbors who had died of the disease (*Secret History* 23).

The rapid disappearance of the *chorepiskopos* from synodal records might further indicate the difficulties in ministering to rural congregations and the increasingly paternalistic view that urban clergy held about them. Rather than allowing Christian congregations in the countryside to operate in an essentially self-sufficient manner, overseen by the *chorepiskopos*

who seemed to have an intense personal interest in their welfare, in the span of a century the urban bishop subsumed the functions of the bishop of the *chora* and admonished those who did not follow the proper chain of command. This may indicate some awareness on the part of the rural clergy of the need to create their own systems of administration or governance outside of the sphere of urban control. The relationship between urban and rural Christians seemed, therefore, to be complex and far from straightforward.

The impacts of Christianity on rural populations

This section addresses the second set of research questions: How were rural peoples' lives materially impacted by Christianity? What did rural populations stand to gain from interaction with the church? Textual evidence for the role that Christianity played in their lives are first examined, followed by a discussion of the realities of rural life in Late Antiquity.

Holy men appeared to act as important intercessors for rural inhabitants, helping to offset the inherent risks and vulnerabilities of agrarian life. Many passages from the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* demonstrate his commitment to aiding villagers with explicitly rural problems, especially pertaining to farming and agriculture. Farmers petition Theodore for aid when an encroaching river erodes arable land, when a swarm of locusts eats all the summer crops and vines, when hailstones destroy crops, and when drought wreaks havoc on the harvest. In each of these instances, representatives from the village approach Theodore with their problem, Theodore offers prayers and often physically travels to visit the site of the problem, and through his intercession, the river abates, the locusts die off, the hail-bearing clouds clear, and rain ends the drought:

- The river Siberis, which passes near the tilled arable land of the village of Sykeon that is close to the monastery, was undermining the arable land and little by little carrying away much earth. Through his trust in God the most saintly one came and commanded the river in Christ's name to change its bed and no longer come near the tilled land. After setting up a wooden cross and praying, by the grace of God he made it change course away from that farmland. (*VTS 45*)
- On another occasion, in the village of Mazamia [...] one June there appeared a huge swarm of locusts, which covered their district like a cloud and ate up their summer crops and the fruit of their vines. [...] On the following day [Theodore] led out a procession to the plain and told them to stand in a particular place and ask for mercy from the Lord, while he, taking three locusts in his hand, stood their praying about them to the Lord. [...] When on the next day the people went out to the plain, they found every locust dead, and glorified God. (*VTS 36*)
- About six miles from [Pessinus] there was a garden, and in this garden there was a swarm of locusts that were destroying the vegetables that had recently sprouted. When the garden's owner learned of the presence of the divinely inspired man, he ran three miles from his garden to meet him and, falling before him, reported the damage that the locusts had caused in his garden. [...] [After following Theodore's instructions] When he went back to the place that had earlier been watered, he did not find any locusts. (*VTS 101*)
- In the village called Reace a storm-cloud would sometimes appear in the countryside, and when the fruit of the vineyards was ripe would cover them with hail, and the people of the village were in great distress, since they had been unable to gather the fruits of their farming for several years. [...] [Theodore] went around the vineyard and the countryside,

and having prayed he placed four wooden crosses at the four corners of their territory [...] As a result of his holy prayer, the storm-cloud ceased to appear there. (*VTS* 52)

- At that time there was a severe drought in the metropolis of Pessinus and the fruits of their produce were withered. [...] The blessed Theodore and the metropolitan George led off the procession, set out with the whole people, and processed in prayer [...] When everyone had taken communion and were seated for a feast, the sky clouded over and on the same day heavy rain soaked all the earth. (*VTS* 101)

The *Life of Nicholas of Sion* features similar themes. One passage describes a tenant farmer asking Nicholas for aid, as he and his wife had barely been getting by with their harvest:

...a married man from the district of Arneai came to the servant of God Nicholas [...] saying “As of today, we have lived on our piece of land for twenty years. And this land requires 25 large modii of seed grain and never yet have we gotten more than 25 modii in return. [...] We have been brought very low, have lost our income, and are wasting away with hunger, living on that piece of land; we are working ourselves to death, and are no longer able to eke out our livelihood. (*VNS* 59)

Subsistence seems to have been at the forefront of villagers’ concerns, and local Christian leaders appeared uniquely equipped to assist them. Perhaps this is due to the personal connection each man felt to the local area; indeed, the *Codex Theodosianus* decreed that village clergy should be appointed from the area where the church was established because they would be familiar with local concerns (*CTh* 16.2.33).

During the Late Antique period, the Church grew to be entangled with agricultural systems. The *Codex Justinianus* captures this evolving dynamic, with bishops becoming legally implicated in managing the grain supply during times of famine or scarcity (*CJ 10.27.3-4*). Farmers were also required to provide revenue to the imperial state, sometimes in the form of grain (*CTh 11.24; CJ 11.54.1*). The Church also became more and more of a source of tangible charity in many forms, from providing hospitals to money and food for both urban and rural poor (Caner 2021; Finn 2006). Indeed, the letters of Basil of Caesarea described earlier mention two *chorepiskopoi* who oversee hospitals, presumably in rural or extra-urban areas.

Wealthy Christians were also encouraged to personally give money via the Church to aid the poor, through tithing, hosting feasts, or donating food (Finn 2006). John Chrysostom exhorts wealthy Christian landowners to personally provide charity to rural dwellers in the form of constructing churches on their estates. In one of his *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, he gently chastises his listeners for funding public buildings like baths and marketplaces, but not churches (*Hom. Acts 18*). As Strickland (2018) argues, Chrysostom saw these rural churches as key to the evangelization of the countryside, as well as sources of spiritual and material nourishment for villagers. Interestingly, Chrysostom explicitly links the work in the fields done by these villagers to spiritual success:

Your people yonder cultivate your field: cultivate thou their souls: they bring to you your fruits, raise thou them to heaven. [...] But think now what a thing it would be to see a presbyter, the moving picture of Abraham, gray-headed, girded up, digging and working with his own hands? What more pleasant than such a field! [...] Thence as from headquarters let the hands go forth to work: first let the people hold them up for prayers, and then go their way to work. So shall there be

vigor of body; so shall the tillage be abundant; so shall all evil be kept aloof.

(*Hom. Acts 18*)

The physical toil of agricultural labor is apparently matched by its spiritual benefits, further evidence for his views of rural Christians as somehow spiritually privileged. Chrysostom also wrote of the creation of a social safety net for villagers through church construction: “They have also another comfort, if sickness befall, if death. Then again the friendships formed there by people as they go side by side (to and from the church) are not struck up at random and promiscuously” (*Hom. Acts 18*). Christianity seems to have acted as a major social connector for rural communities, something that is apparent in the hagiographical literature as well.² Rural churches hosted myriad feasts and festivals which drew crowds from diverse corners of the country. Theodore of Sykeon is shown frequently attending services and festivals at village churches (e.g. *VTS 13, 71, 112*, among many others). These festivals and processions brought rural people together as well: an annual festival dedicated to Mary in the village of Mousge brought together whole populations of multiple villages, as well as clergy and even several bishops (*VTS 71*). Nicholas of Sion, too, makes several circuitous journeys through the countryside, visiting small villages along the way to sacrifice oxen, “make merry,” and sing praise to God with the villagers (*VNS 55, 57*). The villagers themselves frequently travel to visit Theodore and Nicholas and ask for their counsel and prayers.

Christianity in the rural sphere therefore appears to have been a powerful mover of people through the countryside. Congregations did not appear to be fixed; villagers, saints, and

² Christianity, of course, was not the sole source of social connection for people living in rural areas. Agricultural activities, civic events, market days, crafting and building, and membership in guilds were also important generators of community. Additionally, religion had always acted as a social connector – Libanius wrote of temples as the “soul of the country” and worried that their closure would diminish the hopes of rural-dwellers (*Pro Templis* 30.9-10)

bishops were highly mobile, creating overlapping networks that transcended concerns about topography and travel time. These networks, it is argued here, were another means of providing security and stability for rural populations.

For people living in the countryside, Christianity provided several new avenues for managing the risks inherent to agrarian life. It is important to emphasize first, however, that too much emphasis on peasants' risk avoidance can reify stereotypes of the countryside as static, conservative, or simplistic, entirely at the mercy of the natural world (Van Oyen 2019). To combat this, van Dommelen (2019) suggests acknowledging the reality that peasants did often find themselves living and working in marginal conditions while still experiencing a high degree of social integration, both within and outside rural spaces. The network of churches, bishops, and holy people provided a new means of integration, physically uniting people across wide geographic swaths for a common purpose. The maintenance of wide and robust social networks was a key survival strategy for agrarian and pastoralist societies. It was not always possible or practical for every independent farm to possess all of the expensive equipment necessary for agricultural processing—many farmers would share tools and installations, like presses and threshing floors (Foxhall 2007; Halstead 2014). Modern ethnoarchaeological studies of agro-pastoralism in the Mediterranean have revealed the intricate systems of reciprocity and mutual obligation between pastoralists and farmers, indicating the strong social bonds necessary to ensure success and survival (e.g. Koster 1997; 2000). Christianity provided another durable social identifier that worked to strengthen ties and form community, which not only provided the spiritual succor John Chrysostom hoped for but also may have provided tangible material support essential for agrarian life.

Furthermore, the aid directly provided by holy men and clergy living and working in the *chora* also helped to support those whose livelihoods revolved around agriculture. The *Lives* of Theodore of Sykeon and Nicholas of Sion, especially the former, demonstrate that these saints provided important spiritual intercession on behalf of rural people for their specifically rural concerns. While church leaders based in urban areas may have been concerned about the rural poor, as John Chrysostom seems to have been, the actual direct aid seems to have been provided by those who actually lived in rural space. Chrysostom's plea to construct churches in the countryside can thus be seen as a sort of 'passing the buck' along to those living out there. The Christian community therefore had to rely upon rural church leaders for assistance when crops would fail, as urban leaders (both ecclesiastical and civic, as indicated by imperial law codices) were not always willing or able to. Indeed, if the accounts of corruption and defrauding described in the previous section are to be believed, rural people could even face direct challenges from those who were assigned to deal with them, further indicating a need for support from the inside.

Conclusion: lived religion in rural Asia Minor

This project has attempted to address the imbalance of scholarly attention that has been paid to rural Christian experience. In doing so, the role that Christianity had to play in the lives of rural people has been clarified and the relationships between urban and rural clergy have been explored. Beyond these aims, however, exploring the textual evidence for rural Christianity in Late Antique Asia Minor has provided an excellent case study of lived religion, a summary of which will conclude the study.

The suggestions for approaching lived religion provided by Orsi, Vinzent, and Denzey Lewis are well suited to exploring literature on the subject of rural Christianity, especially the hagiographical sources. In these, the quotidian concerns and practices of many individual religious agents are described in detail, including those that may be considered heterodox. One vivid example of this is the story of the possession of a sacred tree (ξύλον ἱερόν) in the *Life of Nicholas of Sion*: “One day there came men from the village of Plakoma, who fell down before holy Nicholas and said: ‘O servant of God, on our land there is a sacred tree in which dwells the spirit of an unclean idol, that destroys both men and fields’” (*VNS 15*). Nicholas travels to the village and spots the tree which was covered in gashes: someone had taken an axe to it in an exorcism attempt before the demon seized the axe and the man was killed (*VNS 16*). The crowd of gathered villagers is nervous about the situation, “for none believed that such a tree, being sacred, was about to be felled” (*ibid.*). Nicholas prays for two hours before striking the tree himself, driving out the demon but felling the tree in the process (*VNS 17-18*). The sacred tree is then brought to rest at Nicholas’s monastery of Holy Sion, where presumably it was venerated (*VNS 19*).

The existence of a sacred tree is not described in a negative way or viewed as an idolatrous holdover of earlier polytheistic practices. Rather, a Christian village regarding a tree as sacred is seen as perfectly legitimate Christian behavior, even though it falls outside of the norms of orthodox Christian practice. The landscape itself could still be thought of as alive with holiness. In earlier centuries, adherents of polytheism felt the presence of deities in all aspects of their lives and across a wide variety of spaces (i.e. Schowalter 2021). This remained true for rural Christians, for whom the landscape was alive with reminders and traces of a world beyond their own, both benign and non: martyria and churches dotted the landscape, but unclean spirits also

dwelt in trees, rivers, fields, and mountains, ready to cause real harm (e.g. *VNS 15, 20*, among many). Rather than an empty vessel for religious activity, the landscape—upon which rural people depended for their livelihood—was an active co-constituent in shaping religious life and activity.

Religious experience in rural Asia Minor is inextricably linked to the daily lives and activities of its practitioners. Just as John Chrysostom asserted that those who toiled in the fields possessed an innate connection to the divine, so were the actual mechanics of agricultural or pastoral labor embroiled with the Church. Although it is not possible to ever have direct access to the lives and experiences of others, be they in the past or present, attempting to redress the historical imbalance of scholarly attention paid to rural Christians is still important work to do. By expanding the scope of inquiry beyond the narrow focus on urban leaders, rural Christians emerge as active religious agents, rather than the ‘imperfectly Christianized’ villagers previously imagined.

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