

Interpreting Catastrophe: Disasters in the Works of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, Socrates Scholasticus, Philostorgius, and Timothy Aelurus.

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Abstract

This study examines four different fifth- and early sixth-century Christian authors (Pseudo-Joshua, Socrates Scholasticus, Philostorgius, and Timothy Aelurus). It then analyzes the biblically derived interpretative structures that each uses to explain fifth-century political catastrophes such as the decline of western

Roman political power. All of these authors incorporated a Christian explanation of disasters into a rhetorical strategy designed to advocate certain behaviors. Not all authors expected this rhetoric to influence behavior, but some, such as Pseudo-Joshua and Timothy Aelurus, believed that it could convince people to act in particular ways. The study concludes by arguing that, whereas late antique religious explanations of catastrophe often serve as a literary trope, they need not always be dismissed as empty or ineffectual rhetoric.

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In northern Mesopotamia, the decade and a quarter spanning the years 494 and 506 represented a “period of distress” described in vivid and extremely memorable terms in a *Chronicle* traditionally attributed to Joshua the Stylite.¹ Written in response to a request for a “memorial of (the time) when the locusts came, the sun was dimmed, there was earthquake, famine, and plague, and the war of the Romans and the Persians,”² this early work of Syriac historiography describes a progression of catastrophes that afflicted people living in the areas around Amida and Edessa. The text presents an interesting mixture of political narrative, local history, and theological speculation.

¹ On this text, see the translation and important introduction of F. Trombley, J. Watt, trs., *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* (Liverpool, 2000). Note also S.A. Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley, 1990), 57–75.

² Ps.-Joshua the Stylite 1. All translations are those of Trombley and Watt.



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