

LECTIO IV: HIERONYMI VITA MALCHI MONACHI CAPTIVI
(fourth century, ca. 386–391)

NB: I have translated and adapted (*nunc moderata breuitate, nunc mediocri adiectione*) the following from Jérôme. *Trois vies de moines (Paul, Malchus, Hilarion)*, introduction par P. Leclerc, E.M. Morales, A. de Vogüé, texte critique par E.M. Morales, Sources Chrétiennes 508 (Paris, 2007). Morales's Latin text and critical apparatus, however, are marred by frequent errors and cannot be recommended for serious study.

IN 386, after several years of travel through Palestine and Egypt, Jerome, together with a noble Roman widow, Paula, took up residence in Bethlehem, where Paula's wealth allowed them to establish a double foundation for monks and nuns. It was this relatively stable period in Jerome's life that proved the most fruitful for his pen. And it was likely early in this period that he composed his *Vita Malchi monacho captiuo*, as suggested in its opening apology, *ueluti quamdam rubiginem linguae abstergere*. The hero of the *Vita Malchi* is an obscure Syrian known only to Jerome from his time at Antioch and Chalcis more than a decade earlier. Jerome claims to have heard the story directly from Malchus, and the story is told throughout in the first person. This narrative method serves well to lend credibility to a story that, in fact, departs from the traditional life of a holy man (including other lives by Jerome) and has more traits in common with the early Roman novella: fierce Saracens, a beautiful woman, forced servitude, a daring escape, a fortuitous lion – all capped in good fashion by a *lieto fine*.

The values celebrated in this life are not solitude and asceticism (as in the Lives of Paul and Anthony) but communal life and chastity. It is interesting to compare the image of communal life that emerges from this *Vita* with that which Jerome had proposed just a few years earlier in *De uirginitate seruanda*, his famous letter to Eustochius, the daughter of Paula. Writing at Rome in 384, Jerome had described for Eustochius an Egyptian monastery he had never seen but had only heard about second-hand. On the Egyptian model espoused by Jerome, obedience was the capital monastic virtue (*prima apud eos confoederatio est obedire maioribus et quidquid iusserint facere* [Ep. 22.35]), while the mutual relations of the brothers remained very much in the shadows. In lieu of hierarchical monasticism, the *Vita Malchi* advocates a model of communal monasticism via the exemplar of ants in an anthill – *ubi laboratur in medium, et cum nihil cuiusquam proprium sit, omnium omnia sunt* – a metaphor that might be considered an extended *amplificatio* of Proverbs 6:6, *vade ad formicam o piger et considera vias eius et disce sapientiam*, a verse Jerome purposely calls to mind: *recordatus Salmonis ad formicae solertiam nos mittentis et pigras mentes sub tali exemplo suscitantis*.

But the *Vita Malchi* does not entirely ignore the solitary life. In fact, during his forced exile and servitude, Malchus finds solace in his quasi-ascetic routine: *Delectabat me captiuitas mea agebamque Dei iudicio gratias, quod monachum, quem in patria fueram perditurus, in eremo inueneram*. But this blessed solitude was interrupted by a forced marriage, and it is this chaste marital union – transparently similar to the (non-marital) relationship between Jerome and Paula – that is the primary lesson of the *Vita*. Hence, in part, the *Vita Malchi* is an allegory of Jerome and Paula's double foundation at Bethlehem. Written in the early days of the two sister communities, the *Vita* traces, in the form of a novel, Jerome and Paula's journey from distant Rome and their life in forced exile until the founding of a new home in the holy city of Christ. The union of a chaste monk and a woman who is not a virgin, their spiritual marriage a real love that can never desecrate what God had consecrated: such is the daring invention of this *Vita*, wherein Jerome celebrates under a transparent veil his holy association with Paula. The *Vita Malchi* was reworked in the early twelfth century by Reginald of Canterbury as a six-book verse life in rhyming hexameters.