

Historical Assessment – In Defence of The Golden Legend: A Case Study of Saint Anthony of Egypt

Assessing the reliability of The Golden Legend narrative of St. Anthony, compared to other written sources.

Dedicated to “Medusa”

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Overview

BLUF (Bottom Line Up Front)

- An account of Saint Anthony of Egypt within The Golden Legend a renowned collection of biographies of saints, criticized by some for historical inaccuracies, was assessed against The Sayings of The Desert Fathers and Athanasius' account of St Anthony of Egypt for reliability.
- We assess The Golden Legend likely drew heavily the two earlier accounts in compiling its own narrative. The key events and narratives about St. Anthony's life documented in The Golden Legend, are all largely consistent with Athanasius' hagiography and the Sayings collection.
- We assess The Golden Legend account to have reliable narrative comparable to the assessed two more authoritative sources, and found no major new or unique events about St. Anthony's life that are not already documented in the other two written accounts.
- We assess that while The Golden Legend's account is quite consistent concerning St. Anthony of Egypt, it is unlikely that this finding can be automatically extrapolated to other accounts written within The Golden Legend due to the large amount of sources used within the work.

Yosi Tosi Research Group Commentary

It should be noted that while this version of the assessment has been made public and can be freely shared or distributed with out cost, providing the author is credited or Yosi Tosi Research Group is mentioned.

Background

The Golden Legend, which includes an account of Saint Anthony of Egypt, a prominent figure in the early Christian Church and widely regarded as the founder of Christian monasticism, is a renowned collection of hagiographies, or biographies of saints, compiled by the 13th-century French cleric Jacobus de Voragine. The work, which was popular during the Middle Ages, contains over 150 stories of the lives, miracles, and martyrdom of several saints. However, the work has also been the subject of considerable criticism over the centuries, with some arguing that the accounts in The Golden Legend are often exaggerated, inaccurate, or even fabricated.

The scope of this assessment focuses on primarily assessing the reliability of the narrative within The Golden Legend account of St. Anthony compared to other popular written sources (The Sayings of The Desert Fathers and Athanasius' account of St Anthony of Egypt). The sources used in writing the account of St. Anthony of Egypt within The Golden Legend have not been assessed.

Furthermore, the assessed accuracy of the account of St. Anthony of Egypt compared with other written works noted within this assessment cannot be automatically extrapolated to other accounts written within The Golden Legend.

Moreover, it should be noted that only two other written sources were selected for comparison, these sources were chosen due to their general popularity and lack of significant criticism, it is possible that other written sources exist which could influence the conclusion of this assessment

The sources and information used for analysis and the production of this historical assessment included, but were not limited to, open-source information.

Lastly, it should be noted that the assessment produced is solely for the purpose of encouraging research regarding the accuracy and historicity of saints venerated by the Catholic Church.

Assessment

During our initial comparison of the basic information and events mentioned within The Golden Legend's account of St. Anthony's life against Athanasius' hagiography and the Sayings collection, we were able to quickly identify that general information about the Desert Father, such as his birth in Egypt to religious parents, his death at 105 years old, and him giving away his possessions and becoming a hermit, were reflected in all three accounts.



Figure 1 : A Syriac text of The Sayings of The Desert Fathers

Furthermore, Saint Anthony of Egypt is depicted as a humble man who goes against temptation and demonic forces by The Golden Legend. All three accounts of St Anthony of Egypt allude to him possessing these character traits. Moreover, all major events within the Golden Legend are reflected within The Sayings of The Desert Fathers and/or Athanasius' account of St Anthony of Egypt.

To demonstrate, the event below is referenced within the Golden Legend account:

St. Anthony of Egypt said unto the Lord 'Lord, I have a great desire to be saved, but my thoughts let me' and an Angel responded 'Do as I do, and thou shalt be safe' and he went out and saw him one while labour and another while pray.

This same event is also recorded within The Sayings of The Desert Fathers:

He said to God, 'Lord, I want to be saved but these thoughts do not leave me alone; what shall I do in my affliction? How can I be saved?' A short while afterwards, when he got up to go out, Anthony saw a man like himself sitting at his work, getting up from his work to pray, then sitting down and plaiting a rope, then getting up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct and reassure him. He heard the angel saying to him, 'Do this and you will be saved.'

Other events recorded in The Golden Legend's account, such as those which could be considered as even more supernatural are also reliably present within at least one of the two authoritative written sources. For example, The Golden Legend's account of St. Anthony speaks of an encounter with a demonic force, in the form of a black child, as written below:

***On a time when he had overcome the spirit of fornication,
the devil came to him in the form of a little child all
black, and fell down at his feet and confessed that
he was the devil of fornication, which S. Anthony
had desired and prayed to see him, for to know him
that so tempted young people.***

In Athanasius' account of St Anthony of Egypt the same event with a spiritual attack from a demon disguised as black child is told as follows:

he appeared to Antony like a black boy, taking a visible shape in accordance with the color of his mind. And cringing to him, as it were, he plied him with thoughts no longer, for guileful as he was, he had been worsted, but at last spoke in human voice and said, 'Many I deceived, many I cast down; but now attacking you and your labours as I had many others, I proved weak.' When Antony asked, Who are you who speak thus with me? He answered with a lamentable voice, 'I am the friend of whoredom, and have taken upon me incitements which lead to it against the young. I am called the spirit of lust. How many have I deceived who wished to live soberly, how many are the chaste whom by my incitements I have over-persuaded!'

Moreover, The Golden Legend, similar to Athanasius' account, describes even more of St. Anthony's lengthy battles with demonic forces, temptations, and visions in the wilderness. Both relate how the demons appeared to Anthony in frightening and violent forms, trying to deter him from his holy path. However, while these trials and difficulties are a central part of the account in all three written sources, it should be noted that The Sayings of The Desert Fathers, does not reference demonic warfare explicitly as the other two accounts.

Likewise, The Golden Legend's depiction of Anthony's interactions with fellow monks and his role as a mentor and advisor to the ascetic community mirrors what is found in the Sayings collection. The legends describe Anthony offering spiritual guidance and performing miraculous healings, which align with the anecdotes preserved in the Sayings.

Regarding the end of Anthony's life, The Golden Legend reflects Athanasius' account, recounting how Anthony peacefully passed away and was buried by two lions in the desert. This distinctive death scene is a key narrative shared across the assessed sources.

We assess all significant acts, themes and details regarding St. Anthony's life presented in The Golden Legend do not seem to diverge significantly from the earlier, more authoritative sources of Athanasius' hagiography and the Sayings of the Desert Fathers. The later legendary account appears to build upon and expand those earlier well-established traditions.

Sources

- **The Sayings of The Desert Fathers**
- **Athanasius's account of St Anthony of Egypt**
- **The Golden Legend**