



COMMENT ON “THE MAIN ASPECTS OF ASCETICISM AND REPENTANCE IN THE WORK OF PRATUM BY JOHN MOSCHUS”


Eftihios Mariou

Open University of Cyprus, Nicosia 12794 – Cyprus.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9893-4316> |  eftihios.mariou@yahoo.com

Commented Article: SMETANIAK Mariia Atanasia. The main aspects of asceticism and repentance in the work of Pratum by John Moschus. *Trans/Form/Ação: Unesp Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 47, n. 2, “Feminine perspectives in philosophical thought”, e0240010, 2024.

Received: 21/07/2023 | Approved: 01/08/2023 | Published: 22/10/2023

 <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2024.v47.n2.e0240020>



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License.

COMMENT ON “THE MAIN ASPECTS OF ASCETICISM AND REPENTANCE IN THE WORK OF *PRATUM* BY JOHN MOSCHUS”

*Eftihios Mariou*¹

Commented Article: SMETANIAK Mariia Atanasia. The main aspects of asceticism and repentance in the work of *Pratum* by John Moschus. **Trans/Form/Ação:** Unesp Journal of Philosophy, vol. 47, n. 2, “Feminine perspectives in philosophical thought”, e0240010, 2024.

In her research, Smetaniak (2024) focuses on the analysis of the work *Pratum* written by John Moschus, which touches on the theme of penance and the main aspects of asceticism. As part of this research, the scientist successfully identified and analyzed the key characteristics of monastic life associated with the ascetic practices of early monasticism described in the work. The *Pratum* is an enduring literary masterpiece that includes a complex narrative structure, recounting the ascetic monks’ outstanding exploits from the 6th to 7th centuries. These monks, including Abba Dorotheus and John the Baptist’s other contemporaries, stand as constant examples of Christian asceticism throughout the centuries. Rejecting the illusory temptations of the world in favor of the higher truth - Christ, they were able to overcome themselves and make a journey to the desolate and waterless desert with their humble prayers’ help and cruel fasting, turning it into a flourishing paradise bearing the fruits of eternal life. Their exploits were inherited by subsequent generations of Christians who sought to acquire deep knowledge and wisdom of life in Christ through their example. The author of the book *Pratum* is a strict anchorite monk: Blessed John Moschus. He is a learned Palestinian monk. He was Saint Sophronius’ mentor and teacher, the future patriarch of Jerusalem. Together, Blessed John Moschus and Sophronius travelled through the Orthodox East, documenting in detail the outstanding achievements and creativity of the Fathers of the Church for the benefit of future generations.

The term “asceticism” comes from the ancient Greek word “ἀσκησις”, which means “exercise”. Initially, it was used to denote physical exercises aimed at improving the health

¹ Open University of Cyprus, Nicosia 12794 – Cyprus. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9893-4316>. E-mail: eftihios.mariou@yahoo.com.

of the body. However, over time, it acquired a moral significance. Thus, it can be concluded that asceticism indicates a conscious limitation of bodily pleasures and rejection of material goods to elevate the soul above the physical sphere. On the other hand, the term “repentance” means a deep transformation, a kind of rethinking that includes a change of mind, a change of life, and a sincere renunciation of sinful behavior. These two concepts were explored in John Moschus’ work.

In the work *Pratum*, John Moschus documents his observations and stories, which were handed down to him about the life of monastic communities in Palestine and Egypt, dating back to the 7th century. Despite its remoteness from our time, the work has reached us in various versions. Many researchers have made considerable efforts to deal with the issues related to the title, authorship and goals of writing this work. But the overwhelming evidence supports the attribution of authorship to John Moschus. The work *Pratum* by John Moschus is of great importance in the study of monastic literature and in expanding our understanding of early Christian monasticism, as it offers a detailed description of the ascetic practices and spiritual ideas of the period. He sheds light on the intricacies of asceticism and penance during this period of his development. However, modern researchers recognize the possible presence of prejudices or ideological views related to the influence of the historical and cultural context in which this work was created (Downey, 2003).

One of the fundamental aspects of monastic life is based on the belief in asceticism as a means of salvation. In other words, it can be argued that action requires contemplation. Ascetics never doubted the value of abstinence, often very severe, and boldly believed that this “substitute for bloody martyrdom” is a true manifestation of love for God, which returns to “nature”, that is, to the pure world created by God, which testifies to the power of the Holy Spirit. For monks, the ascetic practice was a way of transformation “from slavery to freedom.” This practice was manifested in the desire to get rid of social “structures”, such as moral laws. However, internal asceticism retained its original purpose: inviolability, the inaccessibility of the human heart to sin, passions and everything that could spoil free access to God. Although nothing can be “passive” to achieve this goal, on the contrary, it involves a constant struggle for purity of heart.

In the apothegmatic tradition *Pratum*, John Moschus, in a scientific style, gives several conclusions about the process of repentance and its significance for a Christian. This tradition considers repentance as a fundamental component of the spiritual development of a person, which is connected with the effort to overcome the suffering of the body and achieve the prosperity of the soul. Repentance, in the context of this tradition, is seen as a process of soul healing that takes place at the ontological, aesthetic and ethical levels. Repentance transforms a person, making him a God’s temple. It is seen as a way of life that does not require sacrifice and bloodshed but requires self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Such repentance

is the result of the interaction of human and divine will. In this tradition, repentance is considered as a linear process that occurs throughout a person's life. It embodies the main principles of Christian philosophy, which recognize repentance as a form of escape from the kingdom of sin and the devil. One of the manifestations of repentance is a deep hostility to sin, which is characterized by a complete hatred of it. Thus, John Moschus' apothegmatic tradition “*Pratum*”, in a scientific style, attests to the importance of repentance for a Christian, which is reflected in his focus on spiritual growth and efforts to conquer sinfulness in his life.

The work *Pratum* by John Moschus was created for scientific research, in particular for the study of monastic or Christian literature. The work examines the basic principles of monastic life and highlights the importance of ascetic practices, repentance and the role of God's grace in human life. Despite the presence of some terminological complexity, the analysis of the work can reveal its main components. *Pratum* is an important source for understanding the Byzantine mentality and the role of penance and asceticism as a spiritual and social force that greatly influenced the life of late antique and early Byzantine society.

All these conclusions, obtained from this study, are of great importance for understanding the mentality of the early Christian and early Byzantine periods, as well as for considering repentance and asceticism as spiritual and, therefore, social phenomena that influenced the life of late antique and early Byzantine society. John Moschus' work has significant research potential for monastic and Christian literature. Although the work presents the basic principles of monastic life, often due to the use of specific terminology, its structure can be ambiguous. However, the main components can be found in significant parts of the text. The choice of these principles is justified, because the author emphasizes them most expressively, and they can serve the modern generation for a deeper and more complex immersion in spiritual life with God and neighbor. By emphasizing the importance of ascetic practices and the role of God's grace in human life, this study contributes to a better understanding of the function of monasteries in Byzantine society in the late antique and early Byzantine eras.

REFERENCES

- DOWNEY, M. (ed.). **Nuovo Dizionario di Spiritualità**. Vaticano: NDSp, 2003. 1048 p.
- SMETANIAK Mariia Atanasia. The main aspects of asceticism and repentance in the work of *Pratum* by John Moschus. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp Journal of Philosophy, vol. 47, n. 2, “Feminine perspectives in philosophical thought”, e0240010, 2024.