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The Symbolics of Death and the Construction of Christian Asceticism:
Greek Patristic Voices from the Fourth through Seventh Centuries

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Submitted for the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

*The Symbolics of Death and the Construction of Christian Asceticism:
Greek Patristic Voices from the Fourth through Seventh Centuries*

Jonathan L. Zecher

This thesis examines the role which death plays in the development of a uniquely Christian identity in John Climacus' seventh-century work, the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* and the Greek ascetic literature of the previous centuries. I argue that John Climacus deploys language of death, inherited from a range of Greek Christian literature, as the symbolic framework within which he describes the ascetic lifestyle as developing a Christian identity. This framework is expressed by the ascetic practice of 'memory of death' and by practices of renunciation described as 'death' to oneself and others.

In order to understand Climacus' unique achievement in regard to engagement with death it is necessary first to situate the *Ladder* and its author within the literature of the Greek ascetic tradition, within which Climacus consciously wrote. In the Introduction I develop ways Climacus draws on and develops traditional material, while arguing that it must be treated and interpreted in its own right and not simply as his 'sources.' I then examine the vocabulary of death and the lines of thought opened up in the New Testament. Chapter One argues that the memory of death plays an important role in Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*. Chapter Two surveys material from the fifth- and sixth-century Egyptian and Palestinian deserts in which memory and practice of death are deployed in a wider variety of ways and are increasingly connected to ascetics' fundamental understanding of self and salvation. Chapter Three examines the sixth-century *Quaestiones et Responsiones* of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza in which further elaboration of the same thematic is discernible. Chapter Four concludes this thesis with a sustained reading of John Climacus' *Scala Paradisi* in which the various thematics centring on memory and practice of death are synthesized into the existential framework and practical response, respectively.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

This work has been submitted to the University of Durham in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is my own work and none of it has been previously submitted to the University of Durham or in any other university for a degree.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abbreviations	3
Acknowledgements	11
Introduction	12
I. The Place of the Study.....	16
II. Tradition and the Individual Monk.....	31
III. The Shape of the Present Study.....	37
IV. The Vocabulary of Death.....	42
1. <i>Vita Antonii</i>	56
I. A Rule in Narrative.....	58
II. The New Man and the Old Enemy.....	65
III. Life, Death, and Ascent.....	72
IV. Daily Dying.....	81
2. Heirs of the Desert	86
I. Living Toward Death.....	88
II. Living Beyond Death.....	97
III. The Living Death.....	107
IV. Ambivalence.....	122
3. The Great Old Men of Gaza	128
I. The Memory of Death and the Virtue of Tears.....	131
II. Ages in Opposition and Continuity.....	138
III. The Limit of Death.....	144
IV. Practicing Death in Gaza.....	149
V. Ambiguity and Crucifixion.....	171
4. <i>The Ladder of Divine Ascent</i>	178
I. The Ladder and its Author.....	180
II. The Quest for Unity.....	185
III. The Temporal and Iconic Framework of the Ascetic Life.....	196
IV. The Ascetic Life as Death and Resurrection.....	222
V. Imitating Christ in Death.....	234
Conclusion: John Climacus' Achievement	239
Bibliography	243

ABBREVIATIONS

Primary Sources

- AP** *Apophthegmata Patrum*
- Alphabeticon* Referenced as 'Name #'. *Editio princeps* in PG 40:71-440, and supplemented by Guy, J.-C., *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum*, Subsidia Hagiographica 36 (Brussels: Société des bollandistes, 1984), 19-36; ET Ward, Benedicta (trans.), *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, CS 59 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975).
- Anonyma* Referenced as 'N #'. *Editio princeps* in Nau, F., 'Histoires des solitaires chrétien', in *Revue d'orient chrétien*: 12 (1907), 48-68, 171-81, 393-404; 13 (1908), 47-57, 266-83; 14 (1909), 357-79; 17 (1912), 204-11, 294-301; 18 (1913), 137-46. ET of N 1-132 in *The World of the Desert Fathers: Stories and Sayings From the Anonymous Series of the Apophthegmata Patrum*, trans. Columba Stewart, SLG (Oxford: SLG Press, 1986); ET of N 133 – 393 in *Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward, SLG (Oxford: SLG Press, 1984).
- Systematica* Guy, J.C. (ed. and trans.), *Les Apophthegmes des Pères: collections systématique*, 3 vols., SC 387, 474, 498 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993-2005).

Athanasius of Alexandria:

- CG** *Contra Gentes* in Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, ed. and ET by Robert S. Thompson, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: OUP, 1972).
- DI** *De incarnatione* in Kannengiesser, C. (ed and trans), *Sur l'incarnation du verbe*, SC 199 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1973); ET in Thompson, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*
- VA** *Vita Antonii* in G.J.M. Bartelink (ed and trans), *Vie d'Antoine*, SC 400 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1994); ET Athanasius, *Life of Antony and the Epistle to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, CWS (New York: Paulist Press, 1980)

Basil of Caesarea

- RB** *Asceticon Magnum (sive Quaestiones) regulae brevius tractatae*, ed. J. Garnier, OSB, S. P. N. Basilii Caesareae Cappadociae archiepiscopi opera omnia quae extant, 3 vols. (Venice: Gaspar Girard, 1750-51), reprinted in PG 31:1052-1305; ET in Silvas, Anna, *The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great*, OECS (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 271-452
- RF** *Asceticon Magnum (sive Quaestiones) regulae fusius tractatae [cum Praefatio]*, ed. J. Garnier, OSB, S. P. N. Basilii Caesareae Cappadociae archiepiscopi opera omnia quae extant, 3 vols. (Venice: Gaspar Girard, 1750-51), reprinted in PG 31:889-1052; ET in Silvas, Anna, *The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great*, OECS (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 151-270

Diadochus of Photice

Capita *Capita centum de perfectione spirituali* in É. des Places, *Diadoque de Photicé. Oeuvres spirituelles*, SC 5 (3rd edn.; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1966) and Rutherford, Janet E., *One hundred practical texts of perception and spiritual discernment from Diadochos of Photike*, Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations 8 (Belfast: Institute of Byzantine Studies, 2000); ET in *Philokalia* (ET) 1:251-96.

Evagrius of Pontus:

Cogitationibus *De diversis malignis cogitationibus*, sub nomine Nili ancyrae, Recensio Brevius: PG 79 :1200D-1234A; Recensio Fusius: Évagre le Pontique, *Sur les pensées*, ed., trans., and annot. Paul Géhin and Claire Guillaumont, SC 438 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1998); ET of recensio fusius in Sinkewicz, Robert E., *Evagrius of Pontus. The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, OECS (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 136-82.

Eulogius *Tractatus ad Eulogium*, sub nomine Nili Ancyrae, PG 79:1094D-1140A; alternative text (Athos ms. Γ 93[E], fols. 295v-298r) in Sinkewicz, *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 310-333; ET Sinkewicz, *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 12-59.

Monachos *Sententiae ad Monachos*, sub nomine Nili ancyrae, in Hugo Gressmann, *Nonnenspiegel und Mönchsspiegel des Evagrius Pontikos*, TU 39.4 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1913); ET in Sinkewicz, *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 115-135

Oratione *Tractatus de oratione*, sub nomine Nili Ancyrae, PG 79:1166A-1200D; ET in Sinkewicz, *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 183-209.

Paraenesis *Institutio sive Paraenesis ad monachos* (recensio brevior), sub nomine Nili Ancyrae, in PG 79:1235-40; ET in Sinkewicz, *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 217-223

Practicus *Tractatus practicus vel monachos* in Évagre le pontique, *Traité Pratique ou Le moine*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Antoine and Claire Guillaumont, SC 170-71 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971); ET in Sinkewicz, *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 91-114.

Rationes *De rerum monachalium rationes, earumque juxta quietem appositio*, PG 40:1252D-1264C; ET in Sinkewicz, *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 1-11.

Spiritibus *De octo spiritibus malitiae*, sub nomine Nili Ancyrae, Recensio A: PG 79:1146A-1164D; Recensio B: Muyldermans, J., 'Une nouvelle recension du *De octo spiritibus malitiae* de S. Nil', *Le Muséon* 52 (1939), 235-74. Recensio B ET in Sinkewicz, *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 66-90.

Vitiis *De vitiis quae opposite sunt virtutibus*, sub nomine Nili Ancyrae, PG 79:1140B-1144D; ET Sinkewicz, *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 60-65.

- HL** G.J.M., (ed), *Palladio. La storia Lausiaca* (Verona: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1974); Butler, Cuthbert (ed), *The Lausiaca History of Palladius*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: CUP, 1904); ET Robert Meyer (trans), *Palladius: The Lausiaca History*, ECW 34 (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1964).
- HM** A.-J. Festugiere (ed.), *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, Subsidia Hagiographica Graeca 34 (Brussels, 1961); ET in Norman Russell, *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, CS 34 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980).
- Ladder** John Climacus [or Scholasticus], *Scala Paradisi*, ed. Mattheus Rader, *S.P.N. Ioannis Scholastici abbatis Montis Sina, qui vulgo Climacus appellatur opera omnia* (1633), reprinted in PG 88:624A-1164D; Sophronios (ed), Κλίμαξ (Constantinople, 1883; repr. Volos: Schoinas, 1959); ET by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (1959; repr. Brookline, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1978) and Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (trans), *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, CWS (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

Mark the Monk:

- De Lege** *De lege spirituali* in Marc le moine, *Traité*s, vol. 1, ed. G.-M. de Durand, SC 445. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1999), 74-128 ; ET in *Philokalia* (ET) vol. 1, 110-24 ; and Mark the Monk, *Counsels on the Spiritual Life*, 2 vols. in 1, trans. Tim Vivian and Augustine Casiday, *Popular Patristics* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 85-111.
- Ad Nicolaum** *Ad Nicolaum praecepta animae salutaria*, in Marc le moine, *Traité*s, vol. 2, ed. G.-M. de Durand, SC 455. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2000), 106-154 ; ET in *Philokalia* (ET) vol. 1, 147-60 and *Counsels on the Spiritual Life*, 55-78.
- Operibus** *De his qui putant se ex operibus justificari* in *Traité*s, vol. 1, 130-200; ET in *Philokalia* (ET) vol. 1, 125-46 and *Counsels on the Spiritual Life*, 113-139.

Ps-Macarius:

- Collectio B** *Sermones* (collectio B), in Berthold, H. (ed.), *Makarios/Symeon Reden und Briefe. Die Sammlung I des Vaticanus Graecus 694 (B)*, 2 vols., GCS 55-56 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1973)
- Collectio H** *Sermones* (collectio H) in H. Dörries, F. Klosterman, and M. Kroeger (eds), *Die 50 geistlichen Homilien des Makarios*, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 4 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1964); ET Pseudo-Macarius, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, trans. George A. Maloney, CWS (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).
- Collectio HA** *Sermones* (collectio HA) in G.L. Marriott (ed), *Macarii anecdota*, *Harvard Theological Studies* 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918, repr. 1969)

- Philokalia** Macarius of Corinth and Nicodemus of Athos (eds), ΦΙΚΟΚΑΛΙΑ ΤΩΝ ΙΕΡΩΝ ΝΗΠΤΙΚΩΝ ΠΑΤΕΡΩΝ (Venice, 1782; reprinted in 5 vols., Athens: Aster, 1982) ; ET G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware et al., *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, 4 vols. to date (London: Faber & Faber, 1979-1995) .
- PS** PG 87.3:2851-3116; supplemented by Mioni, Elpidio, 'Il Pratum Spirituale di Giovanni Mosco: Gli episodi inediti del Cod. Marciano Greco II, 21', *OCP* 17 (1951), 61-94; and Nissen, Th., 'Unbekannte Erzählungen aus dem Pratum Spirituale', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 38 (1938), 251-76; ET in Wortley, John (trans),): *The Spiritual Meadow of John Moschos*, CS 139 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992).
- QR** Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, *Quaestiones et Responsiones* in Neyt, François and de Angelis-Noah, Paula (eds), *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza. Correspondances*, trans. Lucien Regnault, 5 vols., SC 426-27, 450-51, and 468 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1997-2002) ; ET Chryssavgis, John, *Barsanuphius and John. Letters*, 2 vols, Fathers of the Church 113-14 (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2006-2007).
- SVF** *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, ed. H. von Arnim, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1923-1938)

Other Abbreviations

- CCSG *Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca*
- CCSL *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*
- CSCO *Corpus Scriptorum Christianum Orientalium*
- CSEL *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*
- CUA Catholic University of America
- CUP Cambridge University Press
- CWS Classics of Western Spirituality
- DS *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 20 vols., ed. M. Viller et al. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1937-1995)
- ECW Early Christian Writers
- ET English Translation
- GCS *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*

GNO	<i>Gregorii Nysseni Opera</i> , 10 vols., ed. W. Jaeger, H. Langerbeck, et al. (Leiden: Brill, repr. 2008-09)
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
Lampe	Lampe, G.W.H. (ed), <i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961)
LSJ	Liddell, H.G., Scott, R., Jones, H.S., and McKenzie, R. (eds), <i>A Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement</i> (9th ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)
OCP	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
OECS	Oxford Early Christian Studies
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
OUP	Oxford University Press
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>
SP	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
SVOTQ	<i>Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Quarterly</i>
TDNT	Kittel, Gerhard (ed), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. and ET Geoffrey R. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-76)
TU	<i>Texte und Untersuchungen</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
ZTNW	<i>Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und antike Christentum</i>

To Tatiana, my wife, and
To my parents, Rodney and Jennifer;
In loving gratitude for all that each
Has sacrificed and given and endured,
In ways known only to themselves,
In hope that this work will offer some recompense
For the unpayable debt I owe to each,
I dedicate these chastened words with love.

There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
From self and from things and from persons; and, growing
 between them, indifference
Which resembles the others as death resembles life,
Being between two lives – unflowering, between
The live and the dead nettle. This is the use of memory:
For liberation – not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past. Thus, love of a country
Begins as attachment to our own field of action
And comes to find that action of little importance
Though never indifferent. History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved
 them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.
Sin is behovely, but
All shall be well, and
All manner of thing shall be well.

---T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*: IV: 'Little Gidding', III, ll. 1-19

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Jonathan L. Zecher

May, 2011

INTRODUCTION

One might say that Christianity rendered the souls of the living and those of the dead continuous in a new way, as if the living soul were in some sense already dead, while the dead soul, in that very same sense, were still alive.

---Robert Pogue Harrison,
The Dominion of the Dead, 106-107

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.

---T.S. Eliot,
'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in his
The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism, 48

A monk is: achievement of the order and state of the bodiless beings in a material and defiled body.

A monk is: one who holds only God's edicts and words in every time, place, and act.

A monk is: ceaseless struggle against nature and unfailing prison of senses.

A monk is: chastened body and purified mouth and enlightened mind.

*A monk is: affliction—a soul trained by ceaseless memory of death, whether asleep or awake.*¹

John Climacus, abbot of the Vatos Monastery at the base of Gebel Musa on the Sinaite peninsula, penned these words in the mid-Seventh century. This series of ὄροι, 'definitions', of the monk form part of the opening chapter of his *magnum opus*, the *Scala Paradisi*, or *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, a work which would exercise unparalleled influence on the Byzantine and Eastern Christian spiritual traditions. I have highlighted the final definition because, as this study will demonstrate, engagement with death is fundamental to the development of a monk's character and, in fact, thanatological vocabulary underpins and informs the other definitions given. The monk's home is his 'tomb before the tomb...For no one leaves the tomb until the general resurrection. But if some depart, know that they have died.'² The monk lives as though dead on the earth yet, as this passage indicates also, differently from those have 'died' through premature departure from the monastery. Climacus makes of death a symbolic framework within which to cultivate and communicate the contours of Christian ascetic identity. In doing so, Climacus highlights the profound importance of understanding practices like the 'memory of death' and metaphorical deployment of 'death' for interpreting the ideals and tools of Christian asceticism.

Climacus was hardly original in emphasizing the 'memory of death' or in metaphorizing death in order to cultivate a markedly Christian, ascetic, identity. A peculiar attitude to death as constitutive of life is, as it were, stitched through whole fabric of the early Christian theological tradition. Paul had reminded the Christians in Rome that in baptism they had 'died' and 'been buried' with Christ, and so they ought to live accordingly, expecting resurrection and glory with him as well. Jesus in the various Gospel accounts cautioned his disciples that, in order to live they must first die—whether intended literally or figuratively, John's image of a fallen grain of wheat, trampled into the dirt only to spring up

¹ *Scala Paradisi*, §1, PG 88:633B-C: Μοναχός ἐστιν τάξις καὶ κατάστασις ἀσωμάτων ἐν σώματι ὑλικῷ καὶ ὀυπαρῶ ἐπιτελουμένη. Μοναχός ἐστιν ὁ μόνον τῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐχόμενος ὄρων καὶ λόγων, ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ, καὶ τόπῳ, καὶ πράγματι. Μοναχός ἐστιν· βία φύσεως διηνεκῆς, καὶ φυλακὴ αἰσθήσεων ἀνελλιπῆς. Μοναχός ἐστιν ἡγνισμένον σῶμα, καὶ κεκαθαρμένον στόμα, καὶ πεφωτισμένους νοῦς. Μοναχός ἐστιν κατώδυνος ψυχὴ ἐν διηνεκεῖ μνήμη θανάτου ἀδολεσχοῦσα, καὶ ὑπνώπτουσα, καὶ γρηγοροῦσα. See Abbreviations for editions and ET's.

² §4, PG 88:716B: Μνήμά σοι πρὸ μνήματος ὁ τόπος ἐστω. Οὐδεὶς γὰρ ἀπὸ μνήματος ἐξέρχεται ἄχρι τῆς κοινῆς ἀναστάσεως· εἰ δὲ καὶ τινες ἐξῆλθον, ὅρα ὅτι ἀπέθανον· ὅπερ μὴ παθεῖν ἡμᾶς, τὸν Κύριον δυσωπήσωμεν.

once more, is haunting. To see how later generations of Christians would heed Jesus' words, one need only call to mind the armies of martyrs who chose death in order to gain life. Death's role remained integral to the ascetic movement's rapid growth in the Fourth century. In Athanasius' biography of him, Antony the Great used the thought of death and Christ's eschatological judgment to repel the Devil's advances. Evagrius described the practice at some length, Ps-Macarius praised the qualities of the corpse, while various Desert Fathers would, in various ways, speak of 'dying to oneself', of 'keeping death before one's eyes', and of the virtues that went with these practices. Climacus stands self-consciously within a long line of ascetic theologians and practitioners, whom would refer to as the 'discerning Fathers' and professed to follow wholeheartedly. To understand Climacus and his contribution to Christian ascetic spirituality, we must also appreciate and understand those who would influence, inspire, and provide him with much of the raw material out of which he would craft his own ladder to Paradise.

This study will, therefore, examine a range of Greek Christian ascetic literature of the centuries leading up to Climacus' own lifetime (ca. 579-659 CE).³ I shall focus on the language of 'death', and will argue that death, considered as both the fundamental condition of mortality and an entrance into eschatological judgment by Christ, provides an evocative symbol on which these writers regularly draw to cultivate and communicate their ideal identity as Christians. I look first at Athanasius of Alexandria's mitigated but suggestive deployment of engagement with death in his *Vita Antonii* (Chapter 1). I then explore death's complicated, often ambivalent, elaboration in the Desert Fathers of the fifth and early sixth centuries (Chapter 2). Next, I examine the correspondence of the Gaza Fathers of the mid-sixth century to show how for them the themes and imagery of death have become integral to their hermeneutic of the ascetic life (Chapter 3). In each of these three chapters I will discuss a number of interrelated practices treated throughout the literature: obedience, renunciation, exile, humility, non-judgment, dispassion, and, above all, the denial of one's own will. These concepts are common to the writers at hand and suggest a relatively stable vocabulary for speaking of ascetic spirituality. I will discuss them because over time authors increasingly describe these various practices in terms of the practice of 'death.' The importance of death for ascetics is demonstrable from this movement by which death becomes a dominant feature of the language of ascetic identity. Nevertheless, I will also demonstrate the ambiguities and ambivalence which accompany the language of death as it becomes more widely used.

³ I will discuss dating in chapter four below.

I will then offer a sustained reading of the *Scala Paradisi* (Chapter 4) in which I will argue that John Climacus elaborates these ascetic practices within an existential engagement with death which overcomes the ambivalence and ambiguities of prior literature. For Climacus the event and concept of death provide the organizing logic for the ascetic life—principles according to which the monk can make progress through failure and become a Christian—in Climacus’ definition a true imitator of Christ. Under the rubric of death, Climacus draws together the themes laid out in the first three chapters and, in doing so, elaborates a profound vision of the human person and of ascetic spirituality. For him, all progress in the virtues and practices discussed in the first three chapters is mobilized by a certain existential engagement with death. Further, this progress toward Christian identity takes the form of a metaphorical practice of death.

This study will accomplish three tasks. First, it will offer a holistic understanding of John Climacus’ contribution to ascetic spirituality in terms of identity-formation, opening up fruitful avenues for further research on the *Ladder* as well as re-examination of later Byzantine ascetic literature. Second, it will broaden our understanding of the variety of literature associated with the Egyptian and Gaza deserts by examining at length a theme which has not yet received scholarly attention. Third, by thus situating Climacus, this study will demonstrate more clearly than has yet been done the ways in which a Greek ascetic *tradition* took—or, perhaps, was given—shape as a normative and coherent body of wisdom which would itself shape later writers in their own traditional and creative work.

This last point will not only be made over the course of the study, but also informs the choices I have made in terms of material, organization, and hermeneutical approach. I will, therefore dedicate the remainder of the Introduction to three inter-related tasks. First, I will situate the study’s scholarly contribution in terms of how others have attempted to locate the *Ladder* within earlier and later Greek ascetic literature. Second, I will explain, in light of its intended contribution to scholarship, the shape of this present study. Third, I will trace the contours of the vocabulary and conceptualizations of death which are found in the New Testament (NT). I do so because the NT provides a common well-spring of Christian ascetic self-understanding, ideals, and practices, as well as a shared vocabulary with which to describe those ideals and practices. The themes which I will examine over the course of this study all have their roots—one way or another—in creative interpretations of Scriptural and, especially, NT material. The introduction, then, will offer an understanding of *tradition* as both material and hermeneutic which will allow us to fully appreciate Climacus’ unique contribution to Christian spirituality and, more specifically, Byzantine and Eastern ascetic theology.

I. THE PLACE OF THE STUDY

I had not originally intended this study to be about Climacus. Having envisioned a broad thematic survey, I approached the *Ladder* expecting only another example among many. What I found—and what I hope to convey to the reader—was a profound and synoptic presentation of the ascetic life in which death figured not as leitmotif or even as one principle among many, but as a central and organizing concern. Moreover, I found that I could not treat Climacus as simply one more ascetic author, and then move on. His influence was immense in the Byzantine ascetic world and is still unsurpassed in the Christian East. Though as yet barely felt in the scholarly world, a body of literature is growing around this enigmatic figure and his imaginative treatment of ascetic spirituality. For these two reasons—his influence and his profundity—I have chosen, then, to focus this study on John Climacus. Chapter Four will offer a lengthier introduction to the *Ladder*, its structure, and its author, but I will here draw out what I mean by Climacus’ ‘influence’ and discuss what sort of text it may be.

The Ladder in Byzantium and Beyond

It is the *Ladder* more than the man which so inspired later monks and theologians. The man remains enigmatic, his ‘biography’ by Daniel of Raithou (the basis for all later menological and hagiographical notices) cookie-cutter hagiography. The *Ladder* itself, however, has become a unique locus of reverent study. Peter Brown, though dedicating to it only a few brief pages in his massive *The Body and Society*, there called the *Ladder* the ‘masterpiece of Byzantine spiritual direction’⁴ His comment concerns its content, of which we will speak at length later, but it also touches on its popularity. Scripture excepted, almost no other work has exercised such a profound and lasting influence on Greek Christian ascetic spirituality.

Climacus’ Spiritual Sons

The *Ladder*’s popularity spread from Sinai across the Byzantine Empire and would gain a decisive place in Eastern Christian spirituality. In Sinai, Climacus’ work was followed, expanded, and interpreted

⁴ Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (rev. ed.; New York: Columbia, 2008), 237

by Hesychius (7th-8th c.?) and Philotheus (8th-9th c.?) of Sinai.⁵ These two authors, about whom almost nothing is known, but whose short works are memorialized by their inclusion in the *Philokalia*⁶ together form what some scholars refer to as the ‘Sinaite School’ of ascetic spirituality.⁷ The language of ‘school’ unduly pigeonholes their works, but it remains true that the *Ladder* so exercised their imaginations that their works simply elaborate on it. Further afield, the great Constantinopolitan monk and monastic organizer Theodore the Studite (759-826) liked and recommended the *Ladder*.⁸ Later, it graced the courtly library of Symeon the New Theologian’s father, and Symeon’s (949-1022) discovery of this book inspired and in no small part formed Symeon’s own life and ideas.⁹ Symeon’s disciple and biographer, Nicetas Stethatus (11th c.), like his mentor drew heavily on the *Ladder*.¹⁰

Later, the Hesychast movement—an important strand of ascetic spirituality in Byzantium which became the dominant one following its vindication and political backing in the mid-Fourteenth century—turned to the *Ladder* for instruction.¹¹ Briefly summarized, Hesychasm is the practice of ‘inner stillness’ (ήσυχία) through certain techniques like short, repetitive prayers, the most famous being the ‘Jesus prayer’: ‘Κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστὲ υἱὲ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐλέησον με.’ Monks, particularly in Athonite monasteries after the twelfth century, undertook this practice assiduously, seeing in it the culmination of ascetic

⁵ Hesychius, Λόγος πρὸς Θεόδουλον ψυχωφελῆς καὶ σωτήριος περὶ νήψεως καὶ ἀρετῆς ἐν κεφαλαίοις διηρημένος διακοσίοις τρεῖς, *Philokalia* 1:141-75; Philotheus, Νηπτικὰ κεφάλαια τεσσαράκοντα, *Philokalia* 2:279-88. See especially their respective introductions in *Philokalia* ET, 1:161 (Hesychius) and 3:15 (Philotheus).

⁶ An anthology edited by Macarius of Corinth and Nicodemus of Athos and published in 1782, it is composed of works conducive to or consciously written about what had become known as ‘Hesychast spirituality,’ which I discuss below. Publication information is found in Abbreviations.

⁷ *Philokalia* ET, 3:15; Völker, W., *Scala Paradisi. Eine Studie zu Johannes Climacus und zugleich eine Vorstudie zu Symeon dem Neuen Theologen* (Wiesbaden, 1968), 291-314. See also John Chryssavgis’ more cautious assessment in his *John Climacus: From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 39.

⁸ Theodore the Studite, *Epistulae*, 150, 303; Theodore several times defers to ‘the holy Climacus’ in his own catecheses: *Μεγάλη κατήχησις*, 73 (p. 505) 98 (p. 706), .122 (p. 913).

⁹ Nicetas Stethatus, *Vita Symeonis Novi Theologici*, 6, in Hausherr, Irénée (ed. and trans.), *Un grand mystique byzantine: Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien par Nicétas Stéthatos*, *Orientalia Christiana* 12 (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1928).

¹⁰ It is clear from Symeon’s own writings as well as Nicetas’ biography that he drew from Climacus his emphasis on tears and the memory of death, as well as his views on the ‘spiritual father.’ See especially the excellent article by Kallistos Ware, ‘The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian’, *SP* 18.2 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 299-316. Nicetas’ teaching on tears reflects what we find in both Climacus and Symeon: ‘On the Practice of the Virtues’, 69-70 in *Philokalia* ET 4:97. See also Hilarion Alfeyev’s *Saint Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, OECS (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 273.

¹¹ Couilleau, G., ‘Saint Jean Climaque’, *DS* 8, 382-86 379-80, 386-87; Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 222-232; Ware, ‘Introduction’, 43-58. See also Bogdanovic, Dimitrije, ‘Jean Climaque dans la littérature Byzantine et la littérature Serbe ancienne’, in his *Jovan Lestvičnik u vizantijskog i staroj srpskoj književnosti* (Belgrade: Vizantolozhki Institut, 1968), 222-224.

Christian life. They even claimed that such practices allowed them to reach such a state of blessedness and union with God that they could physically see what they referred to as the ‘uncreated light of Christ.’ This movement began in the monasteries of Mt. Athos in the Thirteenth century and as it spread its proponents, particularly Gregory of Sinai (1265-1346) and Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), would turn to the *Ladder* to find references to both the ‘Jesus prayer’ and experience of ‘uncreated light.’¹² While it would be very hard indeed to claim (as some have) that Hesychast readings of the *Ladder* reflect the concerns of the text or its author, it is probable that Hesychasts drew not only inspiration but, more especially, legitimacy and the unquestionable stamp of tradition, from imaginative readings of the *Ladder*.¹³

Ultimately, I would not argue that the *Ladder* alone imparted to later Byzantine spirituality its unique character. Rather, it appears in later writings as an unquestioned and authoritative document, recommended reading for monks and Hesychasts, as well as lay people common and royal. Climacus was not the only author so memorialized, nor the *Ladder* the only work, and yet it more than any other is cited, used, and recommended by name. Understanding later Byzantine theological and spiritual thought demands that we pay sustained attention to this formative element in its tradition.

The Character of the Text

Aside from references in later writers, even a brief glance at the *Ladder*’s textual history reveals a vast and widely dispersed manuscript tradition extending well beyond Byzantium’s borders. To judge from its surviving manuscripts, the *Ladder* is—Scripture excepted—one of, if not the *the* most popular spiritual work of the Christian East.¹⁴ Written in the seventh century, by the eighth it was translated into

¹² Nicephorus the Monk, ‘On Watchfulness and the Guarding of the Heart’ (in *Philokalia* ET, 4:200); Gregory of Sinai, ‘On Stillness: Fifteen Texts’, 2-13 (*Philokalia* ET, 4:265-72); idem, ‘On Prayer: Seven Texts’, 4-5 (*Philokalia* ET, 4:277-80); and Gregory Palamas, ‘In Defense of Those Who Devoutly Practise a Life of Stillness’, 4-7 (*Philokalia* ET, 4:335-37).

¹³ Hesychasm was a relatively recent development and its claims struck many as ‘novel’—the dirtiest word in Byzantine theological vocabulary. Its proponents defended its traditionality by scouring accepted works by Mark the Monk, Diadochus of Photice, Nilus of Ancyra, the Gaza Fathers, and Climacus for possible references to Hesychasm.

¹⁴ Robert Sinkewicz lists more than seven hundred Greek manuscripts. Of these, three hundred date from before 1300 CE. To these must be added Slavonic (of which Bogdanovic lists 108), Romanian, Syriac, Arabic, Georgian, Armenian, and even the Latin manuscripts which would follow. See: Sinkewicz, *Manuscript Listings for the Authors of the Patristic and Byzantine Period*, Greek Index Project Series 4 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1992), L21-C22; Johnsen, Henrik Rydell. *Reading John Climacus: Rhetorical Argumentation, Literary Convention and the Tradition of Monastic Formation* (Lund: Lund University, 2007), 10-11; Bogdanovic, *JovanLestvičnik*, 205-08, cited in Heppel, Muriel, ‘Some Slavonic Manuscripts of the ‘Scala Paradisi’ (‘Lestvica’), *Byzantinoslavica* 18.2 (1957), 233; Gribomont, Jean, ‘La *Scala paradise*, Jean de Rhaïthou et Ange Clarenò’, *Studia Monastica* 2.2 (1960), 345-58.

Syriac; by the eleventh into Georgian, Armenian, and Slavonic; by the fourteenth into Latin, Romanian and then Spanish, Portuguese and more.¹⁵ Each monastery would have had a copy, as did kings and princes, scholars, courtiers and other laymen.¹⁶ The evidence also suggests that these were well read and much-loved. For example, the *Ladder* was kept in Romanian households and handed down just like a family Bible.¹⁷ Likewise, at the other end of the social spectrum, we have already seen how Byzantine courtiers might keep a copy in their private library and there is the interesting point that after Scripture the *Ladder* is the most often-quoted text in the surviving correspondence of the Russian Tsar Ivan IV ‘the Terrible’ (1530-1584)—though perhaps we should not hold this fact against the *Ladder*.¹⁸ The numerous surviving manuscripts are also—almost uniquely so—very heavily illuminated and illustrated¹⁹ while iconic depictions of it adorn numerous monastery church walls. Clearly, Climacus’ masterpiece fired the artistic imagination of Byzantine copyists and iconographers. While authorial references reveal it as influential in certain circles, the manuscript tradition reveals the *Ladder* as an enormously popular and highly respected text across the entire Christian East.

Yet for all its popularity the *Ladder* has a relatively stable textual transmission. Where we might expect dozens of different versions all claiming authority, we find, for the most part, a text free from significant variation. Henrik Johnsén has usefully compiled results from the *Ladder*’s editors and scholars, discerning five more or less common types of variation: the title of the book, the titles of the rungs, the division of some rungs, explanatory additions, and short omissions. There is one other point of significant variance, though not in the text itself. Manuscripts of the *Ladder* very often have bodies of *scholia* (interpretive comments) either appended to chapters or in the margins. In some cases, the scholia have found their way into the text—thus the ‘explanatory additions.’ Nevertheless, the scholia vary

¹⁵ See Couilleau, ‘Jean Climaque’, 382-86; Corneanu, N., ‘Contributions des traducteurs roumains à la diffusion de «l’Echelle» de saint Jean Climaque’, *SP* 8 [TU 93] (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1963), 340-355. Portions of the *Ladder* survive in Ethiopic as well—sections of §6 (on the Memory of Death) in the *Patericon Aethiopicus*, 2 vols., ed. Victor Arras, CSCO 277-78 [Scriptores Aethiopici 53, 55] (Louvain: Peeters, 1976) as well as a recently published version of §5 (on Repentance) in an article by Robert Beylot (‘Un Témoin éthiopien inédit du Gradus 5 de Jean Climaque, Colledgeville EMMML 1939, Folio 102 R°-113 V°’, in M.A. Amir-Moezzi, J.D. Dubois, et al. (eds), *Pensée grecque et sagesse d’Orient. Hommage à Michel Tardieu*, Bibliothèque de l’école des hautes études sciences religieuses 142 [Turnhout: Brepols, 2009], 89-107).

¹⁶ Since the *Ladder* must be read each Lent, the monastery library could not be without it. We have already seen Symeon the New Theologian’s father, a Byzantine courtier, in possession of a copy.

¹⁷ Corneanu, ‘Contributions des traducteurs roumains’, 342

¹⁸ Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 236

¹⁹ Martin, J.R., *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Studies in Manuscript Illumination 5 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954)

widely within the manuscript tradition. Scholia aside, Johnsén concludes astutely that ‘there are variations in the manuscripts, but they do not seem to be numerous and rarely of much importance.’²⁰ In this way the *Ladder* differs from other very popular works like the *Apophthegmata Patrum* or the *Pratum Spirituale*, whose textual transmission is as tortuous as it is vast.²¹ Rather, the *Ladder*’s greatest point of variation emerges in the body of scholia, not always well distinguished from the text, which has attached to it.

These two facts—stability and commentary—allow us to characterize how the *Ladder* was perceived by its readers. It was understood as an *authoritative collection of wisdom* and so, while its author could remain all but anonymous, its copying was undertaken with great care—changes being rare (outside of book and chapter titles), and illustrations (even colour ones) popular. This same perception explains the more widely varied body of scholia which have, in some cases, attached to the text itself: as it was read and interpreted, other bits of wisdom (often attributed to if not directly taken from works of famous luminaries like Isaac the Syrian, Barsanuphius of Gaza, and others) which recalled the *Ladder* or with which it resonated, would be inserted in the margins to explain this or that obscure point. It was—like works by Maximus Confessor, Dionysius the Areopagite, or Gregory Nazianzen to which similar bodies of scholia have attached—difficult to understand, but, like those other theologians, must have been also perceived as worth the effort of understanding. It became a locus of meditative reading onto which readers might pour out libations of wisdom accrued from numerous writers.

Conclusion

In light of textual stability and the continuing lack of a critical edition, I have relied confidently on the *editio princeps* by Matthew Rader, reprinted in Migne’s PG.²² Though it has undeniable flaws—misreadings, omissions, typos, the usual litany of errata associated with texts in PG—it is likely a

²⁰ Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*, 14-17 (quote from 16)

²¹ On AP see Guy, J.-C., ‘Remarques sur le texte des *Apophthegmata Patrum*’, *Recherches de science religieuse* 63 (1955), 252-58 ; as well as his *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum*, Subsidia Hagiographica 36 (Brussels: Société des bollandistes, 1984). On PS, see Mioni, Elpidio, ‘Il Pratum Spirituale di Giovanni Mosco’, OCP 17 (1951): 61-94; and Chadwick, Henry, ‘John Moschus and his Friend Sophronius the Sophist’, *JTS* n.s. 25:1 (1974), 41-47.

²² *Sancti patris nostril Ioannis Scholastici abbatis Montis Sina, qui vulgo Climacus appellatur opera omnia* (1633), reprinted in PG 88:632-1164. Edition and ET’s are found in Abbreviations. I have consulted Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell’s ET, but all translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

representative and reasonably accurate rendering of the *Ladder*.²³ I have, however, not examined the scholia (though Rader printed many at the end of each Rung), as lying somewhat outside the hermeneutical purview of this study—though a study of these would be very fruitful in its own right.

It is his popularity, though, which continues to astound me. Climacus and the *Ladder* are commemorated on the Fourth Sunday of Lent in the Christian East and in those monasteries the *Ladder* is prescribed daily reading alongside Theodore the Studite's *Catecheses* and the 'Greek' Ephrem's metrical homilies in the *Triodion*—the book of services for Lent—thus perennially reinforcing its perception as a dominant force in Eastern Christian spirituality.²⁴ One can easily see from the foregoing survey of its literary influence and textual tradition that Climacus—or, rather, the *Ladder*—is well worth scholarly attention.

Though the textual critic and historian alike find themselves stymied before this unknown man John and his inordinately popular work, it cannot be denied that understanding Climacus greatly facilitates our comprehension of the complex development of various traditions and, in particular, the Hesychast movement in later Byzantine and Eastern Orthodox spirituality. Likewise it gives us an important insight into the spiritual assumptions and reading habits of generations of Eastern Christians. In light of its popularity and influence the continuing scantiness of scholarly attention is, to say the least, surprising, even with the lack of scientific critical edition. The *Ladder*, therefore, deserves greater attention and, I shall argue now, more nuanced interpretation, than it has so far received.

The State of Climacian Studies

I must confess to a bit of irony in using the term 'Climacian studies.' Unlike so many Church Fathers whose venerable names have been eponymously applied to the ever-increasing bodies of scholarly literature dedicated to their study, Climacus has garnered no such legacy. To date there are

²³ Another edition, by the monk Sophronius, (Κλίμαξ, [Constantinople, 1883; repr. Athens, 1959]), is preferred by L. Petit ('Saint Jean Climaque', *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. 8 [Paris, 1924], 690-93) and Couilleau, ('Saint Jean Climaque', col. 382). In favour of Rader's edition, Dimitrije Bogdanovic, noted that 'l'édition de M. Rader...est, à notre sens, encore utilisable, cor les variants, pourtant existantes, ne sont ni nombreuses ni importantes' ('Jean Climaque dans la littérature', 217). Johnsén (*Reading John Climacus*, 12-19) has made a persuasive case for preferring Rader's edition—Sophronius had no qualms about incorporating *scholia* and his own readings into the text when he felt that explanation might be required. His text, therefore, is less reliable as a witness to the *Ladder* than Rader's which, for its faults, leaves the *Ladder* alone.

²⁴ Lash, Ephrem, 'The Greek Writings Attributed to Saint Ephrem the Syrian', in Behr, John, Conomos, Dimitrie, and Louth, Andrew (eds), *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West, Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos Ware* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2003), 82-83

only five monographs and a couple dozen articles dedicated to the man or the work. Apart from these, a few book chapters, two introductions and the requisite dictionary entries make up the bulk of what we may affectionately term ‘Climacian studies.’ This situation is certainly surprising, given the incredible popularity of the *Ladder* among Byzantine and Eastern Christians, but, in fact, it is probably urged on by precisely that fact. The *Ladder’s* manuscript tradition, as I have noted, is so vast and complex—however stable it may be—as to preclude a critical edition which is, undoubtedly, the cornerstone of a scholarly corpus. Nevertheless, the literature grows and, as it does, two clearly discernible hermeneutical trends have emerged. I will briefly lay these out and then introduce the relevant literature according to them, before moving into the more detailed hermeneutical discussion which will follow.

John Climacus wrote probably three centuries after the Christian ascetic movement exploded across the Mediterranean world. He wrote with the accumulated wisdom of those centuries spread out before him and his own work is deeply indebted to a wide range of literature. He was also followed, as I have shown above, by numerous authors who either continued his work in their own way or—as was more common among the Hesychasts—plundered his pages for whatever might be amenable to their own practices and beliefs. Thus, when reading Climacus, it is tempting either to look *back* to the world which shaped his text or *forward* to the world which was shaped (or at least wanted to have been shaped) by his text.

Moderately applied, of course, neither tendency is damnable. In fact, both may yield up rich fruit. However, it is also tempting to move to polar extremes and to let concern with its past or future ideologically drive one’s reading of the *Ladder*. Looking backward, scholars too often read Climacus simply as a ‘synthesizer’ of earlier tradition and so submerge the *Ladder’s* concerns and context in an ever-further dissected analysis of ‘source-material.’ Or, looking forward, it is easy to read Climacus as ‘proto-Hesychast’ and the *Ladder* as a Hesychast treatise written about six centuries before its time. Both of these extremes lead to more or less egregious misreading of the *Ladder*, either emphasizing things Climacus does not or fitting him into constrictive pigeonholes. Curiously, both extremes, motivated by certain conceptions of ‘tradition’, effectively disjoint the *Ladder* from its proper place within the complex and ever-developing Greek ascetic tradition. It is neither the ‘end’ nor the ‘beginning’, but, rather, an important moment in which prior moments are joined, and later ones anticipated or hinted at. Nevertheless, reading the *Ladder* as end or beginning of tradition has been the tendency among scholars who can generally be divided into two camps based on which pole they choose for Climacus’ location.

The Discerning Fathers

In 1968, Walther Völker published *Scala Paradisi. Eine Studie zu Johannes Climacus und zugleich eine Vorstudie zu Symeon dem Neuen Theologen*,²⁵ one of a series of works by him on Greek patristic spirituality.²⁶ In it, he analyzed the *Ladder* chapter by chapter, attempting to work out the practical spirituality he found therein. What is interesting about this piece is that, aside from careful examination of Climacus' possible sources, Völker approached Climacus as preparation for an examination of later Byzantine theology—that he dedicated the final chapters to the 'Sinaite school' and to Symeon the New Theologian shows that he has in mind the *Ladder's* *Nachlass* and, indeed, this significantly colours his approach. In the same year appeared Dimitrije Bogdanovic's *Jovan Lestvičnik u vizantijskog i staroj srpskoj književnosti*, whose closing chapter he mercifully wrote in French rather than Serbo-Croat. Bogdanovic was clearly a careful reader of Climacus, though he too was, at least in his closing chapter, deeply concerned with later readings of Climacus and, especially, his influence on the Hesychast tradition. In 1989, John Chryssavgis published his doctoral dissertation entitled *Ascent to Heaven: The Theology of Human Person according to Saint John of the Ladder* which over the years he refined into *John Climacus: From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain*. This book is less a study of Climacus than an interesting essay in theological anthropology for which the *Ladder* and Christos Yannaras' work,²⁷ as well as Hesychasm, provide three entangled root-systems. Chryssavgis falls directly into the trap of trying desperately to find Hesychast leanings in Climacus.²⁸ However, it must be noted that Chryssavgis also wants to fit Climacus into categories which he draws from the earlier Gaza Fathers.²⁹ Unfortunately, this amounts, in his work, to making the Gaza Fathers *also* into curiously Existentialist-Palamite Hesychasts.

More recently, the pendulum has, thanks to a salutary push from Germanic historical scholarship, swung in the opposite direction. In 2006, Andreas Müller penned his massive *Das Konzept des geistlichen Gehorsams bei Johannes Sinaites. Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte eines Elements orthodoxer Konfessionskultur*. In it he attempts to radically re-date Climacus, situating him within the time of the

²⁵ Full bibliographical information for all works mentioned can be found in the bibliography.

²⁶ This is actually not the first book on the *Ladder*, but it is the first monograph dedicated to its teaching. J.R. Martin's 1954 study, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder*, is a useful demonstration of the fusion of Byzantine artistic and spiritual consciousness, and includes a Greek 'Penitential Canon to the Holy Criminals' which I will discuss in Chapter Four.

²⁷ Yannaras, Christos, *Η ΜΕΤΑΦΥΣΙΚΗ ΤΟΥ ΣΩΜΑΤΟΣ. Σποθδή στον Ιωάννη της Κλίμακος* (Athens: Dodone, 1971)

²⁸ Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 95-97, 228-32

²⁹ Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 38

Emperor Justinian, allowing Müller to formulate a new understanding of Climacus' ideas on monastic organization. This is all very interesting but, as far as his conclusions about Climacus' ideas on obedience go, they tell us little we did not already know and, in their unique points, are derived much more from *AP* and Basil of Caesarea than anything else. Müller's reading shows us little of the unique genius of Climacus. The following year, Henrik Rydell Johnsén published his doctoral dissertation entitled *Reading John Climacus: Rhetorical Argumentation, Literary Convention and the Tradition of Monastic Formation*. This most recent work also looks backward, but now to Byzantine rhetorical practice. Johnsén works very hard at what he calls a 'literary' interpretation of the *Ladder*, discerning forms of argumentation and prose style. His conclusions are interesting, but most intriguing is his attempt to re-evaluate Climacus' relationship with tradition—meaning, for Johnsén, his literary sources. He too presents Climacus as working off of other peoples' work—this time the Greek *Systematica* and Evagrius' more practical treatises. For Johnsén, Climacus is not even a systematizer or synthesizer—he merely adapts the wisdom of others to his own situation and so, for Johnsén, rhetorical strategy exhausts the meaning of the *Ladder*—there is no place for its 'content.'

Over the last century L. Petit, G. Couilleau, and Kallistos Ware wrote fascinating introductory pieces on Climacus. Each of these engages Climacus with a deep consciousness of his debt and repayment to tradition. Ware's is by far the most complete, concise, accessible, and informative introduction to the *Ladder* available in English—possibly in any language. However, even he betrays a certain predilection for Hesychast reading of Climacus, though he is, at least, more cautious about it than Chryssavgis.³⁰ There have also been a number of very interesting articles on the structure of the *Ladder*, which I will evaluate at some length in Chapter Four.³¹

Conclusion

The history of Climacian studies, though brief, reveals a common hermeneutical problem faced by anyone wanting to understand the *Ladder*. They must first appreciate its place within a much wider body of ascetic literature. The answer commonly supplied by Orthodox readers, such as Chryssavgis and Ware—reading Climacus *through* Hesychast eyes—may be dismissed out of hand as destined to distort

³⁰ Ware, 'Introduction', 43-58

³¹ Price, James R. in 'Conversion and the Doctrine of Grace in Bernard Lonergan and John Climacus,' *Anglican Theological Review* 72 (1980), 338-362; Lawrence, Richard T., 'The Three-Fold Structure of the Ladder of Divine Ascent', *SVOTQ* 32:2 (1988): 101-118; Duffy, John, 'Embellishing the Steps: Elements of Presentation and Style in "The Heavenly Ladder" of John Climacus', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 53 (1999): 1-17

not only the author's intentions, but the whole thought-world of the text. The other answer, favoured by more recent writers, is to look more assiduously to Climacus' own context, be it rhetorical formation or Justinianic policies. These writers appreciate more fully the ways in which Climacus draws on his tradition but they too end up drowning Climacus' own voice in the crowd of sources, just as others have submerged him in 'schools' of later interpreters. The question then becomes, how *should* we approach the *Ladder*? A clearer hermeneutic is in order, and in the next section I will draw out in greater detail the potential and pitfalls of engaging Climacus *via* tradition.

The Ladder and Greek Ascetic Tradition

While I have argued against readings motivated too much by Climacus' literary sources or successors, it is nevertheless true that the *Ladder* cannot be divorced from the tradition in which its author explicitly places himself and his work. Climacus alerts us to his self-conscious traditionality at the very outset of the *Ladder*, when he describes his authorship thus:

...faithfully constrained by the commands of those true slaves of God, stretching for a hand unworthy of them in undiscerning obedience, and by their knowledge taking up the pen to write, dipping it in downcast yet radiant humility, resting it upon their hearts smooth and white, just as on sheets of paper or, rather, spiritual tablets, divine words – or rather, seeds – we will write here, painting them in many colours.³²

This irenic statement belies the complexity of Climacus' engagement with the 'fathers' he claims, yet it certainly shows that, in order to understand Climacus, one must also appreciate the *tradition* within which he worked. Along these lines, Peter Brown's assessment is as correct as it is vague, that 'the tradition of the Desert Fathers flowed into *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* of John Climacus.'³³ For Climacus, the 'tradition of the Desert Fathers' refers especially to their writings, the literary tradition to which he would have had access and out of which he saw himself writing.³⁴ This was quite elaborate by the time John wrote, and so, while his milieu is worth investigating, we are primarily concerned with Climacus' reading habits. Analysis of Climacus' utilization of and relationship with earlier literature reveals the kinds of ideas he liked and disliked, which lines of thought he followed up, and which he avoided.

The range of literature discernible from the *Ladder* is impressive: Barsanuphius and John's *Quaestiones et Responsiones*, Isaiah's *Asceticon*, Dorotheus' *Doctrinae*, *AP*, *HM*, *HL*, *PS*, Evagrius (especially

³² §1, PG 88:633C

³³ Brown, *Body and Society*, 237

³⁴ Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*, 197

the *Practicus*, and *Eulogium*), Ps-Macarius' homilies (though only in resonances), Diadochus of Photice's *Capita*, Mark the Monk (especially *De Lege* and *Ad Nicolaum*), Basil's *Asceticon*, the *Vita Prima Graeca Pachomii*, John Cassian, Gregory Nazianzen, and even Gregory the Great (perhaps). The question then becomes for us: *how* does Climacus *relate* to all this literature? What did he *do* with what he read? By examining just *how* Climacus engages tradition in the *Ladder* we will be able to delineate the concerns which motivate him as well as the parameters within which he exercises his own creativity. I will, therefore, lay out three models of engagement which represent the three major tendencies among scholars of Climacus: an Evagrian-Macarian synthesis, a Desert-Gazan trajectory, and an adaptation of formative techniques.

Evagrius and Macarius on Sinai

First, Eastern Orthodox scholars at times suggest that Climacus combines the Evagrian with the Ps-Macarian tradition.³⁵ This assessment relies on a distinction drawn by Irénée Hausherr between two 'grands courants' in Byzantine spirituality. First, there was a 'Semitic' one, focused on the will and locating the unity of the human person in the καρδία (and, therefore, body) with an emphasis on purifying the θέλημα. This, he argued, was exemplified by the Syrian monk, Ps-Macarius (4th/5th c.). Second, was a Hellenistic one, locating the person's true 'self' in the νοῦς and describing humanity's proper activity as a divine and wholly 'intellectual' θεωρία. This was exemplified by Evagrius Ponticus (346-99).³⁶ For Hausherr, the latter 'courant' represented a corruption of the common inheritance of early Christianity from Judaism. Thus, Hausherr sees a tension between 'intellectual' and 'voluntary' spiritualities, each with its own exclusive anthropology and soteriology.³⁷ Climacus, it is then argued, brings these together either by including both (Ware) or by avoiding either extreme (Chryssavgis).³⁸

Two problems immediately emerge from the 'Evagrian-Macarian synthesis.' First, the whole dichotomy relies on artificial and ultimately untenable categories which do not take account of other factors like variety of monastic organizations, problems of the Origenist controversies, and other

³⁵ E.g., Meyendorff, John, *Byzantine Spirituality: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham, 1974), 67-69; and Ware, 'Introduction', 60-61; Chryssavgis, 'Sources of John Climacus', 6

³⁶ Hausherr, 'Les grands courants de la spiritualité orientale', *OCP* 1 (1935), 121-24; I will critique Hausherr's position in relation to Evagrius in Chapter Two below.

³⁷ Couilleau ('Jean Climaque', col. 372) and Müller replace Ps-Macarius with Basil of Caesarea, making the synthesis concern individual versus community: Evagrius representing Scetiotite eremiticism and Basil a *coenobium*.

³⁸ Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 37

complexities which beset readers of ascetic literature. Second, even if Climacus utilizes language and perhaps even ideas akin to Evagrius and Macarius, it is unclear from the different perspectives of Ware and Chryssavgis that what he accomplishes is in any way a rigorous ‘synthesis’ of two different modes of thought.³⁹

Nevertheless, it is true that Climacus seems to envision no real distinction or priority between ‘voluntary’ and ‘intellectual’ humanity. It would be hard to say with Climacus whether νοῦς, ‘mind’, or θέλημα, ‘will’ locates the core of a person. Rather, each must be transformed and offered to God. Consequently, Climacus is equally comfortable with language of καρδία (as one might find in Ps-Macarius) and νοῦς (as in Evagrius). Indeed, he sees a deep connection between what happens in one organ and the other.⁴⁰ Thus, Climacus effectively *holds together* different, even hostile, strands of thought within a *holistic* (though perhaps not ‘monistic’) view of the human person.⁴¹ One way, then, of describing Climacus’ achievement—and, I shall argue below, a very helpful one—is to say that he stitches together the human being which ascetic spirituality had so successfully laid bare—his synthesis is an *existential* one, albeit not a consciously *anthropological* one.

Scetis came to Gaza, Gaza came to Sinai

Second, scholars consider Climacus as the end of a trajectory of thought which may be visualized roughly as a pilgrim trail carved from Scetis and Nitria up to Alexandria, over to Gaza and Palestine, and down to Sinai. Climacus is strikingly fond of *AP* and related literature from (or at least purporting to come from) Egypt, utilizing tales and sayings liberally throughout the *Ladder*.⁴² He read this literature, though, very often in light of its interpretation and utilization by the Gaza Fathers: Abba Isaiah (d. 491), Barsanauphius (d. ca. 540), John (d. 542), and Dorotheus (d. ca. 578). Chryssavgis would go so far as to say that ‘John could be seen as a deliberate continuator or a direct successor of this school of

³⁹ The same criticisms, *mutatis mutandis*, hold true if the synthesis operated on Evagrius and Basil.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., §1, PG 88:633D (calling the heart the tomb, and the mind Lazarus of Bethany), §4, 700B-C (recommending parallel activities for heart, mind, and body), §6, 796B (insensitivity in the heart hardens the mind) and §26, 1064C (an unmoved heart and mental prayer represent ἀπάθεια).

⁴¹ Climacus is not constructing an ‘anthropology.’ Rather, the ways he describes the human being are not susceptible to division.

⁴² According to Ware, citations from *Alphabeticon* and *Anonyma* are second in number only to Scriptural references: Ware, ‘Introduction’, 59-60.

spirituality.⁴³ The reasons for this are easily discernible. Not only were *AP* first written down and collected in Palestine, but the earliest collection of *apophthegmata* in Greek belongs to the *Asceticon* of Abba Isaiah (*Logos* 7).⁴⁴ Numerous sayings, with and without names, but substantially belonging to *AP* as we now know it, are to be found in the *Quaestiones et Responiones*. The Gaza School was inspired by and, most likely for that very reason, helped collect and edit, the variety of sayings and stories associated with the Egyptian desert.⁴⁵ Under this model, the best way of understanding Climacus is to first read Desert and Gazan literature, see the themes and ideas developed there, and examine how Climacus handles them.

Of course, the ‘Desert-Gaza’ model is hopelessly vague as regards the *Ladder’s* specific subject-matter. But it does alert us to the kind of mindset, the preferences and animadversions which Climacus might have encountered. It can also lay bare the tensions and ambiguities of the literary tradition within which Climacus worked. This model proposes a more helpful *genealogy* of ideas rather than the static categories of the ‘Evagrian-Macarian.’ And, taken together with the ‘Evagrian-Macarian’ model, it reveals the *kind* of literature to examine in order to better understand Climacus’ work.

Formation and Adaptation

Third, we find Henrik Rydell Johnsén’s model centring on Climacus’ adaptation of ‘formative’ techniques. Johnsén has shown exactly the limitation of any kind of ‘synthetic’ or ‘source-critical’ approach to the *Ladder*, whether conceived as Evagrian-Macarian or Desert-Gazan. He writes, ‘Either scholars seem to presuppose that a source, a text or a concept is something more or less static or unchangeable, understood or conceived in the same way in the new text, or at least they do not thoroughly investigate how the sources are actually used and function in the new text.’⁴⁶ Johnsén then argues that most ‘source-critical’ examinations of Climacus seek to find what he retains or misses or, at least to trace ‘ascetic doctrines that the text is supposed to expose to the reader.’ In so doing, scholars assume that Climacus is a dogmatic writer and the *Ladder* a systematic treatise to be read as such—neither

⁴³ Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 38; Völker reads Climacus against Desert and Gazan literature (see, e.g., *Scala Paradisi*, 25-41). See also Müller, *Das Konzept des geistlichen Gehorsams*, 156-164.

⁴⁴ Regnault, ‘Les Apophthegmes des Pères en Palestine aux Ve-VI^e siècles’, in *Les Pères du Désert*, 80-83; so also Chitty, , Derwas, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1966), 67-68.

⁴⁵ Chitty, *Desert a City*, 73-77, 103-04.

⁴⁶ Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*, 23

of which is the case.⁴⁷ In order to draw out Climacus' ideas on certain topics or themes, he says, scholars rip material from its proper place in the *Ladder*, set various formulations against one another, and so attempt to construct a representative and, perhaps, synthetic view of Climacus' ideas on this or that topic.⁴⁸ Johnsén proposes a rather different reading of the *Ladder* which centres on the concept of 'formation.'

Johnsén himself argues at length that Climacus operates very much within a *literary* tradition, and was himself shaped by the texts and treatises to which he had access.⁴⁹ He spends much time on what he sees as the order of argumentation and Climacus' prose style, before turning to examining the *Ladder* as 'formative' literature.⁵⁰ With his emphasis on argumentation and style, Johnsén considers especially how Climacus 're-arranges' ordering of vices and virtues found in the Greek *Systematica* and Evagrius' works.⁵¹ Climacus' achievement is, for Johnsén, not a synthesis at all but, rather, an adaptation whose novelty—if there is any—lies in the structural changes which Climacus makes to patterns of argumentation *rather than ideas* gleaned from previous authors. In this model, Climacus retains the spirit of his predecessors and even maintains his allegiance to them as teachers, while modifying their teaching in accordance with his own rhetorical strategy, aimed at inculcating certain practices among his own audience.

While Johnsén is right to speak of 'formation' rather than 'systematization,' his model suffers from at least one great flaw: he sees only the 'formal' aspect of 'formation', and ignores its purpose and material. Johnsén's greatest achievement is his discernment of an *order of argument* within the various chapters of the *Ladder*—he sees very clearly the 'rhetorical strategies' of which Climacus makes use. The accuracy and the precision of the form Johnsén describes is open to criticism, but for present purposes it is worth noting that, even if it turns out to be correct, it tells us little if anything about *what* Climacus teaches. Thus, 'formation' excellently keeps the reader focused on Climacus' practical intent, but must be filled out by deeper engagement with the *Ladder's* specific content.

Conclusion

⁴⁷ Ibid., 23-24

⁴⁸ Ibid., 18

⁴⁹ Ibid., 196-99

⁵⁰ Ibid., 196-276

⁵¹ Ibid., 198

Each of the three models here laid out contributes something to understanding Climacus, but each represents also an unduly limited way of engaging the *Ladder*. The 'Evagrian-Macarian synthesis' rests on false categories and generalizations, but it also takes account of a profoundly *existential* concern in the *Ladder*. The 'Desert-Gazan trajectory' tells us little about what Climacus thinks or what topics specifically concern him, but it does lay out an excellent way of locating Climacus within recognizable trends in literature. The 'adaptation' of 'formative' strategies calls the reader back to Climacus' intent, but has been applied only to a purely formal critique of the *Ladder's* 'rhetorical strategies.' In the next section I will elaborate a way of understanding the *Ladder* as 'formative' which moves beyond formal critique and describe how this study will read Climacus against and yet within Greek ascetic tradition.

II. TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL MONK

With these three models—‘Evagrian-Macarian’, ‘Desert-Gazan’, and ‘adaptive-formative’—in mind, I will offer a hermeneutic which takes account of the *Ladder’s* existential concern with identity-formation, and which more fully delineates Climacus’ literary relationship with the tradition within which he stood. Over the course of the study I will carry this reading through with regard primarily to death but, for now, I will trace its outline with special reference to the issues discussed above.

The Identity of the Monk

To begin with, we must appreciate the wider implications of Climacus’ emphasis on ‘formation.’ Kallistos Ware perspicaciously remarked of the *Ladder* that, ‘It is an existential work, and only those who read it existentially will appreciate its true value.’⁵² Ware means that the *Ladder* seeks to form the kind of person who can live a specifically Christian way of life. If, then, ‘formation’ describes Climacus’ purpose, we must understand this as referring not simply to ‘rhetorical strategy’ but to the cultivation of identity. Climacus’ teaching is not limited to one or a collection of beliefs or actions or even habits but refers, rather, to the whole constellation of ways of perceiving, objects of belief, habits of acting and speaking, and modes of relating to other people, to the world more generally, and, especially, to God.

Specifically, Climacus seeks to form Christians through monastic lifestyles. To explain, Climacus begins the *Ladder* with definitions of the ‘monk’—with which ὄροι I opened this introduction. Together with these, Climacus offers a definition of the Christian, suggesting that a monk is ultimately just that—a Christian. His monastic vocation allows him more completely and more effectively than those in the world to flee from sin toward the Kingdom of Heaven and the love of God.⁵³ Love demands complete adherence⁵⁴ and its attainment at the final rung of the *Ladder* confers a ‘likeness to God.’⁵⁵ And yet, only thus does the monk achieve the definition of ‘Christian’ which Climacus offers in the First Rung: ‘...the imitator of Christ, as far as humanly possible, in words, deeds and thought, rightly and blamelessly

⁵² Ware, ‘Introduction’, 8

⁵³ §1, 633C: ‘Πάντες οἱ τὰ τοῦ βίου προθύμως καταλιπόντες, πάντως ἢ διὰ τὴν μέλλουσαν βασιλείαν· ἢ διὰ πλῆθος ἀμαρτημάτων· ἢ διὰ τὴν εἰς Θεὸν ἀγάπην τοῦτο πεποιήκασιν. Εἰ δ’ οὐδεὶς τῶν προειρημένων σκοπῶν αὐτοῖς προηγήσατο, ἄλογος ἢ τούτων ἀναχώρησις καθέστηκε.’ Cf. 640B-C on married people who, for all their virtue, are only ‘οὐ μακρὰν...τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν.’

⁵⁴ Witness §1, 644A: ‘Τίς ἄρα ἐστὶν ὁ πιστὸς, καὶ φρόνιμος μοναχὸς, ὃς τὴν θέρμην τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἐφύλαξεν ἄσβεστον· καὶ μέχρι τῆς αὐτοῦ ἐξόδου καθ’ ἡμέραν [προστιθεὶς] πῦρ πυρὶ, καὶ θέρμην θέρμη, καὶ σπουδὴν σπουδῇ, καὶ πόθον πόθῳ οὐκ ἐπαύσατο;’

⁵⁵ §30, 1156B: ‘Ἀγάπη κατὰ μὲν ποιότητα ὁμοίως Θεοῦ, καθ’ ὅσον βροτοῖς ἐφικτόν.’

believing in the Holy Trinity.⁵⁶ Here is an identity, modelled on the person of Christ, which incorporates actions, speech, and thought. The virtues which Climacus teaches so well are those which render their practitioner more and more like Christ through faith in the Trinity. The *Ladder* speaks not only to this or that practice but to the human character in both its voluntary and intellectual capacities, and the uniquely Christian hope of the ascetic. It is *formative*, but formative of a Christian identity which incorporates and implicates the whole human being.

Shape and not System

Since Climacus writes to form identity, then it stands to reason that he read ascetic literature with similar hopes. That is, like any monastic, he read ascetic literature as something normative for life, and his own achievement will stand out best when read against earlier authors' ideas about the cultivation and communication of a peculiarly Christian ascetic identity. This should hardly be surprising, since ascetic literature is inevitably prescriptive: consisting of advice about habits, thoughts, and words; of rules; of exemplary and cautionary tales which explicitly or implicitly call for either imitation or aversion. That is, ascetic literature is most naturally read as teachings on cultivating a peculiarly Christian identity—to become a monk and, as so many Desert pilgrims would say, to 'be saved.' The important thing is that we also be sensitive to this way of reading. Certainly, Climacus is likely not a conscious synthesizer and still less a systematizer.⁵⁷ This fact does not preclude Climacus from operating within certain doctrinal contexts and concerning himself with the *content* rather than merely the *form* of earlier teaching.

The Doctrinal Context

John clearly does not write like dogmatic theologians. We find only hints of technical Trinitarian or Christological language, and absolutely no polemic against opponents real or imagined—rather, Climacus keeps always to his formative purpose, instructing monks in the way in which they can become Christians. However, in doing so, John also *presupposes* certain doctrinal and ecclesial contexts. He refers, in the ὄρος of the Christian, to 'rightly and blamelessly believing in the Holy Trinity,' and elsewhere

⁵⁶ §1, 633B: 'Χριστιανός ἐστὶν μίμημα Χριστοῦ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν ἀνθρώπων, λόγοις, καὶ ἔργοις, καὶ ἐννοίᾳ εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν Τριάδα ὀρθῶς, καὶ ἀμέμπτως πιστεύων.'

⁵⁷ Note his unwillingness to adjudicate between various fathers at §14, 897A-B.

states that ‘I venerate a Trinity in unity and a unity in Trinity.’⁵⁸ In this instance, Climacus quotes a doctrinal statement issued by the Emperor Justin on his accession, showing that he is certainly aware of the importance of right belief as maintained in the Byzantine Empire.⁵⁹ Elsewhere John remarks that, ‘Some say that prayer is better than memory of one’s death [ἐξόδος]; but I hymn two natures of one person.’⁶⁰ Here Climacus writes in Chalcedonian language, using its famous (and, in the sixth century, highly divisive) definition as the backdrop to his comment on two activities which, though seemingly disparate, he would aver together. John writes from within the fold of the Byzantine Church. Yet he does so merely in passing—Christology provides the context within which the ascetic life may unfold. Imitation of Christ presupposes a sense of who and what Christ *is*. Climacus’ emphasis is on a way of life, but this way can only be found within ‘right and blameless’ belief in the Holy Trinity. We must, therefore, keep in mind that John develops his treatment of monastic identity within the strictures of Nicene and Chalcedonian (Byzantine) orthodoxy.

Ways of Shaping

Within that context, there are basically three ways in which Climacus engages with traditional material. First, there are a very few instances where he openly rejects a seemingly acceptable point of teaching. Climacus rejects Evagrius Ponticus—by the seventh century a straw man for almost all suspect eschatological speculation—as ‘most foolish of the foolish.’ However, John rejects Evagrius not on account of Evagrius’ suspect eschatology,⁶¹ but because he thinks Evagrius’ advice on fasting is too strict. John quotes Evagrius as saying: “‘When our soul desires various foods, discipline it with bread and water.’”⁶² Climacus compares Evagrius’ advice to ‘telling a child to ascend the whole ladder in a single bound.’ Climacus offers rather more moderate advice instead—cut out fatty foods and don’t eat too

⁵⁸ §25, 993A: ‘...προσκυνῶ Τριάδα ἐν μονάδι, καὶ μονάδα ἐν Τριάδι.’ See also §3, 672B; §25, 992A; §27, 1117A.

⁵⁹ The phrase quotes the Emperor Justin’s ‘τοῖς ἑκασταχοῦ Χριστιανοῖς πρόγραμμα’ found in Evagrius Scholasticus’ *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 5.4: ‘Μονάδα γὰρ ἐν τριάδι καὶ τριάδα ἐν μονάδι προσκυνούμεν.’ Müller (*Das Konzept des geistlichen Gehorsams*, 213) thinks this a reference to a Greek translation of the creed *Quincunque vult*, citing the *Formula Tertia* (PG 28:1587C): “Ὡστε κατὰ πάντα (καθὼς εἰρηται) καὶ τὴν μονάδα ἐν Τριάδι, καὶ τὴν Τριάδα ἐν μονάδι σέβεισθαι δεῖ.” Justin’s letter uses προσκυνέω as John does, rather than *Formula Tertia*’s σέβομαι, making it the most likely source.

⁶⁰ §28, 1137A: ‘Φασὶ μὲν τινες κρεῖττον εἶναι προσευχὴν μνήμης ἐξόδου· ἐγὼ δὲ μιᾶς ὑποστάσεως δύο οὐσίας ὑμνῶ.’ This phrase is most curious, as we might expect ‘ἐν μιᾷ ὑπόστασει’, which would reflect standard Chalcedonian usage.

⁶¹ Cf., e.g., *PS* 26, 177

⁶² Evagrius, *Practicus* 16

much.⁶³ On this point, Evagrius' ideas were hardly heretical or extreme. Climacus, nevertheless, rated it unfavourably against his own experience which he judged to be of greater worth.⁶⁴ Climacus' rejection of this teaching, operating as he does within Chalcedonian parameters, demonstrates that he was critically and reflectively engaged with literature which fell within those bounds.

Second, there are times when Climacus submits his own opinion to the wisdom of the 'discerning fathers.' For example, Climacus believes insensitivity to be the second vice after lust (which he covers in §15).⁶⁵ Nevertheless, he follows 'the discerning fathers' in putting avarice (or, as Climacus calls it, the 'many-headed snake of idolatry') between the two.⁶⁶ He admits to not knowing why the fathers have set things down in this order and, although he has followed them, it seems to him incorrect.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the order he accepts becomes the order of his work. Perhaps there is ambiguity here and, while Climacus cannot understand the reason for it, experience teaches that, in fact, the order of things that has been handed down is perfectly usable.

Most often, Climacus combines and re-shapes traditional material. A simple but illustrative example concerns Climacus' list of vices, which is inspired by Evagrius' list of eight thoughts, which passed into common usage from the fifth century.⁶⁸ These λογισμοί take hold as πάθη, Climacus argues, according to a psychological schema derived from Mark the Monk.⁶⁹ However, Climacus crucially modifies and expands Mark's terminology by including an Evagrian term not previously applied to human psychology.⁷⁰ The change, though slight, represents a view of human psychology different from either Mark's or Evagrius'. Moreover, Climacus freely reduces Evagrius' eight thoughts to seven, as did Cassian and, later, Gregory the Great, and then splays them out once more according to the order deemed best by himself and others, dwelling on their confused interrelations and offering his own

⁶³ §14, PG 8:865B

⁶⁴ Cf. Ware, 'Introduction', 7-10

⁶⁵ §14, 869C

⁶⁶ §17, 929B; an Evagrian inheritance—see *Monachos*, Prol (PG 79:1236), *Vitiis* 3 (PG 79:1141), etc.

⁶⁷ §17, 929B: Τρίτην πῶς οὐκ οἶδα λαχῶν παρὰ τοῖς διακριτικοῖς τῶν πατέρων ἐν τῇ ὀκτῶ ἀλύσει.

⁶⁸ Cf. Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*, 239-73.

⁶⁹ Following *Philokalia* (ET 1:365-67) the stages are: προσβολή (provocation), συνδυασμός (coupling), συγκατάθεσις (assent), αἰχμαλωσία (shamefulness), πάλη (delusion), πάθος (passion) (found at §15, PG 88:896C). All save αἰχμαλωσία are Marcan in origin (see *De Lege* 141, 142; *Operibus* 148). Climacus expounds it at some length (§15, PG 88:897A-D), adding to it another term of Mark's—παράρρησις νοός, 'disturbance of mind' (found in *Ad Nicolaum* 9).

⁷⁰ Αἰχμαλωσία is simply a property of demonic λογισμοί (*Eulogium*, PG 79:1113C, 1120C).

account of how best to deal with them.⁷¹ Climacus demonstrates here that, while he very often does not adjudicate between different strands of thought, he will hold them together. When necessary, though, he will either reject prior teaching as inconsistent with experience, or submit his own experience to the wisdom of his fathers. Through the interaction of these three modes of engagement, Climacus crafts an ascetic spirituality which, though resembling what one finds in previous literature, is fully unique.

The implications of Climacus' threefold engagement with tradition illuminate the *Ladder* as a unique achievement. Mark's schema, like Evagrius', was built on a particular understanding of human psychology, which said that thoughts work in this way and not another. By changing the process of temptation and by setting it within his own ordering of vices and virtues, Climacus establishes a necessarily different series of assumptions and beliefs about human psychology. In doing so he creates a new, equally formative, model for ascetic practice, operative now according to his own understanding and experience of human nature and capacity. At stake in Climacus' working of traditional material, by which he *holds together* various strands of thought, is a concept of the *human person*. What emerges is a new and profound picture of the human being as a sinner struggling by the grace of God to a Christian identity always by means of existential engagement with death.

Tradition and not Sources

Crucially, the works on which Climacus drew were not afterward discarded as unnecessary. Rather, they too continue to be read within the same Christian ascetic context where they remain normative pieces whose portraits of asceticism monastics still strive to emulate. We do well, then, not simply to point out how and where Climacus differs from other writers and thus laud his uniqueness. Rather, we must also locate him within the elaboration and shaping of a living tradition which neither ended nor began with him. He stands *within* tradition, and his achievement is most noticeable as it interprets and contributes to that tradition.

Therefore, I will devote whole chapters to the literature which would contour Climacus' theological and spiritual 'thought-world.' I will treat it in roughly chronological order, which will allow me to show how authors drew on, elaborated, and even disagreed with, one another. This conversation over time, wherein each generation could interrogate its predecessors especially through their texts,

⁷¹ §22, 948D-949A; §29, 1149A-B; on which see Ware, 'Introduction', 62-66

created currents of spirituality and gave a increasingly definite *shape* to ascetic practice.⁷² Samuel Rubenson, commenting on *AP*, writes, ‘Scholars trying to draw general conclusions from the complete collections of sayings have thus come to conflicting conclusions on a variety of subjects, including the degree of literacy, theological training and speculative thinking among the monks.’⁷³ If this is so for scholars, it was also true for those monastics who sought in collections like *AP* ways to craft their own lives. Thus, as Douglas Burton-Christie notes, ‘In assessing the *Sayings* as literature, one must take into account the diversity and richness of its literary expressions and the dynamic, reciprocal relationship that existed between it and other early monastic texts.’⁷⁴ I will certainly show how variant usages of the language of ‘death’ demonstrate heterogeneity in Greek ascetic literature. This heterogeneity implicates conceptions of the monastic vocation, even of the human being itself. And yet we must keep in mind Burton-Christie’s later remark, ‘This exuberant polyphony of words is one of the real strengths and charms of the *Sayings*.’⁷⁵ For all of the different voices were read together, all accepted as useful and at least potentially normative for the reader’s life. As texts were read, some elements were picked up, others discarded; they were recombined, reconceived, and redeployed. Trajectories of thought thus emerged and by this frictive yet dialogical process a tradition emerged, marked at times by ambiguity and ambivalence, and yet possessing an increasingly pervasive sense of the importance and potential of death as impulse and symbol of asceticism. This sense would be given its fullest expression and profoundest application in John Climacus’ *Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

I will, therefore, demonstrate in Chapters One through Three how themes and vocabulary 1) are maintained over time, 2) diverge, 3) are broadened in their application; and 4) are sometimes worked out in deeper ways. Not everything in Chapters One through Three will feature in Chapter Four, but it remains important for the material treated in those chapters. This ‘singing silence’ will also further our appreciation of Climacus’ achievement as both ‘traditional’ and ‘original.’

⁷² See on this Harmless, William, ‘Remembering Poemen Remembering: The Desert Fathers and the Spirituality of Memory’, *Church History* 69:3 (2000), 488-89, 518.

⁷³ Rubenson, Samuel, ‘Origen in the Egyptian Monastic Tradition of the Fourth Century’, in Bienert, W.A. and Kühnweg, U. (eds), *Origeniana Septima* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999), 332

⁷⁴ Burton-Christie, Douglas, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: OUP, 1993) *esert*, 90

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 94

III. THE SHAPE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

In keeping with the hermeneutical considerations outlined above, I have made certain material choices by which I have focused my argument both in terms of the material to be covered and the questions to be addressed. One could trace the genealogy of Climacus' ideas back through not only Greek ascetic material, but hagiographic, martyrological, biblical, and even Greco-Roman literature. This is because Climacus, like any other writer, writes from within not only his immediate milieu, but, as I have already discussed, the wider tradition which informed it. But that tradition also has its own past. Thus, we must be *selective* when attempting to delineate Climacus' tradition. I have first chosen to confine myself to Greek ascetic materials (and, rather briefly, the Christian Scriptures), foregoing extended examination of other obvious loci, such as the Christian *Acta Martyrum* or Greco-Roman philosophical and rhetorical materials.

From among Greek ascetic authors I have to be yet further selective, and it is easiest to describe the selections in reverse order. As already noted, the Gaza School is Climacus' most proximal source and teacher. Its inclusion is integral to the study. Of the authors associated with Gaza, I have limited discussion, for reasons of space, to the central two: Barsanuphius and John. However, the close and sustained reading which I offer of their *Quaestiones et Responsiones*, will be representative of the main lines of thought which Climacus took from Gaza.

Likewise, for both Climacus and Gaza, the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the various *Historiai*, and related 'Desert literature' were important. His debt to the Desert is coloured by the ways in which its traditions were understood and elaborated by the Gaza Fathers who were inspired by and helped shape the apophthegmatic literature especially. This study will examine a variety of pieces to which I will refer by the terms 'Desert Fathers' or 'Desert literature': the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (ca. 5th c.)—both the *Alphabeticon* and the *Anonyma*;⁷⁶ the anonymous travelogue, the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (ca. 399); Palladius of Helenopolis' *Historia Lausiaca* (ca. 420); and, John Moschus' *Pratum Spirituale* (ca. 593). Of these, the first three are obvious choices,⁷⁷ but the last was probably not directly known to Climacus.⁷⁸ I

⁷⁶ I will leave aside the *Systematica*, *pace* Johnsén (*Reading John Climacus*, 216-39), whose argument for Climacus' reliance on the Greek *Systematica* is unconvincing.

⁷⁷ *HM* and *HL* were so closely associated in readers' minds that *HM* in its Greek form was thought until the twentieth century to be part of *HL*. See Butler, Cuthbert (ed), *The Historia Lausiaca of Palladius*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: CUP, 1904), I:10-15.

⁷⁸ Though Ware ('Introduction', 60 n220) and Johnsén (*Reading John Climacus*, 201 n19) have discerned one apparent allusion.

have included *PS* because it represents a literary continuation of the tradition begun with *AP* and the *Historiai*. While *HM* and *HL* purport to describe lives and practices of fourth-century Egyptian monks, and Moschus those of fifth- and sixth-Century Palestinians,⁷⁹ the differences are not so great as they might seem. First, as Demetrios Katos notes, Moschus' collection of pilgrim's tales was, perhaps, the first great 'literary successor' to *HL* and *HM*⁸⁰. Second, *AP* was first compiled in Palestine,⁸¹ and quote from and allude to both *HL* and *HM*.⁸² That is, while *AP* purport to describe Fourth-century Egyptian monastic culture, they may reflect at least as much of the *mentalité* of Fifth-century Palestinian monasticism. *PS* more obviously continues the story of that world, including quite a bit of apophthegmatic material either original or, in a few cases, lifted directly from *AP*.⁸³ Thus, *PS* consciously continues the kind of literary and spiritual traditions which first flowered in *AP*, *HL*, and *HM*.⁸⁴

In the same chapter, I discuss the most famous teachers of the Christian desert: Evagrius Ponticus (346-99), Ps-Macarius (4th/5th c.), Mark the Monk (5th c.), and Diadochus of Photice (5th c.). Climacus' reliance on these is universally acknowledged. However, I do not focus primarily or even at any great length on these authors, and this for two reasons. First, because of space; and second, because their treatment of death does not differ markedly from what we find in other literature.⁸⁵ I will, however, certainly draw attention to and incorporate these authors and their work wherever necessary and, though short, the readings will be responsible and representative.

⁷⁹ Moschus' account, as John Binns notes, picks up where where Cyril of Scythopolis' biographies leave off, in 558. However, the two authors share nothing of genre or style, and Moschus is certainly far fonder of anecdotes and lore, in the style of *AP* and the *Historiai*. See Binns, John, *Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ: The Monasteries of Palestine 314-631*, OECS (Oxford: OUP, 1994), 49-52.

⁸⁰ Katos, Demetrios S., *Palladius of Helenopolis: An Origenist Monk and Writer of the Fifth Century* (Ph.D, CUA, 2001), 43 (this will soon appear in OECS under the same title, though I have not been able to consult the book-form in preparation of this study).

⁸¹ Regnault, 'Les Apophthegmes des Pères en Palestine aux V^e-VI^e siècles', in *Les Pères du Désert*, 73-83 (especially 80-83); so also Chitty, *Desert a City*, 67-68

⁸² Gould, *The Desert Fathers*, 5; see also Gould's article ('The Collection of *Apophthegmata Patrum* in *Palladii Lausiaca* 20 (P: 74, 377-82)', *SP* 45 [Leuven: Peeters, 2010], 27-33) on a later Latin version of *HL* which is really a sort of anthology of extracts from *HL* and *AP*. This only goes to show how *HL*, *HM*, and *AP* were interrelated in their readers' minds.

⁸³ See, e.g., *PS* 54, 110, 113, 115, 144, 152, and 212 (which comments on N 337).

⁸⁴ So concludes Henry Chadwick ('John Moschus and his friend Sophronius', 43-44, 60

⁸⁵ Excepting Evagrius' speculative eschatology which was roundly rejected by the sixth century and did not influence Climacus.

I have also included Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*. In fact, I begin with it. This may seem a somewhat stranger choice, and raises a few methodological questions which must be addressed: why stop the genealogy with a work not directly referred to by Climacus? Why not Basil's *Asceticon* instead or as well? Indeed, why not press on to include the *Acta Martyrum*?

I include *VA* because of its paradigmatic significance for later hagiographers and Desert writers. Like the *Ladder's*, *VA's* influence may be traced in two ways: translational dissemination and literary influence. For the former, we know that it was translated into Latin no later than 374 by Evagrius of Antioch, though another, more literal Latin translation was completed before his. Coptic translations were made quite early, as witnessed by Shenoute's homilies, though these may also include Coptic source material (as is suggested by a late-sixth century text of John of Hermopolis). Arabic and Ethiopic translations were also made. *VA* was translated into Syriac in the Fifth Century and later into other languages of the Christian world.⁸⁶ Anyone who wished could read the story of Antony and it seems that very many wished for exactly that.

We can see *VA's* literary and spiritual influence at work in Jerome's ascetic biographies, in the foundation of Marcella's monastery in 386,⁸⁷ in Augustine's own ascetic tendencies,⁸⁸ in Chrysostom's

⁸⁶ On the early dissemination of *VA* see especially Garitte, G., 'Le text grec et les versions anciennes de la Vie de saint Antoine', in Basilius Steidle (ed.), *Antonius Magnus Eremita 356-1956*, Studia Anselmiana 38 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum S. Anselmi, 1956), 1-13; cf. also Barnard, 'The Date of the "Vita Antonii"', 169-70 and Bartelink, 'Introduction', 68-70. On the independent witness of Coptic material, see Garitte, G., 'Panegyrique de saint Antoine par Jean, évêque d'Hermopolis', *OCP* 9 (1943), 100-31 and 330-65. On the early Latin translations, see Gandt, Lois, *A Philological and Theological Analysis of the Ancient Latin Translations of the Vita Antonii* (PhD: Fordham, 2008), 1-55 and Mohrmann, Christine, 'Note sur la version latine la plus ancienne de la Vie de saint Antoine par saint Athanase', in Steidle (ed), *Antonius Magnus Eremita*, 35-44, who argues that the translation, though often close to the Greek text, is still interpretive.

Renée Draguet (*La Vie primitive de S. Antoine conserve en syriaque*, CSCO 407-08 [Scriptores Syri 183-84] [Louvain: Peeters, 1980]) had argued that the Syriac version depended not on the Greek, but on a lost Coptic original. From this claim flared up an argument concerning Athanasius' authorship and the provenance of *VA*. Against those like T.D. Barnes ('Angel of Light or Mystic Initiate? The Problem of the *Life of Antony*', *JTS* ns 37:2 [1986]: 352-368) who argued that Athanasius had little if anything to do with *VA*. Against this, Andrew Louth ('St. Athanasius and the Greek Life of Antony', *JTS* ns 39:2 [1988]: 504-509) argued convincingly from the theological content that Athanasius was at least an editor. David Brakke ('The Greek and Syriac Versions of the *Life of Antony*', *Le Museon* 107:1 [1994], 29-53) established firmly on linguistic grounds that the Syriac text does not betray a Coptic original but is, in all likelihood, a Fifth-century translation and redaction of Athanasius' Greek original.

⁸⁷ Jerome, *Epistulae*, 127.5

⁸⁸ *Confessiones* 8.14-29

homilies,⁸⁹ and in Sulpicius Severus' popular and influential *Vita Martini*. Of the Desert literature surveyed in this study, *VA* is explicitly or implicitly utilized in: *HM*,⁹⁰ *HL*,⁹¹ and *AP*.⁹² It was read in the sixth century, since Cyril of Scythopolis utilizes it in five of his biographies,⁹³ including a reference in his *Vita Euthymii* to the memory of death⁹⁴ and a vision of death in *Vita Johannis Hesychastae*.⁹⁵ Barsanuphius and John were, at least, familiar with it,⁹⁶ while Dorotheus' first letter alludes to it.⁹⁷ Thus, even if Climacus does not directly refer to *VA*, its influence can be felt in salient ways throughout the tradition in which he wrote.

One might ask, though, why *VA* and nothing else? Though it meets many the same criteria, I have not discussed Basil's *Asceticon* because death does not feature very strongly in that work, and so it adds very little to the tradition on this theme. This does not undercut my argument more generally, since it is hardly necessary that every author utilize death in the same way or even to the same extent.⁹⁸ We encounter in *VA*—albeit only *in seminis*—many of the practices and concepts centring on death. Likewise, I have ended Climacus' ascetic genealogy with Antony and not with the martyrs because, while the martyr-literature bears on the topic and would enrich this study, it would require a full study of its own and, in any event, raise fundamental questions of continuity and self-understanding among late antique Christians, which need not concern us here.

Conclusion

I have thus far laid out the material and hermeneutical considerations with which this study will approach John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent* as well as the broader tradition of Greek ascetic

⁸⁹ *In Mattheum*, 8

⁹⁰ E.g., *HM* 22.9 preserves *VA* 60.1: its author paraphrases Antony's vision of Amoun's death. *HM* 9.1's tale of a δράκων recalls Athanasius' language in *VA* 6.1 and 24.4. So Russell in *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, 132 n. 1.

⁹¹ *HL* 21.16-17 incorporates *VA* 66.1-5: Palladius tells Antony's vision of death.

⁹² E.g., Arsenius 41 refers to *VA* 91.1: Arsenius echoes Antony's burial requests.

⁹³ Garitte, G., 'Reminiscences de la Vie d' Antoine dans Cyrille de Scythopolis', in *Silloge Bizantine in honore di S.G. Mercati*, Studia Bizantini e neoellenici 9 (Rome, 1957): 117-122; See also Roldanus, 'Die Vita Antonii als Spiegel', 194-98, 211-16. For *VA*'s later influence, see Foscati, A., "'Antonius maximus monachorum'". Testi e immagini di Antonio eremite nel Basso Medioevo', in L. Canetti, et al. (eds), *Studi di storia del cristianesimo. Per Alba Maria Orselli*, Le Tessere 16 (Ravenna, 2008), 283-311.

⁹⁴ *Vita Euthymii*, 9 (Schwartz, p. 17, 14-15) echoes *VA* 5.6 and 19.3

⁹⁵ *Vita Johannis Hesychastae*, 17 (Schwartz, p. 215-16) redeploys *VA* 60.1

⁹⁶ *QR* 508 relies directly on *VA* 7.11-12.

⁹⁷ *Epistula* 1 (§181) alludes to *VA* 26; so Regnault, Lucien and de Préville, J., *Dorothee de Gaza. Oeuvres spirituelles*, SC 92 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1963), 492 n.1

⁹⁸ I will, however, discuss Basil as an influence on Barsanuphius, in Chapter Three.

literature. I have argued especially that the *Ladder* is concerned with the cultivation of a particular Christian identity. This purpose relies on and implicates a conception of human nature, which fact carries the hermeneutical consequence that, if we are to understand the ways in which Climacus conceives Christian identity, we must first expose his more existential assumptions as well as the organizing principles of his ascetic instruction. By accomplishing this, we will be able to understand the full depth of Climacus' ascetic spirituality and the breadth of his contribution to the Greek spiritual tradition.

I have elaborated three ways in which Climacus actively engages with traditional material. He infrequently rejects, sometimes submits to, and consistently re-shapes traditional material. His re-shaping takes place through combination, interpolation, and adaptation (re-deployment in new contexts) of conceptual material and language drawn from ascetic literature. Each of these modes of interaction contributes to the formation of a unique interpretation of ascetic spirituality as formative of a Christian identity. I have also shown, however, that the literary tradition on which Climacus drew should not be thought of merely as source-material for his work. Rather, it is a free-standing, vibrant, and living tradition, within which Climacus holds a place *together with* the material he re-shapes. We do not set out, then, simply to interpret the *Ladder*, but, rather, to situate it and its author within a living tradition to which his work contributes, whether through rejection, submission, or reshaping.

I have so far only gestured toward the specific topic of death, around which this study will be centred. But, with these general hermeneutical principles in place, I will dedicate the first three chapters of this study to showing how a tradition was built up which drew attention to death as an event which is determinative of human life and as a symbol for the practices and achievements of Christian asceticism. In these chapters I shall be sensitive to the rough edges of tradition, and the frictive forces by which it is shaped over time. I shall then argue that, for Climacus, death reveals humanity in its limitation and possibility, and will demonstrate that the event and concept of death (as both mortality and judgment) provides Climacus with the organizing logic of ascetic spirituality. In doing so I will show how he draws together different strands of thought, resolves tensions, and crafts a coherent framework within which to consider ascetic spirituality that does not suffer from the ambiguities and ambivalences present in earlier literature. Only thus will we be able to fully appreciate both the profundity of Climacus' contribution and the ways in which tradition takes shape over time.

IV. THE VOCABULARY OF DEATH

Anthony Meredith once wrote, 'Even the most philosophically self-conscious attempt to justify asceticism with the Church has never been able to forget the appeal to the words and example of Christ in the New Testament as a basis for its practice.'⁹⁹ This final section inaugurates our study by describing key vocabulary and conceptual themes which Greek writers obtained from Scripture. I will argue here that in some NT literature death as physical event is relativized to eschatological hopes and fears, and attention shifted from mortality to Christ's universal judgment and the eternal destiny that judgment determines. Second, I will show that in other literature death manifests the power of sin as well as the means by which Christ (and Christians) overcome it. I will, in keeping with the concerns laid out above, conclude by noting other salient themes and terminology not connected in the NT with death or judgment but which ascetics will increasingly describe using language of death.

The Event of Death

Scripture does not use any one word to signify the phenomenon of death. Generally, we encounter two kinds of vocabulary: terms for 'death,' and terms for 'destruction.'¹⁰⁰ Both of these are opposed to words for 'life' or 'living,' (particularly ζωή).¹⁰¹ The commonest words for 'dying' are (συν)(ἀπο)θνήσκω, and τελευτάω.¹⁰² The latter is rarer than the former and, though τελευτάω shares an etymological origin with τελειόω ('to perfect' or 'make complete'), τελευτάω simply means to 'come to the end [of one's life].'¹⁰³ Thus, τελευτῶν, 'dying', refers to the deterioration of the human being leading up to and culminating in death (Heb 11.22). Τελευτάω and its related form τελευτή refer most generally to the cessation of physical life and, therefore, to death as an event which terminates or, at least, demarcates, physical existence.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Meredith, Anthony, 'Asceticism, Christian and Greek', *JTS* ns 27:2 (1976), 331-32

¹⁰⁰ 'Destruction' (ὄλεθρος, φθείρω/φθορά, ἀπόλλυμι/ἀπωλεία) is only tangentially related to the topics under survey.

¹⁰¹ *S.v.* θάνατος, *TDNT* 3:7-25

¹⁰² The NT also uses κοιμᾶσθαι: literally, 'to fall asleep' (e.g., John 11.11-13, 1 Cor 7.39). Sleep and death were closely associated in Greek and Jewish thought and, as Bultmann notes (*s.v.* θάνατος, *TDNT*, 3:14 n60) both Homer and the rabbis could use 'to fall asleep' for 'to die' without intending any idea of afterlife, let alone physical resurrection. Cf. John 11.11-13.

¹⁰³ *S.v.* τελευτάω, LSJ

¹⁰⁴ E.g., Gen 6.17, 27.2, Lev 24.16, Ezek 18.17, Mat 2.19, Mar 9.48, John 11.39, Act 7.15

Another curious word is ἔξοδος. Though rare, its range of meaning is remarkable: aside from the obvious reference to the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, it can mean, among many other things, death.¹⁰⁵ Luke, for example, uses the term of Jesus' death: 'Οἱ ὀφθέντες ἐν δόξῃ ἔλεγον τὴν ἔξοδον αὐτοῦ, ἣν ἤμελλεν πληροῦν ἐν Ἱερουσαλήμ'(9.31). The context of the transfigured Jesus speaking with Moses and Elijah suggests an intentional reference to the Exodus narrative. Though tempting to infer similar references elsewhere, this is generally unwarranted, and ἔξοδος simply means a 'departure' and so 'death.' Ἐξοδος can refer to the departure of πνεῦμα from σάρξ (or σῶμα—the material portion of the human being), as in the following: ...'παρακλήθητι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐν ἐξόδῳ πνεύματος αὐτοῦ' (Sir 38.23). Or it can refer to death generally as a person's 'departure' from the life: 'Σπουδάσω δὲ ἐκάστοτε ἔχειν ὑμᾶς μετὰ τὴν ἐμὴν ἔξοδον τὴν τούτων μνήμην ποιεῖσθαι' (2 Pet 1.15).¹⁰⁶ By ἔξοδος authors intend 'departure,' though without any discernible consensus on what exactly that entails.

Finally, there is Jesus Ben Sirach's curious formulation of τὰ ἔσχατα, 'end.' While ἔσχατα is a common expression,¹⁰⁷ Ben Sirach uniquely uses it thrice to refer to death:

Ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς λόγοις σου μιμήσκου τὰ ἔσχατά σου καὶ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα οὐς ἀμαρτήσεις (7.36).

Μνήσθητι τὰ ἔσχατα καὶ παῦσαι ἐχραίνων καταφθορὰν καὶ θάνατον καὶ ἔμμενε ἐντολαῖς (28.6).

Μὴ δῶς εἰς λύπην τὴν καρδίαν σου ἀπόστησον αὐτὴν μνησθεὶς τὰ ἔσχατα (38.20).

In these passages τὰ ἔσχατα refers to 'death' as 'end of existence.' Ben Sirach does not envision anything after death, whether an eschatological judgment or a post-mortem existence. He says, rather, 'μὴ ἐπιλάβῃ οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐπάνοδος...μνήσθητι τὸ κρίμα μου ὅτι οὕτως καὶ τὸ σὸν ἐμοὶ ἐχθὲς καὶ σοὶ σήμερον. ἐν ἀναπαύσει νεκροῦ κατάπαυσον τὸ μνημόσυνον αὐτοῦ καὶ παρακλήθητι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐν ἐξόδῳ πνεύματος αὐτοῦ (38.21-23). Thus, τὰ ἔσχατα must refer simply to that common κρίμα ('sentence') which is death and whose result is the νεκρός, the 'dead body.'¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, as these same verses show, consciousness of death's inevitability impinges on one's manner of *living*: protecting

¹⁰⁵ Judges 5.27, Wis 3.2, 7.6; Sir 38.23, Luke 9.31, and 2 Peter 1.15

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Phil 1.23 and 2 Cor 5.8.

¹⁰⁷ The plural reflects LXX usage for 'end' or 'final end', as at 2 Sam 2.26, Lam 1.19, and Wis 2.16; or for 'outcome', as at Isa 41.22 and Dan 12.8; or even for 'descendants', as at Dan 11.4; or for 'latter' state or days, as at Job 8.7, 42.12, and Mat 12.45.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Eccl 2.15-16.

from sin (7.36), helping to make peace (28.6), and lightening one's heart in face of calamities (38.20). Ben Sirach's usage is not retained, as Christian authors apply radically different meanings to τὰ ἔσχατα and εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, neither of which, for them, refer to the present life but, rather, to eternity. However, his *ideas* will resonate throughout the ascetic tradition. Sirach 7.36 is the biblical foundation for the μνήμη τοῦ θανάτου, the 'memory of death', which will be so vital to ascetic authors.

Something similar was prevalent in Greco-Roman philosophical circles and it is even possible that Ben Sirach, a Hellenistic Jew of Alexandria, was influenced by philosophers' 'μελέτη τοῦ θανάτου.' Pierre Hadot discussed at some length the practice and perceived benefit of so-called 'spiritual exercises' in antiquity, arguing that Christian ascetical practices owed much to these.¹⁰⁹ In particular he found in προσοχή, 'attentiveness' (usually to oneself), a concept which fared well among Christians. For Stoics and Platonists alike, the philosopher sought to see himself as he really was and to discern how he did and ought to obey the supreme principle, whether θεός, λόγος, or φύσις.¹¹⁰ Προσοχή, Hadot argues, 'suppose une continuelle concentration sur le moment présent, qui doit être vécu comme s'il était à la fois le premier et le dernier.'¹¹¹ Thus, attention to oneself means also attention to one's *death*, because humans, being mortal, live always under the shadow of their own mortality which is natural, reasonable, and distinguishes humans from gods. Indeed, Hadot characterizes the 'spiritual exercises' of philosophers as *existential*. He says, '...ces exercices veulent réaliser une transformation de la vision du monde et une métamorphose de l'être. Ils ont donc une valeur, non seulement morale, mais existentielle. Il ne s'agit pas d'un code de bonne conduite, mais d'une manière d'être au sens le plus fort du terme.'¹¹² That is, the Socratic 'μελέτη τοῦ θανάτου,' the 'practice of death,' helped the philosopher to live a life whose goals and habits accorded rationally to the fact and consequences of his mortality.¹¹³ Thus, a practice vital to ascetics has its genealogy from philosophical exercises and Scriptural admonitions, both of which would be interpreted through Christian perspectives on death.

¹⁰⁹ Hadot, Pierre, 'Exercices spirituels antique et « philosophie chrétienne »', in his *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1981), 60-63

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 65

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 60

¹¹³ See especially Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, 21; Marcus Aurelius, *Tὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν*, 2.11. See also any who took up Socrates' definition of philosophy as μελέτη τοῦ θανάτου (Phaedo 81a): e.g., Chrysippus, SVF 3.786 and Iamblichus, *Protrepticus*, pp. 13, 100, 115, 119.

Definitions Physical and Metaphorical

For ‘death’, Scripture usually uses (ἀπο)θνήσκω, ‘to die’, and its related noun, θάνατος, ‘death.’ Neither NT nor LXX gives an explicit definition of θάνατος or related words. Rather, we must, as early Christians did, look outside the range of Scripture to the definition of death dominant in the Greco-Roman world: ‘χωρισμός ψυχῆς ἀπὸ σώματος,’ the ‘separation of soul from body.’¹¹⁴ This definition became normative also for Christian writers¹¹⁵ and is employed in those rare moments in ascetic literature which gesture toward defining death.¹¹⁶ What χωρισμός might entail—whether the ψυχή would continue to exist eternally or only for some time, or not at all; whether it could still function at all, or even function better, without the σῶμα; whether death meant the complete destruction of a particular human being or simply of the material portion; whether χωρισμός means release or dismemberment—hardly found consensus. Indeed, the ways in which philosophers filled out the details of χωρισμός implicated their cosmological and anthropological ideas more broadly, and these vary widely between schools, eras, and cultural milieus.

Because the common definition left so much in doubt, alternative definitions were deployed by Jewish and Christian thinkers with a vested interest in the immortality of the soul. These definitions suggested that the soul, being ἀθάνατος, can suffer something analogous to what the entire human, being θνητός (at least with regard to the σῶμα φθαρόν), suffers in physical death. For example, Philo, attempting to explain why, given God’s stern warning in Genesis 2, Adam and Eve in fact did not die upon eating the forbidden fruit, argues that the term is equivocal: ‘For death is twofold [διττός]: of a person [ἀνθρώπου] and, properly, of the soul [ψυχῆς ἴδιος]: while death of a person is “separation of soul from body” [χωρισμός ἐστι ψυχῆς ἀπὸ σώματος], death of a soul is corruption of virtue [ἀρετῆς

¹¹⁴ True of Platonists, Stoics and Epicureans, as well as their common descendants: e.g., Plato, *Phaedo* 67D; Zeno, SVF 1.146 and Chrysippus, SVF 2.604, 2.790; Plutarch, *Moralia* 1052C; Diogenes of Oenoanda, *Fragmenta*, 37; Philo, *Legum Allegoriarum* 1.105, *De Abrahamo* 258; Iamblichus, *Protrepticus*, p. 65; Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.6.5.20; Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos* 7.234; Alexander of Aphrodisius, *Problemata* 3.11; etc.

Aristotle only discusses θάνατος briefly in his medical works, defining it as a cooling of interior heat or cessation of respiration—the loss of vital energy—and the corruption that accompanies that loss. See *De respiratione*, 472a, 479b; *Problemata*, 909b.

¹¹⁵ Matthew 10.28 hints at it, but see e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 4.3.12.5, 7.12.71.3; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 7.5; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 2.30.8 Gregory of Nyssa, *De iis qui baptismum differunt* PG 46:424B; Nemesius of Emesa, *De natura hominis* 2; John of Damascus, *Expositio Fidei*, 72; etc.

¹¹⁶ E.g., Ps-Macarius, *Collectio* H, 22; Theophilus 4; Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Joannis Hesychastae*, 17; Evagrius, *Practicus*, 52. Climacus offers no definition of death.

μὲν φθορά] and reception of evil [κακίας ἀνάληψις].¹¹⁷ Alexandrian Christian authors, familiar with Philo's move, similarly multiplied definitions of θάνατος to incorporate not only the cessation of physical existence which was, for them, of only limited import, but also a more worrisome 'death of the soul.' Clement of Alexandria would boldly invert thanatological language, 'One could dare to say that, while death [θάνατος] is the participation of a sin-prone soul in a body [ἡ ἐν σώματι κοινωνία τῆς ψυχῆς ἀμαρτητικῆς οὐσίας], life is separation [χωρισμὸς] from sin.¹¹⁸ Clement uses θάνατος to describe a sinful state of being, and ζωή to describe freedom from it. Origen would make similar assertions, when, describing how the Holy Spirit is called 'life-creating', he compares it to Paul's remark that 'the letters kills, but the spirit makes alive' (2 Cor 3.6). Origen then asserts that 'the "letter kills" and works death, not as the separation of the soul from the body, but as the separation of the soul from God and his Lord and his Holy Spirit.'¹¹⁹ Here Origen shows his acceptance of the common definition of death, but suggests that, in relation to God, there is a different kind of state which might also be called by the name θάνατος. In these examples, the standard definition of death is accepted (at least implicitly), but its primary claim—that death means a *separation* of normally united elements—applied to the soul's status with regard to God, truth, or virtue. Writers thus attempted to elucidate the consequences of death in spiritual terms as well as physical. The ascetic writers we will survey will also liberally apply the term θάνατος to vices which damage the soul or to a separation from God, even while envisioning a 'death' which positively contributes to Christian identity.¹²⁰

Death and Disclosure

In the LXX θάνατος is sometimes personified,¹²¹ sometimes a natural event,¹²² sometimes a metaphor for great suffering,¹²³ often the consequence of divine judgment,¹²⁴ even an expression of the

¹¹⁷ *Legum allegoriarum* 1.105-06, cf. 2.77; on which see Zeller, D., 'The Life and Death of the Soul in Philo of Alexandria: The Use and Origin of a Metaphor', *Studia Philonica Annual* 7(1995): 19-55.

¹¹⁸ *Stromateis* 4.3.12.1

¹¹⁹ Origen, *Commentarium in Ioannem*, 13.23.140: 'αἱ γὰρ τὸ γράμμα ἀποκτέννει καὶ ἐμποιεῖ θάνατον, οὐ τὸν κατὰ τὸν χωρισμὸν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος, ἀλλὰ τὸν κατὰ τὸν χωρισμὸν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ τοῦ κυρίου αὐτοῦ, καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος.'

¹²⁰ 'Ὁ θάνατος ὁ δεύτερος', 'the second death' (Rev 2.11, 20.6, 20.14, 21.8) is not used by these, and in the literature under survey I find only one reference (QR 233) and there without comment.

¹²¹ Hos 13.14, Hab 2.5, Sir 41.1-2, Job 18.13; cf. 2 Kgds 22.5, Prov 7.27, etc.

¹²² Gen 3.19, 18.27; Eccl 12.7. See on OT theology of death generally, Bailey, Lloyd R., Sr.: *Biblical Perspectives on Death*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 58f, 109-110. On the Eden episode see

moral character of one's life.¹²⁵ Death may not have been a good thing, but neither was it necessarily a bad one: death was a fact of life. For NT writers, the situation looked rather different. Paul, for example, sees death disclosing the limitations imposed on humanity through sin, while Matthew refers it the eternal resolution of human existence in Christ's eschatological judgment. For John, while death is terrible, even tragic (11.34, 12.27), it in no way disrupts the life which Jesus offers (11.25-27).¹²⁶ For such writers, death can only be a good or bad thing, and, if ever it is neutralized, as Matthew's or John's Gospels might suggest, it is only with reference to a more fearful prospect in eternity¹²⁷ or an eternal hope realized in the present.¹²⁸ Ascetics, to put it very generally, also concerned with the spiritual 'meaning' of death, take ideas of eschatological judgment from Matthew, and their focus on death as symbol of fallen and saved humanity from Paul. While the modern critic would be in no danger of confusing these two strands of thought, patristic readers would, through creative readings, combine them without rejecting either. I will, therefore, lay out these strands of thought without attempting to adjudicate or synthesize. We will, in the chapters which follow, see the ways that Matthew and Paul's ideas, if not always their words, resonate through ascetic literature.

Death and Judgment

Because it was conceived as the cessation of human existence, θάνατος could give Job hope for rest after his torment (Job 3.13-16), remind Ben Sirach not to worry so much, or could, conversely, cause the Teacher to toy with nihilism (Eccl 2.15-20). In the Pentateuchal and Historical narratives what mattered was that death be natural, in old age, and that one be buried and 'gathered to one's people.'¹²⁹

especially Barr, James, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality: The Reed-Tuckwell Lectures for 1990* (London: SCM, 1992), 1-20.

¹²³ Pss 17.5-6, 106.18, 114.3, etc.; cf. Rom 7.12-25.

¹²⁴ Gen 2.17, 6.7; Exod 12.29, 32.28; 2 Kgds 6.7; etc.; so also in some NT writings—Acts 5.1-11; cf. Luke 13.1-5. This is most especially true for Paul (Rom 5.12-21), on which more below.

¹²⁵ Bailey (*Biblical Perspectives on Death*, 47-52, 77-80) confines this distinction to older strata of literature, seeing it subverted in Wisdom literature and fully reversed in Christian martyr literature as well as passages like 1 Cor 4.9-13 and Luke 21.16. This does not deny the validity of 'good' versus 'bad' death, but simply changes the criteria rather drastically. See also Johnston, Philip S., *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downer's Grove, IA: Intervarsity, 2002), 39-46

¹²⁶ See Bailey, *Biblical Perspectives on Death*, 51-52; Clark-Soles, Jaime, *Death and the Afterlife in the New Testament* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 122-138; and Rowland, Christopher, 'The Eschatology of the New Testament Church', in Jerry L. Walls (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 66

¹²⁷ Mat 5.22: 'ἡ γέεννα τοῦ πυρός'

¹²⁸ John 17.3: 'ἡ αἰώνιος ζωή'

¹²⁹ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 26-27, 33-35

To wish for more than peaceful oblivion was unknown and to expect any fate other than that which befalls all mortals was absurd. Not so in Matthew's narrative. He writes, 'Καὶ μὴ φοβεῖσθε ἀπὸ τῶν ἀποκτενόντων τὸ σῶμα, τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν μὴ δυναμένων ἀποκτεῖναι· φοβήθητε δὲ μᾶλλον τὸν δυνάμενον καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἀπολέσαι ἐν γέννη·' (10.28). For him, therefore, physical death—which affects only the body—is much less important than the possibility of eternal and total destruction 'ἐν γέννη'.¹³⁰ Death's meaning is, therefore, ultimately referable to an eschatological fate.

How does this terrible fate come about? We learn that "Ὅταν δὲ ἔλθῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐν τῇ δόξῃ αὐτοῦ καὶ πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι μετ' αὐτοῦ, τότε...συναχθήσονται ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, καὶ ἀφορίσει αὐτοὺς ἀπ' ἀλλήλων, ὥσπερ ὁ ποιμὴν ἀφορίζει τὰ πρόβατα ἀπὸ τῶν ἐρίφων' (25.31-32). The all-important event is the eschatological and universal judgment of Christ at which all will be divided into their two possible destinies: beatitude with Christ or torment in Gehenna. In this moment all secrets are revealed (10.27) and God takes account of *actions*.¹³¹ Elsewhere, Matthew (6.4; cf. Heb 4.13) suggests (following 1Kgds 16.7) that God's gaze even now penetrates appearances. Yet it is only in his eschatological judgment that all will see clearly what God sees now — thus the surprise of both the sheep and the goats Matthew 25. The goats are dismissed and sheep welcomed because of their ethical habits: feeding the hungry, aiding the poor, visiting prisoners, etc. The surprise is that Jesus' judgment reveals even the most apparently banal actions as divinely significant: 'Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐφ' ὅσον ἐποιήσατε ἐνὶ τούτων τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν ἐλαχίστων, ἐμοὶ ἐποιήσατε' (25.40).¹³² The myriads of different human lives, the numerous shades of goodness, resolve into the only two possibilities which remain when nothing is kept secret and the implications of every action fully understood.¹³³ The revelation of Christ makes death refer not primarily to mortality, but to Christ's judgment and the destiny it determines, which lies beyond the grave and is based on how one lives presently. The terror

¹³⁰ See also Mark 9.43-49 (with Byzantine variants). On which see Metzger, Bruce, *Textual Commentary on the New Testament* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 86-87.

¹³¹ So also Luke 12.3

¹³² Paul also speaks of (probably) eschatological judgment (in one of the very few instances that he could be said to speak of it at all) in terms of actions as well: 'Ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον φανερὸν γενήσεται, ἢ γὰρ ἡμέρα δηλώσει, ὅτι ἐν πυρὶ ἀποκαλύπτεται· καὶ ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον ὁποῖόν ἐστιν τὸ πῦρ δοκμάσει...Εἴ τις τὸ ἔργον κατακαήσεται, ζημιωθήσεται· αὐτὸς δὲ σωθήσεται, οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός' (1 Cor 3.13, 15). On which see Clark-Soles, *Death and Afterlife*, 82-83.

¹³³ Clark-Soles, *Death and Afterlife*, 188-90

facing humans, therefore, is not the physical event of death but eternal ‘destruction’—which is itself understood as a more complete form of ‘death.’¹³⁴

Conclusion

We have seen the μνήμη τοῦ θανάτου, which, for Ben Sirach, referred primarily to the fact of *mortality*. Christian ascetics would interpret Ben Sirach’s verses through descriptions of eschatological judgment such as Matthew’s. In doing so, they would fill out θάνατος with eschatological content, such that its ‘memory’ refers most especially to ‘judgment’ and only secondarily to ‘mortality.’ Memory of death still motivates certain patterns of behaviour, but now these must accord particularly with the criteria of judgment.¹³⁵ Thus, for example, when Jesus counsels the removal of *every* stumbling block external or internal, since ‘καλόν ἐστίν σε κυλλὸν εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν ζωὴν’ than to go intact ‘...εἰς τὴν γέενναν, εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ ἄσβεστον, ὅπου ὁ σκώληξ αὐτῶν οὐ τελευτᾷ, καὶ τὸ πῦρ οὐ σβέννυται’ (Mark 9.43-44), this must be weighed against Jesus’ demand that ‘Εἴ τις ἔρχεται πρὸς με καὶ οὐ μισεῖ τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ τὰ τέκνα καὶ τοὺς ἀδελφούς καὶ τὰς ἀδελφὰς ἔπι τε καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἑαυτοῦ, οὐ δύναται εἶναί μου μαθητής’ (Luke 14.26).¹³⁶ The relativization of physical death to eschatological judgment makes possible a perspective within which total renunciation of the present life—insofar as it presents an obstacle—is desirable. This understanding of the world will inform ascetic ‘μνήμη τοῦ θανάτου.’

Mortality, Sin, and their Solution

Another trend in NT writings—confined to Paul and his pseudonymous successors¹³⁷—is to treat physical death as an expression of the condition of sin. Death enters the world through the sin of Adam

¹³⁴ NT writers commonly use ἀπόλλυμι/ἀπωλεία, which can refer to any ‘loss’ or ‘destruction’, to refer to the end of sinners (Mat 7.13, Phil 3.19, Heb 10.39, 2 Pet 3.7). Paul (1 Cor 1.18, 2 Cor 2.15; cf. Jame 4.12) opposes ἀπολλυμένοι to σωζόμενοι, thus suggesting a binary analogous to Matthew’s description of judgment. One is either ‘saved’ or ‘lost’ and, at least in Matthew, this ‘destruction’ must be understood as an ongoing separation from Christ, ‘εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον ἡτοιμασμένον τῷ διαβόλῳ καὶ τοῖς ἀγγέλοις αὐτοῦ’ (25.41). So Clark-Soles, *Death and Afterlife*, 73.

¹³⁵ So notes Rowland, ‘Eschatology of the New Testament’, 60

¹³⁶ Cf. also Luke 9.62, Mat 16.24, etc.

¹³⁷ Generally, scholars aver Pauline authorship only of Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians. They refer to more dubious letters as ‘Duetero-Pauline’: Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians. They refer to the Pastorals as ‘Pseudo-Pauline’: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus. I have no intention of entering that fray. I will accept it as writ that Paul’s authorship is contested for many letters but will, for the sake of brevity, speak as though Paul himself wrote them.

and, since all sin (Rom 3.23), all die (5.12). In Paul's cosmology, sin is not merely a kind of action (though it is that); it is also a malevolent force which holds humanity in thrall.¹³⁸ Sin's power is *expressed* through mortality: '...ἐβασίλευσεν ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ' (5.21a). Thus, Paul can apply 'death' as a description of the life of those bound by sin (Eph 2.1, Col 2.13).¹³⁹ However, death's sinister force is only revealed by Christ and, most especially, his death. But Paul sees this as uniquely vivifying because it ended in a resurrection which Paul sees as the type and guarantee of a universal resurrection: 'Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ δι' ἀνθρώπου θάνατος, καὶ δι' ἀνθρώπου ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν (1 Cor 15.21).¹⁴⁰ Jesus is no longer held by the power of sin because he has died (Rom 6.10, 7.1-6) and yet, by his resurrection, the constricting potency of death was utterly nullified (cf. Rom 8.37-38, 1 Cor 3.22) and the power of his resurrection extends to all who will receive it. Thus we see Paul's emphasis on the σταυρὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ as the manifestation of the power of God (1 Cor 1.18) as the means of salvation (Eph 2.16, Col 1.20) and as the procurement, by death, of life (1 Cor 15.21). This means that death is revealed as an 'ἐχθρός' (1 Cor 15.28) *only because* it has been 'conquered' by Christ's own death, the rule of sin broken and Christ exalted that he might rule over 'καὶ νεκρῶν καὶ ζώντων' (Rom 14.9).

The upshot is that, as C. Clifton Black argues, Paul's understanding of death comes primarily from his understanding of Christ.¹⁴¹ Thus, although death expresses sin, it also becomes the means by which believers receive life. More than that, 'death' becomes a mode of 'life.' Believers are called to a kind of 'death' themselves, but one which is in accordance with Christ's, and not the end of sinners.¹⁴² Thus, Paul describes baptism 'εἰς Χριστόν' as baptism 'εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ' (Rom 6.3). However, elsewhere, he reminds his readers that 'ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς Χριστόν ἐβαπτίσθητε, Χριστόν ἐνεδύσασθε' (Gal 3.27). To put on Christ—to become like Christ, which, as I have already pointed out, is Climacus' definition of the Christian—means in some way to *die* not only *like* but *with* Christ. Baptism into his death means that believers have the opportunity of living free, beyond the reach of death and sin, because they

¹³⁸ Rom 3.9, Gal 4.3; cf. Heb 2.14-15; on which see Cousar, Charles, *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 57; and Tannehill, Robert, *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 32 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1966), 124

¹³⁹ Cf. Heb 6.1, 9.14; Jam 2.17, 2.26

¹⁴⁰ Cousar, *Theology of the Cross*, 88-109.

¹⁴¹ 'Pauline Perspectives on Death in Romans 5-8', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103:3 (1984), 413-433.

¹⁴² Cousar, *Theology of the Cross*, 157-64

live toward a resurrection like Christ's which allows them to live with Christ.¹⁴³ Paul's words are worth repeating on this point:

συνετάφημεν οὖν αὐτῷ διὰ τοῦ βαπτί σωματος εἰς τὸν θάνατον, ἵνα ὡσπερ ἠγέρθη Χριστὸς ἐκ νεκρῶν διὰ τῆς δόξης τοῦ πατρὸς, οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς περιπατήσωμεν. εἰ γὰρ σύμφυτοι γεγόναμεν τῷ ὁμοιώματι τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς ἀναστάσεως ἐσόμεθα· τοῦτο γινώσκοντες, ὅτι ὁ παλαιὸς ἡμῶν ἄνθρωπος συνεσταυρώθη, ἵνα καταργηθῇ τὸ σῶμα τῆς ἁμαρτίας, τοῦ μηκέτι δουλεύειν ἡμᾶς τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ· ὁ γὰρ ἀποθανὼν δεδικαίωται ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας. εἰ δὲ ἀπεθάνομεν σὺν Χριστῷ, πιστεύομεν ὅτι καὶ συζήσομεν αὐτῷ. (Rom 6.4-8)

Believers exist now in a state of 'death', having been buried and looking forward to a future resurrection.¹⁴⁴ Paul compares this state to a καινὴ κτίσις (2 Cor 5.17), a new person (Col 3.10), entirely free of the constraints and demands of his παλαιὸς ἄνθρωπος, his σάρξ (Gal 5.24) which, like his relationship to the world, has been 'ἐσταύρωται' (Gal 6.14).

Believers can, therefore, happily face all manner of suffering, knowing that 'οὐκ ἄξια τὰ παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ πρὸς τὴν μέλλουσαν δόξαν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι εἰς ἡμᾶς' (Rom 8.18). As we saw with Matthew, believers gaze beyond death to the eschatological hope which overshadows and displaces the present life. On this account, they can accept as trivial or, perhaps, even beneficial, whatever trials come, 'πάντοτε τὴν νέκρωσιν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματι περιφέροντες, ἵνα καὶ ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματι ἡμῶν φανερωθῇ' (2 Cor 4.10). Thus, suffering now actually helps constitute future blessings.¹⁴⁵ Death now, life later—or, to put it differently, alive now in spirit while dead in body (Rom 8.10, 2 Cor 4.16), alive at the resurrection in glorified body and spirit (1 Cor 15.51-54).

New life, severed from the constraints of sin yet still subject to mortality, carries an important ethical component. Paul exhorts his readers, since they have died to sin, not to allow it a place in their bodies (Rom 6.11-13) and, therefore, 'Νεκρώσατε οὖν τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς' (Col 3.5). The believer who, like Paul, would imitate Christ (1 Cor 11.1, Eph 5.1, 1 Thess 1.6) must act the part—he does not sin because of his freedom (Gal 2.16-19) or in order to receive God's gift afresh (Rom 6.1). Rather, he remembers Paul's injunction that 'εἰ γὰρ κατὰ σάρκα ζητε, μέλλετε ἀποθνήσκειν· εἰ δὲ πνεύματι τὰς πράξεις τοῦ σώματος θανατοῦτε, ζήσεσθε' (Rom 8.13).¹⁴⁶ If sinful acts lead 'to death,' render a person 'dead in sins,' and are themselves 'dead works,' then only by a process of severance analogous to death,

¹⁴³ So argues Tannehill (*Dying and Rising with Christ*, 14-20).

¹⁴⁴ Paul's argument in 1 Cor 15; and 2 Tim 2.11 quotes the saying as 'πιστός.'

¹⁴⁵ See Cousar, *Theology of the Cross*, 150-51

¹⁴⁶ See also Rowland, 'Eschatology of the New Testament', 60-61

does a person live. A metaphorical death, therefore, allows believers to receive God's gift of life predicated on Christ's life-giving death.

Conclusion

Paul opens up a second important mode of engaging with death. Here, death can express both the condition of sin and the life of the Christian. The former allows Paul to describe nonbelievers and their lifestyles as 'dead.' The latter allows Paul to describe Christians as 'dead', but rests implicitly on the reversal which Christ's death effected, delimiting death and offering resurrection to humans. Believers look forward to resurrection but, for the moment, live in a state of tension, a kind of living burial, dead as far as the world or even their own bodies are concerned. They are free from the constraints of sin—and therefore 'dead' to it—but not from mortality—and therefore 'dead' in their bodies.¹⁴⁷ This line of thought will be important as well for ascetic writers, providing a theologically symbolic framework of thanatological imagery within which to conceive Christian ascetic lifestyles.

Advanced Vocabulary Lessons

Having looked at two lines of thought about death in the NT from which spring ascetic emphases on 'memory of death' and 'practice of death,' I will enumerate five other concepts which those authors would draw from the NT. Although the NT *does not* describe any of these in terms of 'death', *per se*, ascetics would increasingly use thanatological language for them. To begin with, the NT emphasizes (ἀπ)ἄρνησις, 'self-denial.' In a statement which ascetics never tire of quoting, Jesus tells those who would follow him, 'Εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἐλθεῖν, ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθείτω μοί' (Mat 16.24).¹⁴⁸ Though similar to Paul's statements above, here the emphasis on ἀπάρνησις, 'denial' of oneself, is explicit: to die with Christ is to willingly relinquish one's own desires, choices, anything which might hold back. The idea of self-denial here enshrined will be of universal importance for ascetics as regards the θέλημα, 'will.'

Then there is 'non-judgment': Μὴ κρίνετε, ἵνα μὴ κριθῆτε, ἐν ᾧ γὰρ κρίματι κρίνετε κριθήσεσθε, καὶ ἐν ᾧ μέτρον μετρεῖτε, μετρηθήσεται ὑμῖν' (Mat 7.1-2). Judgment, as we have seen above, belongs to Christ, and so arrogating that function to oneself amounts to hubris which will, in

¹⁴⁷ Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ*, 76-77, 85, 130

¹⁴⁸ So Mark 8.34, Luke 9.23

Christ's eschatological judgment, be turned against the usurper. Nevertheless, Jesus' call to non-judgment does not preclude all 'discernment'—'διακρίνειν' is praised (Mat 16.3, 1 Cor 6.5, 14.29) and 1 John commands people to 'δοκιμάζειν τὰ πνεύματα' (4.1). Certainly, both sides—refusal to judge others, and a strong emphasis on διακρίσις, 'discernment'—come together in ascetic thought, particularly by turning judgment against oneself, as Paul exhorts: 'Εἰ δὲ ἑαυτοὺς διεκρίνομεν, οὐκ ἂν ἐκρινόμεθα (1 Cor 11.31).

We note also πένθος, 'mourning,' and λυπή, 'sadness.' In the NT, the former is rare and negative (Luke 6.25). The latter is important to Paul, who says, 'νῦν χαίρω, οὐχ ὅτι ἐλυπήθητε ἀλλ' ὅτι ἐλυπήθητε εἰς μετάνοιαν· ἐλυπήθητε γὰρ κατὰ θεόν, ἵνα ἐν μηδενὶ ζημιωθῆτε ἐξ ἡμῶν. ἡ γὰρ κατὰ θεὸν λύπη μετάνοιαν εἰς σωτηρίαν ἀμεταμέλητον ἐργάζεται· ἡ δὲ τοῦ κόσμου λύπη θάνατον κατεργάζεται (2 Cor 7.9-10). Paul makes a crucial distinction here between 'godly sorrow' which 'operates repentance' and 'worldly sorrow' which 'operates death.' There is, then, a kind of sorrow, perhaps even of 'mourning,' (1 Thess 4.13)¹⁴⁹ which is not only acceptable but actually conducive to that fundamental and universally acknowledged virtue, μετάνοια.

Μετάνοια, however, is a kind of first movement toward God and away from the world, or sin, or oneself. As the author of Hebrews says: 'Διὸ ἀφέντες τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον ἐπὶ τελειότητα φερώμεθα, μὴ πάλιν θεμέλιον καταβαλλόμενοι μετανοίας ἀπὸ νεκρῶν ἔργων καὶ πίστεως ἐπὶ θεόν (6.1).¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, as a θεμέλιος, μετάνοια is ever-present, and must characterize one's actions over which one will be judged (Mat 3.8, Acts 26.20). While Paul does not elaborate on his distinction between repentance-bearing and death-working λυπαί, ascetic literature—especially following Evagrius—will use λυπή to refer to that 'worldly sorrow' which leads to death, associating it with ἀκηδία, 'restless indifference', and ἀνελπιστία, 'despair.'¹⁵¹ In place of Paul's 'λυπή κατὰ θεόν' ascetic literature will deploy πένθος and δάκρυα, 'tears' as the result and source of μετάνοια.

¹⁴⁹ As Clark-Soles, *Death and Afterlife*, 101; *pace* Barclay, J.M.G., "'That you may not grieve, like the rest who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13): Death and Early Christian Identity', in Morna D. Hooker (ed.), *Not in the Word Alone: the First Epistle to the Thessalonians* (Rome: Benedicta Publishing, 2003), 131-153.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Luke 24.47, Rom 2.4, 2 Tim 2.25

¹⁵¹ In fact, Evagrius claims that λυπή and ἀκηδία are σύμφοιτοι (*Vitiis*, PG 79:1141D). In some works, Evagrius does preserve the Pauline semantics as, for example, at *Eulogius*, 6-8 (PG 79:1101D-1104D) and *Spiritibus* (Recensio B), 5.19-20. However, more generally he will make of λύπη a wholly negative vice: *Vitiis* 3 (PG 1141D-1141A), *Practicus* 10, 19; *Monachos* 56, *Rationes* 5 (PG 40:1257A), etc. Generally, then, the same distinction continues to operate, whether or not under the same semantics.

Humility, Obedience, and Love

The five virtues I have discussed, self-denial, mourning, repentance, discernment, and non-judgment flow into the final and, for ascetic writers, probably greatest virtue available to those who would be like Christ: ταπεινώσις, ‘humility’. Ταπεινώσις appears in the NT primarily in its verbal form, ‘ταπεινώω.’ In the Gospels, Jesus says: ὅστις δὲ ὑψώσει ἑαυτὸν ταπεινωθήσεται καὶ ὅστις ταπεινώσει ἑαυτὸν ὑψωθήσεται (Mat 23.12).¹⁵² The implication of such statements is that by self-deprecation of some kind (cf. Luke 18.9-14) one becomes open to aid by which God effects an exaltation (cf. Luke 14.7-14).

It is no surprise, then, that with ταπεινώσις goes ὑπακοή, ‘obedience.’ Ὑπακοή is very often to God’s ἐντολαί, ‘commands.’¹⁵³ Obedience, in the NT, specifies humility’s ‘submission to God’ by means of the twin Mosaic commandments to love: God with a whole heart (Deut 6.5), and one’s neighbour as oneself (Lev 19.18).¹⁵⁴ While these commands are taken from the LXX, the Gospel writers focus on broadening a concept of ‘neighbour’ to include not only one’s friends, kin, or co-religionists, but ‘enemies’ (Mat 5.44, Luke 6.27), ‘persecutors’ (Rom 12.14), and even a complete reversal of the concept (Luke 10.25-37).

The wider definition of obedience as love has important ramifications for Christian identity, which will exercise the imaginations of many ascetic writers. For example, Paul will find none of the distinctions in Christ which kept people from being ‘neighbours’, whether social, cultural, or even genetic (Gal 3.28, Col 3.10-11). Likewise, in the Johannine writings, love motivates and is characterized by obedience, as Jesus told his disciples: Ἐὰν ἀγαπᾶτέ με, ἐντολὰς τὰς ἐμὰς τηρήσετε (John 14.15; cf. 2 John 1.6). There, Jesus’ ‘commands’, though, are to love (13.34) and give oneself for others (John 15.10-13). Obedient self-giving takes place according to Jesus’ own example, and so love, through obedience, makes one like him. Similarly, Paul writes of Christ, ἀλλ’ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβὼν, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὗρεθεις ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἐταπεινώσεν ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ (Phil 2.8). This verse—another favourite among ascetics—draws together in Christ’s example of obedience both self-giving and humility, with death as the only limit to each. Ascetics would treasure Christ-like ταπεινώσις as a preeminent virtue,

¹⁵² The opposition of humbling and being exalted is almost proverbial in NT writings: Luke 18.14, 2 Cor 11.7, Phil 2.6-11, Jam 4.10, 1 Pet 5.6.

¹⁵³ E.g., Mat 5.19, 19.17; John 10.18; 1 John 5.2

¹⁵⁴ Mat 22.36-40, Mark 12.29-31, John 13.34-35, Rom 13.9, 1 John 3.23; cf. Luke 18.20-21

and ὑπακοή as the necessary means of achieving it. While they will recognize various motivations—fear of punishment, hope of reward—they will honor ἀγάπη of God and neighbor above all others—ὑπακοή is only perfected in ἀγάπη, and only through that does ταπείνωσις raise one up to heaven.

Conclusion: Memory and Metaphor

From Matthew we have seen that the end of physical existence is rather less important than the consequences of Christ's eschatological and universal judgment. Eschatological focus effectively relativizes physical death and motivates—whether through fear or hope—patterns of behaviour which will be in keeping with the judgment to come. One strives to become the sort of person whom, having served everyone as though they were Christ, is united to him in the Kingdom, and not the sort who, having ignored him in this life, will be shut out in the next. This is the death Greek ascetics 'remember', and for which they prepare—the judgment into which one enters precisely through death.

For ascetic readers, this line of thought operates in conjunction with the Pauline metaphors of death. Thus, death—physical death at that—symbolizes the destructive power of sin as well as the saving power of God in Christ. Death reveals the tragic position of humanity only insofar as it is already conquered and those limitations destroyed by Christ—only because it is already, in a sense, rendered indifferent, is it also revealed as powerful. Because of this, Paul's writings use death as the point of contact between present and future ages, and suggest its deployment as a metaphor for the unique ways in which Christian identity is formed in conscious contradistinction to the normative ethics and limitations of the world at large. Thus, Paul can describe as 'dead' those under sin and those who live in Christ.

Nevertheless, I would stress that the literature which we will examine in coming chapters rarely operates along semantic lines. The vocabulary of death is insufficient to understand the conceptualities of death. Ascetic identity will include virtues of self-denial, discernment, non-judgment, mourning, repentance, obedience, humility, and love. While they do not connect to death in the NT, ascetic writers increasingly use the language of 'dying' to oneself and others to describe these virtues and practices. And it is that kind of perspectival shift, incorporating seemingly unrelated practices and conceptualizations into a symbolic framework derived from death, which is of particular interest for this study.

I turn now to the ascetics themselves, to show how 'memory of death' and metaphorical practice of death play out in the body of literature leading up to and including the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

1. *VITA ANTONII*

Ὅτι θανάτῳ ἀποθανούμεθα καὶ ὡσπερ τὸ ὕδωρ τὸ καταφερόμενον ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ὃ οὐ συναχθήσεται

---2 Kingdoms 14.14 (LXX)

Δέκατος ὄρος τῆς τελείας ἀλλοιώσεως· ἐν τρυφῇ θεοῦ χαρὰν ἠγγεῖσθαι τὸ στυγνὸν τοῦ θανάτου.

---Diadochus of Photice, *Capita*, Proimion

Having sketched out biblical vocabulary and NT conceptualizations about the place and meaning of death, we turn to the ascetic tradition itself, beginning with Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* (VA), Athanasius of Alexandria' encomiastic biography designed to function as a normative exemplar. In this chapter, I will show how Athanasius deploys ideas of the 'memory of death' and how his conceptualization of spirituality as 'ascent' operates within a cosmology in which life and death operate analogously.

This chapter has four parts. The first argues that Athanasius' a consistent concern with ἀνοδος, 'ascent,' contours his portrayal of ascetic spirituality in VA. The second argues that Antony utilizes and advises a sustained 'memory of death'—both in terms of mortality and eschatological judgment—in order to undertake the 'ascent.' The third examines three visions in which Athanasius' focus on ἀνοδος is revealed as normative both for living and dead. The fourth argues that Athanasius' depiction of Antony's 'daily dying' contains seeds of later ascetic emphasis on a 'practice of death.'

What follows touches only tangentially on many of the important themes, ideas, and issues present in VA. I will not discuss monastic organization, episcopal jurisdiction, Nicene orthodoxy; matters of authorship, genre, style, and sources, pervade scholarly literature and need not concern us here. We are not primarily concerned even with the portrait of the great 'mystic initiate' himself. Engagement with death and judgment does not radically colour the picture of Antony as perfected holy man in which Athanasius emphasises his 'Adamic,'¹⁵⁵ even 'deified' life-style,¹⁵⁶ or his thaumaturgical sanctity.¹⁵⁷ Rather, as we consider VA from the perspective of the spiritual 'ascent' I discuss below, we emphasize instead those initial movements of the ascetic which lay the groundwork for his later achievements, as well as those practices which he would counsel for beginners in his great sermon. For the Desert and Gazan Fathers and, especially, Climacus, initial movement, daily struggle, and the means of progress are more pressing concerns than idealized sanctity. By elaborating VA's incorporation of death into Antony's spiritual career, we will see more clearly the first seeds of themes which will dominate in the *Ladder*.

¹⁵⁵ Brown, *Body and Society*, 222-26; Bartelink, 'Introduction' to VA, 57

¹⁵⁶ Harmless, William, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 90-93

¹⁵⁷ Anatolios, Khaled, *Athanasius: the Structure and Coherence of his Thought*, Routledge Early Church Monographs (London: Routledge, 1998), 180-94

I. A RULE IN NARRATIVE

What sort of text is *VA*? It has been hailed as masterpiece of encomiastic biography,¹⁵⁸ and its form compared to those biographies which concerned the θεῖος ἀνὴρ, the 'divine man.'¹⁵⁹ G.J.M. Bartelink (among others) discerned in Athanasius' portrayal of Antony a Christianized development of the classical topos of the θεῖος ἀνὴρ: 'Chez les chrétiens "l'homme de Dieu" a succédé à "l'homme divin", et l'homme héroïsé, en pleine possession de l'ἀρετή éthique ou politique et qui se suffit à soi-même, a cédé la place à l'homme de Dieu chrétien, guidé par la grâce et qui n'est qu'un instrument dans la main de Dieu.'¹⁶⁰ The 'divine man' referred to great philosophers, deified heroes, men whose lineage might be traced to the gods.¹⁶¹ Christianization, however, so changed their physiognomy that we cannot realistically equate Antony with 'divine men' at all. He moves instead within the tradition of the Israelite 'man of God': the patriarchs and prophets, followed in the usual ascetic litany of exemplars with Christian apostles and martyrs. This sense of ontological subordination to God which marks out 'men of God' from 'divine men' is central to Athanasius' portrait of Antony. Johannes Roldanus writes, 'c'est toute la vie ascétique qui est devenu possible par l'incarnation du Christ,' but, he continues, 'la vraie stature d'ascèse est réalisée par Christ.'¹⁶² The ascetic life reflects Christ's life, something possible only because of what Christ accomplished. Thus, Bartelink points out that Athanasius subordinates Antony, the 'subject' of *VA*, to Christ: 'Il y a, dans l'ascèse d'Antoine, une différence essentielle avec celle des

¹⁵⁸ See especially Bartelink, G.J.M., 'Die literarische Gattung der Vita Antonii. Struktur und Motiv', *VC* 36 (1982), 38-62. However, almost immediately after the appearance of that article, Patricia Cox called into question the whole idea of stable genres in late antiquity: as also Cox [Miller], Patricia, *Biography in late antiquity: a quest for the holy man*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 5 (Berkeley: UC Press, 1983). See also, Hägg, Thomas and Rousseau, P. (eds.), *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 31 (Berkeley: UC Press, 2000), 1-28.

¹⁵⁹ Athanasius' classical models include the *Vita Plotini* by Porphyry and Philostratus' *Vita Apollonii Tyanae*. On which see Reitzenstein, R., *Des Athanasius Werk über das Leben des Antonius. Ein philologischer Beitrag zur Geschichte des Mönchtums* (Heidelberg: Sitzunberichte der Heidelberg Akademie der Wissenschaft, 1914), 13-39. See also Ludwig Bieler's classic discussion: *ΘΕΙΟΣ ΑΝΗΡ: das Bild des "göttlichen Menschen" in Spätantike und Frühchristentum* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976).

¹⁶⁰ Bartelink, 'Introduction' to *VA*, 47-48

¹⁶¹ Bieler, Ludwig, *ΘΕΙΟΣ ΑΝΗΡ: das Bild des "göttlichen Menschen" in Spätantike und Frühchristentum* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976); see also Cox [Miller], Patricia, *Biography in late antiquity: a quest for the holy man*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 5 (Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 1983), 20-30, 52-54

¹⁶² Roldanus, J., *Le Christ et l'homme dans la théologie d'Athanasie d'Alexandrie. Étude de la conjonction de sa conception de l'homme avec sa christologie*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 316

philosophes (surtout néoplatoniciennes): elle tire sa force du Christ et se dirige vers lui.¹⁶³ Antony's life, his achievements and his career, are contoured on the identity of Christ, who represents end and means, the one whom Antony serves and the strength by which Antony labours. This decentring process—relativizing the ostensible subject, Antony, against another, Christ—makes *VA* a curious sort of biography, if it is one at all. So concludes Bartelink in his article on *VA*'s genre:

Die didaktischen Zwecke stehen in der *Vita Antonii* mit den eigentlich biographischen in starker Konkurrenz. Doch darf man mit gutem Recht sagen, dass Athanasius, der zahlreiche historische Einzelheiten verarbeitet hat, ein weit besseres Bild seines Helden gezeichnet hat, als es in manchen späteren stereotypen Heiligenleben zu geschehen pflegt, welche nicht weiter kommen als einen vagen Schattenriss, wobei jedes individuelle Element fehlt.¹⁶⁴

That is, in describing Antony in relation to Christ, *VA* inscribes in Antony's personality the points of Christian spirituality which particularly mattered to Athanasius, thus crafting a remarkable portrait of this 'ideal Athanasian human being.'¹⁶⁵ *VA* owes both the vividness of its biography and the pointedness of its spiritual content to the kinds of concerns which Athanasius foregrounded in it: Christ's renovation of humanity as it plays out in an ascetic lifestyle reflective of Christ's own life.¹⁶⁶

In this context, Athanasius and his readers understood *VA* as a normative model of ascetic spirituality. Athanasius wrote that, 'For monks, the life of Antony is, as it were, a model [χαρακτήρ] for discipline [ἄσκησιν].'¹⁶⁷ Gregory Nazianzen hailed it as 'a legislation of the monastic life in the form of a narrative.'¹⁶⁸ When Augustine and his friends read it, they very nearly ran off to join a monastery.¹⁶⁹ While its form may be that of a βίος or ἐγκωμίων, *VA* was meant, to inspire and model other lives, and not, as biographies would, to demonstrate Antony's uniqueness. As Gregory's description and Augustine's reading show, Athanasius' readers were inspired to imitate Antony. To read *VA*, then, is to

¹⁶³ Bartelink, 'Introduction', 48; see also Françoise Frazier, 'L'Antoine d'Athanasie à propos des chapitres 83-88 de la *Vita*', *VC* 52 :3 (1998), 235.

¹⁶⁴ Bartelink, 'Die literarische Gattung', 62

¹⁶⁵ Brakke, David, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, OPCS (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 242

¹⁶⁶ Roldanus, *Le Christ et l'homme*, 317-21

¹⁶⁷ *VA* Prol.3; Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 201-03

¹⁶⁸ *Oratio* 21.5 (PG 35:1088D): Ἐκεῖνος [Ἀθανασίος] Ἀντωνίου τοῦ θείου βίου συνέγραψε, τοῦ μοναδικοῦ βίου νομοθεσίαν, ἐν πλάσματι διηγῆσεως.

¹⁶⁹ *Confessiones* 8.14-29

read not a 'biography' exactly, but the story of Antony's awe-inspiring yet paradigmatic relationship to Christ.¹⁷⁰ *VA* presents, therefore, a picture of ascetic spirituality, whose shape we will here explore.

Ἄνοδος

The story of Antony is, in fact, the story of his relationship with God and the display of Christ's power in him. I wish, then, to examine not the 'perfect monk', but the form of life which cultivated and nurtured his vivifying relationship to Christ. It is difficult in *VA* to discern a point in Antony's life where he is anything less than perfect, making it difficult to say how, exactly, anyone can *imitate* Antony. It is, however, possible to trace a peculiarly Athanasian shape of spirituality in *VA*, which could act as a sort of 'rule' even for beginners. Athanasius was fond of describing Christianity as an ἄνοδος, 'ascent', to heaven. David Brakke has argued that

Athanasius eschewed an educational program in describing the Christian life and instead articulated a myth (humanity's ascent past weakened demonic powers) that stressed moral effort and required practices of withdrawal from society, which he metaphorically described as a death. The Christian life became an ascetic life.¹⁷¹

Brakke here contrasts Athanasius with earlier Alexandrians, such as Clement and Origen, who focused more on humanity's corrupted understanding and assigned to Christ especially a teaching function. Athanasius did not deny the importance of Christ's teaching, arguing at length in *DI* that Christ frees humanity from the deceit of demons.¹⁷² However, the 'myth' of the ἄνοδος delimits Athanasius' conception of *what* Christ taught: the demons are responsible for epistemological error, whose symptoms include idolatry, adultery, and murder. Their epistemic activity is one way in which these demons, by inhabiting the atmosphere, block the soul's path to God.¹⁷³ By his death on the cross ('in the air') Christ overcame these malevolent spirits and by his resurrection opened up the ἄνοδος to God once more.¹⁷⁴ Humans are tasked with actually 'traveling' this ascent.

Athanasius raises the issue of aerial ascent quite explicitly in *VA*.¹⁷⁵ Indeed, David Brakke argues that *VA* 'is governed by Athanasius' myth of heavenly ascent...the monk merges his own story into the

¹⁷⁰ So also Roldanus, *Le Christ et l'homme*, 308; Louth, Andrew, 'St. Athanasius and the Greek Life of Antony', *JTS* ns 39:2 (1988): 506; Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 180-84, 190-96.

¹⁷¹ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 144

¹⁷² See, e.g., *DI* 14 ll.19-30

¹⁷³ On which see *CG* 2, ll. 24-26; *DI*, 25, ll. 17-21, 23-25; cf. also Plato, *Epinomis* 984E; Origen, *De Principiis*, 2.11.6.

¹⁷⁴ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 149-155

¹⁷⁵ *VA* 65.7

myth of the Word's incarnation, death and resurrection.' The monk, typified by Antony, follows Christ, taking on his characteristics and achieving, by Christ's power, great acts of sanctity: 'Christ has rendered the devil and his demons powerless, but the monk, through his ascetic regime, must make Christ's victory his own.'¹⁷⁶ Constitutive of all this are 'social practices of withdrawal.'¹⁷⁷ That is, Antony leaves the world in order to remain *on* the ἄνοδος. So long as he continues his renunciatory practices, Antony walks yet in the ἄνοδος and does not reach his goal in this life, as Roldanus writes: 'So unerschrocken er auch, so sehr er "Arzt" und Vorbild für die Menschen ist, er bleibt Kampf und Gefährdung, solange er lebt, nicht endgültig entzogen.'¹⁷⁸ Antony lives, therefore, in the same tensed hope as all Christians, and though his life appears more perfect than others, it is only because the ἄνοδος to which all are called is revealed so perfectly in his life.

Obedience and Withdrawal

What is the ἄνοδος? Brakke, as I have mentioned, points to 'social practices of withdrawal' as well as 'moral effort.' These, however, are various means of maintaining a total obedience to God's commands as revealed in the Christian Scriptures. Withdrawal is, for Antony, simply a requisite facet of that obedience. Looking at Antony's very first movements in the ἄνοδος, we find that Athanasius presents Antony's entire career as a response to Scripture readings in Church:

'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your goods and give them to the poor, and come, follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven.' (Mat 19.21)

This is not a conversion, but it is an epiphany of sorts—the point of departure for a new kind of movement in Antony's life for which his Christian faith had already prepared him. Antony had been meditating on just the right question, wondering how 'the Apostles, abandoning everything, followed the Savior.'¹⁷⁹ Antony responds to Jesus' command to 'come, follow me': 'But Antony, as if he held the memory of the saints [the Apostles] by divine inspiration, and as if the reading had been performed for him alone, straightway departed from the Lord's house and gave away what he had received...'¹⁸⁰ He

¹⁷⁶ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 226

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 203;

¹⁷⁸ Roldanus, J., 'Die Vita Antonii als Spiegel der Theologie des Athanasius und ihr Weiterwirken bis ins 5. Jahrhundert', *theologie und Philosophie* 58 (1983), 202; cf. Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 159-60

¹⁷⁹ VA 2.2

¹⁸⁰ VA 2.4

keeps a little back until he later hears 'Do not be anxious for tomorrow' (Mat 6.34a).¹⁸¹ Then, giving the rest of his goods to the poor, Antony throws himself wholeheartedly into a life of asceticism.

Antony began the movement which would make him famous out of obedience born of faith. Of this scene, Johannes Roldanus writes:

Il est net ici que pour Athanase la foi en Christ n'est pas seulement une vertu parmi beaucoup d'autres ; mais qu'il ne peut s'imaginer l'obligation et l'obéissance de la foi sans ascèse. Afin d'être parfait dans l'obéissance au Christ et de gagner la gloire céleste, il est nécessaire de se détacher de toute possession terrestre, d'abandonner toute préoccupation, de se détourner même des parents et des amis et de ne plus prêter qu'à soi-même.¹⁸²

Antony's career from this point is a tale of continuous obedience and submission which keeps him ever on the *ἀνοδος*. Even Antony's more spectacular acts of renunciation function within his daily commitment to obedience. He moves from village to tomb, fortress, desert, and, finally, the 'inner mountain'—ever further outward as he 'outgrows' his current place.¹⁸³ His burial place epitomizes this withdrawal: unknown save to the two monks who actually buried him and God.¹⁸⁴ This path, however, is marked by obedience. Antony puts himself first under a local ascetic and those whom he could find nearby,¹⁸⁵ later directly under God,¹⁸⁶ though he still submitted to the proper ecclesiastical authorities.¹⁸⁷ The outward motion of withdrawal and, with it, renunciation, allows Antony to keep himself ever on the upward path of obedience to Christ. Antony's work on that path is simply to stay on it. Athanasius writes that Antony '...each day, as though possessing a beginning of discipline [*ὡς ἀρχὴν ἔχων τῆς ἀσκήσεως*], he had greater labour for progress...he strove each day to present himself to God such as one must appear to God, pure in heart and ready to obey his will and no other.'¹⁸⁸ Antony works to maintain each day the same fervour he had when he first heard Christ's command to 'come, follow me.' Antony's withdrawal simply allows him to shed, so far as possible, the distractions of society, money, property, family, and personal glory, which muddy the clarity of Christ's commandments.

¹⁸¹ VA 3.1

¹⁸² Roldanus, J., *Le Christ et l'homme*, 296

¹⁸³ VA 11.1, 13.1, 45, 48-51, etc.

¹⁸⁴ VA 90-92

¹⁸⁵ VA 3.3-4, 4.1

¹⁸⁶ Cf. VA 66.1

¹⁸⁷ E.g., VA 46-47.1, 67.2, 90.3-5

¹⁸⁸ VA 7.11-12

Conclusion

Antony the Great is also and especially Antony the obedient. By obedience to Christ Antony participates in and dispenses Christ's power. All those distinctive signs of sanctity on which Athanasius lovingly dwells are subordinate to the triumph already wrought by Christ. Thus we can properly appreciate Athanasius' proclamations of Antony as 'athlete'¹⁸⁹ or as 'mystic initiate'¹⁹⁰ or even as the 'Physician given to Egypt'¹⁹¹. Antony is an athlete trained not only by the old men whom he found near his village, and not only by self-discipline, but ultimately by Christ.¹⁹² The mysteries into which he is initiated are those of Christ, and we ought to recall Athanasius' argument elsewhere that Christ is the 'Physician and Saviour' for all humanity.¹⁹³ Antony's achievements all participate in Christ's universal achievement since 'God, and God alone, can destroy corruption and give life, and can unravel demonic deceits and lead each into all righteousness.'¹⁹⁴ Yet Antony is not some automaton, but a subject whose willing response to Christ is the basis for his entire career. Along these lines, Alvyn Petterson argues that

The individual...is to be brought to maturity, to be completed and perfected. Hence, even individual human acts are significant. Indeed, there is a seriousness about the particular individual's experience of conflict, persecution and tragedy...wanting reconciliation and integration and healing in and through God incarnate.¹⁹⁵

Antony progresses toward toward maturity rather than conversion, and obedience refers him always to the model of life set forth in the Incarnate Christ. Andrew Louth has noted especially 'an emphasis on the decisive nature of the Incarnation of the Word and the triumph of the Cross' as well as the understanding of 'our relationship to God as fulfilled in contemplation' and, finally, 'a twinning of Incarnation and deification.'¹⁹⁶ The life which Antony displays, because it reflects Christ's life, reveals the ascetic movement, and all the monastic developments which accompanied its rise, as a particular means to the end proper to *all* Christians: perfect humanity modeled on Christ.¹⁹⁷ The way to that end is Athanasius' *ἀνοδος*, which is best appreciated as a consistent commitment to obedience which demands

¹⁸⁹ VA 12.1

¹⁹⁰ VA 14.2

¹⁹¹ VA 87.3

¹⁹² Pace Brennan, Brian, "'Vita Antonii". A Sociological Interpretation', VC 39:3 (1985), 211-212

¹⁹³ DI 44.2

¹⁹⁴ Petterson, Alvyn, *Outstanding Christian Thinkers* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 96

¹⁹⁵ Petterson, *Athanasius*, 98; so also Roldanus, *Le Christ et l'homme*, 309

¹⁹⁶ Louth, *St. Athanasius and the Greek Life*, 506

¹⁹⁷ Roldanus, *Le Christ et l'homme*, 338-348; so Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 203-04.

the more visible and spectacular acts of withdrawal and renunciation—asceticism is the mode of obedience, and obedience the path to God made possible by Christ.

It is a temptation to which most readers understandably succumb, to focus on the *result* of Antony's relationship with Christ. They wish to discover the 'new man', the 'ideal', the perfect saint. I wish to ask how Antony began, how he continued, and how he held on to 'his' achievement. If we look at Antony's first steps in the *ἀνοδος*, enshrined in those first crucial chapters after his epiphany, we will find the means by which Antony maintained his obedience to Christ and set 'ascents in his heart.'

I. THE NEW MAN AND THE OLD ENEMY

Having delineated VA's spirituality as an 'ascent' to God constituted by consistent and perseverant obedience maintained through ascetic withdrawal, I turn now to Athanasius' portrayal of the initial movements of withdrawal. I will argue that in these movements engagement with mortality and judgment emerges as a tool conducive to maintaining the fervor of obedience to Christ.

Antony and the Monks

We will proceed in a conceptual, rather than narrative order, and begin in the middle of Antony's great sermon to young monks and disciples—his sermon is directed to beginners and concerns their first movements while revealing Antony's own. Antony there portrays *physical death* as an important ally of the monk, an aid and incentive in his ascetic and, ultimately, Christian, hopes. Antony says,

Lest we neglect [our work], it is good to consider the saying of the apostle that "I die each day" [1 Cor 15.31]. For if also we live thus, as dying each day, we shall not sin [ὡς ἀποθνήσκοντες καθ' ἡμέραν, οὕτω ζῶμεν, οὐχ ἁμαρτήσομεν]. There is a saying that, "we rise up each day" [ἐγχειρόμενοι καθ' ἡμέραν], so let us think that we will not remain until evening, and again, when we come to sleep, let us think that we will not rise.¹⁹⁸

In this passage Antony does not treat death as a remote possibility, or mortality as a theoretical condition. Rather, death looms each morning and night and renders foolish any confidence of reaching the next day. Antony goes on to argue that this belief is the proper way to respond to the inescapable uncertainty of mortal existence: 'By nature our life is uncertain [ἀδήλου] and measured each day by Providence [παρὰ τῆς προνοίας].'¹⁹⁹ Athanasius contextualizes mortality primarily in terms of God's *providence* (πρόνοια), and this context marks out the uniqueness of Antony's position: it is, in a sense, God's care for humans, rather than an ontological condition, that makes death's hour uncertain. Because humans are naturally mortal, death looms as its ever-present expectation. However, the curiously uncertain foreknowledge of death's inexorable approach heightens awareness of every moment (for which 'each day' stands in Antony's formulation) and reveals it as the only moment available in which to obey, and so ascend to, God. Athanasius describes Antony's daily fervour beautifully, and it is worth quoting at some length:

For he did not think it important to measure by time the way of virtue, nor the withdrawal undertaken on its account, but, rather, by desire and choice. He, therefore,

¹⁹⁸ VA 19.2-3 ; cf. 7.11-12

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 19.3

did not remember the present time, but each day, as possessing a beginning of discipline, had greater labour for progress, continually saying to himself the saying of Paul, 'Leaving behind what lies behind, stretching out to what lies before' (Phil 3.13). He remembered also the voice of the prophet Elijah, saying 'The Lord lives, before whom I stand' 'today' (1 Kgds 18.15). He carefully observed that, saying 'today', he did not measure the present time but, as though always making a beginning [ἀρχὴν καταβαλλόμενος], each day he strove to present himself to God just as one must appear to God, pure in heart and ready to obey his will and no other.²⁰⁰

Antony lives only in the present day, not measuring out the past and not looking to an uncertain future. By consciously eschewing any moment but the present, Antony sees more clearly that the present moment images the time when he will stand before God—thus connecting 'mortality' to 'judgment', which I discuss below.

Obversely, the consciousness of mortality counters one of the Devil's favourite ploys: fantasizing about the future. We shall see that, in VA 5.2, the Devil suggests not only *past* memories, but also 'the rough goal of virtue, and how great its labour; he laid before Antony the weakness of the body and the length of a life-time.'²⁰¹ But, if we take Antony seriously, there is *no tomorrow* for ascetics. There is only today, and ascetic progress is ultimately 'a new life, a new future to be constructed daily.'²⁰² However, what futurity the new life might have refers to an 'eternal' future which the ascetic enters only when death cuts short the illusory 'future' of his present existence. Thus Athanasius speaks of Antony 'always making a beginning.' Each day is, in a sense, the first day and the last of one's ἄνοδος.

Antony and the Demons

Death has also an *eschatological* content, derived from NT teaching on Christ's universal judgment. Death, as John Chrysostom would later put it, functions as each person's entrance into eschatological judgment and so its memory must also include that of judgment.²⁰³ Antony battles demons throughout VA, and for his warfare he utilizes and recommends a recollection of judgment. Not long after Antony had given his sister to the care of virgins and betaken himself to study under a nearby ascetic, he was attacked by a series of three temptations designed swiftly to end his hopes. First, the

²⁰⁰ VA 7.10-12

²⁰¹ VA 5.3

²⁰² Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 103

²⁰³ *Homilia in i Epistulam ad Thessalonicenses* 9.1: 'Τό τε τέλος ἐκάστου ἡμῶν τῆς ζωῆς εἰκὼν συντελείας ἐστὶ, καὶ οὐκ ἂν τις ἀμάροτοι συντέλειαν αὐτὸ εἰπών.' On which see Daley, Brian, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 106.

‘good-hating and envious Devil’ conjured memories as a means of drawing Antony back to his former life: the Devil contrasted the pleasures of village life with the rigours of asceticism and, moreover, recalled to Antony his obligations in familial relationships.²⁰⁴ Central in the list is Antony’s ‘charge of his sister’—their parents being dead, her maintenance fell to him until she married. But, of course, Antony has given her to the care of others and so, despite the ‘bonds of kinship’ which he shares with her and, presumably, other members of his village, Antony presses on. Athanasius says tellingly that the Devil found himself weakened before Antony’s *πρόθεσις* (‘purpose’) and repulsed and cast down, by his *στερρότης* (‘firmness’ or ‘resolve’).²⁰⁵

A second time the Devil attacked, aiming a bit lower in hopes of snaring Antony with sex—even taking a feminine appearance and trying to seduce him. But Antony, ‘considering [*ἐνθυμούμενος*] Christ and his nobility, and thinking on the intellectual part of the soul, “quenched the coal” (2 Kgdm 14.7) of that one’s deceit.’²⁰⁶ The scriptural allusion is telling. In 2 Kingdoms, to ‘quench my coal’ is a metaphor for the utter destruction of one’s household and life, leaving ‘leaving neither remnant nor name upon the face of the earth.’ Antony, it seems, leaves to the Devil no further deceit—sex, family, property, what other blandishments can the present life offer?

But, though his deceits are revealed as illusory, the *μισόκαλος ἐχθρός* depicts once more ‘the sweetness of pleasure.’ Antony, ‘as befitting one made angry and sad, considered [*ἐνεθυμείτο*] the promise of fire and the work of the worm (cf. Mark 9.43-49); and opposing these [to the Devil’s suggestions] he passed over unharmed.’²⁰⁷ With Antony’s scripturally motivated rebuttal, the Devil is utterly cast down and departs. After this episode we find Antony *physically* attacked by demons—the Devil had reached, it seems, the acme of temptation, and with the thought of death as judgment, no image of passing pleasure could ever again hold power against Antony.

The Fear of Punishment

The Devil’s return to pleasure after Antony’s apparently total victory is curious, and we should note the function ‘pleasure’ plays in *CG-DI*. There, the ‘fall’ of humanity into sin was, in fact, a fall into ‘pleasure’, or, rather, into the erroneous belief that pleasure and its attainment constitutes a ‘good’ equal

²⁰⁴ VA 5.2

²⁰⁵ VA 5.3

²⁰⁶ VA 5.5

²⁰⁷ VA 5.6; drawing on Isa 66.24, as quoted in Mark 9.43-49.

to or even greater than union with God.²⁰⁸ The Devil attempts by showing ‘the softness of pleasure’ to turn Antony not to a particular action (as he might with sex or kin) but toward a way of viewing the world which would surely hinder and very likely scuttle Antony’s ascetic obedience to Christ. So, in response, Antony considers Christ’s judgment. In his sermon, Antony recalls and advises the same:

We ought not simply master [κρατήσομεν]²⁰⁹ desire for a woman or for any other impure pleasure, but rather let us turn from it as something which passes away, always struggling and beholding in advance the Day of Judgment. For ever the greater fear and agony of tortures [βασάνων] dissolves the softness of pleasure, and rouses the drowsy soul.²¹⁰

Athanasius reminds readers here that the struggle is not simply one or another pleasure, but the ἐπιθυμία τῆς ἡδονῆς—the condition of sin-bound humanity—which contemplation of judgment effectively ‘dissolves.’ Why? Because the things which tempt are only *temporary*. On the contrary, judgment, or at least its consequence, is eternal. Antony weighs the eternity presupposed in judgment against the transient world of present life, and in their opposition, eternity is inevitably the weightier option.

This fearful and eternal judgment belongs to Christ and, in the passage from Mark to which Athanasius alludes in VA 5.6, is predicated not on a tally of actions but on a willingness to sacrifice *anything* which might obstruct a person from the ascent to God. It is better, Christ warned his disciples, to enter missing some parts than to be cast complete into fire. Thus, judgment emerges here as a question of *identity*, a *wholeness* and unswerving obedience in those who would follow Christ. As Françoise Frazier argues, this sense of an identity founded in Christ pervades VA: ‘La simplicité de l’esprit comme la pureté de cœur, l’attachement exclusif à Dieu dont il est le serviteur et l’instrument, le "relais" auprès des hommes: tels sont donc les traits essentiels de la spiritualité du moine que veut fixer Athanase.’²¹¹ Regarding the present passage we may further note that Antony’s meditation on eternal *punishment* parallels his meditation on *Christ* and the ‘intellectual part of the soul’ in 5.5.²¹² That is, in response to the Devil’s attacks (which focus, in both instances, on pleasure, whether conceived in its particulars or generally), Antony reflects on two aspects of Christian belief as on two sides of a coin: on one side Christ

²⁰⁸ CG 4, ll. 1-5

²⁰⁹ In Antony’s vision of the giant and the birds, discussed below, language of ‘mastery’ will be important.

²¹⁰ VA 19.5

²¹¹ Frazier, ‘L’Antoine d’Athanase’, 240

²¹² Both are governed by forms of the verb ἐνθυμέομαι, ‘to ponder’ or ‘to consider’.

the Λόγος and the naturally λογικός human who is made ‘κατ’ εικόνα τοῦ Θεοῦ’ (Gen 1.27),²¹³ on the other the pleasure-seeker consumed in eternal torment. These are merely the sheep and goats of Matthew 25, the ends of the narrow and wide ways respectively, and, therefore, the only two eternal possibilities for humans.

The Hope of Beatitude

Antony exhorted visitors, would-be monks, and beginners by ‘discoursing and recalling the good things to come and the love of God for us, “who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all” [Rom 8.32]...’²¹⁴ By such admonitions, Athanasius tells us, Antony persuaded many to become monks. One cannot underestimate the paraenetic value of future hope. Because so much awaits those who give themselves wholeheartedly to the Kingdom of Heaven, it is no great matter to sacrifice things which, like women and pleasures, ‘pass away.’ The gaze which reveals ‘pleasure’ as worthless simultaneously discloses eternal ‘goods’ as infinitely more valuable.

Hope, then, recalls VA 5.5, wherein Antony overcame sexual temptation by contemplation the ‘nobility of Christ’ and the intellectual aspect of the soul. In that case, Antony accomplished the renunciation of the bodily aspect of human life—which, though not of itself an ‘evil,’ carries the twin evils of ‘pleasure’ and ‘desire’ which pin humans to fractured desires and a demonic lifestyle²¹⁵—by concentrating on another. He renounced the sexual expression of the ἐπιθυμητικόν, the ‘desiring’ aspect of the soul, and aligned himself entirely to the νοερόν, the ‘intellectual’ aspect. Athanasius presents Antony’s choice in VA just as he does Adam’s choice in CG-DI—as a *directing* of his soul toward God who is contemplated first via νοητά.²¹⁶ But, in that movement Antony also aligns himself with what, in humanity, is eternal or, at least, capable of becoming so—he cuts off his foot in order to enter heaven without it. ‘Hope’ and meditation on the beatitude which awaits Christ’s judgment means also acceptance of a particular notion of what it means to be human, and a corollary rejection of those aspects of human life which run counter to that notion. Yet this is no anti-somatic Platnoism: Antony meditated

²¹³ CG 2, ll. 8-15; cf. DI 3 ll. 13-30; cf. Also DI 3 ll. 16-20, 5 ll. 1-6; on which Russell, Norman, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 179-187; and Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 57-58.

²¹⁴ VA 14.7

²¹⁵ CG 3, ll. 11-24; 4, ll. 1-5, 20-35; Cf. similar ideas in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 6.12.98.1, and Gregory of Nyssa, *De Opificio Hominis*, 18.1-6.

²¹⁶ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 62-63

not *simply* on the νοερόν but, first and foremost, on the ‘nobility of Christ’—the Incarnate Christ who properly utilized his body.²¹⁷

Conclusion

Living with mortality and judgment provides Antony with a crucial means of persevering in his ascetic mode of obedience to God. First, by admitting that, in face of death’s uncertainty, each day is but a gift offered providentially by God, he rightly perceives the urgency which each holds. Antony’s recollection of death is most definitely *not* a φόβος θανάτου, ‘fear of death.’ For Athanasius (following Sir 40.1-11), this is an entirely negative category—a result of humanity’s fall which keeps humans enthralled with passing pleasures.²¹⁸ Rather, as Brakke rightly notes, Antony’s μνήμη τοῦ θανάτου is ‘a focused attention on the present and on oneself.’²¹⁹ In that regard it far more closely resembles the ‘spiritual exercises’ which Pierre Hadot discerns among philosophers. Thus, Mark Sheridan applies Pierre Hadot’s arguments to VA and says that, for Antony, attention to oneself (προσοχή) is ‘an essential element in the development of the spiritual life, a continual concentration on the present moment, which must be lived as if it were the first and the last; in this way *prosoche* is closely linked to mindfulness of death.’²²⁰ However, unlike them, Antony meditates on the far more important topic of Christ’s judgment, before which fear and hope are reasonable and appropriate responses. By doing so Antony sees not only the vanity of the world but the criteria of obedience to Christ and so discerns in every momentary choice the eternally dichotomy of beatitude and damnation.

Nevertheless, mortality also alleviates the burden of an uncertain future: for the monk there is no future in this life; there are only today, death, and eternity. He lives authentically with a simple fact which Charles Spurgeon would later describe eloquently:

To-morrow—it is not written in the almanack of time. To-morrow—it is in Satan's calendar, and nowhere else. To-morrow—it is a rock whitened by the bones of mariners

²¹⁷ Anatolios (*Athanasius*, 63-65) points out that for Athanasius the body provided ‘the crucial existential locus for the exercise of human freedom’ (63) but that it is also a tempting entity to which the soul may align itself being, as Athanasius puts it, ‘what is nearest.’ Thus a certain rejection of bodily desires may be necessary to overcome the temptations which they mask. So also Pettersen, Alvyn, *Athanasius and the Human Body* (Bristol: Bristol Press, 1990).

²¹⁸ See Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 221-23. So also VA 36.2, wherein Athanasius includes φόβος θανάτου in a list with ‘κατήφεια, μῖσος πρὸς τοὺς ἀσκητάς, ἀκηδία, λύπη...καὶ λοιπὸν ἐπιθυμία κακῶν.’ Athanasius, like the Apologists before him, typically adduced fearlessness of death as a sign of the reality of Christian hope: VA 27.5, 74.3, 75.1, 79.6; DI 27, 44 ll. 48-49, 52 ll. 28-30.

²¹⁹ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 224

²²⁰ Sheridan, Mark, ‘The Spiritual and Intellectual World of Early Egyptian Monasticism’, *Coptica* 1 (2002), 23

who have been wrecked upon it...To-morrow—it is a dream. To-morrow—it is a delusion. To-morrow, ay, to-morrow you may lift up your eyes in hell, being in torments. Yonder clock saith "to-day;" everything crieth "to-day!"²²¹

Athanasius draws on both sides of Paul's engagement with death. In his theology mortality means for non-believers only the cessation of pleasure and so becomes an object of fear and repulsion.²²² Conversely, physical death actually aids ascetics like Antony because it discloses the urgency of their business and, by revealing the transience of pleasures and the prospect of Christ's judgment, it also clarifies the absolute and complete identity toward which every choice will tend. In light of death, there are no idle moments—there are only moments pregnant with eternal possibility. Thus, meditation on mortality and judgment enables Antony remain firm in his renunciation, and to maintain his fervency in obedience to Christ.

²²¹Spurgeon, Charles, 'Effectual Calling', Sermon 73, delivered March 30, 1856, in *New Park Street Pulpit*, Vol. 2, pp. 153-160

²²²CG 3, ll. 22-32; on which Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 146-49; idem., *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 32; as well as note 218 above for further references.

III. LIFE, DEATH, AND ASCENT

Having seen just how valuable the recollection of mortality and judgment is for Antony, I turn now to further elaborate the cosmological assumptions behind the conception of death at work in *VA*. I will, in this section, interpret two visions of death and one of the ascetic life which has often been mistakenly read as a third death-vision. I will show that Athanasius understands the *ἀνοδος* as operative in both life and death. From this I will argue that life and death are linked up in Athanasius' cosmology and that their continuity means that the present age determines the next, while the next reveals, as it were, the realities underlying the present. I will conclude with a discussion of Antony's paradigmatic death-scene.

Amoun's Ascent

While 'seated in the mountain'—his 'inner mountain' in the far desert—a mature Antony sees 'someone [τινα] ascending [ἀναγόμενον] in the air, and there was great rejoicing from all those he encountered.' Antony is perplexed but excited: 'He prayed to learn what this might be. And straightway a voice came to him, [saying] "this was the soul of Amoun, the monk in Nitria."' ²²³ Athanasius then explains that Amoun had 'remained an ascetic until old age' and immediately launches into a calculation of the distance between Antony's mountain and Nitria, before digressing about the deeds of Amoun—a celebrated wonder-worker and frequent visitor at Antony's retreat. ²²⁴ Athanasius then returns to Antony whose disciples have recorded the date of his vision and, sure enough, though the distance was thirteen days, Antony's vision had taken place the very night of Amoun's death. Ostensibly, then, the story is another proof of Antony's gift of clairvoyance, his discernment and favour with God.

On another level, though, it tells us something of what Athanasius thinks death might be. It is first worth noting that Antony does not know *what* he sees—the 'soul' of a person is, even to his eyes, no more than τις or τι—someone, something. Moreover, Antony's great power only operates thanks to

²²³ *VA* 60.1-3

²²⁴ Amoun likely founded the community at Nitria, and is well known from other sources as well, whose accounts (minus the frequent visits to Antony) correlate with Athanasius'. See, e.g., *HL* 8, Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.14, 6.28; and Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 4.26, cf. *Vita Pachomii altera* 4. See Chitty, *Desert a City*, 11-12, 29-32; Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of Wadi'n Natrûn*, vol. 2: *History of the Monasteries of Nitria and Scetis* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1933).

God's revelation which must explain to him what he saw, and which is only granted in response to his prayer. The vision itself is simple enough in most other ways: Antony sees what takes place when a great Christian goes to join Christ in heaven. Those who 'meet' Amoun are, presumably, the angels who guide him to and meet him in heaven (cf. Luke 15.7, Heb 12.23). We will shortly see how important such figures can be. Amoun, though, is an old man who has endured—'remained' in Athanasius' favoured terminology—in the 'discipline' until his death. His joyous entrance into heaven is *continuous* with his chosen of life: his death befits his earthly accomplishments. Palladius emphasises the continuity of life and death when paraphrasing VA 60 in HL 8.6: Amoun's soul is borne aloft by angels, just as they carried him across the river Lycus. Athanasius relates the miracle but says nothing of angels—only that Amoun did not actually *walk* on the water, since that is possible only for Christ.²²⁵ Palladius' account elaborates Athanasius' implicit cosmology: angels ferried Amoun in life, and so they did in death—in each event because Amoun had sought it through asceticism and God had granted it by grace. Death and life operate in the same ways.

The Giant and the Birds

A second vision of death, this one rather more universal, elaborates on the ways in which Athanasius' myth of ascent plays out in death.²²⁶ A discussion arose with visitors concerning the 'journey of the soul and what sort of place there will be for it after these things.' The next night,

a voice called [Antony] from above, saying, "Antony, rise up and go out and see." He went out, therefore...and he beheld a great figure looking upward, formless and fearful, standing and reaching to the clouds, while figures were ascending like birds; and that figure was stretching out its hands and some he impeded and some flew over him and passed over, and were led upward without worry. The great figure gnashed his teeth at those that escaped, but at those that fell he rejoiced.

Understandably, Antony does not comprehend the vision. But his gift is to receive understanding and so:

Immediately a voice came to Antony: "Understand what you see." And his understanding being opened, he knew that the vision concerned the passage of souls [τῶν ψυχῶν εἶναι τὴν πάροδον], and the standing figure was the enemy who hates the faithful. And those who were liable to him he mastered and impeded from passing on

²²⁵ VA 60.5-9

²²⁶ Interestingly, as John Wortley notes, this story does not provide a model for later 'visions', as Wortley notes, but is echoed in PS 66: 'Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell in Byzantine "Beneficial Tales"', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001), 61-62

[καὶ τοὺς μὲν ὑπευθύνους αὐτῷ κρατοῦντα καὶ κωλύοντα διελθεῖν]. But he was unable to master those who did not obey him, as they passed over.²²⁷

After death, whether immediately or eschatologically, the soul seeks to ascend to God. If it owes nothing to the enemy it can ascend. If not, for whatever reason, it is hindered. The ‘enemy’ is formless. His appearance, like that of Amoun’s soul, is unclear to Antony. Yet the enemy in death is certainly the enemy in life, who has always attempted to hinder souls from their ascent to God.²²⁸ The metaphor of ascent past diabolical forces is, as we have seen, integral to Athanasius’ vision of salvation. Yet, just as Amoun’s death befitted his life, so here the metaphysics of death reflect the course of life as ἄνοδος. The question is whether a person is liable (ὑπεύθυνος) to the enemy. If so, the ἄνοδος is blocked and, in death, this blockage means also permanent mastery by the enemy. In life, as we shall see below, people have the opportunity to clear their debts by repentance, and to gain the support and aid of Christ and his angels. In death, it seems, what was done in life is accomplished with certainty; and all the shades and grades of identities resolve into those who owe the enemy and those who do not. Thus, while death is *continuous* with life, it also reveals as a permanent state what in life had been only a tendency, thus clarifying the urgency of every choice.²²⁹

²²⁷ VA 66.2-5

²²⁸ Cf. DI 25.17-21

²²⁹ This story finds its way, with only slight changes, into *HL*. There Cronius (in whose biography this vision is included) tells Palladius that Antony prayed for ‘a whole year...that the place of the righteous and of sinners might be revealed.’ Gone is the deliberate ambiguity and formlessness of the Athanasian account, Antony says that ‘[I saw] a great giant...black...and under him a lake as vast as the sea, and I saw souls flying like birds.’²²⁹ Some fly over and are saved, but those he strikes fall into the lake. Cronius then relates Antony’s interpretation of the relationship of the soul-birds to the black giant: ‘Then came a voice to me saying, “These souls of the righteous which you see flying are the souls which are saved for Paradise. But the others are those which are drawn down to hell, having followed the desires of the flesh and revenge.”’²²⁹ Although Palladius’ (or Cronius’) version differs somewhat from Athanasius’, its description of the soul beholden to the enemy clearly accords with Antony’s preaching in *VA*.

In this version Antony asks to see ‘the place of the righteous and of sinners.’ This language has an eschatological ring, making the vision a curiously inverted vision of God’s judgment seat. Rather than God dispatching righteous and sinners to their appropriate places, we see the enemy allowed to take all that belong to him, but through his own inability and their agility, unable to snatch away the righteous. The sinners fall because of their own attachments, which happen to serve and make them liable or susceptible to the Devil. It is similar to Athanasius’ language of ‘mastery’ but the emphasis now rests on the sinners rather than the enemy—their choices have made them slaves to the Devil. The righteous rise first because they are ‘saved’, but also, presumably, because they are pure of these faults and, by implication, acceptable to God. Palladius has undoubtedly drawn the story from either from *VA* directly, from an unknown elaboration, or from a common source. Palladius claims to have heard the story from Cronius while at Nitria (cf. *HL* 7.3). The only question is whether Cronius is the source or whether Palladius had in mind Athanasius’ written account—he certainly could have, writing nearly seventy years after Athanasius did (and, if he did hear the story, hearing it forty years after Antony’s death).

In the narrative, Antony has an unexpected vision immediately prior to that of the giant, of angels and demons warring over his soul as he is being ‘led through the air’ [ὡς εἰς τὴν ἀέρα ὁδηγούμενον]. This story, does not concern death.²³⁰ Rather, it is a brief allegory of Athanasius’ conception of spirituality as ἄνοδος, but its proximity to Antony’s vision of death is not accidental, for reasons that will become clear below. This vision serves, in conjunction with the vision of the giant, to

We can discern with some clarity the provenance of the elements of Palladius’ telling which differ from Athanasius’ most sharply: the lake, the specificity of the enemy, and the bird-like appearance of souls. It could be that Palladius intends the ‘lake of fire’ referred to throughout NT writings. However, since he does not mention fire or in any way connect the lake with punishment *per se*, it seems unlikely that he has in mind an NT reference. Instead, the lake, the giant and the birds, as W.K. Lowther Clarke noted in his translation—according to a private letter sent him by E.A. Wallis Budge—are ‘certainly Egyptian’ (*The Lausiac History of Palladius*, Translations of Christian Literature Series One [London: SPCK, 1918], 96 n.1). Thus, what sets Palladius’ version apart is its stronger resonance with pagan (especially Egyptian) myth on exactly the points which Athanasius’s language leaves nonspecific.

It is possible, then, that Athanasius and Palladius share a common source, one amenable to local lore. Athanasius, however, was not so amenable—his only representation of Egyptian deities in *VA* concerns a fawn-like creature, meant, as David Brakke notes, to represent the Egyptian god Min. Antony, we are told, is calm before this creature, telling it simply ‘Χριστοῦ δοῦλός εἰμι· εἰ ἀπεστάλης κατ’ ἐμοῦ, ἴδου πάρεμι’ (53.2). At this, the creature is so afraid that it runs off and dies (53.3). Athanasius only introduces this Egyptian deity, whose name he does not deign to give, in order to show the feebleness of the demonic world before Antony the man of God: ‘Ὁ δὲ τοῦ θηρίου θάνατος πτωμα τῶν δαιμόνων ἦν’ (53.3). Athanasius was at pains first to link the world of Egyptian myth with the demonic and, then to show that, divine or not, these entities are powerless before the ‘new man in Christ.’ Athanasius would, therefore, very likely have effaced any pagan echoes in Antony’s vision.

Palladius, on the other hand, allowed them to remain, ascribing the story to Cronius as a source. Indeed, Palladius’ placement of the story is so stark, so curious, that its very awkwardness militates for its authenticity. It sits between two much lengthier stories told by Cronius: Eulogius and a maimed man (21.1-15), and Paul the Simple (22.1-13); connected only by their inclusion of Antony. Between these two more elaborate stories falls the vision, introduced only by the words ‘And Cronius related this too, that...’ The lack of embellishment in presentation and the simplicity of the narrative suggest that Palladius is merely relating a tale he thinks valuable, and that he preserves substantially what Cronius had told him. Under this interpretation, Palladius, rather than Athanasius, records a more authentic version, ascertained from Cronius, who had acted as Antony’s interpreter.

²³⁰ Many do think this vision concerns death. See, e.g., Daniélou, Jean, ‘Les demons de l’air dans la “Vie d’Antoine”’, in Steidle (ed.), *Antonius Magnus Eremita*, 140-145; and Alexandre, Monique, ‘A propos du récit de la mort d’Antoine (Athanasie, *Vie d’Antoine*. PG 26, 968-974, § 89-93). L’heure de la mort dans la littérature monastique’, in Jean-Marie Leroux (ed.), *Le Temps Chrétien de la fin de l’antiquité au moyen âge 3^e-13^e siècles* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1984), 271. I disagree. Given that this vision is *immediately* followed by another one whose content is *explicitly* related to death, it seems unlikely that Athanasius would have simply stacked varying visions on top of one another. Moreover, the language is different—although Antony is led εἰς τὴν ἀέρα, there is no mention either of his ψυχή or an ἀναγωγή—both of which Athanasius uses in the vision of Amoun and that of the giant. John Wortley draws the same conclusion, but rightly notes that ‘Although this experience concerns only Antony’s *monastic* life, all the elements of many subsequent visions of the last judgment are here.’ See his, ‘Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell’, 62.

strengthen the impression gotten from Amoun's death: that life and death operate analogously and within the same cosmological framework of ascent.

Certain 'vindictive and fearful beings [πικροῦς²³¹ καὶ δεινούς τινας]' stood in Antony's aerial path and 'desired to hinder him as not to allow him to pass through.' Given what we have already seen of Athanasius' demon-filled cosmology, these are undoubtedly demons. Antony's guides, however, argue back that he is not 'liable to them [μὴ ὑπεύθυνος αὐτοῖς εἶη].' This vision expresses, in no uncertain terms, Athanasian concern with the Christian's ἀνοδος past weakened yet ever-present demons.²³²

Liability, however, extends even to the minutiae. Athanasius' language of 'ὑπεύθυνος' relies on a belief in at least the possibility of being completely free of liability—those who ascend are, like Antony, answerable for nothing. Of course, as Athanasius and the entire Christian tradition would clarify, all are liable for something, but by Christ's mercy 'each day a beginning' is available. This new beginning, however, implies greater problems. Antony's guides in VA 65 sternly warn his interrogators that deeds from birth to his profession as a monk are wiped clean by Christ. However, Antony must answer for whatever he has done *since* that profession: the new beginning implies a new birth into a life with its own records and judgment. The radicalism of the ascetic mode of spirituality is quite clear in this distinction. Antony passes by unharmed only because his interrogators cannot prove anything against him *as a monk*. The monastic lifestyle demands an absolute renunciation of all that has gone before, because the monk is fully accountable for everything. The way is open, but only to those who are not liable to the demons. Indeed, only after demonic accusations fall flat did 'the way become free to him and unhindered.'²³³ Demons hinder and angels help, but, in the midst of such legal wrangling it is, ultimately, Christ's mercy that makes ascent possible.

Athanasius then relates another story. He describes Antony as meditating on Ephesians 2.2, "'concerning the prince of the power of the air" for in the air the enemy has power, by fighting and trying to hinder those who pass through.'²³⁴ Antony, considering this verse, has a mystical experience²³⁵ in

²³¹ The usual meaning of πικρός is 'sharp' or 'bitter.' But it can also mean 'relentless' or 'vindictive' (*s.v.* LSJ). This latter definition fits with the legal scene and language (ἀπαιτέω, ὑπεύθυνος) at hand.

²³² Cf. VA 21.1-5 and, Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 36-37.

²³³ VA 65.2-5

²³⁴ VA 65.7

²³⁵ Which Athanasius compares to Paul's trip through the 'third heaven' (2 Cor 12.2-5).

which he 'saw himself coming up to the air and struggling until it [or he] became free.'²³⁶ In this experience the emphasis lies much more on Antony's effort. Yet it is not irreconcilable with the more elaborate vision, if we suggest that Antony's ἄγων consists in maintaining his way of life undefiled, and that the only reason the air is even open to human endeavour is the foundational work of Christ.

Conclusion

Antony's vision of ascetic life perfectly parallels the vision of the giant, which elaborates on his vision of Amoun. In all three visions a mythological motif of ascent to God through hostile powers operates. Only those who do not owe the Devil something are able to pass by, as Amoun does. For him the hostile powers are non-present and only angelic ferrymen appear to take him heavenward. This, combined with the vision of the giant, makes clear that Christ's victory opens the way to heaven and yet it is equally important that believers maintain their obedience to him and, therefore, their freedom from the Devil. The way to Heaven is open, but not free, whether in life or death: it is no accident that Amoun had 'persevered' in 'discipline' from youth unto old age. Demons make the same demand of Antony, and his angelic companions are able to answer affirmatively—only when confronted with his perseverant obedience to Christ in the ascetic life do the demons allow Antony to pass by.

In these visions life and death operate within the same cosmological framework, although the terms of the myth vary. At the same time, the visions also demonstrate that both death and life remain veiled: death because humans can only speculate on it; life because it is easy amidst the din of worldly occupations and the illusion of longevity to lose sight of the apocalyptically charged meaning of each moment. Antony has death and life revealed to him, and their parallelism suggests that what takes place spiritually in the present life on the 'aerial path' determines whether or not one evades the giant after death. The dead inhabit the same kind of world as the living, but their status is only determined by their actions when alive. Likewise, the underlying spiritual forces at work in each person's life are only clarified by judgment which takes place after death, though it may be tasted proleptically in the present.

²³⁶ VA 65.9

Excursus: Antony's Death

VA offers, in the scenes leading up to and including Antony's death, a narrative paradigm for monastic death. As Athanasius puts it, 'his death also became worthy of emulation [ζηλωτόν].'²³⁷ However, Antony's death remains only as emulable as Antony's life: like the ascetic discipline he teaches it is normative but not easy.²³⁸ Here I will argue that the continuity we have discerned in Antony's visions holds true in Athanasius' description of his death: it is continuous with and defined by his way of life. Athanasius dwells on two observable foci of the process of dying: preparation and burial. Between these poles, Athanasius crafts a vision of death transformed from an object of terror into a calm passage to Christ.

As to preparation, Antony foretells his death to his disciples and prepares them accordingly. Athanasius tells us that he 'learned about his death from Providence.'²³⁹ As we have seen, human lives are meted out by Providence and so they have no 'fixed term' and, therefore, offer no certain time for repentance or relaxation. Antony lived so attuned to Providence that he gained some knowledge of death generally: in one vignette Athanasius says that Antony knew that one of two monks coming to visit him had died because he 'kept his heart watchful.'²⁴⁰ Antony was, in that case, unable to explain why one brother died and not the other, but he was able to confidently ascribe the events to God's inscrutable judgment.²⁴¹ Antony's attunement to Providence reveals a world cared for by God as well as the course of events as they run, but does not often allow him to offer rational explanations. Thus, when it came time for him to die, Antony simply told his disciples in the outer mountain, 'This is the last visit I will make, and I wonder if we will see each other again in this life; for it is time for me to die [ἀναλῦσαι] (cf. 2 Tim 4.6).'²⁴² Antony's disciples are horrified at this statement and begin to mourn, but he, Athanasius tells us, 'like one setting off from an alien land to his own city, conversed with them rejoicing.'²⁴³ The formal similarities to Plato's account of Socrates' death in the *Phaedo* are unmistakable

²³⁷ VA 89.1

²³⁸ Alexandre, 'L'heure de la mort', 263, 271-72

²³⁹ VA 89.2

²⁴⁰ VA 59.6

²⁴¹ VA 59.1-5

²⁴² VA 89.2-3

²⁴³ VA 89.3

but Antony has greater cause than Socrates to be glad at the prospect of his own death—his ascent, his journey ‘home’, as well as his resurrection, is vouchsafed by Christ whom he has served.²⁴⁴

Antony dies while instructing his disciples one last time. Many of his instructions concern burial, and reveal more about Athanasius’ attitudes toward Egyptian customs than anything else—they reinforce what Athanasius elsewhere attempted to teach: that bodies must be buried, not displayed. It is a false reverence to display a dead body rather than burying it as was done not only for ‘the patriarchs and prophets to this day’ but also and especially for the Lord. For what, Athanasius asks, ‘is greater or more holy than the Lord’s body?’²⁴⁵ Antony requested, therefore, a simple burial, not wishing to make of himself an idol, even in death. His disciples complied with his wishes and so, Athanasius reports, no one knows to this day where he is buried save the two disciples who dug his grave.²⁴⁶

I wish to focus briefly on the content of Antony’s farewell address. Apart from lengthy digressions on burial, it is a sort of resume of his great sermon and, therefore, a précis of those points Athanasius most wished to impress upon his readers. Antony says,

We must be watchful and not abandon our lengthy discipline, but as having a beginning now, let us hasten to preserve our perseverance. You see the demons plotting, you know how savage they are, even being weak in strength. Do not fear them, but rather breathe always Christ and believe in him. And live as though dying each day [ὡς καθ’ ἡμέραν ἀποθνῆσκοντες ζήσατε] (cf. 1 Cor 15.31), paying attention to yourselves and remembering the exhortations you heard from me...Hasten rather always to join yourselves, chiefly to the Lord, but also to the saints, so that after death they may receive you, as friends and familiars, into the eternal dwellings (cf. Luke 16.9).²⁴⁷

We see two themes which we have already touched on: that one must renew one’s discipline each day and that one can, in Christ, overcome the demons. The first command is guaranteed by contemplation of mortality, the second by remembrance of judgment. A third idea on which Antony dwells here is that of living ‘as though dying’—which I will discuss below. Finally, the point of everything is to cling to Christ, to be joined to Christ—but not just to Christ, to the saints as well. The ascetic community strives to enact proleptically the eschatological community of heaven. The monks strive to live now as saints and the friends of saints and, especially, as participants in Christ.

²⁴⁴ Antony expresses his hope of resurrection at VA 91.8.

²⁴⁵ VA 91.4-6

²⁴⁶ VA 92.2 (drawing a parallel with Moses; cf. Deut 34.6). On issues with Egyptian burial see Malone, E.E. ‘The Monk and the Martyr’, in Steidle, *Antonius Magnus Eremita*, 216-20; and Alexandre, ‘L’heure de la mort’, 267-70

²⁴⁷ VA 91.2-5; the ellipsis hides a philippic against Meletians and Arians, which only bolsters my argument that Christian community on earth ought to foretaste the heavenly community.

Of the moment of death, Athanasius can only say that

Antony having spoken at length and having greeted each of them, “he stretched his feet” (Gen 49.33) and, as though he saw friends coming towards him, and being very glad at the sight (for as he lay his face appeared joyous) he “died and was gathered to the fathers” (cf. Gen 49.33).’

Athanasius can only say what the disciples saw: that Antony died tranquilly, beautifully, like Jacob surrounded by his sons, the twelve Israelite patriarchs. Thus Athanasius confidently ascribes to Antony a ‘good’ death, in the style of the OT’s Patriarchal narratives.²⁴⁸ Yet, for Athanasius, as Monique Alexandre argues, it is Antony’s *joy* which demonstrated that his is a ‘good’ death.²⁴⁹ Antony dies, we hear, as he lived, approaching death with the same joyous tranquillity with which he served Christ. His advice at death enshrines the principles by which he lived and through which he hoped to attain to Christ. His death was, as Monique Alexandre puts it, ‘continuité et non rupture.’²⁵⁰ Yet in all this, death’s inner quality remains veiled. We cannot see Antony’s ascent, or what befalls his soul in death. We cannot hear the angels rejoicing over him or the companies of saints which he longed to join. And so we are thrown back upon Antony’s visions of the giant and of Amoun’s ascent, left to ponder how glorious Antony’s own ascent must have been.

²⁴⁸ Thus the allusion to Gen 49.33, regarding Jacob’s death. But it could also be to Abraham’s death (Gen 25.8), to Isaac’s (Gen 35.29) or to Moses’ (Deut 32.50). Athanasius clearly wishes to draw a parallel with these accounts, but he presents Antony as gathered not to *his* fathers, but to ‘the fathers’ (cf. VA 91.2, referencing Jos 23.14). Athanasius suggests, instead, that Antony (like Amoun) is received into the company not of his dead ancestors but of God’s righteous ones, the saints who had gone before him. The ‘fathers’ could then stretch from Abraham to Amoun.

²⁴⁹ Alexandre, ‘L’heure de la mort’, 266

²⁵⁰ Alexandre, ‘L’Heure de la mort’, 265

IV. DAILY DYING

In this final section I will draw together the threads of argument which I have laid out throughout this chapter. I will demonstrate that Athanasius draws heavily on the memory of death as mortality and judgment, correlated with his conception of spirituality as ascent to Christ, when describing how the monk Antony cultivates his serene and, above all, natural, lifestyle. This requires a radical withdrawal from the world, and with that, a fresh approach to ethics and relationships. Both of these are characterized and motivated by a continuing engagement with death—Antony stays on the ‘upward path’ by beginning again each day.

Withdrawal as Death?

As we have seen throughout this chapter, *VA* portrays asceticism in terms of obedience made possible by profound withdrawal. Athanasius thus traces the lineaments of Christian monasticism as a more settled movement with regard especially to ἀποταγή—‘renunciation,’ ‘withdrawal.’ As Roldanus notes, the proper characteristic of *monks* as opposed to ascetically-minded Christians generally,²⁵¹ is their ἀποταγή, their ‘renunciation.’ He says that theirs becomes a new world,

propre et particulier par l’isolement le plus absolu possible. Il se libère de tout lien familial ou agreeable—famille, domicile, sécurité, propriété, culture, nourriture savoureuse, relations sexuelles—et se bâtit, soit tout seul, soit avec d’autres, un milieu nouveau dans lequel aucun lien avec le monde temporel ne l’empêchera de vaquer entièrement aux choses divines.

Monasticism, then, as it took shape, distinguished itself from more casual asceticism by its creation of a new world, cut off and separate from the οἰκουμένη, the ‘civilized’ world. Monastics *symbolized* this withdrawal by locating their existence in the desert.²⁵² For Athanasius, indeed, Antony’s great accomplishment was not the founding of asceticism, nor even of monasticism as such. It was, rather, his withdrawal into solitude which encouraged others to do likewise. When Antony attempted to persuade the old man with whom he first studied asceticism to join him in moving permanently away from the village, the old man demurred for two reasons: ‘his advanced age’ and because ‘this was not yet

²⁵¹ Such as the old man under whom Antony first studied.

²⁵² See especially Guillaumont, Antoine, ‘La conception du desert chez les moines d’Egypte’, *Revue d’histoire des religions* 188 (1975), 3-21; and, more recently, James Goehring’s argument for a ‘literary’ rather than historical ubiquity of eremitic withdrawal, in his ‘The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt’, *J ECS* 1:3 (1993), 281-96.

customary [διὰ τὸ μηδέπω εἶναι τοιαύτην συνήθειαν].²⁵³ Whether this was quite true or not, Antony's defining characteristic becomes his willingness to renounce as far as possible all that was familiar for the sake of an ever more fervent obedience to Christ.

David Brakke argues that Athanasius characterizes this withdrawal with 'the extreme metaphor of death. Natural death, Athanasius believed, was the complete separation of the soul from the body; the metaphor of death expressed the goal of ascetic renunciation as the withdrawal of the soul from the bodily passions.'²⁵⁴ I agree with Brakke, but we must be careful to not overstate the case with regard to VA.²⁵⁵ First, Athanasius does not use the language of death to describe *Antony's* withdrawal or ascetic practices.²⁵⁶ Second, Athanasius is as much concerned with the re-attainment of humanity's natural state of union with God through Christ. These, and not a kind of metaphorical death, undergird his famous descriptions of Antony's tranquillity and joy after his emergence from the fortified well.²⁵⁷ It would, I think, be unwise to try to make VA conform to a model of asceticism as death.

That being said, VA does, however tentatively, suggest a practice of 'dying', if not a metaphorical state of 'death.' This suggestion consists, rather simply, in the implications of Antony's 'memory of death' for how the monk approaches ethics, and his relationship to goods and people.²⁵⁸

²⁵³ VA 11.2

²⁵⁴ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 158

²⁵⁵ Brakke (ibid.) cites Athanasius' *Festal Letters* (preserved in Syriac), 7.2-3.

²⁵⁶ Even Antony's famous move to the tombs is presented as an act of enthusiastic athleticism, rather than a metaphorical death (VA 8-10)

²⁵⁷ VA 67

²⁵⁸ There is also Athanasius' famous comment that Antony, returning from his failed attempt at martyrdom in Alexandria, '...καθ' ἡμέραν μαρτυρῶν τῇ συνειδήσει καὶ ἀγωνιζόμενος τοῖς τῆς πίστεως ἄθλοις' (VA 47.1). I have, for reasons given in the Introduction, chosen not to discuss martyrological literature in this study. While an appreciation of the connections between Athanasius' understanding of martyrdom and his conception of asceticism would be illuminative, it is possible without it still to appreciate the role played by memory of death and 'daily dying' in VA. The elements of martyrdom which concern Athanasius have to do with the endurance that the 'athletes of faith' show in face of tortures and death—and he sees this in Antony's struggles in the tombs (VA 8-10). Antony's life is a kind of ongoing near-martyrdom, in which the spectacular 'single hour' of martyrdom is traded for the slow grind of daily suffering. On which see Malone, 'The Monk and the Martyr', 212-15, 224-27.

Martyrs' endurance points also to an intrinsic connection with ascetic training, on the implications of which see Young, Robin Darling, *In Procession Before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity*, The Père Marquette Lectures 2001 (Milwaukee, WI, 2006).

However, none of these elements have particularly to do with an engagement with *death, per se*, but rather with *suffering* more generally, and so I leave aside Antony's 'martyrdom' as interesting but tangential.

Daily 'Dying'

Antony accompanied his initial withdrawal with 'spiritual exercises'. He used the thought of death to stave off memories of friends and relatives, property and social responsibility; as well as worries about an uncertain future and a precarious bodily health. More than this, though, Antony preached a kind of daily 'dying' to his disciples. The dying Antony commands his disciples to 'live as though dying each day [ὡς καθ' ἡμέραν ἀποθνήσκοντες ζήσατε].'²⁵⁹ What does this mean? Antony's sermon helps fill out what it means to live 'as though dying each day.' He says, 'Serving and living each day thus, we will neither sin nor desire anything nor become angry at anyone nor store up treasures on earth (cf. Mt. 6.19). But, expecting to die each day [καθ' ἡμέραν προσδοκῶντες ἀποθνήσκειν] we will live without property and forgive everything to everyone.'²⁶⁰ This statement echoes what I have already argued, that contemplation of mortality means that there is no 'tomorrow' for the monk. Here, however, Antony connects a close relationship to one's own mortality directly to a lifestyle of forgiveness and simplicity. This prospect prevents old illusory possessions of both past and future to hold—the monk holds neither goods nor grudges. In fact, propertyless-ness (ἀκτημοσύνη) and tranquil relationships go hand in hand: property is so often the cause of strife.

Antony's claims about property and relationships function within his renunciation of property (his inheritance) and the usual mode of social relationships (family and village). Because he has given up attachment either to property or to people—at least the divisive attachment implied by distinguishing family from non-family—Antony can then live happily without property and is able to relate similarly to all. Much of the motivation for Antony's severing all ties with his family rests on a wish to escape from disposing of property. Yet, as we have seen, Athanasius suggested something further in his description of Antony's death: he was gathered, not to his 'people' but to the 'fathers'; not to his tribe or family but to the community of saints in heaven.²⁶¹ Thus, living as though dying entails also a radical re-orientation of relationships both with property and people which, if carried through consistently, means a new way of life for the monk.

²⁵⁹ VA 91.3

²⁶⁰ VA 19.4, following Sira 28.6

²⁶¹ See Note 248 above ; cf. Guillaumont, 'La conception du désert', 17

Indeed, while it is quite correct to say that Athanasius does not emphasize a ‘death to self’ in Antony’s career, focusing instead on a return to humanity’s natural state and union with the Logos,²⁶² it is important to see the ways in which that return is made possible. David Brakke argues of the monk Antony that

His consideration of the rewards in heaven, the precarious nature of human life...and the horrors of hell should produce an unwavering life of virtue free of the “negligence” that led to the fall of the original human beings. The person whose meditation on death leads to such resolve will display courage even in the face of imminent death.²⁶³

Living with the constant memory of mortality and judgment induces a new lifestyle which accords to the exigencies and demands of both.²⁶⁴ This affects relationships with others, and also cultivates the unwavering character which Antony displays. Yes, his tranquillity is undoubtedly a sign of his living *κατὰ φύσιν* as Adam did—but, importantly, Antony does not lose this tranquillity as Adam did. Rather, first through his renunciation of property and social relationships and then through an engagement with death considered in light of Christ’s victory over corruption and the demons, Antony becomes something ‘something greater than’ Adam, able to not only to find but to *remain* in a natural state—a crucial distinction for Athanasius.²⁶⁵ The monk, though not actually *dead*, effectively *dies* each day and is, implicitly, born again with equal frequency, and so able constantly to ἀρχὴν καταβάλλειν.²⁶⁶ In a sense, then, death constantly clears away all passing pleasures and worries from the ἄνοδος for Antony, separating him from his past in sin and mortality, freeing him toward a future whose only reference point is Christ’s judgment seat and the hope of beatitude beyond.

Conclusion: the seeds of tradition

For Athanasius, Christian spirituality takes the form of an ascent to heaven made possible by Christ’s victory over demons and death. The ascetic life exemplifies this ascent as perseverant and absolute obedience to Christ. The ascent takes place in the present life, determining what happens in death, and the continuity between the two is revealed especially by Antony’s visions of life and death. In

²⁶² Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 238-44; see also the references in Note **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

²⁶³ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 223

²⁶⁴ VA 45.1-7

²⁶⁵ See DI 3 l. 22, 26-33, 5 l. 7; Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 36-37; Roldanus, *Le Christ et l’homme*, 63-64; Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 146.

²⁶⁶ VA 7.12, 19.4, etc.; so Alexandre. ‘L’heure de la mort’, 267.

order to live the life taught and exemplified by Christ in the Gospels, certain radical alterations are necessary. The most important one is withdrawal from society and, with that, renunciation of the temporal goods and pleasures which are lauded and sought after in society. We see in Antony's first movements in the ascetic life the strict severance from the world, from goods and relationships which he undertakes by means of remembering death, not only as mortality, but especially as entrance into Christ's eschatological judgment. In light of judgment eternal implications, Antony discards whatever does not help him be united with Christ: goods, property, even home and familial relationships—anything that might tie him to the present life. Likewise, we see in the sermon he preaches that this same memory, if daily practiced, keeps one always on the ascent, because living always as though about to die and as though having just been born, one never grows old or gets tired, but stays fresh and enthusiastic, each day 'beginning' once more. By living thus, Antony is able to find and, more importantly, to maintain the natural state of undisturbed union with and governance by the Logos, which Adam had once lost.

While Athanasius does not use language of death to describe Antony's asceticism or his 'natural' or 'deified' life in Christ, it is clear that Antony achieves this result at least partly through his ongoing engagement with death. It is the memory of death—both as mortality and judgment—which, as Brakke argues, keeps Antony on the *ἀνοδος*. This way of life, free of property and care, works within the context of ascetic withdrawal to enable obedience to Christ. Antony maintains his fervour in obedience through the re-orientation of ethics and relationships to both goods and people which withdrawal and daily 'dying' cultivate. Antony achieves his tranquil, joyous, and natural state only by the power of Christ operative in him, and only because of the weakening of demons which Christ's death and resurrection had already accomplished. Thus, Antony approaches death with calm assurance, aware of the continuity between ascetic life and the fate of the dead. Ultimately, Antony becomes, by the power of Christ, an imitator of Christ and a model for what Athanasius would consider a properly human existence. While Athanasius does not call it death, Antony's way of life differs radically from those living 'in the world.'

Athanasius' high hopes for ascetic accomplishment—perseverant tranquillity and embodiment of Christ's victory over demons—will, among the Desert Fathers, be played out in terms explicitly taken from death. Likewise, his description of the practice of the 'memory of death' will remain basically constant through the authors we survey. Others will nuance, expand, elaborate and, even react against the picture of spirituality laid out here—particularly as regards Athanasius' obvious optimism about what can be achieved with Christ's help—but the practices and, to some extent, the hopes, which Athanasius typifies in Antony will remain the standard point of departure for all those who come later.

We turn now to the Desert Fathers, among whose writings the ideas presented in *VA* are elaborated with increasingly consistent reference to death and which yet display a tremendous ambivalence to the view of ascetic spirituality typified by *VA*.

2. HEIRS OF THE DESERT

Indeed, my ideal soon became my life; whereas, formerly, my life had consisted in a vain attempt to behold, if not my ideal in myself, at least myself in my ideal. Now, however, I took, at first, what perhaps was a mistaken pleasure, in despising and degrading myself. Another self seemed to arise, like a white spirit from a dead man, from the dumb and trampled self of the past. Doubtless, this self must again die and be buried, and again, from its tomb, spring a winged child; but of this my history as yet bears not the record. Self will come to life even in the slaying of self; but there is ever something deeper and stronger than it, which will emerge at last from the unknown abysses of the soul: will it be as a solemn gloom, burning with eyes? Or a clear morning after the rain? Or a smiling child, that finds itself nowhere, and everywhere?

--- George MacDonald, *Phantastes*

Having explored the role played in *VA* by memory and conceptions of death and judgment, and having shown their implications in Antony's 'daily dying', we now turn to the Desert Fathers. This chapter will fall into four sections. The first will demonstrate that desert literature recommends a 'memory of death' with reference both to mortality and judgment. In the second, I will explore the consequences of 'memory of death' for the perceived relationship between the present age and eternity, particularly as this informs and motivates ascetic withdrawal. In the third, I show that ascetics characterize their life as a kind of 'death.' In connection with this characterization I will discuss important practices such 'cutting off the will,' *apatheia*, and obedience which are important to the Desert Fathers, but are *not* often considered in terms of death. In the fourth, I will highlight points of ambivalence and even opposition to the optimism which 'memory' and 'practice' of death implies in Desert literature.

I. LIVING TOWARD DEATH

When Theophilus, archbishop of Alexandria, was dying, he said ‘You are blessed, Abba Arsenius, because you have always kept this hour in mind.’²⁶⁷ Theophilus’ dying words summarize the attitude which numerous of the Desert Fathers took toward life and their expectations of it. Utilizing and greatly expanding on ideas present already in *VA*, ascetics began to make death a constant companion and to shape their own selves around it. Thus an anonymous elder in Palestine rebuked two visiting philosophers, saying ‘Let the object of your philosophy be always to contemplate death, possessing yourselves in silence and tranquillity.’²⁶⁸

Expecting Judgment

Unlike what one finds in, for example, *CG-DI* and *VA*, the Desert Fathers do not generally treat death as something indifferent or contemptible. Many Desert Fathers actually advocate a kind of φόβος θανάτου, though not because mortality is itself terrible or because death ends distasteful pleasures, as in Athanasius’ description of sin-bound humanity. Rather, as Abba Elias said, ‘I fear three things: when my soul will go out of my body, and when I will present myself to God, and when the verdict on me will go out.’²⁶⁹ The moment of death becomes an object of fear because it ushers Elias into judgment, but what he fears is the verdict. The movement toward judgment is expected; its outcome as yet unknown. In this instance, fear of ‘death’ means, really, fear of the unknown outcome of a certain judgment whose criteria, as we have seen from the *NT* and *VA*, are the actions and habits which one has cultivated in life. As *VA*’s Antony saw, God’s future judgment demands a radical response now if one is to prepare for it.

What is it that the ascetic contemplates when he speaks of ‘judgment’? Judgment means Christ’s eschatological judgment and, with it, the whole spectacular narrative of Christian eschatology.

An old man said: If it were possible, at the time of the coming of Christ after the resurrection, that men’s souls should die of fear, the whole world would die of terror and confusion. What a sight, to see the heavens open and God revealed in anger and wrath, and innumerable armies of angels and, at the same time, the whole of humanity.

²⁶⁷ Theophilus 1

²⁶⁸ *PS* 156

²⁶⁹ Elias 1: Εἶπεν ὁ ἀββᾶς Ἠλίας· Ἐγὼ τρία πράγματα φοβοῦμαι· ὅταν μέλλῃ ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἐξελεθῆναι ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος, καὶ ὅταν μέλλω τῷ Θεῷ ἀπαντῆσαι, καὶ ὅταν μέλλῃ ἡ ἀπόφασις ἐξελεθῆναι κατ’ ἐμοῦ. See also, e.g., Evagrius 4, Sisoës 19, Silouan 2, Syncletica 7; *N* 110 134, 136, 138-142, 175, 182, 186, 189, 193, 264; *HM* Prol.7, 11.57; *HL* 34.6, 54.5; *PS* 8, 26, 43, 59, 71, 101, 110, 141, 142, 186

Therefore, we ought to live as having to give account to God of our way of life every day.²⁷⁰

In this saying, as in Matthew's Gospel, judgment means especially a revelation—of the heavens, angels, earth, and of God *as* judge. Yet, as revelation, the judgment merely clarifies what is always true but forgotten or only dimly perceived: that humans must give account to God. The reason is that full awareness of the scope of judgment would actually paralyze people with confusion and even *destroy* them: 'human kind / cannot bear very much reality.'²⁷¹ To ponder judgment means, then, to ponder something still veiled, not only in its outcome, but in its scope and depth. Thus, within the generally biblical eschatological narrative there was space for speculation and, certainly, many authors took very different views of what Christ's judgment might look like. However, all speculation revolved around only two verdicts—vindication or condemnation.

Monastics did not treat Christ's judgment as distant or in deferral. Rather, ascetics lived 'as having to give account to God of our way of life every day'²⁷² since 'our master, Christ, dwelling and being present with us, beholds our life.'²⁷³ Abba Elias located judgment within the narrative of his own death, and the anonymous old man says that eschatological judgment should inspire a sense of being judged daily. Throughout *AP* and other literature, Christ's judgment is variously located as daily,²⁷⁴ post-mortem,²⁷⁵ and eschatological.²⁷⁶ For each of these, it is always one's daily life which is being judged and it is always possibly only once completed. As Abba Poemen said, one is judged according to the state one has attained at death.²⁷⁷ Christ's judgment is perhaps built up daily, but its effect becomes irrevocable only at death—until then one can always 'make a new beginning.'²⁷⁸ While eternal life is the monk's goal, and this life his means, death connects the two through judgment.

²⁷⁰ N 136; as also *HM* Prol.7:

²⁷¹ Eliot, T.S., 'Four Quartets', I: 'Burnt Norton', I, ll. 42-43.

²⁷² N 146

²⁷³ N 78

²⁷⁴ Antony 4, Antony 33 Agathon 24, Ephrem 3, Paphnutius 1, Or 11; *HM* 1.22-25, 8.32-33. See also *PS* 38, 76, 78, 99, 178, etc.

²⁷⁵ Dioscorus 3, Cronius 3, Sisoës 38; *HL* 21.16-17; cf. also Poemen 182; *PS* 19, 44, 128, etc.

²⁷⁶ Ammoës 1, Zeno 6, John of Cellia 1, Cronius 2, Matoes 12, Orsisius 1, Sisoës 19, Silouan 2, Syncletica 7; *HM* Prol.7, 8.53, 11.5-7; *PS* 8, 26, 95, 101, 130, etc.

²⁷⁷ Poemen 182, cf. Sisoës 38

²⁷⁸ Poemen 85, Silouan 11

One Judgment, Two Verdicts

As noted above, whatever the specifics, ascetic conceptions of judgment always has two sides—positive (vindication/beatitude) and negative (condemnation/punishment). Regarding punishment, it seems to have been common practice to meditate on the horrors which await sinners. One *abba* compared memory of death and punishments to the squill (a sea urchin needle) which mothers put on their breast to wean children—the memory ‘of death and the punishment-chamber of the age to come’ provides an analogous antidote for ‘impure thoughts.’²⁷⁹ Likewise, a story of Abba Sisoës is worth recounting:

Three old men came to Abba Sioes, having heard about him. And the first one said to him, ‘Father, how can I be saved from the fiery river?’...The second said, ‘Father how can I be saved from the “gnashing of teeth” (e.g., Mat 25.30) and from “the sleepless worm” (cf. Mark 9.49)?’ The third said to him, ‘Father what shall I do, for the memory of the “outer darkness” (Mat 25.30) kills me?’²⁸⁰

These three questions reveal first, that a ‘memory of punishments’ was common enough practice; second, that it was largely based on biblical language; and, third, that it could be almost paralysing in its effect. Sisoës gently rebukes their enthusiasm, saying,

You are blessed, my brothers. I envy you. The first of you spoke of the fiery river, the second of Tartarus, and the third of darkness. Now, if your mind masters such memory, it is impossible for you to sin...What shall I do, hard-hearted as I am, not being granted to know, even if there will be punishment for people [μη συγχωρούμενος εἰδέναι ὅτι κἀν ἐστὶ κόλασις τοῖς ἀνθρώποις]; and from this I sin each hour.²⁸¹

We will explore Sisoës’ own attitude toward the memory of death in the fourth section of this chapter, but for now one thing is clear: even in his rebuke he admits that a memory of punishment has power to turn a person from sin. His response recalls Ben Sirach 7.36, and conveys the intended result of contemplation of torments: freedom from sin. Just as that anonymous *abba* said that the memory of punishments could wean a person from impure thoughts, so Sisoës allows that it can keep a person from sin. The fear to which such contemplation gives place has a paralysing effect and, in proper doses, this paralysis should extend only to sinful actions and impure thoughts, mobilizing the monk to obey God²⁸²

²⁷⁹ N 182

²⁸⁰ Sisoës 19

²⁸¹ Sisoës 19

²⁸² See N 5, 43, 54, 110, 126, 135, 141, 175, 182, 186, 189, 193, 196, 197, 199, etc.

and cultivate virtues.²⁸³ However, if given too much space, it can actually immobilize a person, like the three tormented brothers. The fear of punishments requires, therefore, a corrective.

Hope of eternal bliss operates offers such a corrective, and, in fact, operates in dialectic unity with fear of punishment. As Douglas Burton-Christie notes, 'Mindfulness of judgment also meant awareness of the possibility of salvation.'²⁸⁴ This possibility was expressed in robust, yet biblical terms. A brother, suffering in fear and frustration, asked an old man,

'How is it that my soul desires tears as I hear of the old men and yet they do not come, and so my soul is afflicted?' The old man said to him, 'The sons of Israel after forty years entered the land of promise, in which, if you return, you will no longer fear warfare. For thus God desires to afflict the soul, so that it may always long to enter into that land.'²⁸⁵

The old man reminds the brother of his great hope, the 'land of promise'—the eschatological dwelling of the saints with Christ, in which he need no longer fear temptation ('warfare') or affliction. Other stories speak of the crowns which await those who have endured²⁸⁶, and of the 'hoped-for rest'²⁸⁷ or the 'great gifts of God'.²⁸⁸ This hope helps carry the monk through the self-doubt and frustration of constant warfare and mitigates the paralysing effect of fear. As Abba Euprepus put it, 'Knowing that [Ἐχων...ἐν ἑαυτῷ], as he says, God is faithful and strong (cf. Heb 10.23), believe in him and you will partake of what is his. But if you take no heed, you must also not acknowledge that we all believe him to be strong and believe that 'all things are possible for him' (Mark 14.26).'²⁸⁹ God's faithful promises ground the ascetic's hope and keep him from despair or paralysis.

Nevertheless, unbridled hope could lead to undue expectations, even arrogance and carelessness. Hope must be tempered with fear, just as fear must be tempered with hope. As fear should make the idea of sin so horrific as to be impossible, so hope should make virtue appear possible even when it is very difficult to achieve. Mark the Monk describes this relationship of hope and fear, referring both to

²⁸³ See, e.g., Discoros 2, and Burton-Christie, Douglas, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 184.

²⁸⁴ Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 183

²⁸⁵ N 142 (my translation); cf. N 5.

²⁸⁶ HL 21.12-14

²⁸⁷ N 196; HM 1.29, 1.46, 1.56, 8.16-7

²⁸⁸ N 197

²⁸⁹ Euprepus 1

the God who alone can judge: 'Fear of Gehenna and desire for Paradise yield endurance of afflictions; and this not because of themselves, but because of the one who knows our thoughts (cf. Pss 93.11).'²⁹⁰

We should understand hope and fear, then, as corollaries of the same eschatological expectation—the judgment of Christ—and as contributing simultaneously to moulding into a monk the person who has already entered a life of asceticism. A lengthy and influential apophthegm attributed to Evagrius²⁹¹ illustrates this point excellently:

Being seated in the cell, gather your thoughts. Remember the day of death. Behold then the death of the body. Contemplate the event. Take up the labour. Observe the vanity in the world. Thus you will be able to remain always in same state of tranquillity and will not become weak. Remember also the present state of things in Hades. Consider how the souls are there, in...great fear and struggle and with a certain expectation...

But also remember the day of resurrection and presentation before God. Imagine that horrible and fearful judgment. Bring to mind the things reserved for sinners...Then also bring to mind the good things stored up for the righteous....

Evagrius goes on to describe the reactions one should have to these thoughts:

Bring before yourself the memory of each of these, and weep for the judgment of sinners, mourn, fearful lest you yourself come to that end. But rejoice and be glad at what is saved for the righteous. And exert yourself so as to enjoy these, and to be utterly alien from the lot of sinners. Take care that you do not forget this, whether you be in your cell or elsewhere, that you may flee from impure and harmful thoughts.²⁹²

According to Evagrius, the monk not only imagines judgment on others, but actually anticipates future judgment by God through a conscious anticipation of it in which he judges *himself*. Burton-Christie puts it thus:

Remembrance of judgment also engendered an awareness of the need for repentance and for a profound exploration of the self. The fact of an ultimate moral reckoning helped to focus attention on the need to cultivate moral purity—both in the hidden recess of the heart and in the more visible acts of everyday life.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ *Operibus*, 132: Γεέννης φόβος καὶ παραδείσου πόθος παρέχουσι τὴν τῶν θλιβερῶν ὑπομονήν· καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἐξ ἑαυτῶν, ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ γινώσκοντος τοὺς διαλογισμοὺς ἡμῶν.

²⁹¹ Evagrius 1, taken from his *Rationes*, 9 (PG 40:1261A-D). The same apophthegm is found in *Systematica* III.2 and III.5, where it is attributed to Antony the Great and Theodore, respectively. The same passage is paraphrased in a century of texts (§§57-59) attributed to Theodore the Great Ascetic, in the *Philokalia*, 1:313-14.

²⁹² See also Evagrius, *Eulogius* 23 and *Monachos* 54; on which Rich, Antony D., *Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Διάκρισις in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoste, 2007), 70

²⁹³ Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 182

Thus, the monk learns to accuse himself and so does not simply recall that *there will be* a judgment but, instead, actively envisions what judgment might look like as far as his own thoughts and actions are concerned.

Some ascetics actually *performed* the results of judgment, but most would resort to the ‘revelation of thoughts.’ For example, Abba Zeno was besieged by the idea of plucking and eating a cucumber. So he reminded himself that ‘thieves are punished’ in this life and the next, and betook himself to suffer now the kind of punishment he expected would await thieves in eternity, and so stood in the sun for five days. At that point he decided it would be better not take the food, since he could not endure the punishment.²⁹⁴ More often, though, the monk ‘performs’ judgment through by confessing his thoughts to an *abba*. Columba Stewart has argued this point brilliantly, saying that by such ‘confession’ monks sought to clear away the demonic deception and, as often as not, self-deception, to which humans are prone.²⁹⁵ The monk sought through confession and the imagination of Christ’s judgment to cultivate an awareness of himself by which he could prepare for that judgment in which all illusion is cast aside and things revealed as they really were all along.

Such self-awareness, however, can only be attained by those already in the ascetic life. Diadochus of Photice would later argue that accurate contemplation of God’s judgement requires already a degree of detachment from the world and love for God.²⁹⁶ This statement, coupled with Evagrius’ portrayal of spiritual exercises as taking place within one’s cell and the fact that revelation of thoughts is always to *someone else*, demonstrates that the practices of contemplating judgment operate *within* the context of ascetic withdrawal. Memory of judgment and all the activities that go with it became a way of cultivating the life-style which one has already, to some degree, chosen; and, therefore, a means of living into an identity which one already holds as an ideal.

Mortality

Consciousness of death means also dwelling on mortality. Mortality, as Antony preached, is uncertain yet inexorable—life is measured out by Providence, but its limit remains hidden.²⁹⁷ This idea

²⁹⁴ Zeno 6; see also John Kolobos 21, John the Persian 1, Isaac of Thebes 1, etc.

²⁹⁵ See Stewart, Columba, ‘Radical honesty about the self: the practice of the Desert Fathers’, *Sobornost* 12:1 (1990), 25-39, as well as the references given there, as well as, e.g., Macarius 3, Poemen 101; *HL* 26.1-4.

²⁹⁶ Diadochus, *Capita*, 16-19

²⁹⁷ See also, e.g., Ps-Macarius, *Collectio* B, 49.4.5: σπουδάσωμεν τοίνυν, ἀγαπητοί, ὡς τέκνα θεοῦ ἀποδυσάμενοι πᾶσαν πρόληψιν καὶ ἀμέλειαν καὶ χαύνωσιν γενναῖοι καὶ ἔτοιμοι γενέσθαι ἀκολουθεῖν ὀπίσω αὐτοῦ μὴ

pervades Desert literature as well.²⁹⁸ In one anonymous saying, a new monk keeps back a little money for his own maintenance. An old man advises him to give away even that small Amount—his renunciation is not yet complete and he is, therefore, something less than a monk.²⁹⁹ The young brother has trouble giving his money away because he imagines that his cell will require repairs—and this thought keeps him from prayer. But, after repeated counsel from the old man, he finally succeeds in completing his renunciation. When the last bit of money is gone, the monk suddenly becomes aware not only of the age and decrepitude of his cell but of a lion prowling nearby. In consternation and terror he confronts the old man: “Everything here is old, and a lion is coming to eat me up.” The old man in turn confessed his own thoughts: “I expect everything to come down upon me, and the lion to come and eat me up so that I may be set free. Go, sit in your cell, and pray to God.”³⁰⁰ When he held back for himself some measure of independent control over the world around him (money), the anonymous young monk was distracted by worldly thoughts (fixing his hut). But when he made his renunciation complete, he no longer had the same sort of concerns, and new ones appeared—he could not control his world (the hut’s collapse came to seem inevitable) and he had to confront mortality as an ever-present companion (the lion). When one has completely renounced the world, one dwells in sight of death. But it is only in sight of death, the old man explains, that a person can live the ascetic life—‘Sit in your cell’ and pray.³⁰¹

This proximity to one’s own mortality, as Antony pointed out in *VA*, means honesty about one’s natural condition. A ‘great old man’ said, ‘I exhort you, brothers, since we have refrained from the actual deeds, let us refrain from the desires as well. For what are we but dust from dust?’³⁰² Living as one about to die is, in fact, no more than admitting that one leads a mortal existence. Yet that admission helps complete the monastic’s renunciation of the world—he can retain *nothing* of it if he is to make progress. This is best illustrated by a story of Abba Elijah, who, burning with lust, left his cell to slake his thirst and fell into a pit. There an angel showed him decomposing bodies of both men and women and said, ‘Go

ἀναβαλλόμενοι ἡμέραν ἐξ ἡμέρας, ὑπὸ τῆς κακίας ὑποκλεπτόμενοι οὐ γὰρ οἶδαμεν, πότε ἢ ἀπὸ τῆς σαρκὸς ἡμῶν ἔξοδος γίνεται.

²⁹⁸ See, e.g., Cyrus 1, Longinus 2, Pambo 8, Rufus 1, Phocas 1, Or 1; *HL* Prol. 3-4, 5.2; *HM* 1.29, 1.45-46, 1.56, 8.16-17; *PS* 5, 19, 42, 44, 71.

²⁹⁹ Cf. Cassian the Roman 8 and Antony 20.

³⁰⁰ N 17 (Stewart’s translation); cf. a similar sentiment in *HL* Prol.3-4

³⁰¹ On ‘sitting in the cell’ as representative of monastic life see, e.g., Moses 6: Ἀδελφὸς παρέβαλεν εἰς Σκητὴν πρὸς τὸν ἀββᾶν Μωϋσῆν, αἰτούμενος παρ’ αὐτοῦ λόγον. Λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ γέρον· Ὑπαγε, κάθισον εἰς τὸ κελλίον σου καὶ τὸ κελλίον σου διδάσκει σε πάντα.’ Cf. Also Antony 1, Antony 10, etc.

³⁰² N 83; see also Evagrius, *Cogitationibus* (Recensio brevis) 18 (PG 79:1164A): Τί μετεωρίζη, ἄνθρωπε, πηλὸς ὢν, καὶ σαπρία τῆ φύσει, καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰς νεφέλας ἐπαίρη;

and enjoy yourself...But in return for that pleasure, take note how much labour you intend to destroy. Just look at the sort of sin for which you are prepared to deprive yourself of the kingdom of heaven...Would you lose the fruit of all that toil for one hour's [pleasure]?'³⁰³ Mortality reveals the natural transience of human life and, therefore, the transience of pleasure, but in light of judgment, that transience appears as a hook drawing one toward eternal punishment.

As in VA so the Desert Fathers speak frequently of 'making a good beginning.'³⁰⁴ To make each day a good beginning implies that the monk carries nothing over from the previous day, and takes nothing with him until the next. One encounters, along these lines, descriptions of the whole ascetic life as taking place or, at least, able to take place, within one day: 'The whole life of a man is one day for those who work with desire.'³⁰⁵ To live entirely within each day, bounded by mortality, dramatically illustrates the sort of 'newness of life' which monastics sought. That sort of life must constantly shed the past and can take no thought for the future. Both past and future bind the monk to the world—one through passions, family, and memories, and the other through worry and care. Yet, as other instances remind the reader, death cuts repentance short and for those who fall 'today' is not always enough.³⁰⁶ Nevertheless, each day brings the opportunity of beginning once more—which is, I suppose, the sum total of progress for which monastics longed. 'Abba Moses asked Abba Silouan, saying "Is it possible a person to make a beginning each day?" And the old man said, "If he is a worker, it is possible every hour to make a beginning."' ³⁰⁷ Living as though about to die heightens the significance and perceived soteriological value of each day and helps the monk to avoid anticipation of an unknown future.³⁰⁸

Conclusion

Mortality and future judgment cannot be separated. They are simply different aspects of what Christian ascetics expect from death. As Evagrius put it, 'He who ever has a care for the remembrance of death is led also to the fear of judgment.'³⁰⁹ Contemplation of mortality can refer directly to the remembrance of eschatological judgment. Abba Rufus says, 'Keep in mind your future death,

³⁰³ PS 19, cf. 39

³⁰⁴ Arsenius 3, Dioscorus 1, Poemen 85, Sisoës 14, Silouan 11, Or 8, N 168, 187, 208 ; cf. VA 7.11-12

³⁰⁵ Gregory Nazianzen 2; see also Alonius 3, Poemen 126

³⁰⁶ Antony 14

³⁰⁷ Silouan 11; see also Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 247-49

³⁰⁸ So Evagrius, *Practicus* 12, 27-29; *Monachos* 54-56; on which Guillaumont, *Traité pratique*, vol. 2, 566-68 and Brakke *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 66-67.

³⁰⁹ *Eulogius* 20; so also Diadochus, *Capita*, 81

remembering that you do not know at what hour the thief will come.’³¹⁰ Here, Rufus conflates death with the return of Christ, implicitly connecting individual death to the *eschaton*. Underlying his admonition is not only the rich man whose soul was demanded of him that very night (Luke 12.20), but Paul’s words (echoing Christ’s at Matthew 24.43) concerning Christ’s eschatological *parousia*: ‘For you know very well that the day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night’ (1 Thess 5.2).³¹¹ Even where remembering death means dwelling on the mortal condition, the activity is inextricably bound up with the eschatological ramifications of death considered in light of Christ. When dwelling on judgment, as we have seen, one must always hold together the fear of punishment and the hope of salvation—each balancing the other, and both operating together to keep the monk from sin while spurring him to virtue. Thus, memory of death and judgment keeps monks from both despair³¹² and pride.³¹³ Each day offers the monk a chance to anticipate God’s judgment and to accord himself to its criteria through performance of that judgment in thought and, especially, revelation of thoughts. Recollection of mortality helps the monk to constantly begin again, to work urgently and tirelessly, since each day becomes, in light of death’s imminence, a kind of new lifetime.

³¹⁰ Rufus 1

³¹¹ Cf. Moschos, Demetrios, *Eschatologie im ägyptischen Monchtums*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 155: ‘In diesen Fällen wird die Erscheinung der Engel mit der Vorbereitung auf den Tag des Herrn v.a. als vorbereitung auf den Todestag verbunden.’

³¹² N 121; HM 1.36

³¹³ HM 1.47

II. LIVING BEYOND DEATH

Hope and fear each rely on the perception of an underlying opposition, even exclusivity, of the temporal and eternal worlds.³¹⁴ The expectation of death diminishes the perceived value of transient goods, whether of relationships or objects. The expectation of existence beyond death keeps the monk from falling into nihilism—a possibility of which Palladius, at least, was aware: ‘For some receive their soul in vain, those who, believing it to be dissolved with the body, are careless about virtue.’³¹⁵ The monk, living with mortality at hand, gives up desires, property and even anger—those things which define relationships in the world no longer apply to the monk. Like Antony, he can live in voluntary poverty, forgiving all and desiring nothing on earth. There are several ways in which Christian ascetics understood the present life as relating to eternity. Ascetics saw a fundamental incompatibility between the polity of the present life—one defined by property, divisive and fractious relationships, by convention, spiritual warfare and, ultimately, sin and demonic powers—and their ‘citizenship in heaven.’ This incompatibility bred among ascetics a general sense of ‘opposition’ between the two aeons. This at times can mean that one must suffer presently to rest in the future (something we have already seen above), or perhaps labour now for rewards later. Alternatively, the opposition can play out a kind of continuity, wherein one chooses to do something either now or later—humans must suffer, but the choice is whether to do so now or in eternity.

The Narrow Way

Ascetics had in common with those they repudiated a sense that the present life is an opportunity to lay hold of goods. Those goods could be material and transient—money, property, fame, physical pleasures—or spiritual and eternal—the longed-for ‘land of rest’ with Christ. Acquiring the latter meant renunciation of the former, and the enjoyment of spiritual blessings was generally consigned to the ‘age to come.’ For example, Amma Theodora said, ‘Strive to enter through the narrow gate. For such is the case with trees, if they do not withstand winter and rain, they cannot bear fruit. So also with us, this age is winter and unless it be through many tribulations and temptations, we cannot become inheritors of the

³¹⁴ In this section I will use ‘age’, ‘world’, and ‘aeon’, interchangeably as ways of describing the life before and the life after death. These words reflect the usage of ascetic literature and, while having an apocalyptic tone, do not, I think, carry gnostic or other mythological baggage.

³¹⁵ *HL* 6.4

kingdom of heaven.³¹⁶ Generally, ascetics considered that the present life was a time for toil and labour and, in particular, for struggle with temptation. 'Abba Antony said to Abba Poemen, that 'This is a person's great activity [ἐργασία], to place his former failings before God (cf. 1 Pet 5.7) and expect temptation [πειρασμόν] until his last breath.'³¹⁷ Abba Theodore of Pherme warned against 'taking one's rest in this age, before God grants it.'³¹⁸ Rather, rest must lay the other side of death, in the 'age to come.' The present life gives an opportunity to work for the age to come, knowing that the desires and habits which drag a person back into sin and attach him to passing pleasure are a constant temptation.

Ascetics responded to the allure of transient goods with renunciation and withdrawal. We are, again, not so far from Antony's outward movement from village to desert, but we see among the Desert Fathers a wider variety of interpretations of ἀποταγή. For some it might mean especially the distribution of money or goods³¹⁹ or care for the sick³²⁰ or, alternatively, it could mean flight from people and speech.³²¹ In each case, however, the monastic renounces something and acquires a new activity. Just as the activities of ἀποταγή vary, so also do the descriptions of it. For some, ξενιτεία, 'exile' best describes the monk's life on earth, since he is ever reminded that his true citizenship is in heaven.³²² Mark the Monk, on the other hand, draws freely on the Gospel images of sowing and reaping, to argue that the present time provides opportunity to renounce what one hopes to find again, multiplied a hundredfold.³²³

For all their differences, these activities and descriptions of ἀποταγή all have their rationale in an engagement with *death*. The reality of death and the expectation of judgment particularly sharpen the sense of opposition, the character of renunciation, and the urgency of labour. For example, a particularly visceral apophthegm of Antony says:

Have always before your eyes the fear of God. Remember the one who 'kills and makes alive' (4 Kgds 5.7). Hate the world everything therein. Hate all fleshly rest. Renounce

³¹⁶ Theodora 2; see also Bessarion 12, Elias 6; Moses 18, 20; Hyperechius 6-7. This saying echoes John of Lycopolis' admonition at *HM* 1.29-30. So also *HM* 8.53; N 21, 141, 142, 193, 299, 312, 368; *PS* 69, 152; Nilus of Ancyra, ΛΟΓΟΣ ΑΣΚΗΤΙΚΟΣ (*Philokalia*, 1:191-92); Mark the Monk, *Operibus* 130, 156. So also Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 219-22.

³¹⁷ Antony 4

³¹⁸ Theodore of Pherme 16

³¹⁹ E.g., *HL* 54.4-5, 61.7, 68.1-4, 71.1-4; *PS* 231

³²⁰ E.g., *HL* 21.3; cf. *PS* 75, on which see Chadwick, 'John Moschus and his friend Sophronius', 61.

³²¹ E.g., Asenius 1-2, Doulas 2, Evagrius 2; cf. Mark the Monk, *De Lege* 108, 114

³²² See, e.g., *PS* 12, 37, 55;

³²³ Mark the Monk, *Operibus* 47, 121, 133, 137; see also N 157 and Nilus of Ancyra, ΛΟΓΟΣ ΑΣΚΗΤΙΚΟΣ, *Philokalia*, 1:190.

this life, that you may live to God. Remember what you have vowed to God—for it will be demanded of you in the Day of Judgment (Mat 10.15, 2 Pet 3.7, etc.). Hunger, thirst, go naked, keep vigil, mourn, weep, wail in your heart. Test yourself whether you are worthy of God, then despise the flesh that you may save your souls.³²⁴

As Antony describes matters, the monastic lives ever in the ‘fear of God’ and expectation of death. The latter reminds the monk that worldly goods will be irrevocably lost and are, in any event, of only illusory value—fleshly rest is not eternal rest and, as Evagrius puts it, ‘possessions will not benefit you in the day of death.’³²⁵ The fear of God, as this apophthegm says, rests on the assumption that one has to ‘give account’ to God of ‘what has been vowed to him’ or, as an anonymous apophthegm puts it, ‘our way of life.’ While engagement with mortality helps monks to ‘despise the flesh’, the fear of God and, especially, his judgment, reminds them to ‘save their souls.’³²⁶

A Matter of Eschatology

I have said that death lies between the monk and his hopes. However, many monks, like Evagrius, for whom *gnosis* constitutes the ultimate goal, believed eschatological hopes to be realizable in the present life. Even so, arguments for renunciation hold good, since spiritual goods are still opposed to material ones. Evagrius certainly does see death as an important moment, at which the character of a monk is tested and revealed, and in that sense it is safe to say that hopes for rest must lie beyond death. He says,

The monk free of possessions...is above every temptation and scorns present realities; he rises above them, withdraws from earthly things, and associates with the things above...Affliction comes and with no sadness he leaves that place. Death approaches and he departs with a good heart, for he does not bind his soul with any earthly fetter.

But the monk with many possessions has bound himself with the fetters of his worries...Even if death should approach, he is miserable in leaving behind present things and giving up his soul...he is separated from the body but he is not separated from his

³²⁴ Antony 33

³²⁵ PS 203; cf. Evagrius, *Paraenesis* (PG 79:1237A): ‘Ποιήσατε φωτεινὸν ἔνδυμα Χριστοῦ τοῦ Κυρίου ἡμῶν, ὑπέρο πᾶσαν στολὴν βυσσίνην, ὅτι οὐκ ὠφελήσει ὑπάρχοντα ἐν ἡμέρᾳ θανάτου.’

³²⁶ Evagrius sums up in *Paraenesis* (PG 79:1240A): ‘Οὐ ὄυσεται πίστις καὶ βάπτισμα τοῦ αἰωνίου πυρός, χωρὶς ἔργων δικαιοσύνης. Εἰ γὰρ συνετάξω τῷ Χριστῷ, τήρει τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ, καὶ εἰ πιστεύεις τὰ μέλλοντα, ἀντιποιοῦ τῆς δόξης τῆ αἰωνίου, καὶ φοβήθητι τὴν φλογίνην ὄμοφαίαν.’

possessions; the passion has a greater hold on him than those dragging him [towards death].³²⁷³²⁸

Nevertheless, Evagrius can also speak of the opposition of ‘ages’ as one which plays out in the present life. The ascetic rises by means of πρακτική through ἀπάθεια to a state of γνῶσις wherein προσευχή and θεωρία are possible.³²⁹ Yet the eschatological hope of the Christian is also θεωρία and προσευχή defined as ‘converse of the mind with God.’³³⁰ Thus, Evagrian eschatology is strongly realized, since the Christian is capable of the same activity now as later — there is little left for death to accomplish except the shedding of the body. Writers like the anonymous author of *HM* oppose πρακτική and θεωρητική in similar terms,³³¹ while Palladius uses ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ persons as his contrasting terms.³³² These follow Evagrius to some extent, though it is not clear that they share his speculative opinions.³³³ For the majority of the Desert Fathers, though, as Graham Gould notes, the ‘reward’ hoped for is ‘implicitly an eternal, heavenly one, a divine response to the way in which [the monk] has chosen to live the monastic life as a life of concern for their neighbours.’³³⁴ Evagrian spirituality, however popular its fourth-century

³²⁷ *Paraenesis* (PG 79:1240A): Οὐ ὕσεται πίστις καὶ βάπτισμα τοῦ αἰωνίου πυρὸς, χωρὶς ἔργων δικαιοσύνης. Εἰ γὰρ συνετάξω τῷ Χριστῷ, τήρει τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ, καὶ εἰ πιστεύεις τὰ μέλλοντα, ἀντιποιοῦ τῆς δόξης τῆς αἰωνίου, καὶ φοβήθητι τὴν φλογίνην ῥομφαίαν.

³²⁸ *Cogitationibus (recensio fusius)* 3.5-7 ; cf. *Monachos* 21

³²⁹ For a convenient summary of Evagrian spirituality see Louth, , *Andrew, Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (2nd ed.; Oxford: OUP, 2007), 97-110.

³³⁰ *De Oratione* 3 (PG 79:1168C): Ἡ προσευχή, ὁμιλία ἐστὶ νοῦ πρὸς Θεόν. The earliest use of this definition, so important to Greek ascetics, comes from Maximus of Tyre (2nd c. CE): ‘ὁμιλίαν καὶ διάλεκτον πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς περὶ τῶν παρόντων καὶ ἐπίδειξιν τῆς ἀρετῆς’ (*Diallexeis* 5.8b-c). Alexandrian Christians took it up: Clement of Alexandria (to define εὐχή, *Stromateis*, 7.12.73.1) and, probably, Origen (προσευχή, *Fragmenta in Psalmos* 1-150, [dub.], Ps. 140.2, l. 7). The definition became common, used by Gregory of Nyssa (*De Oratione Dominica orationes* 5), John Chrysostom (*Contra Anomoeos*, 7 [PG 48:766]; *De fato et providentia* [PG 50:760]; *In Genesim* [PG 53:285]; *Catecheses ad illuminandos* 1-8 (series tertia), 7.25) and Ps-Macarius (*collectio* HA, 56.6). For Evagrius, though, it is only one of several definitions, but in all of them he envisions a kind of communion between νοῦς and God. If Guillaumont’s assessment of Evagrius’ eschatology (drawn from his analysis of the *Kephalaia Gnostica*) is correct, then prayer anticipates—to the extent possible—the life of νόες in the consummation of the age. See Guillaumont, A., *Les ‘Kephalaia Gnostica d’Évagre le pontique et l’histoire de l’origénisme chez les grecs et chez les syriens*, *Patristica Sorbonensia* 5 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962), 37-39; and especially Konstantinovskiy, Julia, *Evagrius: The Making of a Gnostic*, *Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 162-70.

³³¹ *HM* 1.62, 13.11

³³² Palladius, *HL* 12.2

³³³ See Draguet, ‘L’Histoire Lausiaque, une œuvre écrite dans l’esprit d’Évagre’, *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* 41 (1946), 321-64 and 42 (1947), 5-49. However, Hunt, E.D., ‘Palladius of Helenopolis: A Party and its Supporters in the Church of the Late Fourth Century’, *JTS* n.s. 24:2 (1973), 479-80; and Katos, *Palladius of Helenopolis*, 90-100, argue that Palladius, though partial to Evagrius, was not a slavish ‘Origenist’ and his work likely reflects the broader tradition within which Evagrius operated.

³³⁴ Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 105

tradition, became increasingly unique after the Origenist Controversy and it remains generally true of authors here under survey that, whatever hopes they held for the present life, it was eschatological rest in Christ for which they longed, and though they might taste it now, they only expected to enjoy it fully after death.

The time of repentance

Shifting one's attention and desire from transitory and material goods to spiritual ones whose full receipt cannot be realized in the present life requires a forcible alteration of one's priorities and desires. Thus, *μετάνοια*, 'repentance,' a forcible change of attitude and action, is in order: 'Abba Peter...told us about Abba Thalilaios the Cilician that he passed sixty years in the monastic life, never ceasing to weeping, and he always said "God gave us this time for repentance, and we have to seek him wholeheartedly."' ³³⁵ Abba Thalilaios expressed his repentance through weeping, a common practice among the Desert Fathers, though unknown to VA's Antony. Emphasis on *μετάνοια* opposes the present age to eternity, not so much in the *kinds* of activities appropriate to each (though that is certainly true), but as mutually exclusive loci for similar activities. That is, one must weep, and the choice is between weeping now and weeping later. ³³⁶ Thus, a curious continuity between the ages leads to a different kind of opposition, in which ascetics strive to suffer now what they wish to avoid in eternity and to renounce now the very pleasure they hope to gain in eternity.

Arsenius, John of Cellia, and Macarius the Great all agree: humans must weep at some point and so each of these exhorted his disciples 'Let us weep, brothers, and let tears pour from our eyes, before we depart for that place where our tears will burn our bodies.' ³³⁷ The sense is that while tears are useful now for repentance, after death they will be no more than a mark of damnation, paradoxically exacerbating a fiery punishment. Amma Syncretica describes the kind of mourning one must accomplish here and now:

There is profitable sadness [*λυπή*] and corrosive sadness (cf. 2 Cor 7.9-11). Useful sadness includes weeping both for one's own sins and for the weakness of neighbours, so as not to fall away from one's purpose and to lay hold of perfect goodness. But there is also a sadness from the enemy, fully irrational, also called *acedia* by some. It is necessary to cast this spirit out by prayer and psalmody (cf. Mark 9.29). ³³⁸

³³⁵ PS 59

³³⁶ Following Luke 16.19-31; cf. Mark the Monk, *Operibus*, 73, 119.

³³⁷ Macarius the Great 34; see also Arsenius 41, John of Cellia 1; see also PS 110.

³³⁸ Syncretica 27, in Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition Grecque* (cf. Poemen 26, 39, 50, 72). This saying relies on the Pauline distinction—discussed in the introduction—between godly and worldly *λύπη*.

Syncretica points out the danger of indiscriminate weeping as well as the causes of proper mourning— one’s own sins, and the weakness of others. One does not weep for material or even relational loss in this world—such would be irrational and contribute to a discontentment with the life of renunciation. We may note that, in light of Syncretica’s saying, it is no accident that one weeps before the expectation of a judgment in which sin and the world will be condemned.³³⁹ In light of death and eternal judgment, therefore, one seeks not to lament the loss of those things which must pass away, but to mourn for those actions and thoughts which may keep one from God.³⁴⁰ It is no surprise, then, that the primary reason for weeping is ‘for one’s sins’ and that πένθος is thereby associated with μετάνοια.³⁴¹ One may also weep, as Palladius puts it, for the lost life of Paradise, spurned in favour of ‘irrational food’.³⁴² The connection between these various sources of tears is the effect: the world loses its power before one who sees in it a cause not for celebration but for mourning.

Abba Poemen: The way of tears

While many ascetics expected to benefit from tears, Abba Poemen turned mourning into a way of life. Barbara Müller argues that, for monks whose spirituality is typified by the sayings attributed to Abba Poemen, πένθος (or δάκρυα³⁴³) as not simply one virtue among many, but as a framework within which virtues may be cultivated and the whole array of sins is combated.³⁴⁴ Two of Poemen’s sayings demonstrate the importance of tears:

A brother asked Abba Poemen, ‘What shall I do with my sins?’ The old man said to him, ‘Weep within yourself. For deliverance from sins and procurement of virtues both derive from mourning.

Again he said, ‘Weeping is the way which the Scriptures and our fathers have handed down to us.’³⁴⁵

³³⁹ Poemen 122; Or 1; Evagrius, *Eulogius* 7; cf. N 140-41

³⁴⁰ Hausherr, Irénée, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East*, trans. Anselm Hufstader, CS 53 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982), 3-4, 17-33

³⁴¹ Macarius the Great 27, 41; *HM* 1.37, 1.53-58; *PS* 30, 41, 110; on which see Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 184

³⁴² *HL* 1.3

³⁴³ Müller, Barbara, ‘Die Tränen der Wüstenväter: Das Penthos in den Apopthegmata Patrum’, *Östkirchliche Studien* 46:4 (1997), 293-94

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 299-309

³⁴⁵ Poemen 208-09 (in Guy)

These two sayings illustrate the dramatic benefits of a commitment to mourning and yet they also demonstrate that tears are only the *way* and never the *end*.³⁴⁶ Rather, Poemen's emphasis on tears begins with his engagement with death and ends with the hope of salvation. As to the beginning of tears: 'Abba Poemen said: "There are [always] three mysteries before me: it is good for me to pray at all times before the Lord, without stopping; to place my death before me at all times; and [to think] that, when I die, I will be thrown into the fire because of my sins."' ³⁴⁷ William Harmless argues that Poemen exhibited a particularly 'penitential piety' and that 'By picturing himself as deserving damnation, Poemen fiercely cultivates in himself the penitent's heart, knowing that he must face Christ the judge.'³⁴⁸ We must be clear—Poemen mourns now not because he *will* be punished, but so as to *avoid* punishment. Tears keep him constant in his monastic vocation whose end is salvation. Two sayings illustrates this:

When Poemen came to Egypt, he saw a woman sitting at a tomb and weeping [κλαίουσαν] bitterly. And he said, "If all the pleasures [τερπνά] of this world came, they could not move her soul from mourning [πένθος]. So also the monk should always hold mourning [πένθος] in himself."³⁴⁹

A brother asked Abba Poemen, saying 'What shall I do?' Poemen replied, 'Abraham, when he entered the land of the promise (), purchased a tomb [μνημειον] for himself, and by this grave [τάφος] inherited the land (cf.).' The brother said, 'What is a grave [τάφος?]' The old man replied, 'A place of weeping and mourning [Τόπος κλαυθμοῦ καὶ πένθους].'³⁵⁰

The tomb, which represents the activity of mourning by which a monk is protected from worldly distractions,³⁵¹ becomes the means of inheriting the 'land of promise', the 'rest' for which ascetics strive. Poemen advocates mourning as a means of keeping constant in repentance and obedience to God, and is motivated to do so through remembrance of death and judgment.

³⁴⁶ Driscoll, J., 'Exegetical Procedures in the Monk Poemen', in Lohrer, Magnus (ed), *Symbolgegenwort und Theologische Bedeutung: Festschrift für Basil Studer*, Studia Anselmia 116 (Rome, 1995), 167

³⁴⁷ *Collectio Monastica* 13.46 (CSCO 238 [Leuven: Peeters, 1963], 95-96), translated in Harmless, 'Remembering Poemen Remembering', 505-06.

³⁴⁸ Harmless, 'Remembering Poemen Remembering', 506

³⁴⁹ Poemen 119; on which see Harmless, 'Remembering Poemen Remembering', 491f.

³⁵⁰ Poemen 50

³⁵¹ Also Poemen 39

Loving what one leaves

Renunciation and the 'way of tears' demand a rigorous lifestyle which cultivates in the monk a character pleasing to God. Monks renounced goods not simply to procure others, but out of love for God. In *HL*, Palladius describes an ascetic as 'smitten with a love of eternity' who 'renounced the clamours [of the world], and disposing of all his goods' went to undertake the ascetic life.³⁵² The desire for eternal beatitude is a desire to please God and to find happiness in him. Yet, in order to please God, one must learn not to *hate* what one leaves behind—though one must be willing to leave it behind entirely—but to love without striving to possess and without becoming unduly attached. Douglas Burton-Christie's conclusion is particularly apt:

The *telos* of the monks' life in the desert was freedom; freedom from anxiety about the future; freedom from the tyranny of haunting memories of the past; freedom from an attachment to the ego which precluded intimacy with others and with God. They hoped also that this freedom would express itself in a positive sense: freedom to love others; freedom to enjoy the presence of God; freedom to live in the innocence of a new paradise.³⁵³

This means that the Desert Fathers looked not for freedom absolutely, but freedom from the enslaving power of the world. They sought rather to become slaves of God and to serve their neighbour through love of God and eternity. Freedom is not the end. Love, Burton-Christie reminds us—love of God and neighbour—is the end, but it is only possible when someone is free from the false love of transient desire which seeks only to possess. The monk renounces goods to flee from anger, from grudges and malice. He flees marriage to avoid lust, and family to overcome fractional convention. He seeks freedom in which to forgive all because he is so conscious of his own sins over which he weeps, and learns thereby to love and give himself in love as Christ did. Just as monks must meditate both on punishments and salvation in order not only to flee sin but to cultivate virtue, so they must renounce the world in order to love creation.

To illustrate this claim: in a particularly poignant passage, John Moschos tells the story of Abba John the Eunuch who, when he died, had so thoroughly renounced the world and given himself to charity that he left 'nothing whatsoever of the world's goods behind. Not even for one hour did he ever possess books, money or clothing. He gave everything to those in need, investing his entire concern in

³⁵² *HL* 21.3; so Patricia Cox Miller, 'Dreaming the Body: An Aesthetics of Asceticism', in *Asceticism*, 295-96.

³⁵³ Burton-Christie, Douglas, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 222

those things which were to come.³⁵⁴ Yet this same man fed the animals of the monastery right down to the ants. Abba John's all-consuming desire for the next world sharpened his love for this one. The all-encompassing power of ascetics' desire for the kingdom of heaven drove them to renounce the kind of life which might find success in this world. To dwell on the good things to come means to relativize the present world and yet it also means learning to properly love the present world, and to save oneself wholly for God requires, ultimately, making a gift of oneself for one's neighbours.³⁵⁵ It is the ascetics' rejection of the present world which grants them the freedom to love it as they, or rather, as God, wishes. To feed the poor one must, it seems, first renounce wealth, and to love one's neighbour, one must turn over property and family. It is only because they have realized the transience of worldly *goods* that ascetics are so able to love *creation*.

Conclusion

The Desert Fathers were keenly aware of a fundamental incompatibility between this life and the next. The two are in one way continuous—one's life now determines one's life later, and the choices one makes in this life are made binding after death. Yet monastics also renounced transitory goods and urgently strove for a 'salvation' which could not be enjoyed before death. The Desert Fathers accomplish their renunciation in light of the devastating effects of death, which, as the end of material existence, nullifies every material gain one has made. Simultaneously, in expectation of divine judgment whose criteria concern one's actions, monastics cultivated a lifestyle which accorded to Christ's commandments.

While renunciation rests on an opposition of ages in terms of their activities, it also points—particularly in the virtues of *μετάνοια* and *πένθος*—to an opposition of context rather than action. One chooses whether to be afflicted now and rest later or vice versa. This is often expressed in terms of 'weeping' now or 'weeping later.' The opposition is asymmetrical: the work of repentance and weeping *now* is effective, while later it is merely part of one's punishment. Here too death, after which one can no longer amend one's life, demarcates the opposition: it divides between effective labour and mere suffering. The urgency of repentance is fuelled, then, by monastic meditation on mortality and judgment.

While the opposition of ages is contextualized by and predicated on the memory of death and judgment, it is also conducive to the lifestyle of renunciation and withdrawal within which one can

³⁵⁴ *PS* 184; cf. 141, 142; *HM* 6.4

³⁵⁵ *HL* 68.1-4, 71.4; *PS* 24,

acquire virtues. Fathers like Poemen especially advocated the virtue of mourning. They mourned not for loss of transitory goods, but for sin and the difference between the life for which one longs and the life which one leads. Poemen especially advocated tears as a way of life founded on the consciousness of death and judgment and conducive to salvific repentance. Other stories argue that renunciation actually teaches the monk to *love*. He renounces illusory love which is, really, possessive attachment to transitory good. He cultivates a lifestyle in keeping with Christ's commands to love: God with all one's self and, through that, one's neighbour as oneself. This twofold motion reflects also the twofold meditation on punishments and salvation—the former inculcates abhorrence of possession, the latter a virtuous application of godly love.

III. THE LIVING DEATH

In this section I will trace out various ‘practices of death’ as they emerge in Desert literature. Beginning with general metaphorical depictions of monks as dead or entombed, I will then describe ways in which ascetics strove to ‘die to themselves’ and ‘to the world.’ I will particularly draw attention to practices which are clearly important to the Desert Fathers but which, in this literature, are only sometimes connected with death, and then without any real consistency. Nevertheless, Desert literature lays out the conceptual material for practices and virtues of cutting off the will, non-judgment, *apatheia*, and obedience, all of which the Gaza Fathers and, especially, Climacus, will shape in terms of death.

The Untimely Tomb

While Abba Poemen compared monks to mourners at tombs, other stories compare them to the denizens of tombs. To some extent this would have been suggested by VA’s account of Antony’s move to the tombs, where he battled demons.³⁵⁶ However, Desert literature portrays flight to the tombs in contradistinction to Antony’s enthusiastic assault which carried no connotations of ‘death.’ Rather, as for Poemen, the tomb represents the place of weeping—of constant awareness of one’s own sins and failings and, of course, of one’s own impending death and judgment. John of Lycopolis echoes this opinion in his tale of an unnamed youth:

There was another young man in the city who had done many evil deeds and had sinned gravely. At God’s bidding this youth was struck by compunction for his many sins. He made straight for the cemetery [τοὺς τάφους], where he bitterly lamented his former life, throwing himself down on his face...for he considered himself unworthy even of life itself. While still living he incarcerated himself among the tombs, and renouncing his own life [καὶ πρὸ θανάτου ἐν τοῖς νεκροταφίοις ἑαυτὸν κατακλείσας καὶ ἀπειπὼν ἑαυτοῦ τὴν ζωὴν], did nothing but groan from below, from the depths of his heart.³⁵⁷

This man went to die before his death, to renounce ‘his own life’, and to be relieved of his sins. He does not go to carry the fight to demons but to take up an abode which befits his way of life. Certainly, as John continues the story, the demons do come—but not as though to an adversary. Rather, they come to afflict him with memory of his sin, terror of judgment, and to claim him as their own. His response is simply to continue his groaning. And so the demons attack him as they did Antony—physically, but not to the point of death. As with Antony, they continue for three nights, and then depart, crying out ‘You have

³⁵⁶ VA 8-10

³⁵⁷ HM 1.37 (ET modified); cf. N 177 and HL 45.1-3

won; you have won; you have won.’ Now, John relates, ‘he dwelt in the tomb as a pure man without any defilement for as long as he lived...And so, my children, first of all let us discipline ourselves to attain humility, since this is the essential foundation of all virtues.’³⁵⁸ The youth is raised up to virtue and an Antonian persona by first humbling himself down to death. As Antony Rich puts it so well, ‘The awareness of his coming death and judgment, combined with renunciation of secular life, led the monk to regard himself as dead.’³⁵⁹ We turn now to the various ways in which the Desert Fathers realized virtues through ‘practices of death.’ These rely on the memory of death and judgment, and the perceived opposition of ages which makes a ‘death’ desirable in this life if by it one can attain life in the next.

Die to yourself

It is not unusual to hear certain Desert Fathers, notably Poemen and Moses the Ethiopian, speak of the monk as one dead.³⁶⁰ Several sayings of Poemen illustrate this principle. Once, Poemen was annoyed with his brother Paësius (also a monk) who had conversations not to Poemen’s liking. Poemen fled then to Abba Ammonas and told him the situation. Ammonas responded thus: ‘Poemen, are you still alive? Go, sit in your cell and set it in your heart that you have already been in the grave a year.’³⁶¹ Two other sayings tell us that Poemen did just that. Abba Anoub (another of Poemen’s brothers) came to ask if Poemen would like to invite the priests over. Poemen kept silent and finally Anoub left saddened. When asked the reason for his behaviour, Poemen responded, ‘I have nothing to do here. For I died and a dead man does not speak.’³⁶² Another time, Paësius fought with his brother till both were bloodied, and Poemen said nothing. Abba Anoub came, scandalized that Poemen had allowed the fight, and Poemen said, ‘Set it in your heart that I was not here.’³⁶³ Poemen, the dead man, can hardly leap in and instruct brothers. He cannot even be perturbed by their commotion. He does not make demands on them and they do not disturb him. Moses the Ethiopian points to a second facet of ‘death’. He says, ‘A person ought to mortify himself from every wicked act before he departs the body that he may do ill to no

³⁵⁸ *HM* 1.44

³⁵⁹ Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers*, 219

³⁶⁰ See, e.g., Macarius the Great 23, Moses 11-12, 15; N 90, 143; *HM* 14.15; *HL* 16.4; *PS* 144, 229. See also *Collectio Monastica* 13.5, quoted in Harmless, ‘Remembering Poemen Remembering’, 507.

³⁶¹ Poemen 2

³⁶² Poemen 3; see also Moses the Ethiopian 11-12

³⁶³ Poemen 173

one.³⁶⁴ Not only does the ‘dead’ monk cultivate an interior tranquillity which isolates him from distractions and temptations, but he also takes care for how he relates to others. There are, then, two sides to ascetic ‘death’: death to oneself and death to one’s neighbour.

Death to Self: Ἀπαθεία

Monks cultivate interior tranquillity which some compare to ‘death.’ Macarius the Egyptian (the ‘Great’) had someone come asking for ‘a word that I might be saved.’ Macarius responded by giving him a task: ‘Go to the cemetery and insult the dead.’ So the lad did so, hurling both abuse and stones, and upon his return Macarius asks him, ‘Did they say anything to you?’ The brother responds ‘No.’ So Macarius tells him to go and ‘praise them now.’ Going he calls them ‘apostles, saints, and righteous men!’ Again, upon his return, Macarius asks if the dead responded at all, and again the brother responds ‘No, not at all.’ Macarius then explains the meaning of this ‘action-parable’³⁶⁵: ‘You know how much you dishonoured them, and they did not respond; and how much you praised them, and they said nothing to you. So also must you be, if you wish to be saved: considering neither the abuse nor the glory of humans, just like the dead, and you can be saved.’³⁶⁶ There can be no starker, no more devastating claim to make than to tell the disciple to bear insult and praise alike as meaningless. Implicitly, all that matters is God’s judgment. Macarius does not use the language of ἀπάθεια, but Antony richly sums up the tranquillity which Macarius demands thus: ‘Ἀπάθεια is to be as unmoved...as the dead.’³⁶⁷ The ascetic who has severed his ties to and, therefore, his slavery to, the πάθη, can be insulted without becoming angry and praised without becoming vain. The result, according to Macarius, is that ‘if contempt has become for you as praise, and poverty as wealth, and lack as abundance, you will not die. For the one who believes well and works piously cannot fall into the impurity of passions and error of demons.’³⁶⁸ Such a monk is free from attachments to worldly goods and expectations, which freedom allows him to live tranquilly whether praised or insulted—he is unphased by illusions of ego or possession, the ‘impurity of passions and error of demons.’

³⁶⁴ Moses 15

³⁶⁵ N Nagel, Peter, ‘Action-Parables in Earliest Monasticism. An Examination of the Apophthegmata Patrum’, trans. Feardorcha Ó Dálaigh, *Hallel* 5 (1977-8), 253-54

³⁶⁶ Macarius the Great 23; cf. Agathon 5, Zacharias 3, Isaiah 1, John Kolobos 41

³⁶⁷ Rich, *Discernment*, 138; cf. Gould’s similar sentiments about ascetic ‘fear of praise’, at *Desert Fathers*, 133-39.

³⁶⁸ Macarius the Great 20; cf. Nesterus the Coenobite 2

Palladius' tale of Sarapion the Sindonite is probably the most extreme example of such a 'death.' Sarapion sought out a famous virgin in Rome, one who had not been seen for years, and asked her first why she remained seated when he greeted her. She responded that, far from it, she was journeying to God. He then asked if she were 'alive or dead.' She responded, 'I believe in God that I have died. For one living in the flesh does not journey [to God].'³⁶⁹ Wishing to test her and, perhaps, humiliate her, Sarapion proposes that she go out and show herself in church. She demurs and he responds 'if you have died to the world and the world to you, it is for you to go out or not. So go out.' She does and, wishing to press her to the limit, Sarapion says, 'If you wish therefore to show me completely that you have died and no longer live "so as to please humans" (cf. Gal 1.10), do what I do and know that you have died. Strip off all your clothes with me and go into the midst of the city carrying me in this way.' She responds that 'I will scandalize many by doing this and they will say I am possessed!' Sarapion responds 'What do you care? Are you not dead?...I am more dead than you are and by deed I show that I have died to the world. For I do this dispassionately [ἀπαθῶς] and unashamed.'³⁷⁰ For such a 'dead' man even perfectly valid concerns of modesty and scandal—which Athanasius praised in Antony and mark out the particularly 'discerning' Desert Fathers—hold no meaning. He lives as though protected from temptation. The optimism implicit in the stories of Macarius and Sarapion continues the kind of optimism which VA displayed, but it meets with negative reactions among Desert Fathers, which I will discuss below.

Death to one's neighbour

With the death 'to oneself'—the cultivation of ἀπαθεία—goes a death 'to one's neighbour [ἀπὸ τοῦ πλησίον]'. Graham Gould understands the ascetical metaphor of death as an expression of 'the Desert Fathers' strong aversion to attitudes and behaviours which seemed to involve harming anyone else (especially if such behaviour also involved a monk in failure to recognize his own sins.'³⁷¹ Abba Moses the Ethiopian said, 'Unless a person sets it in his heart that he is already three days in the tomb, he will not attain to this word.'³⁷² He meant that the way one dies 'to one's neighbours' is the same way one

³⁶⁹ Cf. Diadochus, *Capita*, 14: ' Ὁ ἐν αἰσθήσει καρδίας ἀγαπῶν τὸν θεὸν...Ὁ τοιοῦτος δὲ καὶ πάρεστιν ἐν τῷ βίῳ καὶ οὐ πάρεστιν· ἔτι γὰρ ἐνδημῶν τῷ ἑαυτοῦ σώματι ἐκδημεῖ διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης τῆ κινήσει τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπαύστως πρὸς τὸν θεόν.'

³⁷⁰ HL 37.13-16

³⁷¹ Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 132

³⁷² Moses the Ethiopian 12

dies 'to oneself.' Death means not only that a monk not allow himself to be perturbed by others, but that he not allow himself to harm others. In a sense, it is only the dead man, free of the world, who can really relate to others as he ought. A community of mutual love, rooted in a shared desire for salvation, cannot allow a 'root of discord' or divisive preferences and factions.

The tranquil dead man is the one who can forge a community with his brethren. His freedom is, as we have noted already, freedom to love and to give himself without expectation. A story of Poemen and Anoub, strikingly similar to the tale of Macarius and the cemetery, illustrates this principle. After they left Scetis, Anoub, Poemen, and a small band of disciples settled briefly in an abandoned pagan temple near Terenuthis. Anoub suggested that they all live quietly for a week and only at the end of it should they come together again. During the week 'each morning Anoub stoned the statue's face, and each evening he asked its forgiveness.' Poemen is understandably confused and, when they come together, asks Anoub the meaning, saying 'Does a believer do this?' Anoub responded:

'I did this for you. For you saw me stoning the statue's face and it did not say anything, did it, or become angry?' And Abba Poemen said, 'No.' And again, 'I did penitence before it, and it was not troubled, was it? And did it say "I will not forgive"?' And Abba Poemen: 'No.' And the old man, 'We are seven brothers. If you wish that we remain together, let us be like this statue, which if insulted or praised, is not troubled. But if you do not wish to become like this, behold there are four gates in the temple, each may go where he wishes.' And they all cast themselves to the ground, saying to Abba Anoub, 'As you wish, Father, let us do, and we hearken as you speak to us.' And we remained together all our lives, working according to the old man's word which he said to us.'³⁷³

Anoub's point was well made and, perhaps more similar to Macarius' instruction than might initially be expected. Poemen asks if a 'believer' would ask a pagan statue for forgiveness. Why? These statues were not *alive*, they had no god behind them. They were merely stone, no more than empty corpses. Statues were not all considered thus—the population of Antioch certainly learned otherwise when it was punished for defacing statues of the emperor. Statues of the living are, in a sense, living. Statues of dead gods are, in fact, dead. Thus, Anoub's point is not to be 'stone' but 'dead.' If the community is to succeed, then its members must be as tranquil as the dead.

The 'death to one's neighbour' requires not only a particular sort of interior tranquillity, but also a new way of conceiving relationships. Social and animal ties are predicated on preference, possession, and attachment—*my* family does not include all people and conducting business often means harming

³⁷³ Anoub 1; cf. Poemen 198, in Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition Grecque*.

others. The Desert Fathers rejected these sorts of claims in favour of non-divisive relationships. The dead, as Anthony Rich points out, 'have no legal rights.'³⁷⁴ Thus, when confronted with an inheritance, Arsenius replied, 'I died before him. He died only recently.'³⁷⁵ The dead person has no relatives—Poemen has no sons³⁷⁶ and Evagrius' acquaintance, when informed that his father has died, responds 'Cease blaspheming, for my father is immortal.'³⁷⁷ The monk has God for his father.³⁷⁸ These kinds of claims are not to be confused with denigration of marriage or families.³⁷⁹ The ascetic may deny his blood-family, but he certainly has an ecclesial and monastic family in his 'brothers' and '*abbas*'. In fact, as Philip Rousseau points out, many early ascetics (like Poemen, Paësius, and Anoub) were *also* blood-relations.³⁸⁰ He argues that for monks who wished to be 'spiritual' relations, 'some well-defined change had been called for; and such change, successfully achieved, ensured a more whole-hearted, freely-chosen bond, and further progress in the ascetical life.'³⁸¹ Relationships had to be re-constituted, not 'by blood or the will of men' but, rather, the various parties had 'to realize that they could appeal to some different set of ideals, which would impel them to co-operate at a new level of spiritual endeavour.'³⁸² Tensions arose when only one party (the ascetic) saw the need for a change, and the other party (a secular family member, or a spouse) did not. Yet this tension demonstrates only the inevitable friction of two mutually exclusive attitudes toward the demands of service to God. While some like Gregory of Nyssa would, in service of glorifying virginity, attack marriage as not merely representative of but actually contributory to the corrupt condition, the literature at hand is generally more cautious. What we find instead is a constant awareness of how close the world is, that it can tempt through the visitation of a mother, a sibling, or in some instances, a spouse.

³⁷⁴ Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers*, 220

³⁷⁵ Arsenius 29; see also Cassian 8; cf. Poemen 33 and *HL* 1.4, 54.2, and 66.1.

³⁷⁶ Poemen 33; cf *N* 295

³⁷⁷ *HL* 38.13 attributes this to Evagrius; but Evagrius (*Practicus*, 95) attributes it to 'one of the monks.' Perhaps it was modesty on his part, or perhaps Palladius' memory was a bit confused and he turned a story told by Evagrius into a statement made by Evagrius.

³⁷⁸ See also Mark (disciple of Silouan) 3-5, Sisoës 10; *HM* Prol.8, 1.25, 2.4 (cf. 3.1, 8.2, 8.17, 8.26), 14.14; *HL* 35.8-954.2; *PS* 68, 85, 110, 184.

³⁷⁹ On which see Clark, Elizabeth A., 'Anti-familial Tendencies in Ancient Christianity', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5:3 (1995), 356-80

³⁸⁰ Rousseau, Philip, 'Blood-relationships among Early Eastern Ascetics', *JTS* n.s 23:1 (1972), 135-44

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 139

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 138

Ways of Dying?

How a monastic achieves interior tranquillity and a new kind of relationship is less clear. For the Desert Fathers, ἀπαθεία and new relationships are of interest, but not clearly defined and the ways in which they might be cultivated—the specific practices and virtues which might come under the heading of death—rarely made explicit. Nevertheless, Desert literature does elaborate ideals of self-renunciation which will be described in terms of death by the Gaza Fathers, and given new shape within context of death by Climacus. These are worth discussing at some length as we find here the conceptual material with which Gazan and Sinaite writers would work.

Amputating the will

We begin with the ‘cutting off of the will.’ Abba Ammonas, asked what is the ‘hard and narrow way’ (cf. Mat 7.14) which leads to life, said ‘It is this: to do violence to one’s thoughts and to cut off one’s own will for God [καὶ κόπτειν διὰ τὸν Θεὸν τὰ ἴδια θελήματα]. And this is also the saying “Behold, we have left everything and followed you” (Mat 19.27).’³⁸³ Why should the amputation of the will proper to each (ἴδιον), which labour Gould calls ‘a general feature of the Desert Fathers,’ be so important?³⁸⁴

The problem is that one’s own will is very rarely one’s own and it is never God’s. It belongs instead, as Poemen tells a young monk named Abraham, to the demons. Poemen says, ‘Do the demons war against you? They do not war with us as long as we do our will [τὰ θελήματα]. For our wills become demons [Τὰ γὰρ θελήματα ἡμῶν δαίμονες γεγόνασι].’³⁸⁵ Thus, no work is good if done according to one’s own will, not even ‘ascending to heaven’³⁸⁶, because the will stands as the last boundary between God and oneself. It is the ‘brazen wall’ which can only be overleapt by its utter rejection.³⁸⁷ Why? Why should one’s will become a demon? Why is the choice between God’s will and one’s own always an absolutely exclusive one?³⁸⁸

The reason has to do with AP’s consistent pluralisation of θέλημα. In the plural it can mean ‘desire’, yet θέλημα generally refers to the capacity by which one chooses and pursues particular

³⁸³ Ammonas 11; see also Cassian 5, Poemen 36, 72, Pambo 3, Joseph of Thebes 1; Rufus 2

³⁸⁴ Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 33 (see also his discussion of the will, 27-36 and 149-50); so also Brown, *Body and Society*, 226-27; *pace* Regnault, L., ‘Obéissance et liberté dans la Apophtegmes des Pères,’ in his *Les Pères du désert*, 87-111

³⁸⁵ Poemen 67

³⁸⁶ N 244

³⁸⁷ Poemen 54

³⁸⁸ As Isidore 9 militates.

desires,³⁸⁹ and, in any event, *AP* have the perfectly serviceable ἐπιθυμία for ‘desire’ or ‘object of desire’.³⁹⁰

In the NT we find the basis for the ‘plural will.’³⁹¹ Paul writes:

And you being dead in trespasses and your sins, in which you once walked according to the age of this world, according to the ruler of the authority of the air, the spirit now working in the sons of disbelief, among whom you all once lived in the desires of our flesh [ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῆς σαρκὸς ἡμῶν], doing the will of the flesh and minds [thoughts?] [ποιοῦντες τὰ θελήματα τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ τῶν διανοιῶν], and we were by nature children of wrath like the rest. (Eph 2.1-3)

Here, one does the ‘will of the flesh and thoughts’, a concept placed in parallel with ‘the desires of our flesh’. The desires of the flesh and the wills of the flesh, these are ‘trespasses and sins’ in which a person is ‘dead’ a ‘son of unbelief’ and a ‘child of wrath.’ Doing these θελήματα places one in servitude to the Devil, the ‘ruler of the authority of the air’ and renders one ‘dead in trespasses and sins.’

The multiplicity of θελήματα expresses, therefore, the fractional and irrational chase after desires which characterizes fallen humans. A saying of Arsenius makes this claim clear. When asked why he avoided people so assiduously, he said, ‘God knows that I love you, but I cannot be with God and men. The thousands and myriads of angels above have one will, but humans have many wills. I am not able therefore to leave God and to come among people.’³⁹² Here the contrast is explicit, and the problem (and reason for Arsenius’ flight) is that humans have many wills—note especially the resonance with Athanasius’ ideas of the Fall. To do one’s own will is to do, actually, a variety of ‘wills’ by following fleshly desires. In this way, following one’s ἴδια θελήματα makes one a diabolical person, one in whom the Devil can operate, who unknowingly expresses that ruler’s desire rather than one’s own. Clement of Alexandria remarked that ‘choosing according to sin to conduct oneself like the demons, unstable, weak, changing in desires like a demon, one becomes a demonic human.’³⁹³ The plurality of wills expresses in its very multiplicity an underlying duality: either God or the demons. Selfishness is no more than slavery behind a mask of pleasure.

³⁸⁹ *S.v.* θέλημα: LSJ gives only ‘will’ or ‘desire;’ Lampe adds ‘object of an act of willing.’

³⁹⁰ See, e.g., Isidore 3, John the Eunuch 3, Poemen 110 (in positive sense), Paphnutius 4; N 152, 165, etc. See also Ps-Macarius, *Collectio* B, 2.9.2, 3.5.1, 15.2.5, 33.1.6, 35.1.3; Evagrius, *Oratione* 31; so also Basil, *RF* 41. Even if *AP* suffer in this instance from optocizing or semiticizing grammar, Basil and Evagrius do not. Other explanations must be sought.

³⁹¹ The LXX *does* use the plural to describe ‘desires’. ET’s render θελήματα at Pss 15.3, 102.7, 110.2; Isa 44.28, 58.3, 58.13; Jer 23.26 as ‘will’ when it means something more like ‘those things which one would will’, i.e., ‘desires.’ In the LXX, the plural expresses totality: ‘τὰ πάντα θελήματα μου/σου’ means ‘all my/your desires.’

³⁹² Arsenius 13

³⁹³ *Stromateis* 6.12.98.1

The plural will which is cut off is a divided one, borne about by demons and devils as their plaything. It is not susceptible to self-enforced unification. In any event, even if one achieves a measure of philosophic self-control, doing one's own will means elevating oneself to be the one giving commandments and thus to falsely usurp God's place. To follow the will is to become diabolical; to reject it, though, is lose the core of one's identity. Burton-Christie says that the Desert Fathers 'knew from experience that the freedom and intimacy with God which they sought could come about only through renunciation of one's very self—that is the will.'³⁹⁴ For many, one's own will, bound to neither place nor company, but rather always accompanying the ascetic, marks the final frontier of withdrawal and renunciation. It is his 'very self', and its loss suggests, however implicitly, a form of death.

Desert Anthropology and Evagrian self-denial

The matter of what constitutes the 'very self' is rather complicated, though, and θέλημα is not the answer for all. Irénée Hausherr once argued that this conception of the person is common to early Christian thought, as well as other ancient cultures: 'pour tous ces anciens, l'homme est avant tout une volonté libre, capable d'aimer et de se sacrifier pour son amour. Dans la charité donc et dans l'abnégation qui la prouve, consistera pour eux toute la perfection humaine.'³⁹⁵ It is not certain that the Desert Fathers understood the human will as 'libre', but it is surely correct to say, in light of the argument above, that they very often located the center of the person in the faculty of willing and choosing: this faculty, however dimly understood, is the locus of choice and action and, therefore the nexus between self and world.

Hausherr went on to contrast this 'spiritualité primitive' with the intellectualism which, suffering under the influence of Plato and his Hellenistic heirs, considered θεωρία to be the τέλος of human life. In this strain, θέλημα is much less important than νοῦς, and it is safe to say that many of the activities associated with θέλημα are transferred to νοῦς. Hausherr (unsurprisingly) sets up Evagrius as the signifier of this spirituality and argues that, for him, 'l'homme est une intelligence.'³⁹⁶ This argument, as stereotyped as it now sounds, began the 'Macarian-Evagrian' distinction which would so influence later writers like John Meyendorff and Kallistos Ware, and which those authors and others would apply to

³⁹⁴ Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 219

³⁹⁵ Hausherr, I., 'Les grands courants de la spiritualité orientale', *OCP* 1 (1935), 121

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124

John Climacus.³⁹⁷ Such sweeping dichotomies suggest a desire for neat categories and anachronistic systematizations. I do not think Hausherr's dichotomy worth holding. Rather, I would point out a level of continuity between Evagrius and Ps-Macarius (and, in this case, the broader *Tendenzen* of Desert literature) which speaks to the topic at hand.

Evagrius's spirituality operates along lines analogous to those which appear in emphases on 'cutting off the will.' That is, both can be related to a kind of 'death' to human restrictions. He never says so specifically, but if we recall that θεολογία (which is, after all, contemplation of the Trinity) is 'the realm of prayer' in Evagrian thought,³⁹⁸ then we may say with justification that the goal of ascetic life is prayer. In many ways this is quite consonant with VA and much of the Christian ascetic tradition. However, Evagrius' definitions of prayer are somewhat more idiosyncratic³⁹⁹ and one of these is extremely telling: 'προσευχή ἐστιν ἀπόθεσις νοημάτων.'⁴⁰⁰ The import of this phrase rests on the meaning of 'νοήματα.' This word may be translated as 'mental images,'⁴⁰¹ but it must be remembered that for Evagrius, νοήματα are the building-blocks of λογισμοί, 'thoughts.'⁴⁰² In this he follows the psychology laid out by Aristotle.⁴⁰³

Now, while the demons tempt by means of λογισμοί, human and angelic λογισμοί are perfectly acceptable and all operate on νοήματα.⁴⁰⁴ Humans can proceed to the heights of 'natural contemplation' without having to reject νοήματα—they are not inherently bad. David Brakke argues that 'thoughts make use of the more basic intellectual currency of representations [νοήματα]...The mind cannot think without representations.'⁴⁰⁵ However, God is beyond all representation⁴⁰⁶ and, therefore, any νόημα would necessarily be false and would serve only as an idol.⁴⁰⁷ Brakke's argument that pure prayer transcends only 'impassioned representations'⁴⁰⁸ is insufficient in light of Evagrius' absolute rejection of any image which can convey God—prayer must reject *all* representations and, therefore, λογισμοί. The

³⁹⁷ Discussed in the Introduction above.

³⁹⁸ Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 103

³⁹⁹ See Note 330 above.

⁴⁰⁰ *Oratione*, 70

⁴⁰¹ S.v. νόημα, LSJ

⁴⁰² See, e.g., *Cogitationibus* (Recensio brevis), PG 79:1201B, 1220B

⁴⁰³ *De Anima*, 407A7-10; *De Memoria*, 450b27-451a2

⁴⁰⁴ *Cogitationibus* (Recensio fusiis) 8, 17

⁴⁰⁵ Brakke, *Demons and the Monk*, 72-73

⁴⁰⁶ Evagrius, *Cogitationibus* (Recensio fusiis), 40-41

⁴⁰⁷ Pace Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius*, 27-47

⁴⁰⁸ Brakke, *Demons and the Monk*, 73

result is that, in order to contemplate God, humans must reject their natural epistemic capabilities and thus reject at least one of the most basic and primary means of νόησις, the activity proper to the νοῦς. The rejection of intellectual faculties operates in Evagrian anthropology analogously to the ‘cutting off of the will’ for those who place θέλημα at the centre of the human being: in both instances one gives up one’s innermost self and becomes open thereby to receiving God instead.

Total obedience

The Desert Fathers are rather clearer on the means by which one cuts off the ἴδια θελήματα: obedience to one’s *abba* or abbot. For example, Abba Rufus told visitors that, of all the activities by which monks might live out their withdrawal—caring for the sick, offering hospitality, taking up absolute solitude—the monk who practices obedience to his *abba* becomes the greatest of all, receiving ‘greater glory’ than the others in heaven. Questioned about this claim, Rufus responds that, while the first three do good things, they perform them ‘by their own will [ἰδίῳ θελήματι].’ However the one who ‘has obedience, having abandoned all his own desires [πάντα τὰ θελήματα], is suspended [κρεμάται] upon God and his own father.’⁴⁰⁹ Rufus argues here that only obedience actually accomplishes the denial of one’s own will which makes renunciation complete. More generally, *AP* laud obedience in no uncertain terms—it is total and absolute, but freely given by the disciple, never taken or demanded by the *abba*.⁴¹⁰ It is obedience which turns men into angels,⁴¹¹ which elevates them to heaven,⁴¹² which earns lofty crowns.⁴¹³ Rufus offers, in the same saying as quoted above, a summative encomium of obedience:

See, my child, how good obedience is when it is undertaken for the Lord...O obedience, salvation of the faithful! O obedience, mother of all the virtues! O obedience, discloser of the kingdom! O obedience opening the heavens, and making men to ascend there from earth! O obedience, food of all the saints, whose milk they have sucked, through you they have become perfect! O obedience, companion of the angels!⁴¹⁴

In the Desert, it does not matter so much *what* the elder has his disciple do. What is important is that the disciple does it immediately. One thinks of Mark, Silouan’s disciple, running when called

⁴⁰⁹ Rufus 2

⁴¹⁰ See Kronius 2, Poemen 174, Pistus 1, etc. See especially Hausherr, Irénée, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel, CS 116 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 197-98 and Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 58-63.

⁴¹¹ John the Theban 1; N 46

⁴¹² Hyperechius 8; N 53; Cf. Mius 1

⁴¹³ Joseph of Thebes 1; N 211

⁴¹⁴ Rufus 2; so also Cassian 5, Pambo 3, cf. Mark, disciple of Silouan 2; N 72

though his pen had not finished the ω he had begun.⁴¹⁵ There is also John Kolobos, commanded by his *abba* to water a stick in the desert for three years, at the end of which, according to Cassian, the *abba* simply went and threw it away.⁴¹⁶ Or of the man who would be a monk, ordered to throw his own son into a river--on his way a monk stops him, saying that the *abba* had ordered him not to.⁴¹⁷ The disciple's role is not to question or to deviate, but simply to obey, and yet his obedience must be *voluntary*.⁴¹⁸ In this way he rejects even a naturally good capacity for discernment in order to fully renounce his own will.⁴¹⁹

Obedience occupies a curious position in *AP* and related literature. Certainly, its importance for beginners should not be taken to mean that *abbas* are exempt.⁴²⁰ While Gould, for example, would argue that the demands of obedience 'apply principally to beginners', he admits that a number of sayings reveal an attitude wherein 'Submission of one's own will to another is seen as something of value in itself and not only a means to an end which can be set aside.'⁴²¹ A story of Zacharias directly affirms obedience for the more advanced. Zacharias has a vision and asks his *abba* if it comes from God. His *abba*, being yet a $\pi\rho\alpha\kappa\tau\iota\kappa\acute{o}\varsigma$ and not able to adjudge ἀκριβῆς περὶ τὰύτα, beats him and says it is from the demons. But the vision persists and Zacharias discovers an *abba* with great gifts, who not only tells him what happened but assures him that 'the $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$ is from God.' But, the old man continues, 'Go, be obedient to your father.'⁴²² Obedience (ὕπακοή) in this story supplants even $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$ as the work of a monk, and Zacharias' return echoes Rufus' claim that obedience alone completes a monk's renunciation.

While obedience delineates the relationship of disciple and *abba*, it also operates in coenobitic contexts. Amma Synclitica argues that obedience is *most* necessary in coenobitic contexts—there it does not simply supplant (as in the story of the would-be Abraham above) but actually *expresses* the great desert virtue of διάκρσις.⁴²³ Poemen tells one novice to be prepared, because he will not be 'free' even to

⁴¹⁵ Mark, Disciple of Silouan 1

⁴¹⁶ John Cassian, *Institutes*, 4.24. Cf. John Kolobos 1, which relates that the stick blossoms and bears fruit and the *abba* takes it to the brethren, telling them to 'taste the fruit of obedience.' The miracle expresses the interior value of obedience—the effect it worked in John's soul. But Cassian's version is more likely the primitive one—as Owen Chadwick (*John Cassian*, 20-22) notes, he would not likely have excised the miracle if he knew of it.

⁴¹⁷ Sisoës 10; also N 295; the stories are clearly modeled on Gen 22.1-18. Cf. Saius 1.

⁴¹⁸ So Isaac, Priest of Kellia 2

⁴¹⁹ Hausherr points, though, that the 'astonishing things' which *abbas* might command does not imply an actual moral responsibility which removes any ethical obligation from the disciple (*Spiritual Direction*, 199-203).

⁴²⁰ See, e.g., Isaiah 2-3

⁴²¹ Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 52-53; his discussion of the *abba*-disciple relationship is also valuable (53-58).

⁴²² Zacharias 4

⁴²³ Synclitica 17; see on this Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction*, 204-05.

drink a cup of wine in the monastery.⁴²⁴ Nilus of Ancyra (d. 430), writing in all probability for monks over which he was abbot, put it thus:

When such teachers [as Moses] are found, they require disciples who deny themselves (cf. Mat. 16.24) and their wills, who conduct themselves like a body whose soul has departed or like material submitted to a craftsman. This is so that, just as a soul operates as it wishes in a body and the body resists in no way; or as a craftsman shows his art in material, and the material offers no resistance to the purpose of his craft; so also the teacher operates the faith of virtue in his disciples, having them obedient and contradicting him in nothing.⁴²⁵

Nilus' formulation of obedience as a kind of death is important, though relatively unique in Desert literature. In all places, though, obedience was, as Hausherr notes, the means of cutting off one's own will and, thereby, of attaining perfection: 'The essential interest in salvation and perfection demands the death of this perceptible attachment to self which is called one's own will.'⁴²⁶

Judge not, lest you be judged

A refusal to judge others emerges also as a principle of monastic community directly related to self-denial, obedience, and the various 'deaths to self' and others. Moses the Ethiopian and Pior both protested against judgment, even when sanctioned by the community. To various councils of judgment each came with a bag of sand on his back, and a hole punched in the bottom: 'My sins pour out behind me and I do not see them; and I have come today to judge the sins of another!'⁴²⁷ Moses' point, as Gould notes, is that 'God alone is the true judge. For a human being to judge is to appropriate a divine function, and this...is always an act of presumption and pride.'⁴²⁸ Instead, focused wholeheartedly on their own impending judgment by God, monastics turned that capacity inward, and 'judged' themselves—without, however, passing verdict. Joseph of Panephrisis, asked how to become a monk, responded, 'If you wish to find rest both here and there, in every action say "Who am I?" And judge no one.'⁴²⁹ The refusal to judge another required the self-interrogation demanded by the prospect of death and judgment.⁴³⁰ Indeed, as Euprepus noted, only when one refuses to judge others does the 'fear of God' dwell in the

⁴²⁴ Poemen 152; cf. 103, Syncretica 16; N 245

⁴²⁵ Nilus of Ancyra, ΛΟΓΟΣ ΑΣΚΗΤΙΚΟΣ (*Philokalia* 1:214)

⁴²⁶ Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction*, 205

⁴²⁷ Moses the Ethiopian 2; Pior 3

⁴²⁸ Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 125

⁴²⁹ Joseph of Panephrisis 2; also Moses the Ethiopian 16, Poemen 99; cf. Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 130

⁴³⁰ See especially PS 241 [Mioni 10], Poemen 64, and Diadochus, *Capita*, 23

soul.⁴³¹ For Abba Moses, this refusal to judge constitutes the essence of ‘dying to one’s neighbour.’⁴³² In this regard, the ‘death’ can be quite visceral: one should not even trust one’s senses, if it means condemning another.⁴³³ However, beyond death, the refusal to judge could have an almost deifying effect. It was said of Macarius the Great that ‘he became as it is written an “earthly god,”⁴³⁴ for just as God covers the world, so Abba Macarius covered defects, which he saw as though not seeing and heard as though not hearing.’⁴³⁵

Conclusion

In this section I have shown that among the Desert Fathers a vocabulary of death emerges by which they were able to describe important practices and ideals of asceticism. The ideas at which Antony’s ‘daily dying’ hinted are here more fully formed. Monks are called to ‘die’ both to themselves and to their neighbours. Death to oneself means especially achieving the tranquillity of ἀπαθεία which means that the monk has severed attachments not only to transitory goods and pleasures, but to his own ego. Death to one’s neighbour operates in conjunction with death to oneself, because it refers to the severance of conventional or sanguinary relationships and the cultivation of a spiritual community. The unity in which brothers dwell arises directly from the tranquillity with which they approach relationships.

While the Desert Fathers begin to deploy a vocabulary of ‘death’, they only seldom suggest *how* one might attain to such tranquil unity as ‘death’ suggests. However, at various points in the literature, certain practices are connected in one way or another to death, and I have argued that by means of these one achieves the kind of state to which ‘death’ refers in this literature. Foremost among them is the ‘cutting-off,’ ‘denial,’ or ‘abandonment’ of one’s own will. For most the will lies at the very centre of a person and its denial means a complete renunciation of oneself—ego, rights, desires, everything goes with the will. Evagrius suggests a similar sort of self-denial as regards the intellectual capacity. In both cases, though, one denies what is one’s own to find what God gives instead—a unified θέλημα attuned

⁴³¹ Euprepius 5; so Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 88-92

⁴³² Moses the Ethiopian 14, 20

⁴³³ Alonius 4, Elias 4, Mark disciple of Silouan 2, Poemen 113-114

⁴³⁴ Referring, interestingly, to *Constitutiones Apostolorum* 2.26, where ‘ἐπίγειος θεός μετὰ Θεὸν’ refers to the ἐπίσκοπος, ‘ὅς

ὀφείλει τῆς παρ’ ὑμῶν τιμῆς ἀπολαύειν.’

⁴³⁵ Macarius the Great 32

to God's will, or the uniquely image-less θεωρία of God. Obedience is often presented as the means to a life of self-denial. Obedience concretizes the idea of abandoning one's own will by submitting to whatever one's *abba* (or abbot) demands. While obedience is particularly important for beginners, it is a life-long activity by means of which one continually renounces one's own will. Lastly, the virtue of non-judgment, predicated as it is on contemplation of God's judgment, allows for the cultivation of monastic community. This is the ideal of 'dying to one's neighbour' and it plays out especially in the refusal to judge one's neighbour. While the denial of one's own will is not generally presented in the language of death, its effect is just as complete, and obedience is at times presented as a kind of 'death.' Likewise, sayings of Poemen and Anoub claim that only by reckoning oneself as dead can one avoid judging others. These various crucial virtues begin to mingle with language of death and are very often predicated on the memory of death and judgment as well as a conception of asceticism as conscious self-denial.

IV. AMBIVALENCE

I have so far laid out evidence that the Desert Fathers utilized the memory of death and judgment. I have argued that this utilization was predicated on a perceived opposition between the present life and the age to come. And I have shown that there emerged in Desert literature a conscious deployment of the language of 'death' to describe ascetic lifestyles and ideals. I must now show the rougher edges of these claims. The sayings associated with certain *abba's*—especially Poemen, Moses the Ethiopian, Arsenius, and Theophilus—assign a significant role to the language and symbols of death, others, such as those of Abraham and Sisoës, suggest the opposite. Between these extremes, sayings accrued to men like Macarius the Great which militate in both directions. If we were attempting to reconstruct a 'theology of Abba Moses' or a 'theology of Evagrius', we might say that, so far as one or the other is concerned, the assumptions and ideals which underlie the utilization of death meet with certain and specific responses. However, we are not concerned with analyzing Desert literature into its constituent *logia* to discover what the *abba's* 'really thought.'⁴³⁶ We read these sayings, homilies, and gnomic material as they have been collected and as they would have been read together by monks like Climacus. In such collections systematic homogeneity did not feature as a criterion for inclusion. Rather, as Jean-Claude Guy writes, 'Chaque monastère possédait son *Patérimon*, et le problème de la conformité de cet exemplaire avec un texte original ne se posait évidemment pas. La qualité du *Patérimon* devait plutôt être jugée à la mesure de sa « richesse », c'est-à-dire du nombre de « paroles édifiantes » ou de récits qu'il avait pu recueillir.'⁴³⁷ With these polyphonous—sometimes cacophonous—voices singing together, we find that the various polyvalent tendencies in Desert literature do not allow us to re-construct some systematic 'theology of death.' Rather, we must speak of currents of optimism and ambivalence with which various authors deployed or reacted against the language of death.

⁴³⁶ Likely a fruitless endeavour anyway, given the amount of literary working that went into the collections of sayings, lives, and travelogues. On which see Guy, J.-C., 'Remarques sur le texte des *Apophthegmata Patrum*', *Recherches de science religieuse* 63 (1955), 252-58; Regnault, Lucien, 'La Transmission des Apophthegmes', in his *Les Pères du Désert à travers leur Apophthegmes* (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre de Solesmes, 1987), 67-69, 70-72; Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford: OUP, 1978), 9-18, 32-55; Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 128, 145; Rubenson, 'Origen in the Egyptian Monastic Tradition', 319-338. Pace Gould, *The Desert Fathers*, 25 and Harmless, 'Remembering Poemen Remembering', 483-518.

⁴³⁷ Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque*, 232-33

The Dangers of Remembering Judgment

As we have seen, many sayings advocate the meditation on death and judgment, and very often do so in terms of the punishments which sinners expect. Generally, then, memory of judgment implies and cultivates a close awareness of one's own sins as well as a fear of the destiny toward which sins draw one. However, for some these two implications are problematic. For example, the saying of Abba Sisoes discussed above betrays his misgivings about meditation on punishment. When the brothers told him of their fear of punishment, Sisoes responded, 'You are blessed, my brothers. I envy you. The first of you spoke of the fiery river, the second of Tartarus, and the third of darkness. Now, if your mind masters such memory, it is impossible for you to sin.'⁴³⁸ Yet, he continues, 'What shall I do, hard-hearted as I am, not being granted to know, even if there will be punishment for people [μὴ συγχωρούμενος εἰδέναι ὅτι κἄν ἐστι κόλασις τοῖς ἀνθρώποις]; and from this I sin each hour.' Sisoes says this, Graham Gould argues, to help his visitors 'to see their fears in a different, more positive light, perhaps even as a source of faith and hope.'⁴³⁹ His ironic tone suggests, further, that the practices to which these brothers had given themselves were not as helpful as they thought. The paralyzing effect of meditation on punishment stands in stark contrast to Sisoes' own calm. Rather than blessing their activity, Sisoes, by questioning whether there will even be such a thing as punishment, throws his visitors back on his own hope in God's mercy, saying 'I do not remember any of these things; for I hope that God, being merciful, will "show mercy to me" (cf. Luk 1.58, etc.)' Perhaps Sisoes would have been placated by the corrective, discussed above, of remembering salvation, but it is not certain.

On a deeper level, neither Evagrius nor Mark the Monk emphasized the 'memory of death', (though both allow for it⁴⁴⁰) because they mistrusted the faculty of memory. The problem arises from the the close awareness of one's own sins required by contemplation of judgment. Memory often conjures up images and ideas which simply re-ignite the very passions which one hoped to uproot. For Evagrius, while memory is a natural faculty⁴⁴¹ and not inherently passionate⁴⁴² it retains the 'impressions' of passions left there. The demons call up these impressions to tempt and to distract from prayer.⁴⁴³ So,

⁴³⁸ Sisoes 19

⁴³⁹ Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 64-5

⁴⁴⁰ See Notes 290 and 291 for references.

⁴⁴¹ *Oratione* 36, 67, 93

⁴⁴² *Practicus* 12, 34

⁴⁴³ *Cogitationibus* (recensio fusius) 2, 4, 9, 11, 35, 37, 41

while Evagrius may not despise the memory, he certainly does not trust it.⁴⁴⁴ The same could be said for Mark the Monk, who sees the same terrible power at work in *πρόληψις* or 'prepossession.'⁴⁴⁵ Kallistos Ware defines *πρόληψις* as 'the involuntary presence of former sins in the memory' which 'predisposes a man to yield to particular temptations.'⁴⁴⁶ For these influential thinkers, then, the power of memory is as dangerous as it might be effective.

Opposition of Ages

For certain *abbas*, such as Macarius the Great, the opposition of ages could be amplified to a conception of the ascetic life as a kind of complete freedom from the world. Thus it was not enough simply to flee from cities,⁴⁴⁷ but from desires and regrets—especially those related to marriage and sex.⁴⁴⁸ For some of the Desert Fathers, then, their conception of renunciation was so totalizing as to be a kind of alternative universe. A tale told by Macarius the Great powerfully illustrates the deep calling of freedom from the world. Asked for a word, he responds, 'I have not yet become a monk. But I have seen monks.' He then tells how, having wandered into the far desert, he found an oasis and saw there two naked men whom he believed at first to be 'spirits.' They placate his fear, though, and the conversation runs thus:

'We are from a coenobium, and found concord together, so we came hither. Behold, [we have been here] for forty years!' One was Egyptian and the other Libyan. And they asked me [Macarius] saying, 'How is the world? Does the water rise seasonably? And does the world have its prosperity?' And I said to them, 'Yes.' And I asked, 'How can I become a monk?' And they replied, 'If you do not renounce all that is in the world, you cannot become a monk.' I said, 'I am weak, and I cannot be like you.' They responded, 'If you cannot be like us, sit in your cell and weep for your sins.' And I asked them, 'When winter comes, are you not cold? And when summer comes, do not your bodies burn?' And they said, 'God has ordained this for us, and neither do we freeze in winter nor does the summer heat harm us.'⁴⁴⁹

Macarius saw in those monks the profundity of total renunciation—not only goods and family, but clothes and concern for health, accepting only God's provision,⁴⁵⁰ to be unaware of whether or not the

⁴⁴⁴ So Brakke, *Demons and the Monk*, 64

⁴⁴⁵ *Operibus* 151-52 and *Ad Nicolaum* 10

⁴⁴⁶ *Philokalia*, ET vol. 1, 367

⁴⁴⁷ Arsenius 1-2, John the Eunuch 3; Longinus 1; Poemen 59,

⁴⁴⁸ E.g., John Kolobos 16, Zacharias 2, Cyrus 1, Olympias 2, Sisoës 3, Paphnutius 4; N 186

⁴⁴⁹ Macarius 2

⁴⁵⁰ Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 223-24 (commenting on Poemen 146). Cf. *HM* 1.46; *PS* 85; see also Mark the Monk, *De Lege*, 110, 158, 159.

Nile floods—a thing unimaginable for an Egyptian.⁴⁵¹ The sight, Burton-Christie says, ‘spoke to his deepest aspirations and to those of all the monks—to live an unfettered, graced existence, as their ancestors in paradise had done before them.’⁴⁵²

Crucially though, that Macarius could not actually attain the state for which he longed. He admitted his weakness, choosing to return to the monastic life and accomplish a far less impressive task: to repent like any other monk, weeping for his sins.⁴⁵³ The discontinuity between ideal and reality to which Macarius’ tale speaks is echoed also in *HL*. There, Macarius visits a coenobium, performing such acts of austerity that he is dubbed a ‘fleshless man’ and sent away. Yet his next story details his failed attempt to keep his thoughts in heaven with the angels, in which he succeeded only for two days before having to return to earth.⁴⁵⁴ For Macarius, the opposition of now and later, earth and heaven, is absolute, and he strives to live entirely in the next age—but he cannot. The opposition of ages cannot be so amplified as to become absolute; rather, the monk lives in a kind of frontier between the two.

The problematic ideal of ἀπαθεία

I have argued that ‘death to self’ meant especially the cultivation of tranquillity and ἀπαθεία. If, however, we are to speak of ἀπάθεια among the Desert Fathers, we must bear in mind Abba Abraham’s admonition to a monk who thought that he had eradicated the πάθη. He reminds this monk that, in fact, if he saw a woman or money or anything else he would not fail to notice but that he would ‘fight with his thought.’ And so, Abraham concludes, ‘The passions live, but they are fettered by the saints.’⁴⁵⁵ The monk’s claim to a complete ἀπαθεία amounted to foolish self-deception. Even Abba Joseph’s joyful statement that ‘I am a king today, for I rule over the passions,’ implies that he does not rule them *every* day. David Brakke thus concludes that, while no single view emerges on the possibility and meaning of ἀπάθεια, ‘The monks are fundamentally “resisters.”’⁴⁵⁶ Their combat continues because passions always return and temptation always waits. As a saying of Antony says, ‘This is the great work of a person, to put his errors before himself in God’s sight, and to expect temptation until his last breath.’⁴⁵⁷ A saying of

⁴⁵¹ See also *HM* Prol.6

⁴⁵² Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 232-33

⁴⁵³ See also *PS* 110

⁴⁵⁴ *HL* 18.15-18

⁴⁵⁵ Abraham 1

⁴⁵⁶ Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*, 151-52

⁴⁵⁷ Antony 4

Poemen illustrates the fundamental opposition to the optimism of ἀπαθεία. Although Poemen is a name we have seen heavily associated with the ideal of being ‘dead’, he is nevertheless sensitive to the needs of his fellow ‘resisters,’ and this saying suggests a very different view of life. A young monk struggled with the λογισμός of πορνεία, and asked Abba Ibistion for advice. Ibistion told him cast the thought away. The monk, certainly discouraged by such austerity, went to Poemen who told him, ‘Abba Ibistion’s works are above with the angels, and it escapes him that you and I are in fornication.’⁴⁵⁸ It is well to be in heaven, but there one is not much of an *abba*, and, even if some can attain such ἀπαθεία as to brush aside λογισμοί, most cannot. We must wonder, then, since even Poemen the ‘dead man’ did not expect perfect freedom from temptation, just as even Macarius the Great could not stay in Paradise, to what extent the optimism implied being like the dead was well-received among the Desert Fathers.

In a different vein, even if monks claimed to be able to achieve tranquillity, and so to bear insults and praise alike, they maintained a very definite limit to the abuse they would suffer and to their avoidance of judgment: the accusation of heresy.⁴⁵⁹ This limit is instructive—the community must have a common conception of the theological and spiritual beliefs around which its constitutive relationships are constituted. Community requires non-judgment, self-humiliation, and, when necessary, the judgment to part from those who travel a different way. For example, Agathon was once tested by the brethren. He happily accepted every reproach offered, saying cheerfully that ‘Yes, yes, I have done that as well.’ Until the brethren called him a heretic. At that point he turned on them and said ‘I am not a heretic.’ They ask him why he accepted all but this last accusation and he says, ‘The first accusations I ascribe to myself; for it is beneficial to my soul. But heresy is separation from God, and I do not wish to be separated from God.’⁴⁶⁰ Heresy is not something which conduces to salvation. Rather, it constitutes the damnation which asceticism seeks to avoid. Thus, the criterion for forging relationship always comes back to the overriding desire for salvation. While the fissures which heresy necessitated might be cause for lamentation,⁴⁶¹ neither place⁴⁶² nor the demands of hospitality⁴⁶³, nor even the great appearance of

⁴⁵⁸ Poemen 62; cf. Poemen 8

⁴⁵⁹ Gould also notes the limit which one might find when staying with an *abba* means harm for one’s soul (for unspecified reasons): *Desert Fathers*, 107-112. This however, is much less clearly defined than the consistent boundary of heresy.

⁴⁶⁰ Agathon 5; the problem of heresy forms a great theme in *PS*: e.g., 10, 12, 26, 40, 46, 74, 144, 241

⁴⁶¹ *PS* 86

⁴⁶² Agathon 6, 23, Ammonas 5, Ammos 5, Joseph of Panephrisis 8, Poemen 18, 155, 159, 189

⁴⁶³ Poemen 78

sanctity,⁴⁶⁴ could overcome the ascetics' simple desire find life in Christ. The matter of heresy problematizes not only the possibility of complete tranquillity—which different assessments of ἀπαθεία would already question—but the universal value and validity of such tranquillity.

Conclusion

These few vignettes serve to illustrate the presence in Desert literature of countervailing lines of thought. The opposition to death rests not on a dislike of the language itself, but on a suspicion of the *optimism* which underlies its use in Desert literature. Can one or, indeed, should one, attain ἀπαθεία? Does one proceed by meditating on death and judgment, or by some other exercise? Must one live wholly 'on earth as though in heaven'? Is such a goal beneficial for others, let alone possible for oneself? Different Fathers answered these questions in different ways. Certainly the ways in which Desert Fathers praised practices of 'death' recall the optimistic picture of the all-forgiving and all-loving monk painted by VA's Antony and his 'daily dying.' Those Fathers who react against language of 'death' are likely reacting more especially against what they perceived as undue optimism, or even self-deception. The memory and practice of death emerge in Desert literature as important but contested means of cultivating and communicating the whole ascetic life.

⁴⁶⁴ PS 106; of which Henry Chadwick ('John Moschus and his Friend Sophronius', 57) remarks, 'Moschus felt no less passionately than Sophronius about the truth of the Christological definition of Chalcedon. To be in error on so cardinal a matter was to fail in all.'

3. THE GREAT OLD MEN OF GAZA

Ἐὰν ἴδῃς βίον ἀνδρὸς ἐν μέσῳ θανάτου καὶ ζωῆς ἐνδεικνύμενον, μήτε παντελῶς πρὸς τὸν θάνατον τετραμμένον, μήτε ὅλῳ τῷ ποδὶ ἐπὶ τῆς ζωῆς βεβηκότα, ἀλλ' ἐν οἷς μὲν σαρκὸς ζωὴ δοκιμάζεται τοῖς νεκροῖς ἐναρίθμιον, πρὸς δὲ τὰ τῆς ἀρετῆς ἔργα, δι' ὧν οἱ «τῷ πνεύματι ζῶντες» ἐπιγινώσκονται, ἀληθῶς ἔμψυχον καὶ ἐνεργὸν καὶ ἰσχύοντα, πρὸς τοῦτον βλέπε τὸν κανόνα τοῦ βίου· τοῦτον τέθεικε σκοπὸν ὁ θεὸς τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ ζωῇ.

---Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virginitate* 23.6

By the sixth century, Gaza had become a thriving monastic centre. Asceticism bourgeoned in Palestine from the fourth century onward, beginning with Hilarion at Gaza and Chariton in the Judean desert, and its development organizationally and theologically took in influences from Egypt, Cappadocia, and Syria. Egypt, or, rather, an interpretation—a literary memory—of Egypt, was built up in Palestine in the fifth century in *AP*, *HL*, and other literature. However, this mythic Egyptian past was blended with adherence to Basil of Caesarea’s ascetic teachings and the spirituality of Palestine’s own great founding fathers as it played out through controversies surrounding the Council of Chalcedon (451) and a resurgence of ‘Origenism’ and its condemnation at the Council of Constantinople (553).⁴⁶⁵ Monastic spirituality flourished in Judaea at the *Lavras* founded by Euthymius (d. 473) and Saba (d. 532). And in Gaza developments in ascetic theology come particularly from the monophysites Abba Isaiah (d. 491), his disciple Peter the Iberian (d. 489). Isaiah’s thought would be formative for his Chalcedonian successors, the abbot Seridos and the two Great Old Men who lived in seclusion at his monastery near Thawatha: Barsanuphius, the Great Old Man; and John the Prophet. These men—Isaiah, Barsanuphius, John, and their disciple Dorotheus—form what is sometimes called the ‘Gaza School.’

This ‘school’ crafted its own vision of ascetic life through creative interpretation and elaboration of the literature surveyed in Chapter Two. All the Gaza Fathers owe much to *AP*, as well as to Mark the Monk, and Basil of Caesarea.⁴⁶⁶ They take up the apophthegmatic tradition but adapt it to their own rather diversified milieu—a *lavra* which housed and was quite often run by hermits⁴⁶⁷--and write in different genres: Isaiah and Dorotheus both wrote homilies, and Barsanuphius and John wrote only letters. Of these last two François Neyt remarks that their their correspondence ‘reflète admirablement la maturité religieuse qui régnait dans ca monastère; elle assume aussi le meilleur des traditions monastique

⁴⁶⁵ On the formative influence of Christological and ecclesial controversies in these years, see especially Binns, *Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ*, 56-78; and Hömbargen, Daniel, *The Second Origenist Controversy: A New Perspective on Cyril of Scythopolis’ Monastic Biographies as Historical Sources for Sixth-Century Origenism*, *Studia Anselmiana* 132 (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 2001).

⁴⁶⁶ Neyt, François and de Angelis-Noah, Paula, ‘Introduction’, *Correspondance*, II.1:68-126; John Chryssavgis notes particularly the influence of the *Apophthegmata*, cataloguing over eighty references in *QR* and fifty-five in Dorotheus’ works.. See ‘Introduction’, to his ET of *QR*, *Barsanuphius*, 1:10-12.

⁴⁶⁷ See on the monastic structure at Maiuma (Isaiah’s monastery) and Thawatha (Seridos’ monastery) Hirschfeld, Yizhar, *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1992); and also his ‘The Monasteries of Gaza: An Archaeological Review’, in *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity*, 61-88; cf. Havelone-Harper, *Disciples*, 32-36

égyptiennes, sans oublier les écrits des grand Cappadociens et la littérature monastique de l'époque.⁴⁶⁸ Barsanuphius and John represent the efflorescence of the Chalcedonian, anti-Origenist strands of Palestinian ascetic thought. Their work would be influential for centuries of Byzantine ascetics, and Climacus' own reliance on texts like *AP* often runs through Gaza's readings and, especially, the ideas deployed by Barsanuphius and John.

In this chapter I will first demonstrate that the Great Old Men elaborate and nuance the now-standard memory of death and judgment. I then argue that they take up 'opposition of ages' opened up in Desert literature and couple it with an important sense of continuity—hearkening back to *VA*'s visions of life and death. I will then explore Barsanuphius' particular emphasis on death as limit. Next I will demonstrate that the language of 'death' which first emerged in Desert literature becomes, for the Old Men, a normative means of describing the ascetic life which touches all aspects of renunciation. Finally, I will argue that 'death' and, especially the 'corpse' retain important ambiguities in Gazan thought, and conclude that asceticism as 'death' must be understood within parameters of imitation and response to Christ's death.

⁴⁶⁸ Neyt and de Angelis-Noah, 'Introduction', *Correspondance*, I.1: 20

I. THE MEMORY OF DEATH AND THE VIRTUE OF TEARS

Like those before them, the writers of the Gaza school laud the memory of death. In keeping with tradition, they describe this memory in terms of the contemplation of the nearness of death;⁴⁶⁹ and the contemplation of post-mortem judgment.⁴⁷⁰ Very commonly the Great Old Men connect mortality and judgment within the same conceptual space. Barsanuphius writes succinctly:

The approach [παρουσία] of death strengthens your thinking, for it is hidden [κεκρυμμένη] from every person. Let us hasten, therefore, to do good before we are seized by death—for we do not know in which day the call comes—lest we be found unprepared and dismissed with the five foolish virgins (cf. Mat 25.1-13)...Let us do what we can in our infirmity, and the Master of all is good and will lead us with the five wise virgins into his bridal chamber to unspeakable joy with Christ. Amen.⁴⁷¹

Contemplation of mortality requires the monk to acknowledge that his life is uncertain—meted out day by day, as Antony the Great saw. Uncertain yet inexorable death gives way to an eschatological judgment based on one's actions and choices in life spurs the monk toward good works now. In this regard the Gaza fathers utilize the memory of death in ways perfectly consonant with the tradition emerging from VA and Desert literature.

Expanding on an Inheritance

Nevertheless, the Old Men—John in particular—crucially nuance the *content* of the memory of death. While Barsanuphius often connects the memory of mortality with that of judgment, John separates them in an interesting way. To a layman concerned with attacks of the passions sparked even by a glance at another person he says,

You ought to remember also the corruption and the stench of our nature, how we are entering the graves. But why give you a word about corruptible things? Don't you think rather to put the coming fearful judgment of God before your eyes? And where will the inheritance of those who do these [sinful] things be found? And how will you escape that great shame of the revelation of our actions before the angels and archangels and all people—before the just judge? And how will the mouth of those doing these deeds be stopped?⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁹ QR, 37, 92, 94, 98, 99, 123, 517-518, 785, 789 (quoting Sira 7.36), etc.

⁴⁷⁰ QR, 57, 77, 138, 208, 242, 271, 379, 428, 446 (where it is advised together with the 'Jesus prayer'), 454, 464 (citing John Chrysostom, *In Matthaëum* 82.4-5), 553, 569, 574, 685, 690, etc.

⁴⁷¹ QR, 617; so also 20, 96, 232, 256-59, 346, 790. Barsanuphius and John often use the virgins as an eschatological example: e.g., 37, 201, 638, 659.

⁴⁷² QR, 659

The memory of mortality, though helpful, is far less valuable than the memory of the judgment which follows death. Certainly, as a guard against passionate relationships with other people, a recollection of putrefaction may be helpful. But that misses the point—rather one flees passions because they expel a person from heavenly inheritance. Though he denigrates it here somewhat, John is actually *contextualizing* the memory of mortality. Contemplation of limited and uncertain existence *must* function within an expectation that mortal life gives way to an ethically divided eschatological existence. Barsanuphius offers much the same advice. He even catches himself mid-sentence and switches abruptly from reminding John of Beersheeba about passing troubles to talking about ‘more fearful things, whether in heaven or in earth.’ He then says simply, ‘Place God and judgment before your eyes, and keep in mind that we have only a little time in the world.’⁴⁷³ He does not denigrate contemplation of mortality but, rather, the troubles of life which are bounded by mortality—the fact of death allows Barsanuphius to adjust his correspondent’s focus toward eternal matters. Here also contemplation of mortality as an end of transient matters naturally leads to contemplation of the eternal realities to which physical death provides an entrance, and those realities are immediately conditioned by the fact of divine judgment.

Barsanuphius offers another sort of corrective with regard to the *mode* of remembering. Barsanuphius shows himself cognizant of the misgivings expressed by Evagrius and Mark the Monk, that too specific contemplation of sins simply rekindles old passions: ‘Compunction [κατάνυξις] comes to a person from unceasing remembrance. Thus, when he prays, the one praying ought to bring into his own memory [εις την ιδίαν μνήμην] all his deeds, and how those doing such things will be judged, and the fearful voice saying “Depart from me you cursed ones unto the eternal fire” [Mat 25.41], and all the rest.’⁴⁷⁴ Well and good, one should remember one’s deeds—presumably one’s sins—in context of God’s judgment of sinners and with a suitable fear of condemnation. However, he goes on, one must be careful just how one brings all these sins to mind: ‘I say memory of sins, not each and individual—lest by intruding the adversary lead in other shamefulness—but, rather, simply remembering that we are debtors to sin.’ One must be careful to keep memory of sins general while, it seems, imagining God’s judgment rather specifically—so far as considering his fearful voice and the (admittedly scriptural) words with which God condemns sinners. Of course, John later tells Aelianus—then a layman, later Seridos’ successor as abbot—who had fallen into despair from terror of eternal punishment, that having faith

⁴⁷³ QR, 20

⁴⁷⁴ QR 428

means giving oneself to God. And, since God is merciful, one should never fear too strongly eternal punishments.⁴⁷⁵ Memory of judgment and death must be measured, careful to avoid passionate intrusions as well as despair. One contemplates judgment so as to desire all the more God's mercy, and one does so in hope also of God's mercy.

In a fascinating exchange of letters with a 'Christ-loving layperson', John also nuances the efficacy of contemplation of death in terms of freedom and constraint. If someone is told that he will die the next day and on that account changes his ways, he is saved 'as though constrained.' Why? Because when someone sees death at hand, he will 'give up his deeds in accordance with necessity.' Rather, if someone is to be saved 'freely', he must consider that he will live for a long time and if he can still do good then he has done so by choice and not constraint.⁴⁷⁶ The layperson is confused and so John first explains that salvation 'by constraint' is better than none, but not as good as one freely chosen. He then reminds the layman of the five foolish virgins, deploying the image in much the same way as quoted above.⁴⁷⁷ The laymen, now thoroughly confused, asks 'If then someone reminds his soul about death [Ἐὰν οὖν τις ὑπομιμνήσκη τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ περὶ θανάτου] and through this he hastens to do good, is this not rewarded as something voluntary [ἐκούσιος]?' John responds by making an important distinction: the memory of death 'is good, so that someone learn he is mortal and a mortal is not eternal and not being eternal he will involuntarily leave this age. From the unremitting memory of death he learns to do good freely [κατὰ προαίρεσιν].' But, John explains, if someone attempts a death-bed repentance, this is hardly 'freely chosen' since death really is waiting then.⁴⁷⁸ The freedom lies, in fact, in the choice to memorialize death and to imagine it being near when, in fact, it may be a long way off—to freely put oneself in a constraining situation teaches one to do good freely. Memory of death is, as for the Desert Fathers, a very good tool, especially for beginners.

Barsanuphius and John also begin to elaborate a wider index of virtues toward which the memory of death aids progress, and explicitly draw into the circle of its practice virtues which thus far have remained at the edge. The memory of death certainly retains in Gaza the efficacy it was always

⁴⁷⁵ QR, 574; see also, e.g., 91

⁴⁷⁶ QR, 637: Ἐὰν εἶπω σοι ὅτι ἀποθνήσκεις, ὡς βεβιασμένη γίνεται ἡ σωτηρία σου. Βλέπων γὰρ ἑαυτὸν εἰς τὸ στόμα τοῦ θανάτου, ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην ῥίπτεις σου τὰ πράγματα. Ἐὰν δὲ προσδοκᾷς ζῆσαι ἔτι πολὺν χρόνον καὶ ἔλθῃ σοι λογισμὸς τοῦ σωθῆναι καὶ τάξης οὕτως τὸν λογισμὸν σου εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν, κἂν ἀποθάνῃς εὐθέως, κατὰ προαίρεσιν εὐρίσκεται σοι ἡ σωτηρία καὶ οὐ βεβιασμένη.

⁴⁷⁷ QR, 638

⁴⁷⁸ QR, 639; cf. 790

thought to have for beginners. The contemplation of mortality and the fear of judgment certainly assist in turning away from sinful habits.⁴⁷⁹ Moreover, in keeping with ideas found already in *VA* and in some Desert literature, Barsanuphius and John, recommend the practice for inculcating various other virtues. First, the memory of judgment (tempered, of course, with God's mercy) breeds endurance while the memory of death as mortality comforts those who find themselves in affliction.⁴⁸⁰ Elsewhere, Barsanuphius implies that memory of judgment aids in procuring 'humility, obedience, subjection.'⁴⁸¹ The fact of future judgment appears to help frighten those who have been lazy or are wounded into action and the attainment of better virtues than they have hitherto found.⁴⁸² In this regard it is unclear whether the memory of death and judgment is purely a preliminary or remedial tool or whether it holds a place even among the higher virtues like humility and love.⁴⁸³ It seems that the memory of judgment provides the perspective necessary to develop all the virtues. It may not itself be a virtue and it may not directly inculcate any save fear of sin and willingness to endure suffering, but those two virtues are necessary for procuring all others. I will return below to the value of endurance for Barsanuphius and John.

Tears, Detachment, and our Proper State

We have seen how, for Poemen especially, tears represent a penitential way of life for ascetics. Barsanuphius and John take up and expand that way of thinking. For example, Barsanuphius comforts a confused monk who has, somehow or another, been insatiably reading Origen and Evagrius, that it is not concerning such speculative matters as they describe that he will give account. Instead, he ought to 'weep and mourn.'⁴⁸⁴ Speculative theology as Origen or Evagrius may have conceived it holds no

⁴⁷⁹ See, e.g., *QR*, 689. Here John even paraphrases the classic topos of *Sira* 7.36 and says: 'Always fear death, for it must come to us. "Remember the hour of departure [Μνήσκου τῆς ὥρας τῆς ἐξόδου], and you will not sin unto God [εἰς Θεόν]."' *Sira* 7.36 reads: 'In all your words remember your end [τὰ ἔσχατα] and you will not sin unto the age [εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα].' Sirach's language refers to death but, for Christians, would have an eschatological ring, and so the change of language is entirely comprehensible.

⁴⁸⁰ See *QR*, 77 (on endurance in light of judgment and mercy) and 123 (in light of mortality)

⁴⁸¹ *QR*, 379

⁴⁸² Such is implied by the letter's subscript—it responds to a monk who has long delayed asking Barsanuphius for advice. Barsanuphius tells him that his wounds have become infected but that there is still time if he does not delay—death's 'seeds' are already in him but they can be cut off.

⁴⁸³ The latter may be implied by its inclusion in a list of salvific virtues as parenthetical to the constant memory of God in *QR* 271.

⁴⁸⁴ *QR* 604; on virtues of mourning see especially Müller, 'Die Tränen der Wüstenväter', 294-98; Hausherr, *Penthos*, 121-56.

particular virtue in Barsanuphius' opinion, though he is willing at times to engage in it.⁴⁸⁵ Tears, on the other hand, do.⁴⁸⁶ Along these lines, Jennifer L. Havelone-Harper describes Barsanuphius' style of spiritual direction as 'not allowing theological speculations to distract his disciples from their task of personal spiritual discipline', a description borne out by Barsanuphius' tendency to forcibly bring his correspondents back to their daily practice of virtues from the more ethereal spheres of controversial debates.⁴⁸⁷ Barsanuphius says that those who have found 'true weeping with compunction [ἀληθινὸς κλαυθμὸς ὁ μετὰ κατανύξεως]' that 'war no longer comes upon them' and later they 'are not at all bothered by war, whether among people or even prostitutes—it [weeping] is with us and fights [for us].'

Barsanuphius further eulogizes weeping thus:

It also wipes out former faults and washes away stains. And unceasingly it guards the man who has procured it with the name of God. And it banishes laughter and distraction and obtains unceasing mourning. For it is a shield repelling all the 'fiery darts of the Devil (cf. Eph 6.16).⁴⁸⁸

If you wish to wash all your pollutions, wash with tears, for these wash every stain completely away.'

Barsanuphius' language in these passages clearly connects the purificatory power of tears to baptism.⁴⁸⁹ In the first passage he has substituted κλαυθμὸς for Deutero-Paul's πίστις—mourning, Barsanuphius implies, has the potency of faith. The practice of mourning—so long as it resembles Paul's 'godly sorrow'⁴⁹⁰ was so fundamental that John refers to monks at one point simply as 'mourners [Οἱ πενθοῦντες].'⁴⁹¹ Godly mourning accompanies him at all times in the fight with demons, with vices, with temptations of speech or lust.

⁴⁸⁵ See Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *The Monastic School*, 99-106; and, as a corrective to their assessment of the Old Men as 'anti-intellectual', note QR, 137b, 'On the "ἦ"' which, according to the redactor is only a sampling of Barsanuphius' more speculative mediations. On 137b, see Angelis-Noah, P., 'La méditation de Barsanuphe sur la lettre Ἦτα', *Byzantion* 53:2 (1983), 494-506; cf. Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *The Monastic School*, 107-126.

⁴⁸⁶ E.g., QR 18, 48, 125, 340, 462 etc.

⁴⁸⁷ Havelone-Harper, 25-28 (quote from 26); cf. also QR 58, 693, 694, 695, 699-701. Barsanuphius and John alike attach less importance to doctrinal accuracy than, for example, Cyril of Scythopolis or John Moschos (both staunch Chalcedonian anti-Origenists); and more to obedience to God's commandments as mediated through one's spiritual father.

⁴⁸⁸ QR 461, cf. 257

⁴⁸⁹ QR, 148

⁴⁹⁰ QR, 574: 'Λοιπὸν ἀπόρριψον τὴν λύπην, ἥτις κατεργάζεται θάνατον, ἥ γὰρ κατὰ Θεὸν λύπη σωτηρίαν ἐργάζεται.'"

⁴⁹¹ QR, 618

Barsanuphius, like Poemen and others before him, founds mourning on the memory of judgment. He writes: 'Mourning washes a person from his sins, but it comes with labour, through much effort and endurance, and pondering the fearful judgment and eternal shame, and denying oneself.'⁴⁹² Moreover, John claims that those who mourn take no thought for temporal possessions—they see things in a different light and so recognize the unimportance of objects whose value and utility is bounded by death—including their own bodies.⁴⁹³ The monastic does not pamper his body, since it is destined for the dust.⁴⁹⁴ However, Barsanuphius writes elsewhere, neither should he hate his body as though it were alien. Rather, as a part of himself, albeit a mortal one destined for destruction, the body offers the monastic a instrument for cultivating virtue.⁴⁹⁵

Connecting weeping to detachment, John writes to someone concerning the Beatitudes, 'Mourn [Πένθησον] for your sins in this world so that you may be comforted with those things written in the Gospel.'⁴⁹⁶ John specifies that the weeping which leads to comfort concerns one's sins.⁴⁹⁷ In light of his dismissal of temporal goods (noted above), it seems likely that John has in mind eschatological comfort. John says in another letter, "'To rejoice with those who rejoice'" means to rejoice together with those establishing godly virtue and to be glad with them in the hope of good things to come. "'To weep with those who weep'" (Rom 12.15) is to suffer together the repentance from sin with those who sin.'⁴⁹⁸ One weeps, though, to be comforted through repentance regain one's hope of 'good things to come.' One does not hope for anything in this present life—rather, weeping, like the memory of death and judgment, nourishes a detachment predicated on the recognition not only of one's own mortality but of the transience of all present things and their conclusion in judgment. It precludes concern for passing things and even temptations because it demands a constant awareness of one's failures. Weeping for one's sins

⁴⁹² QR, 257

⁴⁹³ See also QR 241-242 (which draw on Bessarion 11); on which Chryssavgis, *Baransuphius*, 248 n109.

⁴⁹⁴ See, e.g., QR, 517 by John: 'Despise the body eaten by worms.'

⁴⁹⁵ QR, 517-18

⁴⁹⁶ QR, 627; I here follow Regnault's translation rather than Chryssavgis'. Chryssavgis takes the phrase τοῖς ἐγγεγραμμένοις τῷ Εὐαγγελίῳ to mean 'those whose names are written in the Gospel.' But this seems unlikely—rather, as with the other Beatitudes he discusses in QR 627, John has in mind the comforts promised by the Gospel.

⁴⁹⁷ As also in QR, 699

⁴⁹⁸ QR, 675: "'Τὸ χαίρειν μετὰ χαϊρόντων" ἔστί, τὸ συγχαίρειν τοῖς κατορθοῦσι τὴν κατὰ Θεὸν ἀρετὴν καὶ τὴν ἐλπίδι τῶν μελλόντων ἀγαθῶν εὐφραينوμένοις. "'Τὸ δὲ κλαίειν μετὰ κλαίωντων," τὸ συμπάσχειν τοῖς ἀμαρτάνουσιν ἐπὶ τῇ μετανοίᾳ τῆς ἀμαρτίας.'

cannot help but inculcate sobriety, humility, and with them patience and compassion for others: the monk who sees his own sins and weeps for them has put himself below the trajectory of demonic assault.

Conclusion

Barsanuphius and John both nuance the means and content of the memory of judgment and death, while ascribing to the practice a wider-ranging role than it found in either VA or the Desert Fathers. They begin from the traditional understanding that one recalls mortality so as to dwell on immortal things and to detach oneself from transient goods. Among things immortal they include God's judgment, and meditate on that directly in relation to their own sin. Certain dangers, as Evagrius and Mark had recognized, accompany specific recollection of sin. Thus the Old Men refer memory of judgment to a regular but general self-examination in light of God's commands, understood as the orders of one's spiritual father. The memory of death and judgment must also be undertaken when one feels oneself distant from death. Deathbed repentance is, as John points out, of little value to a God who desires his creatures to act freely—one freely chooses to hold death near even when it seems not to be, so as to willingly acquire virtue with all the urgency of constraint.

Memory of death and judgment thus inculcate multiple virtues. It not only helps monks turn from sin, but makes them more obedient, humble, submissive, and perseverant. Many of these virtues rest on a proper interpretation of the present world in relation to eternity. Memory of death and judgment therefore foster *detachment* above all, an attitude which, in keeping with the rigours of *renunciation*, keeps the world at arm's-length. With detachment goes a realization of how far one actually is from the life one wishes to live. In an extension of the spirituality associated with Abba Poemen, the monk learns through contemplation of death and especially judgment to mourn for his own sins—thereby becoming humble and non-judgmental. Tears guard him from further temptations, and his mind grows more accustomed to contemplating things eternal and spiritual. Moreover, tears signify repentance and humility. Tears, like the contemplation of death and judgment, emerge as a kind of practice, a way of life which seeks other goods: humility, endurance, repentance, self-accusation and non-judgment all manifest themselves in and through tears. This is why the Old Men lay such emphasis on procuring tears—not because weeping *is* virtue, but because it is conducive to and significant of, numerous fundamental virtues.

II. AGES IN OPPOSITION AND CONTINUITY

In this section, we return to the ‘opposition of ages’—a perception of the present life in light of eternity which, aided by remembrance of death and judgment, motivates renunciation and repentance. For the Gaza Fathers, the present life is a limited opportunity to seek beatitude, and while this age and the next present fundamentally opposed requirements for success, they are mediated by a proper use of worldly goods. Whether one becomes attached or remains detached from transitory goods, that relationship determines in the present one’s future destiny. We are, of course, not so very far from VA’s visions or the Desert’s call to repentance. However, I will also show that the spiritual relationship constitutes another type of continuity exists between between the ages. In all events, both opposition and continuity are mediated by death, and it is on that fact that we will especially focus.

Barsanuphius says:

In all these things remember that the world passes away, and its glory is fleeting and its enjoyment corruptible. Choose ‘to suffer ill with the people of God than to have fleeting pleasure from sin’ (Heb 11.25). And again, remember that we depart the world unwillingly and our life is not long. For what is the life of a person? Particularly since we do not have confidence in this life from morning to evening. Willingly let us give up worldly affairs, so that we may have our reward. Let us choose freedom from care [ἀμεριμνία] about earthly things, we who yearn to see the face of God, that we might be bold to say, “Bring my soul out of prison that I may confess your name” (Ps. 141.8 LXX).⁴⁹⁹

He argues that the transience of the present life and the hope of eternity not only make endurance of suffering *possible*, but actually demand that the monk willingly court suffering through renunciation. Detachment from the world and that all-encompassing ἀμεριμνία for which the monastic seeks, are themselves for the sake of something better—attachment to eternity. Throughout his correspondence with John of Beersheba,⁵⁰⁰ Barsanuphius sets out this opposition in cogent, programmatic terms. I will, therefore, outline his conception of the ‘opposition of ages’ primarily from QR 1-55. Although John has little to say about the ‘opposition of ages’, the few times where he raises it seem to correspond to what Barsanuphius dwells on at greater length.

⁴⁹⁹ QR 790

⁵⁰⁰ On John of Beersheba’s identity, see Perrone, Lorenzo, ‘La lettere a Giovanni di Beersheba nella corrispondenza di Barsanufio e Giovanni di Gaza’, in J. Mallet and A. Thibaut (eds), *Memorial Dom Jean Gribomont*, Studia Ephemeridis ‘Augustinianum’ 27 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum ‘Augustinianum’, 1988), 467 n. 7; and Neyt and de Angelis-Noah, ‘Introduction’, *Correspondance*, I.1:62. More recently, Havelone-Harper (*Disciples*, 38-44) argues persuasively for identifying John of Beersheba with John the Prophet and co-author of QR. I follow Havelone-Harper.

Opposition

Barsanuphius sets up two oppositions which are relevant for us. First he juxtaposes ‘affliction’ (θλίψις, πάθη) or ‘labour’ (κόπος) with ‘rest’ (κατάπαυσις, ἀνάπαυσις) or ‘stillness’ (ἡσυχία).⁵⁰¹ Barsanuphius at times speaks of ‘rest’ as eschatological (comparing it to the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’, as in 2) and at time assimilates it to John’s impending departure from his cenobium into a solitary cell (as in 6). While this may betray nothing more than sloppiness in Barsanuphius’ ascetic vocabulary, it seems more likely that he wishes to convey something of the eschatological value of a hermit’s life. Barsanuphius confirms this supposition later when he explicitly compares John’s enclosure to the resurrection and divine life promised by Christ in John’s Gospel.⁵⁰² The monk anticipates presently in his chosen mode of existence the eschatological hopes for which he struggles.

Second, Barsanuphius arbitrates between what is ‘passing’ (παρερχόμενα) and what is ‘more fearful’ (φοβέρα).⁵⁰³ In light of things more fearful, such as God and his judgment, ‘Why speak of the things of the world which are passing?’ Indeed, Barsanuphius reminds John, ‘we have only a little time in the world.’⁵⁰⁴ God and his judgment are more fearful precisely because they are *not* passing away. God is eternal and his judgment has everlasting consequences.⁵⁰⁵ If eternal, then more worthy of consideration, and so Barsanuphius effectively subordinates any ‘passing’ concerns to eternal, ‘fearful’, ones. In other correspondence, Barsanuphius sometimes expresses this same sentiment with a quotation of Romans 8.18 (‘For I do not consider the sufferings [τὰ παθήματα] of the present time worthy of the glory about to be revealed to us’) when encouraging his correspondent.⁵⁰⁶

Barsanuphius then combines these two oppositions into a single paraenetic framework for John (and his other correspondents). John had gone to Egypt to find work (ἐργόχειρον) and he and those with him had to spend a long time before they found any—and so, enduring ‘affliction and reversal [θλίψιν καὶ διαστροφὴν]’, they grew weary. Barsanuphius, we are told, prepared a letter in advance for John, filled with admonition and encouragement. Barsanuphius begins thus: ‘Why are you wearied with

⁵⁰¹ In *QR*, 2 (quoting 2 Cor 6.4-5, 12.10; Heb 4.1, Acts 14.22), 6, 9, 27. In 2, for example, Barsanuphius uses both terms for ‘rest’ interchangeably and in 6 and 9 he treats ‘σου ἀνάπαυσιν καὶ ἡσυχίαν’ as a hendiadys.

⁵⁰² *QR*, 36 (quoting Jn 5.25-26)

⁵⁰³ *QR*, 20; I have quoted this letter at greater length above.

⁵⁰⁴ *QR*, 20

⁵⁰⁵ Barsanuphius in his tirade against Origenism makes clear that he believes this to be the case—God does not plan a series of ‘judgments’ which he may later commute or alter. See 600: “Ὁ ἄν σπεύρης ἐνταῦθα, ἐκεῖ θερίζεις. Οὐκ ἐνι μετὰ τὴν ἄφιξιν τῶν ὧδε προκόψαι τινά.”

⁵⁰⁶ E.g., *QR*, 59, 90, and 122. John echoes Barsanuphius in 597 when he says ‘Τὰ γὰρ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου σκηνὴ ἐστὶ.’ He alludes, I think, to 2 Corinthians 5.1 or 5.4.

afflictions as a fleshly person [cf. 1 Cor 3.3], not hearing that afflictions are set before you, as also the spirit said to Paul and then encouraged those being with him in the ship to rejoice [cf. Acts 27.21-26, 33-36]?⁵⁰⁷ He goes on to remind John of the Psalmist's words that 'the afflictions of the righteous are many' (Ps 33.20) and of 'all the saints from the beginning' who, though good and loving to all, were received with hatred and mistrust—in perspective of Joseph's troubles or Paul's obstacles or Job's patience, difficulty finding work should not even wrinkle John's brow.

Barsanuphius' purpose is rather profounder than simply shaming John with examples greater than his own. He first explains how John *ought* to endure troubles: 'If we are righteous, let us be tested [δοκιμασθῶμεν] by afflictions; but if we are sinners, let us endure them as deserved. "For endurance fashions character" [Rom 5.4].' It is in this light that John should consider the saints of the ages—they were tried and shown to be saints precisely by their patient endurance of troubles. It was not, as Job's example must surely demonstrate, that the saints *knew* their situations to be tests. Rather it was that they knew *themselves* to be strangers in the world and, therefore, detached from its concerns. They remembered what Barsanuphius would tell John: 'Denigrate the works which perish and are passing—but godly endurance saves the one who cultivates it.'⁵⁰⁸ Because this world and all that belongs to it is 'passing' and 'corruptible', it is not worth becoming attached to it. Rather, one must cling to God through all things—this, I think is what 'godly endurance' (κατὰ Θεὸν ὑπομονή) means. It is endurance which does not grow slack through any worldly concern but is, rather, wholly concerned with eternal salvation in God—thus also Barsanuphius' fondness of Romans 8.18.⁵⁰⁹

Barsanuphius bluntly rebuked a young monk who had asked his prayers for healing for the elderly monk Andrew:

Importunate brother, "if you knew the gift of God [Jn 4.10]", on account of which from time to time he disciplines [παιδεύει] his slave Andrew as a merciful father [cf. Heb. 12.6-8], you would have glorified God that he silences the stained mouth of the dragon so that one will not find a pretext against Andrew in the day of judgment on account of the great promises, offered to Andrew by God through me his lowly and useless slave.⁵¹⁰

Barsanuphius is quite clear: salvation requires suffering. In order that Andrew come through 'the day of judgment' unscathed into the 'great promise' of God, he must suffer what Barsanuphius treats as a form

⁵⁰⁷ QR, 31

⁵⁰⁸ QR, 31

⁵⁰⁹ cf. Ps-Macarius, *Collectio H*, 32

⁵¹⁰ QR, 122

of loving παιδεία. Barsanuphius thus tells the zealous but misguided brother to leave Andrew to his suffering since it is precisely through this that humans learn sonship and that God shows his love for them. All die, willingly or not, and so detachment from the world is necessary for monks to cultivate attachment to the next. Monks prove their detachment—they even develop it—by enduring the sufferings which come to them from external events and other people.⁵¹¹

John's thumping response to a layperson concerned with hesitation and a lack of faith demonstrates that he internalized Barsanuphius' admonitions to himself and others. He says that God glorifies his saints but that we do not always see it in this life—they had to endure because they were and are being tested and proved. His list resembles Barsanuphius': Job and Paul (down to the incident in the basket and the Damascus wall). But he adds Lazarus (in Luke's parable) and even Christ himself who was deeply troubled in the garden: none of these hesitated, and all were faithful, but all suffered strong testing and, crucially, all passed.⁵¹² For Barsanuphius and John, endurance means accepting the tests which God either sends or allows, which produce and demonstrate character. Ultimately, then, the 'opposition of ages' amounts to a what is often a very difficult recognition of the value of transitory things in light of mortality and judgment—it is not that they pass away, but that the monk does, and enjoyment of material goods is not only fleeting but in no way conducive to the ethical demands of eschatological judgment.

Continuity

While the 'opposition of ages' performs an important function, a subtle 'continuity' also emerges in their thought, and this continuity, though recalling VA's descriptions of ἀνοδος in life and death, nevertheless distinguishes Gazan spirituality from what we have seen among the Desert Fathers. The lifestyle forged by those who reject 'passing things' prefigures the character of eternal existence for which monks suffer now. I will discuss below at greater length the severance of relationships fundamental to Gazan monasticism, but for now I want to highlight briefly the type of relationship which survives monastic 'detachment.' Barsanuphius unfailingly emphasizes the obedience of monks to their spiritual directors and to their abbots.⁵¹³ This relationship lasts until death—obedience, as we shall see below,

⁵¹¹ QR, 790

⁵¹² QR, 382

⁵¹³ Though often those would be the same person, in Seridos' monastery there was the ever-present spectre of the Great Old Men. Seridos himself did not seem to mind this (acting as amanuensis for Barsanuphius and encouraging John's epistolary career), perhaps partly because most of their letters are to monks and laypeople *outside* Seridos'

becomes the permanent condition of the monk's life. But in another way this 'father-son' relationship outlasts death.⁵¹⁴ Barsanuphius assiduously petitions God that he may be always found with his children. Barsanuphius offers the following advice and encouragement to a monk worried at the thought of losing Barsanuphius to death:

Pray that God may grant me to say, 'Father, give to me that where I will be, there also will be my children [cf. Jn 17.24], in the unspeakable life.' Trust me, brother, that on the one hand 'the spirit is willing' [cf. Mark 14.26] to say to my Master who rejoices in the requests of his slaves, 'Master, either bring my children with me into your kingdom or blot me from your book.' On the other, my infirmity and carelessness prevent me from having such boldness. But even so, his mercy is great! Having, therefore, such a Master, let us be comforted, believing that he always show mercy to us.⁵¹⁵

Barsanuphius loves his 'children' absolutely, by which term of endearment he means, I believe, *all* who correspond with him.⁵¹⁶ If Barsanuphius has his way, he would never be separated from those he loves as children. His hope of God's kingdom involves especially his children with him—it is a kingdom composed of relationships rather than stones, bordered only by shared holiness and, ultimately, an unfading reliance on Christ who 'takes care of us unto the ages.'⁵¹⁷

Conclusion

The fact of suffering expresses a present age whose character is opposed to eternity as labour opposes rest. John's letter on glorified saints shows this: their glory is hidden by the suffering which comes to them from the world, but revealed by their endurance of it. Moreover, the saints set their examples of endurance precisely through their own recognition that temporary sufferings, minor

community. To those inside the coenobium, the Great Old Men unflinchingly supported Seridos' authority to his monks, thus legitimating his position and assuaging any feelings of rancor he might develop at their occasional rebukes to him personally. Within their own monastery, then, the Great Old Men exerted their authority indirectly, through advice and admonition to the abbot who then, because of his easy relationship with them and their agreement not to interfere with his public role, acts on their advice and thus exerts their authority over the monks as a sort of partially autonomous agent. I will discuss the relationship of elders, abbots, and disciples further in the section on 'Obedience', below.

⁵¹⁴ See also Claudia Rapp's social-historical assessment, "For next to God, you are my salvation": reflections on the rise of the holy man in late antiquity', in James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (eds.), *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 74-75.

⁵¹⁵ QR, 187. Cf. also, e.g., 77, 243 (superscript), 274, 573, and 790. Of course, the relationship is open to nuance. In some letters Barsanuphius claims to have secured salvation (which God promises through him). In others (e.g., 274) Barsanuphius admonishes his correspondent that while he himself desires their unity it is ultimately up to his correspondent and not himself.

⁵¹⁶ As also Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *The Monastic School*, 98

⁵¹⁷ QR, 90

reversals, and the loss of all things corruptible, appears vanishingly trivial when set against the fearful and eternal reality of beatitude in God, refracted through his eschatological judgment. In contrast with transitory relationships, spiritual relationships appear all the more solid, all the more precious and worth struggling over. They are modelled on God's own *παιδεία*, and, since God's care for humans transcends the opposition of this world and the next, Barsanuphius finds an eternal bond in his own relationship with his spiritual children. The life which a monk builds up *in renunciation* and *detachment*, cultivated by contemplation of death and judgment, becomes itself *eternal*, a mode of being which will not be cut off by death.

In light of this situation, suffering is not incidental to salvation, but *constituent of it*. As John notes at one point, concern for transitory life prevents one from 'giving oneself over completely to death for the Kingdom of Heaven.'⁵¹⁸ The resultant condition he calls *διψυχία*, an existential 'duplicity.' The monk, in order to be *ἅπλως*, 'simple' or 'whole', must act out of his recognition of the absolute priority of eschatological beatitude over the present or 'fleshy' life. Acceptance of suffering is, therefore, not simply an action, but an anthropological constitution. The monk's action is governed by the *δοκίμη*, the 'character' which accepts and emerges from the endurance of suffering.

⁵¹⁸ QR, 846

III. THE LIMIT OF DEATH

In his *Asceticon Magnum*—a series of longer and shorter responses to questions about monastic life and organization—Basil of Caesarea adduced the example of Christ’s obedience to the Father as normative for monastic obedience. Basil was especially fond of quoting Philippians 2.8: ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ.⁵¹⁹ At one point, Basil was asked ‘How should one be eager “to risk” even “danger for the sake of” the commandments “of the Lord” (Acts 15.26, 2 Cor 11.26)?’ His response is telling:

In the first place by reminding oneself that the Lord himself “was obedient” to the Father “even unto death” [Phil 2.8] and by being fully persuaded of the power of the “commandment” of the Lord which “is eternal life” as it is written [Jn 12.50]. Then also by believing in the Lord who said: “Whoever wants to save his life, shall lose it, whoever loses his life for my sake and the sake of the Gospel, is the one who shall save it” [Mk 8.35].⁵²⁰

In light of Christ’s example and the hope which obedience to him offers, death holds little terror for Basil. Instead, his response encourages monks to look beyond physical death to the far grander vistas of eternal life. Thus, for Basil, ‘death’ becomes the ‘measure of obedience’ because it is the measure of Christ’s,⁵²¹ but as a physical event it is indifferent, the possible outcome of obedience moving beyond it to eternal life in Christ.

In the literature we have looked at in the first chapters, Basil’s ideas have not featured. In *VA* Antony displayed a remarkable indifference to death, and Athanasius denigrated ‘fear of death’, yet Antony’s disciples were deeply saddened at his departure, which suggests that not all were capable or at least prepared to accept such indifference. Likewise, this pattern of thought is not so visible in Desert literature which, considering death most frequently in terms of terrifying images of judgment, emphasized fear of the unknown eschatological verdict. Barsanuphius, however, takes up this more ‘Basilian’ line of thought and makes endurance unto death a crucial virtue which informs and characterizes all others. I will explore now how death functions as a limitation for spiritual progress—both as the end toward which one strives and as the cessation of all possible action—through one of Barsanuphius’ favorite verses of Scripture.

Matthew 10.22

⁵¹⁹ Basil, *RF* 28.2, 44, 55; *RB* 69, 103, 116, 119, 152, 172, 176, 199, 206, 317. He also quoted John 6.29-34 with some frequency: *RF* 5.3; *RB* 1, 60, 137, 138; cf. 120. All translations are from Silvas’ ET.

⁵²⁰ Basil, *RB*, 199

⁵²¹ Basil, *RB*, 317

Barsanuphius constantly quotes, alludes to, paraphrases, or generally reminds his readers of, Scripture. In many cases it is difficult to tell where Scripture ends and Barsanuphius begins, so imbued is his language with that of Scripture. As François Neyt and Paula de Angelis-Noah have argued, the Word of God—mediated by the Scriptures and the Great Old Man’s commentary on them—is fundamental to Barsanuphius’ attempts to form his correspondents in the monastic life. Neyt and de Angelis-Noah go on to highlight the importance of a hermeneutical study of the Old Men since ‘La correspondance des moines de Gaza, comme les Règles de saint Basile, se présente comme un commentaire, une explication de la Sainte Écriture adaptée à chaque personne pour l’aider’ or, more generally ‘[à] transformer la vie des les correspondants.’⁵²² Elsewhere, Neyt expands on this assessment: ‘Rarement, dans les écrits ascétiques, trouvera-t-on un spiritual posant aussi constamment et aussi radicalement la “parole de vie”, qui interpelle, suscite une libération de la personne et une conversion à une Dieu miséricordieux et “philanthrope”.’⁵²³ That is, in order to understand the more general theological claims being adapted to individual situations in the correspondence, we do well to examine the Old Men’s use of scripture—in particular their deployment of certain preferred passages. While a study of Barsanuphius’ scriptural hermeneutic would lie far beyond the scope of this chapter,⁵²⁴ it is possible to pick out and discuss his use of a few relevant verses which stand out from the crowd of quotations littering his letters. In this regard, Matthew 10.22b is stitched into Barsanuphius’ thinking: ‘He who endures to the end will be saved.’ Barsanuphius quotes or alludes to this verse eighteen times, making it one of the single most-cited verses in his correspondence.⁵²⁵ By contrast, John only alludes to it once.⁵²⁶ This contrast suggests that Matthew 10.22 expresses Barsanuphius’ unique perspective, disengaged from the more general tradition.⁵²⁷

For Barsanuphius life-long endurance is, perhaps more than any other virtue, salvific. He notes early on that if one does not endure to the end, one cannot be saved.⁵²⁸ Contrariwise, he comforts the sick old monk Andrew thus: ‘Be, therefore, trustful of the Lord that no one enduring until his end in this

⁵²² Neyt and de Angelis-Noah, ‘Introduction’ *Correspondance*, I.1:83-84

⁵²³ Neyt, François, ‘Un Type d’Autorité Charismatique’, *Byzantion* 44 (1974), 352 and ‘La Formation au monastère de l’abbé Seridos à Gaza’, in *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity*, 154-155

⁵²⁴ Elia, L., *Usò e interpretazione della Sacra Scrittura negli scritti di Barsanufio di Gaza*, Dissertazione per la Licenz in Teologia e Scienze Patristiche, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum (Rome, 1996-97)

⁵²⁵ QR 14, 23, 27, 30, 55, 57, 59, 66, 74, 76, 90, 115, 118, 187, 214, 613, and 823

⁵²⁶ QR, 382

⁵²⁷ *N.b.* Barsanuphius understands the ‘end’ as death. See QR, 823; cf. 23, 27, 57, 74, 187. For conjunction of Acts 14.22 with Mat 10.22, see QR, 27, 59, 66; cf. also 2 and 106.

⁵²⁸ QR, 23

place is cast out of the pen of sheep belonging to Christ our God (cf. John 10.26-29).⁵²⁹ Why should endurance in the monastery (to which 'this place' presumably refers) be so salvific?

If brothers can endure the little difficulties of daily life together then they develop patience and, with it, peace and, with that, love—divine attributes given to them by Christ for their labours.⁵³⁰ Barsanuphius envisions this community—not simply the sum of those living in a certain proximity, but the peaceful bond of love which unifies them—as eternal and eschatological.⁵³¹ It is the community of spiritual fathers and children, of spiritual brethren—it is bounded by the limits of virtue rather than by time or space. Endurance keeps monks in the 'place'—the constellation of activities and relationships—where they can make progress, where they can practice virtues, where they can find salvation.⁵³² Thus, while 'endurance' on its own is devoid of content—enduring *in what*, we might ask—Barsanuphius has in mind the endurance of trials⁵³³ and illnesses⁵³⁴, and the long-suffering opposition of temptation—particularly the temptation to despair⁵³⁵ or departure—which keep the monk toiling and grant him the necessary 'faith...humility and long-suffering of endurance through which "he who endures is saved."' ⁵³⁶ The point of endurance is that all virtue must be cultivated until death. Endurance, essentially meaningless in isolation, stamps all virtues with its own character.

The Boundary of Progress

Barsanuphius and John not only conceive of physical death as the 'limit' of labour, but also as the 'boundary' beyond which labour is no longer possible. We have already seen this classic topos in their teaching on the memory of mortality. This second way of conceiving death as 'limit' reinforces the radical opposition of ages as well as sharpening the urgency of the ascetic lifestyle. John of Beersheba's enclosure prefigures and anticipates his eternal rest. Yet we must keep in mind Barsanuphius' aphoristic maxim: 'Here the toil, there the reward.'⁵³⁷ The proleptic experience of eschatological beatitude is, as

⁵²⁹ QR, 77

⁵³⁰ QR, 57

⁵³¹ QR, 77, 187; cf. 214, 823.

⁵³² The obverse is certainly true: Barsanuphius tells a struggling monk that departure will mean his fall (QR, 553-54).

⁵³³ QR, 30, 66

⁵³⁴ QR, 74, 76, 90, 613

⁵³⁵ QR, 74, 57, 59, 214, 823

⁵³⁶ QR, 115

⁵³⁷ QR, 600

Daniel Hombargen argues, at best partial, and its enjoyment should never be cause for relaxation. He writes,

In earthly life a monk should not strive for spiritual knowledge, which is only a reward in heaven, instead, he should dedicate himself exclusively to the ascetic practice...this reveals a conception of the ascetic life which strongly opposes that of Evagrius. When Evagrius divides the spiritual life into *praktiké* and *knowledge*, the first stage is a preparation for the second, which is a goal to be reached *during this lifetime...a result of the ascetic practice and belongs to the spiritual progress a monk should make on earth. For Barsanuphius, however, it is only a reward bestowed after death...*⁵³⁸

Hombargen's point is to contrast attitudes which see the summit of perfection as something to be *attained* in this life with attitudes like Barsanuphius' which see perfection as something only received after Christ's judgment. Rest—and with it spiritual contemplation—are rewards reserved for heaven. For Barsanuphius and John, the grave bounds the possibility of progress, of repentance, and, with them, of salvation. And the distinction between this life and eternity remains always absolute. The present life is a threshing floor and, though Christ winnows the wheat from the chaff in this present life, the results must wait the eschatological resurrection.⁵³⁹

Conclusion

There is an ambiguity in the phrase ἕως (or μέχρι) θανάτου, as the prepositions can mean either 'until' (in a temporal sense) or 'as far as'.⁵⁴⁰ One may endure 'until one's death,' meaning 'as long as one is alive;' or 'so far as death,' meaning 'even if this action leads to death or one dies while doing it.' Barsanuphius tells Andrew that being a monastic means giving oneself entirely to God, and that means holding nothing back—not even care for one's bodily health. Barsanuphius says,

If you truly believe that God has carefully led you here, believe in him as your seal, "casting all your care on him" (1 Pet. 5.7), and he himself will ordain all things pertaining to you as he wishes...He who gives himself to God with his whole heart (cf. Jer 24.7, Wis 8.21) ought to give himself over to God even unto death [ἕως θανάτου], for he [God] knows much more than us what benefits our soul and body.⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁸ Hombargen, Daniël, 'Barsanuphius and John of Gaza and the Origenist Controversy', in *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity*, 179-180

⁵³⁹ QR, 60

⁵⁴⁰ S.v. ἕως and μέχρι, LSJ.

⁵⁴¹ QR 72

Monks offer up to God even their judgment of what is and is not good—a point to which I will return below. Just as they relinquish personal property to the monastery, monks offer their natural self-preservation to God. If this self-offering ends in death, then that is to be accepted as the result of God’s providential arrangement. Barsanuphius, however, is not extremist: the sick should not maintain the same regime as the healthy, but they should not consider sickness an excuse to give up their monastic vocation entirely.⁵⁴² Partly, Barsanuphius’ command to endure in monastic work, even if it entails physical deterioration or death, comes from his firm eschatological hope—predicated on his understanding of the continuity of ages—that God’s concern extends not only through the present life as well as the next.⁵⁴³ Barsanuphius considers physical death far less important than eternal beatitude and in light of the latter, the former should be viewed as a matter of indifference—simply the end of one’s work on earth.

While Barsanuphius’ use of Matthew 10.22 is unique, we have seen echoes of his ideas in John’s emphasis on wholly giving oneself to God. To hold back out of fear of suffering or even death leads to *διψυχία*, whereas the monk should be *ἅπλως*. The unified identity for which monks labour in light of eschatological judgment requires the indifference to physical death which only an equally eschatological hope can provide.

⁵⁴² QR, 77-78, 92, etc.

⁵⁴³ QR, 75

III. PRACTICING DEATH IN GAZA

We come now to examine the ways in which Barsanuphius and John explicitly conceive of ascetic life as a metaphorical ‘death.’ The conceptual framework of death—only hinted at in *VA* and traced vaguely in Desert literature—approaches normativity in Gaza. For these it fair to say that to be a ‘monk’ is to ‘die’ to oneself and others. Here the practices of renunciation and withdrawal play out as a kind of ‘death.’ Barsanuphius uses the image with some regularity to describe the general state of the monk⁵⁴⁴ and even describes his cell as a ‘cemetery’ in which he rests, by God’s grace and his own struggle, from passions and temptations.⁵⁴⁵ I have shown that Barsanuphius conceives of rest as both eschatological and present—the hermit’s life is, when compared with the coenobite’s, one of ‘rest’, though, as we have also seen, perfect rest is to be found only after death. Barsanuphius’ experience of rest now prefigures his experience beyond death and so his ‘rest’ and his freedom are, therefore, to be equated with his status as ‘dead.’ The monk’s cell, paradoxically the place of his struggle and his rest, becomes the nexus of heaven and earth, of ‘time present and time future’ in which the living anticipate their own mortality in hope of eternal beatitude beyond.

The Gaza Fathers conceive of monasticism as a ‘practice of death’ in three interrelated ways: the severance of relationships, a change of perception, and especially, the denial of one’s will through obedience. For Barsanuphius and John, the practice of death draws together the practice of remembering death and judgment, the opposition of ages, endurance in the monastic life, and the monk’s mortal identity. Thus, in Gaza for the first time ‘death’ plays a dominant and organizing role for conceptualizing ascetic life.

Relationships Then and Now

A pious laymen named Aelianus once asked the Old Men how to renounce the world. Their correspondence is particularly intriguing, since Seridos’ διάθηκη named Aelianus as a possible successor after his death—under the assumption that Aelianus would become a monk. Aelianus, however, was unaware of Seridos’ will until, all the other possible successors having demurred through humility, his name alone remained. John then had Aelianus tonsured and he became not only brother but abbot of the

⁵⁴⁴ *QR*, 68, 130, 142,

⁵⁴⁵ *QR*, 141-42

monastery.⁵⁴⁶ The correspondence gives us a rather nice ‘before-and-after’ picture of how a man’s relationships and attachments change when he enters the ascetic life.

Before becoming abbot, Aelianus was married with children and property.⁵⁴⁷ His initially asked about becoming a monk and ‘to find in withdrawal a freedom from care.’⁵⁴⁸ But, he wondered, what should he do with his wife, children, and property? John advises him simply: leave your wife to the care of her nephews, leave her and your children properties appropriate for their expenses, and as for the rest, ask Barsanuphius what to do.⁵⁴⁹ To preface this advice, though, John first alludes to Luke 9.62,⁵⁵⁰ then recalls the fate of Lot’s wife (Gen 19.26), and finally cautions, ‘And again, the lion is caught by a single hair, and the eagle by the tip of his talon.’ John’s apocalyptic rationale makes his practical advice instructive: as long as Aelianus is concerned for his family and goods he will find neither the ἀναχωρήσις nor the ἀμεριμνία which he seeks—he remains trapped and in danger of the annihilation and exclusion implied by Lot’s wife.

Aelianus then writes to Barsanuphius, who responds in even stronger terms. He too recalls Lot, saying that ‘whoever is able to flee will be saved as Lot from Sodom.’⁵⁵¹ Barsanuphius then elaborates on what John had already said, describing (also in terms of Luke 9.62) the difference between those who stay in the world and those who flee. He writes:

Those bound up with earthly things become earthly, but those renouncing them ascend from the earth—therefore it is clear that they become heavenly. And we wretches do not understand, that even if we do not wish to withdraw from these for God’s sake, we have to depart unwillingly in the hour of death [Καὶ οὐ συνιῶμεν οἱ ἄθλιοι, ὅτι καὶ μὴ θέλοντες διὰ τὸν Θεὸν ἀναχωρῆσαι ἀπὸ τούτων, ἀναχωρῆσαι ἔχομεν ἐν τῇ ὥρᾳ τοῦ θανάτου ἄκοντες]. Child, God’s command is that a person immediately cut off from all....“No one putting hand to plough and turning back is fit for the kingdom of Heaven” (Luke 9.62). And again...“Let the dead bury their own dead” (Luke 9.60) and again “Who

⁵⁴⁶ Subscripts to QR, 574-575b; cf. 252ff; on which see Havelone-Harper, *Disciples*, 62-68.

⁵⁴⁷ QR, 571 subscript

⁵⁴⁸ QR, 571 subscript

⁵⁴⁹ QR, 571. Interestingly, John tells Aelianus that by giving her to others’ care and providing for her, his wife ἀεὶ ἔχει τὴν ἀμεριμνίαν. Her nephews and children, John says, will take care of her—because they hope to inherit from her after her death, and kindness now will make that more likely—John relies on a perceived mercenary selfishness of those in the world.

⁵⁵⁰ Luke 9.62 reads: ‘No one setting hand to plough and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God.’ John says simply, ‘No one setting hand to plough and looking back goes immediately.’ He does not seem to have in mind fitness for the kingdom of God (*pace* Chryssavgis, *Barsanuphius*, 2:152) but the immediacy of renunciation which Aelianus’ tone had implied. Aelianus wants to become a monk *now* but if he remains caught up in affairs of family and money he will only delay.

⁵⁵¹ QR, 572 (see Gen 19.17-25).

loves father or mother more than me is unworthy of me" (Mat 10.37) and what follows.⁵⁵²

Barsanuphius sharpens the dichotomy to which John had already pointed: either flee the world and ascend to heaven, or stay and be destroyed. Barsanuphius appends an interesting, albeit very traditional, point in his distinction between renunciation 'for God's sake' and 'involuntary' renunciation. The latter recalls Evagrius' description of the monk torn unwillingly away at death.⁵⁵³ The former helps sever the attachments to the material world which make death 'involuntary.' One cannot 'partially' withdraw from the world—one cannot renounce a few things and retain others. Barsanuphius sees no middle ground, and so he describes the situation in the absolute terms of life and death. This tension informs the Old Men's more specific advice elsewhere about relationships.

Both recognize that the destruction of relationships is a painful process which really does resemble death. John affirms the profundity of renunciation precisely because he recognizes the depth of the marital bond and, therefore, the intensity of renunciation. To Theodore, who was distraught at leaving his family for monasticism, he says

It is written concerning man and woman that "The two will become one flesh" (Gen 2.24). Therefore, just as if some bit of your own flesh were cut off, the rest of your body would suffer for a while until the wound was healed and the pain stopped, so also in this it is necessary for you to suffer for a time as if your flesh were cut away from you.⁵⁵⁴

Barsanuphius responds to Theodore at the same time in a different manner. He writes, 'If you have chosen for yourself the model of one dead [τύπον νεκροῦ], ask a corpse if it desires to see its own wife or if it judges her should she leave and commit adultery. If you have 'let the dead bury their own dead' (Luke 9.60), why aren't you preaching the kingdom of God? How long will you sleep?'⁵⁵⁵ Here Barsanuphius returns to Luke 9.60 but argues that not only those left behind are dead but, in a rather different way, so is the one who leaves them. While Barsanuphius deploys the image of death equivocally, he nevertheless affirms, as he did to Aelianus, that renunciation is absolute and permanent, a process no less painful than amputation, no less profound than death.

⁵⁵² QR, 572

⁵⁵³ Discussed in chapter two above; see *Cogitationibus (recensio fusius)* 3.5-7 ; cf. *Monachos* 21.

⁵⁵⁴ QR, 129

⁵⁵⁵ QR, 130

The extent to which Barsanuphius took his own advice is evident from his treatment of his own family. In another letter, Barsanuphius, who we know to have had a biological brother,⁵⁵⁶ refuses even to acknowledge his existence. He writes: 'Concerning your brothers—I do not know that I have a brother except for Jesus. Do you have brothers? Do with them as you wish, I have nothing to do with it. If he himself [Jesus] says, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" is it for me to tell you to disobey God's commandment and hold friendship with fleshly brothers?'⁵⁵⁷ The command to leave behind one's family becomes the command of salvation, while the renunciation of earthly siblings opens up the possibility of having Jesus as brother instead. Barsanuphius thus freights monastic profession with all the apocalyptic urgency which Jesus' words in the Gospels can carry.

The Character of New Relationships

Well and good—Barsanuphius and John have high hopes for those who would enter monastic life. It is transformative and its first step is renunciation not only of goods but of relationships as well. Of course, the monk is not alone, is he? He enters a *coenobium* full of others struggling, undoubtedly, with the same doubts, fears, desires, and memories as himself. Not only that, but the community constitutes, by definition, a new constellation of relationships in which—since obedience and brotherhood last until death—the monk is bound for life. Supreme among these relationships the monk maintains obedient in all matters to his abbot. Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky have argued that the goal of monastic life was to minimize social interaction for fear of distraction, factionalism, and other related problems.⁵⁵⁸ Against this claim we may recall the monk, discussed above, who wanted *hesychia* and was rebuffed by both Old Men and told to stay in the *coenobium*. Neither Old Man is concerned with minimizing relationships *as such*, but with carefully constructing the *character* of monastic relationships. If blood ties and social friendships are replaced with an abbot and monastic brothers, how ought the monk to conceive of his new family?

Both Barsanuphius and John are clear on the subject: a monk approaches relationships in humility and without recourse to combative argument or recrimination. A monk's renunciation of biological and other conventional relationships creates a sort of freedom to approach all relationships equally. Barsanuphius writes to his biological brother:

⁵⁵⁶ QR, 348

⁵⁵⁷ QR, 138

⁵⁵⁸ *The Monastic School*, 197-205

This tribulation [an illness] has partly come to you since you attributed importance to me, who am nothing, and to yourself: to me as some great man and to yourself as the brother of such a man. Do you not know that we are children of Adam's transgression? And we are earth and ashes (Gen 18.27)? Give thanks therefore to God who has driven you to this state. If we have the humility of Jesus, we can say, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" and what follows.⁵⁵⁹

Here, the monk's 'mortal identity' underpins Barsanuphius claims. No one is 'great', or at least, no one is 'greater', since all are sinful, all mortal, all ultimately children of the same biological forefather. On that account Barsanuphius countenances no favoritism based on pre-given 'natural' (biological) or conventional (business, friendly, marital) relationships. He accepts no convention in order that he may approach the very possibility of relationship from an entirely different direction: the imitation of Christ in humility and love.

Barsanuphius' final letter to John of Beersheba expresses this exquisitely with an allusion to Macarius the Great's advice: 'Do not close the door, for mortification is not in closing the door but in closing the mouth.'⁵⁶⁰ The monk, even an anchorite like John of Beersheba whose enclosure is watched over by Barsanuphius (who saw no one at all save Seridos), must be open to others. Even Barsanuphius (at least prior to his final enclosure) remains open. As he says to Andrew, "'Brother, your key opens my door", for I am witless and I do not dare to hide the marvels of God!'⁵⁶¹ Barsanuphius, we have seen above, understands the importance of maintaining relationship in the monastery even with those who make them difficult. For that reason, the dead must neither harbor resentment⁵⁶², nor allow themselves the volatility of emotion nor arrogate to themselves positions of authority.⁵⁶³ Instead the monk must humble himself before others: 'Whoever wishes to please God cuts off his will before his neighbor, doing violence to himself.'⁵⁶⁴ Indeed, humility may be *the* defining characteristic of monastic relationships.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁵⁹ QR, 348

⁵⁶⁰ QR, 54: 'Μὴ φράξης τὴν θύραν, οὐ γὰρ ἐν τῇ φράξει τῆς θύρας ἐστὶν ἡ νέκρωσις, ἀλλ' ἐν τῇ φράξει τοῦ στόματος.' Cf. Macarius (the Egyptian) 16: 'Ὁ ἀββᾶς Μακάριος ὁ μέγας ἔλεγε τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ἐν τῇ Σκήτει, ὡς ἀπέλυε τὴν ἐκκλησίαν· Φεύγετε, ἀδελφοί. Καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῶ τις τῶν γερόντων· Ποῦ ἔχομεν φυγεῖν πλέον τῆς ἐρήμου ταύτης; Ὁ δὲ ἐτίθει τὸν δάκτυλον αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸ στόμα, λέγων· Τοῦτο φεύγετε. Καὶ εἰσήχητο εἰς τὸ κελλίον ἑαυτοῦ, καὶ ἔκλειε τὴν θύραν, καὶ ἐκάθητο.' Barsanuphius has characteristically interwoven his thought with his traditional material, retaining the sense of Macarius' advice without requiring direct allusion to the words of the apophthegma.

⁵⁶¹ QR, 90, quoting Peter the Pionite 2.

⁵⁶² QR, 37

⁵⁶³ QR, 68, 213 (possibly alluding to Poemen 76)

⁵⁶⁴ QR, 121

However, humility relies in its turn on the practice of death, which means that the monk turns against himself the weapons with which he might otherwise exert his will over others: the monk does not claim to teach or to arbitrate disputes, regarding himself or others; he enters into no contracts—which, Barsanuphius reminds one monk, ‘is not proper to monks, for...this work is not proper to love.’⁵⁶⁶ Love for others requires, paradoxically, violence toward oneself. It seems that the self is constantly trying to exert its will (the ἴδιον θέλημα) and so either one lets it (as in biological and business relationships) or one fights against it (as in Christian, and especially monastic relationships). Curiously, this battle against the self allows the monk to imitate Christ who suffered patiently but, John reminds another, no one can equal Christ’s loving acceptance of suffering.⁵⁶⁷

Life-long endurance defines the character of monastic relationship, thus connecting relational ‘death’ back to death as limit. Barsanuphius tells John of Beersheba:

Brother, we are strangers, let us be strangers and not measure ourselves in anything, and no one will attach importance to us and we will find rest. Having joined us, wrestle in order to endure. For it says, “He who endures to the end will be saved” (Mat 10.22). In all things struggle to die to every person and you will be saved. And say to your thought: “I died and lie in the grave.”⁵⁶⁸

To be able to endure in a community one must die to everyone. Not simply, it seems, to those whom one leaves behind in the world, but even to one’s own monastic brethren. Barsanuphius surely echoes the advice given Abba Poemen when he was tempted to anger by his brothers and the advice offered by Moses the Ethiopian to those who would be monks: Remember that you are already dead.⁵⁶⁹ It is only by counting oneself as dead or as a stranger that the monk can live in a monastery in peace because it is only when he counts himself as dead that he can forge relationships in humility.

Humility in relationships means especially that the monk never judge others or even ask why their lot is different from his—he simply obeys and gives thanks.⁵⁷⁰ As in Desert literature, relational ‘death’ connects, then, to self-judgment as the young monk must learn to accuse himself constantly. In doing so he comes to recognize his own sin and, if constantly pre-occupied with that, finds no time to see

⁵⁶⁵ So Perrone, ‘The Necessity of Advice’, 139f

⁵⁶⁶ QR, 486

⁵⁶⁷ QR, 483

⁵⁶⁸ QR, 55; see also 38, 52, 505, and 553

⁵⁶⁹ As discussed in chapter two above: Poemen 76, Moses 12, etc.

⁵⁷⁰ QR, 68 and 92

sin in others; thus he learns to see them as better than himself.⁵⁷¹ The humility which comes from recognition of one's earthy, sinful, and mortal condition, enforces the practice of death and submission of oneself to others. In another letter, Barsanuphius elaborates this living death in terms we have seen often enough:

Whoever is among people and yet wishes to die to them, does not judge and does not despise anyone and does not enforce his own will—this is what it means to die to all while among them...respond with meekness to your neighbor who has provoked you...Do not be troubled about being deprived of food...Give thanks to God, judging yourself unworthy.⁵⁷²

Equanimity, meekness, non-judgment, self-accusation, an excised will, humility and love—these characterize the person who lives among others as one dead.

Let us return to the eschatological dimension of Barsanuphius' and John's concept of relationships. Theodore, we recall, was commanded to 'cut off' his wife though it would hurt like an amputation, and to leave himself only the desire for her that a corpse might have. In the same letter, Barsanuphius, who, we have seen, has Christ and his fellow monks for his brothers, offers Theodore a proleptic eschatological hope which far outstrips his loss:

Take from this fire [of suffering] and offer incense, that the Master may smell your offerings and bring his Father with the life-creating Spirit, and make his dwelling with you in your sanctuary, in which you offer "yourself to him as a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to him" (Rom 12.2). And then, kindled from this fire, ever yearning to become a fellow traveler, citizen, and inheritor of the saints who have lived righteously, of those things 'which eye has not seen, ears have not heard, and there has not entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Cor 2.9), in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁵⁷³

Theodore finds the saints to be his new friends, as Barsanuphius has Christ for his brother. Severing relationships and building new ones—dying and staying dead—he leaves the world in order to dwell in heaven, and so it is to heaven that we next turn.

Looking Beyond the World

As regards intellectual faculties of perception and judgment, the practice of death constitutes a forcible alteration of perception—a kind of alternative epistemology. This is analogous to the Evagrian

⁵⁷¹ E.g., QR, 48 (cf. Phil 2.3), 69, 214

⁵⁷² QR, 151

⁵⁷³ QR, 130

'epistemological death to self' which I detailed in chapter two above. What I will call 'dead' perception rests on the ontological 'opposition of ages' (discussed at length above) which have death as their nexus. Indeed, 'dead perception' may best be described as the epistemological outworking of the 'opposition of ages' in those who are willing to pay attention. Barsanuphius says, for example, to John of Beersheba:

Pass over in thought from this vain world into another age. Leave the earthly and seek the heavenly. Abandon the corruptible and you will find the incorruptible. Flee with your mind from temporary things you will encounter eternal ones. Die completely, that you may live eternally in Christ Jesus our Lord to whom be glory unto the ages.⁵⁷⁴

The opposition of ages is here vitally apparent and the command to die connects them—just as physical death ushers a person *in toto* from this age into the next, so a metaphorical practice of death can accomplish the same transition as far as the mind is concerned. Thus, the present may foreshadow eternity, if only 'in mind' or 'in thought.' And yet Barsanuphius' language is intriguing—'you will encounter eternal' ones. The implication is that one perceives spiritual realities only by a forcible shift of gaze which requires a kind of total death.

This forcible mental transition has also physical consequences. Barsanuphius tantalizes Andrew with the following description of 'God's holy ones': '...even as they are still here, [God] reveals to them his marvelous mysteries, glorious things, enduring rest and glory for them, and [he] alienates their mind from this world, and they always see themselves in heaven with Christ and the angels.'⁵⁷⁵ This new perception causes 'inexpressible and unceasing joy' such that 'neither hunger nor thirst nor any other earthly thing afflicts them. They are freed from all the complaints and passions and sins found in life.' A mental flight from the world causes the monk to perceive the glorious things to come, and, in his joy at their prospect, he actually *forgets* the usual bodily and material requirements and desires which define life for 'the living.'

If the monk 'dies' solely in order to 'live' eternally, then clearly the practice of death is simply the pre-requisite for the acquisition of life. Death is not an end, but a means. The relativization of death is already implied in the dual content of the memory of death as both mortality and *judgment*. Post-mortem or eschatological judgment fixes the monk's conception of death within an eternal, but ethically divided framework. 'Dead' perception is, therefore, not simply flight 'from' but flight 'toward'—from earth to heaven.

⁵⁷⁴ QR, 37

⁵⁷⁵ QR, 77; cf. 199, 554

The Only Way to Salvation

Though it relies on and cultivates virtues such as humility, endurance, and heavenly relationships, the monastic's 'death' itself revolves around one activity: ἡ ἐκκοπή τοῦ (ιδίου) θελήματος, the 'cutting-off of the (personal) will.' Irénée Hausherr remarked that for the Gaza Fathers the 'ἐκκοπή τοῦ οἰκείου θελήματος' is 'la pensée central de cette spiritualité...Ce principe commande toute la doctrine.'⁵⁷⁶ John remarks at one point: 'This progress is according to God [Τοῦτο προκοπή ἐστὶ κατὰ Θεόν]: to cut off the will, so that while someone cuts off his own will, even in good things, he does that of the saints; in evil things, of his own he flees what is improper.'⁵⁷⁷ Concerning προκοπή, 'progress' (a great concern for the Gaza Fathers⁵⁷⁸), Lorenzo Perrone argues that it refers not to 'an established pattern of progressive stages' but rather to 'one essential message continuously drive home: the "way" the pupil has to follow.' This 'way' consists, Perrone concludes, in 'the progressive renunciation of one's personal will. It is no exaggeration to say that precisely this "way" marks for them the essence of Christianity.' Indeed, while we find the motif in earlier Desert Literature, 'no other source of ancient monasticism so radically insists on the "cutting away" of the will...as embodying the quintessence of the way to perfection.'⁵⁷⁹ 'Progress' refers not cut off one's own will once for all. Rather, it is more like a continual 'shaving away' of the will, one desire and attachment at a time.

Perrone's point is excellent, but requires nuance. While shaving off one's will centres Gazan asceticism generally, it operates within and as the organizing force of the myriad ways in which Barsanuphus and John deploy the imagery of death. Aryeh Kofsky remarks in passing that 'overall, it seems that Barsanuphius and John are less interested in the will of the flesh—namely, desires and passions—and more interested in cutting out the personal will per se.'⁵⁸⁰ This point could not be more important. As with the Desert Fathers, cutting off of the personal will has less to do with renouncing objects of desire or choice than with the destruction and, I shall argue, re-creation—the death and resurrection—of the faculty of choice itself. Thus, to understand how and why 'cutting off the will'

⁵⁷⁶ Hausherr, 'Barsanuphe', col. 1257

⁵⁷⁷ QR, 380

⁵⁷⁸ See QR 2, 21, 89, 122, 160, 197, 202, 203, 250, 278, 383, 496, 600, etc.

⁵⁷⁹ Perrone, Lorenzo, 'The Necessity of Advice: Spiritual Direction as a School of Christianity in the Correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza', in *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity*, 135-137; Kofsky agrees, in 'Renunciation of Will in the Monastic School of Gaza', *Liber Annuus* 56 (2006) 332-333.

⁵⁸⁰ 'Renunciation of Will', 336, expanding on Perrone, 'The Necessity of Advice', 142-43.

centres Gazan asceticism, it is necessary to appreciate its meaning within the context of the practice of death.

Barsanuphius contextualizes the process of cutting off one's will within the more general framework of dying for God's sake to oneself and to the world. Barsanuphius expresses this idea beautifully to Andrew. Andrew has asked Barsanuphius to forgive all his sins and Barsanuphius has already responded that God is forgiving so long as Andrew perseveres. Andrew, concerned that Barsanuphius avoided his question, put it to him a second time.⁵⁸¹ Barsanuphius responds rather more clearly: 'Brother Andrew, may Jesus, who said "ask and receive" (cf. Mat 21.22) give you all that you request—simply prepare your house in great purity in order to receive his gifts, for they are kept in a purified house.' His point is that God alone bestows forgiveness but that in order to appreciate and hold on to that gift, Andrew must order his life appropriately. Unsurprisingly, Barsanuphius then describes the radical internal change that comes to one who 'has tasted' God's gifts, saying that he 'he becomes stranger to the "old self" (Col 3.9), being crucified to the world and the world to him (cf. Gal 6.18), living always in the Lord.' Desire for God's gift of forgiveness requires a radical death to oneself and the world which, far from an inactive or emptied state, is life in the Lord. In light of this, Barsanuphius counsels Andrew to enter wholeheartedly into the self-crucifixion which makes him live in Christ:

Therefore, brother, hate completely that you may love completely, depart entirely and draw near entirely, despise adoption that you may receive adoption (Rom 8.23, Gal 4.5). Stop doing [your] will and do [your? God's?] will, cut yourself off and bind yourself [together], put yourself to death and make yourself alive (cf. 1 Sam 2.6), forget yourself and know yourself. And behold you have the works of a monk.⁵⁸²

While he seems generally to have in mind something like the gospel paradox of hating mother, father and brother and yet loving one's neighbour and enemy, Barsanuphius' language is ambiguous. It is, for example, possible that he means to leave off one's *own* will in order to do *God's* will. It is also possible that the transformative power of crucifixion to the world falls between the first term of each pair and the second. Between perfect hate and perfect love the monk must develop the tranquillity which John ascribed to Barsanuphius. So also between casting aside and taking up *a* will, whether one's own or God's, this same radical transformation must take place which makes one's own will like that of the

⁵⁸¹ Barsanuphius devotes five letters (QR, 111-115) to Andrew's apparently persistent worry about being forgiven. In them he consistently attempts to re-direct Andrew's attention away from his own ability (or lack thereof) to procure forgiveness toward a profounder appreciation of God's gifts and the sort of life which responds properly to them.

⁵⁸² QR, 112

saints.⁵⁸³ This transformation is as painful and complete as amputation and death, yet gives way by the mystery of God's grace to life and wholeness. Barsanuphius' language recalls Aelianus' severance of familial relationships, but here the cut goes far deeper. The monk must cut himself down to nothing—must die—in order to become whole—carefree, alive, able to love. Before this transformation, even attempting God's will would come from selfishness, a point which Barsanuphius makes explicitly elsewhere.⁵⁸⁴ After this transformation, even doing one's 'own' will would be merely to do God's will with which, as we shall see below, the monk has replaced his own will. The excision of will constitutes the deepest, most fundamental layer, of the transformative death which leads the monk into true life.

Perception and Relationship

For the Gazan Fathers, cutting off one's will means rejecting not only specific desires and hopes but even the capacity for judgment by which one chooses to accept or reject those desires. In this regard they both accept and expand on Desert ideas of rejecting the *θελήματα*—ambiguous objects of will and, as I have argued concerning Desert literature, a multiplicity of wills. For example, John tacitly agrees with Basil of Caesarea's brief commentary on Matthew 23.25-26 and 2 Corinthians 7.1, both of which exhort a purification of both interior and exterior aspects of the human person. Basil comments simply 'That it is impossible for one who is attached to any visible thing, or for one held by something which draws him even the littlest bit from a command of God, to become a disciple of the Lord.'⁵⁸⁵ John's correspondent mentions this passage and asks whether to pursue a debt owed him by his relatives and which he wishes to give to the poor. He clearly understands enough to realize that pursuing accounts receivable is probably the sort of thing Basil had in mind as attachment to the world.⁵⁸⁶ John responds with his characteristic laconism: 'If you do not cut off the fleshly mind and receive a little godly impudence [*ἀναίδειαν κατὰ Θεόν*], you will also fall into people-pleasing. May God grant you strength to do his will in all matters. Amen.'⁵⁸⁷ It is hard to know what to make of John's answer. I think that, since he hopes that this monk will do *God's will* in everything, and not his own, that he will not pursue matters with his relatives—however noble his own motivations may be, they remain expressions of the *ἴδιον θέλημα*, which, like the 'fleshly mind' must be cut off entirely. John's response seems to pick up

⁵⁸³ QR, 380

⁵⁸⁴ QR, 66

⁵⁸⁵ Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae morales*, 2.2 (PG 31:705AB).

⁵⁸⁶ Cf. Basil, *RF*, 9, and Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *The Monastic School*, 211-212.

⁵⁸⁷ QR, 319

where Basil's commentary leaves off. If a person must be detached from every worldly constraint, he must ultimately detach himself even from his own will and that means that he must reject his own seemingly noble inclinations. If done out of one's own will, even alms for the poor remain an act of 'the fleshly mind.' Cutting off one's own will becomes, then, the ultimate response to the 'opposition of ages'.

Barsanuphius also connects excision of one's will to the memory of death and places both in service of the new perception. A monk asks him 'Be merciful with me, master, and tell me how I can be saved in this time, for a thought of terror ascends to my heart. What therefore do you command that I do?' This monk's terror recalls those three brothers who visit Sisoës only to be revoked for their undue fear of punishment.⁵⁸⁸ Barsanuphius takes a somewhat different tack:

At all times if a person can cut off his will in everything, and have a humble heart and hold death always before his eyes, he can be saved by the grace of God. And wherever he may be, terror will not master him. For such a person "forgets those things which lay behind and stretches toward those which lie before him" (Phil 3.13). Do these things and you will be saved without care [ἀμεριμνῶς] through God.⁵⁸⁹

Here, Barsanuphius treats excision of will as one of three activities necessary for salvation.⁵⁹⁰ Humility, the cutting-off of one's will, and memory of death, combine to keep a person from terror at the prospect of perhaps not being saved, and compel him to look forward rather than back. Those things which lie behind are, we are tempted to think, past sins and, perhaps more importantly, the power which their memory exerts over a person. The memory of sin could easily lead to fear concerning salvation and, if unchecked, to terror and despair. By remembering death, the monk keeps in mind not only that judgment is coming, but that it has not yet happened, and so becomes able to attain virtue, since he knows time to be left for progress. The direct means to virtue is through cutting off his will, as I shall discuss below. And the mode of virtue is always humility. Barsanuphius combines, I think, the paradoxical comfort that 'dead perception' can offer in light of mortality and judgment with the means and mode of virtue. If a person can combine these, God's grace is certainly sufficient to save him.

In similar ways, Barsanuphius adduces violence toward one's will as constitutive of Christian relationships. He writes to Andrew about how to treat a 'neighbouring brother':

Concerning how to deal with the brother, whoever desires to please God cuts off his will for his neighbour, doing violence to himself. For it is said, "the kingdom of heaven

⁵⁸⁸ Sisoës 19, discussed in chapter two above.

⁵⁸⁹ *QR*, 232; cf. 554 by John

⁵⁹⁰ See similar triads: *QR*, 69 (blaming oneself, casting one's will behind, and holding oneself below all creation) and 554 by John (obedience, humility, and submission, which John defines as excision of the will).

suffers violence, and the violent inherit it" (cf. Mat 11.12). Learn, therefore, how your brother finds rest and do it—and you also will find rest before God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁵⁹¹

As I noted above, the monk must cut off his will for the sake of God. Here, though, Barsanuphius uses the same formulation regarding one's neighbour.⁵⁹² The monk must die not only 'for God' but, for all others in order 'to please God.' His relationship with God is still central, but the monk must extend the implications of his 'death' to include not only 'God's will' but a neighbour's pleasure—which, as we have seen, can mean enduring a cantankerous abba or washing the feet of those who doubt his existence. The alternative, though, to this behaviour, is to make oneself hateful to the monastery and to cause harm to one's brothers. As to the community's response to such a person, John advises Aelianus to 'bear with him, if someone abides in his own will, until he is persuaded or, from his own will, casts himself out.'⁵⁹³ The community endures the unruly brother for the same reason that monks endure cantankerous elders—it is especially with regard to the insolent or obnoxious neighbour that Christ's command to love, played out in the monastic command to obey, becomes a test and an opportunity for virtue.

Excision of the will and all monastic virtues

For Barsanuphius and John, excision of the will stabilizes not only the monastic practice of death, but also the whole constellation of virtues which radiate out from its transformative power. No one, Barsanuphius says, is healed of "'jealousy" and strife and "disorder and every wicked deed" (James 3.16)', except by 'cutting off his own will and struggling not to bother his neighbour.'⁵⁹⁴ Indeed, to do one's own will is futile, arrogant, and proud.⁵⁹⁵ Doing one's own will, though, isn't really doing one's own will. It is doing the Devil's will because in asserting oneself over others and, ultimately, over God, one mimics and pleases the Devil who not only did the same but counsels others to follow his futile example. On the other hand, cutting off one's own will procures the tranquillity which John ascribed to

⁵⁹¹ QR, 121; John (173) distinguishes between excision undertaken alone in the cell (where it means struggling against fleshly desires) and among others in the *coenobium*, when it means 'dying to them and being with them as though not being.' Thus, while ἐκκοπή τοῦ θελήματος informs monastic life, whether solitary or communal, it operates always *within* the particular context of renunciation.

⁵⁹² 'Κόπτει τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ τῷ πλησίῳ [for πλησίον in crit. ed.]' here versus 'κόψαι τὸ ἴδιον τῷ Κυρίῳ' in QR, 572. The syntax is the same, if we accept, as I see no reason we should not, the slight assumption that 'his will' is to be equated with 'the personal will.'

⁵⁹³ QR, 582

⁵⁹⁴ QR, 483

⁵⁹⁵ QR, 551

Barsanuphius in his ‘cemetery’⁵⁹⁶ and yet also cultivates *κατάνυξις* and *πένθος*.⁵⁹⁷ While the average person may not see life in such stark terms, Barsanuphius and John demonstrate that a monk who has ‘died’ epistemologically, who contemplating death and judgment sees the world in relation to eternity, understands the apocalyptic dualism which underlies the apparent multiplicity of goods and the illusory scale of moral and spiritual propriety which describe secular existence.

In an particularly illustrative exchange, Barsanuphius and John write in succession to a monk who does carpentry in Seridos’ monastery and who was troubled by thoughts of discouragement, feeling that he made no headway in the coenobium and would be better off ‘practicing silence’.⁵⁹⁸ First, Barsanuphius responds by saying that ‘for such as we who wish to be delivered from evil days and frightful afflictions, God gave people two gifts through which they can be saved and delivered from all the passions of the “old self”: humility and obedience.’⁵⁹⁹ If, Barsanuphius goes on, a monk has humility and obedience, ‘not only will the Lord prosper the work you do now with your hands [carpentry], but he will also prosper all your works, for he guards the way of those who fear him and watches over their goings-on (cf Ps 120.8).’ If the monk can obtain humility and obedience, then the other virtues will flow. But to consider leaving the monastery—the ultimate act of disobedience, since by departing the carpenter would, of his own will, remove himself from the relationship of obedience to his abbot—this is an act entirely out of keeping with monastic identity. It is an act of will and, therefore, of pride. Barsanuphius, therefore, rounds on him and says, ‘Die, wretch, to every person! Say to the thought [of departure], “Who am I? ‘Earth and ashes’ and a dog.”’ If the monk can learn to hold himself of no account⁶⁰⁰ he can, with endurance and patience and by means of humble obedience, cast off the ‘old self’. He can die completely only if he cuts off his own will in humility. Yet it is only cutting off his will that he *can* obtain

⁵⁹⁶ QR, 278

⁵⁹⁷ QR, 237, 257, 285, 462

⁵⁹⁸ This picture emerges from the subscripts to QR, 553 and 554.

⁵⁹⁹ QR, 553; Lucien Regnault argues that for Barsanuphius, John, and their disciple Dorotheus, humility and obedience are inseparable. See Regnault, Lucien, ‘Théologie de la vie monastique selon Barsanuphe et Dorothee (VI^e siècle)’, in Fr. Gabriel le Maitre (ed.), *Théologie de la vie monastique: Études sur la tradition patristique*, Théologie 49 (Paris: Aubier, 1961), 320

⁶⁰⁰ The technical word is ἀψήφιστον and, though not used here, is implied. Elsewhere, Barsanuphius explicitly connects γῆ, σποδός, and ἀψήφιστον (QR, 48 and 101) while John and Barsanuphius both connect cutting off the will and counting oneself as nothing (QR, 101 and 278). Barsanuphius and John emphasises ‘τὸ ἀψήφιστον κράτειν’. While the idea recalls concepts found in Desert literature, the term only occurs there once, at Pistus 1: ‘Ὁ κατέχων τὸ ἀψήφιστον ἐν γνώσει, ἐπιτελεῖ πᾶσαν τὴν Γραφήν.’ See also, e.g., QR, 48, 94, 138, 259, 600 and 604.

humility. Or, rather, humility properly describes the cutting off of his will. This, though, is to be undertaken through obedience.

Obedience: A How-To Guide to Excising the Will

We have already seen that, for the Desert Fathers, obedience was a primary means of cutting off one's own will and of attaining the various virtues of humility, patience, and discernment. The Gaza Fathers continue in precisely that vein, except that they explicitly bring obedience under the heading of death, and this move is consistent with what I have shown of how they treat virtues like the excision of the will. Though obedience is without doubt dear to Barsanuphius,⁶⁰¹ John speaks of it more consistently and in broader terms, so this section will focus on John's letters.

For John and Barsanuphius both, cutting off the will means obeying one's spiritual father, whether abbot or, in the case of abbots and hermits, another monk.⁶⁰² John's all-embracing vision of obedience holds together 'excision of will' for God and for one's neighbor, since the abbot embodies both. As superior over a monk, he represents God whose will the monk expects to find in the abbot's commands. As a man and fellow-monk, the abbot represents the 'neighbour', that vague everyman figure whom the monk is called to love and before whom he must humiliate himself. In this regard, the monk must also submit to his brethren as though they too were 'above' him, but none of them can supersede the abbot whose authority is absolute. The monk's new relationships define his life in the monastic community, and his endurance there, as we have seen above, is predicated on making and keeping peace with one's brethren until death⁶⁰³ and, perhaps most importantly, on living *obediently* until death. That is, if a monk endures in community, he endures under an abbot. Even if he seeks advice from another, as many did with Barsanuphius and John, they were still ultimately responsible to their own abbots⁶⁰⁴—and, indeed, Barsanuphius and John support Seridos and his successor Aelianus in every matter, even if they privately correct him.⁶⁰⁵ Endurance until death really means obedience until death, as

⁶⁰¹ See, e.g., *QR*, 21, 34, 61, 549, 551

⁶⁰² *QR*, 249, 253, 288, 318 (cf. N 290 and *Syncretica* 2), 549; see also Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *The Monastic School*, 152-53.

⁶⁰³ See, e.g., *QR*, 690, which is addressed to laypersons.

⁶⁰⁴ *QR*, 551, 555-558 clarify that obedience to one's abbot is absolute—any deviation amounts to an attempt to assert one's will, which is antithetical to ascetical progress. *QR*, 552, though, provides an important corrective: spiritual elders should be understanding with their disciples.

⁶⁰⁵ Concerning different styles of direction in Gaza, and distinctive self-consciousness of authority, Neyt, 'Un Type d'Autorité', 343-356; and Perrone, 'The Necessity of Advice', 144-147. Their distinctions are valid but as far as

Barsanuphius says: ‘The one who wishes to become his disciple (cf. Mat 16.24) must cultivate obedience unto death.’⁶⁰⁶ This demand was levelled even at the abbot, Seridos, whose obedience to John ‘until death’ provides QR’s editor with a perfect example of denying one’s own will.⁶⁰⁷ Demands of obedience never cease, even for those in authority—there is no ‘freedom *from*’, only ‘freedom *within*’ obedience.

Obedience is a life-long condition whose character is such as to relativize physical death to a matter of indifference: ‘Death is not death outside of sins, but translation from suffering to rest, from darkness to “unspeakable light”⁶⁰⁸ and eternal life.’⁶⁰⁹ John connects this idea back to the Desert ideal of a ‘good death’, saying, ‘If someone dies in the monastery with humility and obedience, he will be saved through Christ. For Christ gives account for him.’⁶¹⁰ One who dies in obedience escapes judgment, precisely because, I think, he does not do his own will—he does God’s, and so who would give account to the Father but Christ? This is an idea which will be of tremendous importance for Climacus.

Conclusion: The Will of God, Prayer and the New Self

I have argued that the memory of death as judgment and mortality feeds into the Gazan conception of ascetic renunciation as a ‘practice’ of death. This practice, in accordance with Barsanuphius and John’s emphases on death as the limit of opportunity and extent of obedience, must be life-long and complete. The practice of death leaves no trace of the man who first entered the monastery. That man is gone. First to go is the web of relationships which bound him to the world. He severs his ties with family, friends, business and property. This act of severance can take time (as it did for Aelianus and Dorotheus), but it must be complete—no worldly thing may be allowed to grasp at the disciple of Christ.

obedience goes, the demands remain constant (so Hausherr, ‘Barsanuphe’, col. 1258). Nevertheless, Barsanuphius and John, whatever they said in private to the abbot, publicly supported his authority. The ‘chain of command’ as Havelone-Harper calls it, was maintained with great care and only served to reinforce the absolute value of obedience (*Disciples* 44-55). See also Chryssavgis, John, ‘Aspects of Spiritual Direction: The Palestinian Tradition’, in Allen, Pauline and Jeffreys, Elizabeth, *The Sixth Century: End or Beginning?*, Byzantina Australiana (Brisbane: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1996), 126-130.

⁶⁰⁶ QR, 359: ‘Ο θέλων οὖν μαθητῆς αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι, ἕως θανάτου ὀφείλει ποιῆσαι τὴν ὑπακοήν.’ See also QR, 288, 549 and 551 on obeying one’s abbot (or spiritual father) unto death.

⁶⁰⁷ QR 188, 570c

⁶⁰⁸ Cf. Ps-Macarius, *Collectio* B, 51.1.7

⁶⁰⁹ QR, 218: ‘ὁ γὰρ ἐκτὸς ἁμαρτιῶν θάνατος οὐκ ἔστι θάνατος, ἀλλὰ μετάβασις ἀπὸ θλίψεως εἰς ἀνάπαυσιν, ἀπὸ τοῦ σκότους εἰς τὸ ἀνεκλάλητον φῶς καὶ εἰς τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον.’ So also QR, 781: ‘Ο γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ θάνατος οὐδὲν κακὸν ἔχει.’ Cf. QR, 219 and 223.

⁶¹⁰ QR, 582

What begins with relationships culminates—this side of death—in a proleptic, *interior*, taste of heavenly blessings. For Barsanuphius and John the division of ages is absolute and so the monk must wait for death to receive his reward. Nevertheless, he prepares for death, remembering his own end and the judgment which follows, fixing his attention firmly on things which will last rather than on those which will be lost at death. His perception of the world, predicated on the ‘opposition’ and ‘continuity’ of ages, differs radically from perception and valuation whose scope is limited to the present life. Barsanuphius and John describe this radical transformation as ‘death.’

Most especially, though, the monk must completely cast away not only his old relationships but the *character* of those relationships; not only a false valuation of present goods, but the means of making it—a monk neither demands nor bargains nor expects *anything*. In order to complete his renunciation and cultivate a new perception and new kinds of relationships, the monk engages in a daily and life-long process of ‘cutting off the will.’ He violently rejects this core part of himself so as to receive God’s will instead of his own. He does so primarily through an obedient relationship with his abbot whom he serves in every matter absolutely. In obedience, he must give up his own judgment and even his own desire. No means are left to the monk to exert himself over others and so he is emptied of the selfish desire and deliberation which previously defined his relations with others and his perception of the world.

The practice of death has as its *τέλος* the emptying of the monk. Death strips him of his old identity, and readies him to receive a new one. What identity does he receive? Paradoxically, he gains his own, which is also God’s, and the result the Old Men sometimes call a ‘deified’ human because the emergent monk accepts and accomplishes God’s will rather than a human one. To quote Irenée Hausherr, ‘...*la perfection*...consiste dans la charité, qui est le faîte de la maison spirituelle. Or, aimer c’est observer les commandements...renier sa propre volonté pour faire la volonté de Dieu, et, ce qui est plus, pour *l’accomplir*.’⁶¹¹ For the Old Men even the abbot represents God, and it is always God’s will which the monk prays may be done on earth as in heaven. John writes also to the wayward carpenter:

Brother, already it has been made clear to you that it is not beneficial for you to depart from the coenobium. And now I’ll tell you that if you depart, you will come to a fall. Therefore you know what you are doing. But if you desire in truth to be saved, obtain

⁶¹¹ Hausherr, ‘Barsanuphe’, col. 1257

humility, obedience, and indeed submission—that is, cutting off the individual will—and you will live in heaven even when on earth.⁶¹²

John's advice draws together a number of threads which I have laid out in the foregoing sections. His closing phrase 'ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς' is *strikingly* similar to the Byzantine text of Matthew 6.10 (the Lord's Prayer): '...ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.' The similarity is that of recitation, and is likely intentional and certainly natural, given that John is speaking about giving up one's own will. The corollary request in the Lord's Prayer is that God's 'will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' John here implies that the monk lives 'in heaven and on earth' *precisely because* his life consists in doing not his own will but God's.⁶¹³ His life becomes the active fulfilment of his own request to God.

The juxtaposition of earth and heaven corresponds to a juxtaposition of personal and divine wills. Barsanuphius claims that cutting off one's will constitutes the meaning of Christ's admonition to 'hate one's own life' in order to follow him. How else, he asks rhetorically, 'does one hate his own life except by cutting off his own will for the Lord in all things, saying "Not as I will but as you do" (Mat 26.39)?'⁶¹⁴ Barsanuphius at another point reminds his correspondent that 'If someone desires to impose his own will he is a son of the Devil, and if someone does the will of such a person, he does the Devil's will (cf. John 8.44).'⁶¹⁵ The request to be delivered from the Evil One is, therefore, a request for help in excising one's own will. Cutting off one's will leads, in turn, to acceptance, rather, of God's will—provided, that like all renunciations, it is done 'for God.'⁶¹⁶ Thus, excision of one's will enables and enforces the shift in perception—the death to all that the world has to offer—expressed in prayer. The monk who sees with 'dead' perception realizes that only two choices lie before him: his own will which is earthy and, in reality, diabolical; and God's will, which is heavenly. The monk who accomplishes his own will becomes like Satan; the one who accomplishes God's becomes a child of God. Between the two possibilities is the practice of death by which the monk transitions from the old self, a child of the Devil, to the new self created according to God. The monk who learns to cut off his own will obtains humility, with which goes

⁶¹² QR, 554; while here John defines only ὑποταγή, 'submission', as excision of will, he elsewhere defines humility in the same way (462), and argues that cutting off one's will leads to ἀμεριμνία (505; so also Barsanuphius, 252).

⁶¹³ Cf. QR, 173: 'Τὸ δὲ θέλημα τὸ κατὰ Θεόν ἐστι τὸ κόψαι τὸ θέλημα τῆς σαρκὸς κατὰ τὸν Ἀπόστολον (cf. Eph 2.3).'

⁶¹⁴ QR, 572; cf. Diadochus, *Capita*, 66

⁶¹⁵ QR, 551; see also 574: 'Ἐὰν γὰρ ὁ ἄνθρωπος παραιτήσῃ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐρχόμενα, παρακούει τοῦ Θεοῦ, ζητῶν τὸ ἴδιον θέλημα στήσαι, οὕτως γὰρ καὶ οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ζητοῦντες τὸ ἴδιον θέλημα στήσαι οὐκ ἠδυνήθησαν ὑποταγῆναι τῷ νόμῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ.'

⁶¹⁶ So Perrone, 'The Necessity of Advice', 141-43.

compassion for neighbours, refusal to judge others, a recollection of one's own sin, a constant remembrance of one's own sin and the ability to hold oneself as a mortal and sinful human being who, whatever his apparent accomplishments, expects death and judgment and stands in need of God's grace and love.

Old and New Selves

The foregoing discussion points us to the conclusion that at stake in renunciation is the development of a new *sort* of person—a 'heavenly' rather than 'earthly' human. John's recourse to the Lord's Prayer suggests as much, while Barsanuphius' language of 'earthly' and 'heavenly' intentionally recalls Paul's eschatological juxtaposition of Adam and Christ (1 Cor 15.47-56). Barsanuphius' use of Paul's typology implies that the 'heavenly' self is to be equated with the 'new' self, and that, at least to some extent, with Christ. However, rather than speaking of 'now' and 'then', Barsanuphius transmutes Paul's temporal language into a spatial metaphor. No futurity delays the acquisition of a 'heavenly' self. It is not only possible here and now, it is the essential goal of monastic renunciation. Nevertheless, it requires a life-long process of transformation through obedience, self-examination, and repentance. Aryeh Kofsky argues that 'the new social and psychological conditions did not diminish the ascetic's self-awareness of sin but actually intensified it and even turned it into a life-long preoccupation.'⁶¹⁷ His renunciatory 'death to the world' merely clarifies the monk's vision, allowing him to see how deep his ties to the 'earthly' world run. He will spend his life cutting them and taking on, little by little, a 'heavenly' lifestyle.

Given that the monk becomes 'heavenly' and does God's will rather than his own, it is no great leap for Barsanuphius to boldly conclude:

The Son of God became human for you; through him, become God.⁶¹⁸ For he wishes it, when you do. And I pray that you be freed from "the old self" (Rom 6.6, Eph 4.22, Col

⁶¹⁷ Kofsky, A., 'Aspects of Sin in the Monastic School of Gaza', in Jan Assmann and Guy G. Stroumsa (eds), *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, Studies in the History of Religions 83 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 421

⁶¹⁸ Chryssavgis (*Letters*, 1:208 n. 180) thinks Barsanuphius has in mind Athanasius' *De Incarnatione Verbi* 54.3, which seems unlikely. Athanasius' version reads: Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηνθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν. Barsanuphius writes rather more abruptly, free of any technical language: Ἄνθρωπος γέγονε διὰ σέ ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ, γενοῦ καὶ σύ, δι' αὐτοῦ Θεός. Barsanuphius very rarely makes such an explicit claim of 'deification' (cf. 200, 207, and 484) and so this statement likely represents traditional material. The most proximal formulation comes from John Chrysostom, who says, discussing Paul's exhortation to 'feast' in 1 Cor 5.8, 'Τί γὰρ οὐ γέγονεν ἀγαθόν; ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος γέγονε διὰ σέ· θανάτου σε ἀπήλλαξεν, εἰς βασιλείαν ἐκάλεσεν. Ὁ τοιούτων τοίνυν ἐπιτυχῶν

3.9). But you are found in this region. If, therefore, you fight, the Son of God has given you a mind—give him this for the sake of heaven, “seeking things above, despising things below” (Col 3.2). There he is “at the right hand of God” (Col 3.1) to where I pray that you attain, with all “those who love his name” (Ps 68.37).⁶¹⁹

Barsanuphius would like to tell the hermit to take on his eschatological and even deified identity right now. But he cannot, because, as we have seen above, the opposition of ages is too strictly delineated in Barsanuphius’ thought. Instead he can suggest a partial solution: to offer God the ‘mind’, to think, if not actually dwell, in heaven. In doing so, the monk interiorly anticipates his eschatological dwelling which will be heavenly—in both mind and body. Barsanuphius has referred to the ‘old human’—that Pauline specter of sinful identity which haunts every Christian. The practice of death becomes the struggle to be freed of ‘the old human’ and so become like Christ. Or, as Barsanuphius puts it elsewhere,

...from the “alpha” to the “omega”, from the beginning state to the perfect, from the beginning of the road unto its completion, from the “putting off the old man with its” desires (cf. Col 3.9) to the “putting on the new human fashioned according to God” (Eph 4.24), from becoming a “stranger upon the” sensible “earth” (cf. Jer 14.8) [to] becoming a citizen of heaven (cf. Phil 3.20) and an inheritor of the noetic earth of the promises (cf. Mat 5.5).⁶²⁰

σὺ καὶ ἐπιτυγχάνων, πῶς οὐκ ὀφείλεις ἐορτάζειν πάντα τὸν βίον;’ (*In epistulam i ad Corinthios*, PG 61:125B). Barsanuphius could, therefore, be using Chrysostom’s language while channeling Athanasius.

Another likely source is N 81, wherein an old man says, ‘**Διὰ σὲ ἐγεννήθη ὁ Χριστὸς, ἄνθρωπε. Διὰ τοῦτο ἦλθεν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα σὺ σωθῆς. Γέγονε παῖς, γέγονεν ἄνθρωπος θεὸς ὢν.**’ The language is a little more distant (γεννάω instead of γίγνομαι) but the soteriological emphasis is certainly visible—however, it lacks language of deification. It is possible, then, that Barsanuphius has in mind either 1) a different version of this *apophthegma* or 2) a conflation of N 81 with Chrysostom and the already common teaching on θέωσις.

Bitton-Ashkelony (‘Demons and Prayers: Spiritual Exercises in the Monastic Community of Gaza in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries’, *VC* 57:2 [2003]: 200-221) claims that Barsanuphius honours the typically Byzantine emphasis on θέωσις ‘more in the breach than in practice’ (221). Barsanuphius seldom raises the topic of deification under any terms (e.g., QR 199, 200, 207, and 484). However, Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (*The Monastic School*, 93-96) argue from the same references that ‘Deification (θέωσις) through mystical experience becomes the ultimate monastic goal. It is also understood according to traditional monastic spirituality as an imitation of the Son of God’ (*The Monastic School*, 94). They are not entirely consistent in this judgment, since later they refer ‘the rare occasions when Barsanuphius described the culmination of perfection as the total self-transformation of a monk to a state of *theosis*’ (182). It is difficult to affirm that deification, for Barsanuphius and John, occurs precisely or only through mystical experience, or even what that mystical experience would look like, though in the same pages Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky are eager to equate it with dream visions and trance states. I would argue instead that ‘deification’ includes an intellectual, a relational, and volitional element—all of which converge in the practice of death.

See on deification in ascetic literature generally Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 235-262.

⁶¹⁹ QR, 199

⁶²⁰ QR, 49

‘Putting off the old human’ corresponds to the beginning of ascetic struggle—the total renunciation of the world, past relationship, goods and desires.⁶²¹ For this to work, the monk’s gaze passes to heaven only through the refractory prism of divine judgment. Because eternity divides according to actions and dispositions developed in the present life, the monk who shifts his gaze and, with it, his hopes, to heavenly goods, must live a life worthy of or, at least, in accordance with, those goods. Thus the mental renunciation of the world carries with it a totalizing ethical demand, that the monk actually act in accordance with the mind given him by God.⁶²² Because of this, the destruction of the old self—a process of dying—is not the end. It only enables the monk to put on a ‘new human’ self, one which is Godly. Barsanuphius considers the ‘new self’ to be more properly human, and certainly more godlike, than the old one. Death, then, leads to the formation of a properly *human* being—which is a god. Ceasing to do his own will, the monk accomplishes God’s; giving up his blood relations, he is adopted as a son of God.

Perfect Prayer

The active expression of ‘living death’ and its deifying end consists in prayer. Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky argue that prayer, for Barsanuphius, helps form the new person in Christ and, moreover, that the Gazan Fathers distinguished between ‘pure’ or ‘perfect’ prayer and more generally usable prayers, such as the *Trisagion* and the ‘Jesus Prayer.’⁶²³ Thus, prayer forms a person to undertake ‘perfect’ and ‘unceasing’ prayer with God. The spiritual exercise is, as Pierre Hadot argued, both formative and expressive of an existential condition. Along these lines, Barsanuphius gleans ideas of ‘perfect prayer’ from Evagrius and, before him, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, absorbing what had become, by his day, a classic definition of prayer as *ὁμιλία (τοῦ νοῦ) πρὸς (τὸν) Θεόν*.⁶²⁴ Barsanuphius, as is his wont when dealing with traditional material, modifies this definition somewhat toward a rather more practical-sounding concept: ‘Perfect prayer is speaking undistractedly with God by gathering together all the thoughts with the faculties of sense [Προσευχὴ δὲ τελεία, ἐστὶ τὸ λαλῆσαι τῷ Θεῷ ἀρεμβάστως, ἐν τῷ συνάγειν ὅλους τοὺς λογισμοὺς μετὰ τῶν αἰσθητηρίων].’⁶²⁵ Prayer, Barsanuphius, continues, when it has become perfect, ‘says nothing further to God, except “Deliver me from the Evil One” and “Let your

⁶²¹ On the ‘old self’ see also QR, 14, 71, and 77

⁶²² Cf. QR, 66, etc.

⁶²³ *The Monastic School*, 157-182

⁶²⁴ See the discussion in Note 330 above.

⁶²⁵ QR, 150; Barsanuphius uses *εὐχή* and *προσευχὴ* interchangeably.

will be done" in me (cf. Mat 6.10).' The one who prays in this manner 'stands having his mind before God and speaks with him. He perceives that he prays when he is delivered from distraction and sees that his mind rejoices, being enlightened by the Lord.' Perfect prayer is, then, a completed escape from the multiform distractions which the world offers. Prayer, in the two simple requests to be delivered from the Evil One and for God's will to be done, resolves the apparent multitude of worldly and spiritual goods into their proper apocalyptic duality, and, as already discussed, continually opens the monk to receiving and accomplishing God's will.

To connect this perfect clarity back to death: prayer effects the changes necessary for a monk to arrive at this state of clarity and eschatological focus. Continuing the passage quoted above, Barsanuphius explains that 'What leads a person to [perfect prayer] is dying to every person and dying to the world and all that is in it [Ὁδηγεῖ δὲ εἰς τοῦτο τὸν ἄνθρωπον, τὸ ἀποθανεῖν ἀπὸ παντὸς ἀνθρώπου, καὶ ἀποθανεῖν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς ἐν αὐτῷ].' Thus, Barsanuphius draws an intimate connection between the spiritual exercise of prayer and the practice of death, whose result is 'perfect prayer' in which the monk, dead to the world and all and everyone it contains, can speak undistractedly with God. Prayer thus expresses the radicality of practices of death regarding both relationships and the excision of the will, and it enables the monk to become godly and even divine.

IV. AMBIGUITY AND CRUCIFIXION

To conclude this chapter, I want to show briefly how Barsanuphius and John's deployment of language of death refers especially to Christ's unique death. VA's pointedly participatory representation of the holy man constructs spirituality in mimetic terms—Antony becomes the 'physician of Egypt' in imitation of and by participation in Christ's work as the 'physician of the world.' The imitation of Christ, however, is a much less prominent theme in Desert literature, and then really not connected to death.⁶²⁶ However, a sense that asceticism—and Christianity more generally—means imitating Christ and especially his *death* comes to the fore in Gazan literature. As Paula de Angelis-Noah says, for the Old Men 'l'idéal ascétique est l'imitation du Christ.'⁶²⁷ Havelone-Harper extends the point to say that 'the monk and lay person pursued the same goal: the imitation of Christ.'⁶²⁸ For the Old Men, then, monastic practice is the means by which one attains a properly *Christian* identity, and their deployment of the language of death reflects their concern with imitation of Christ.

The Ambiguity of Death

To begin with, we cannot get too comfortable with a facile proclamation of the monk as 'dead'. Death, at least for Barsanuphius, holds as many negative connotations as it does positive ones. While he is certainly fond of describing the monk as one who is dead, or has died to all, he also quotes Luke 9.60 with some regularity.⁶²⁹ This verse reads: 'But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."' When Barsanuphius admonishes Theodore it is in these terms—he conceives monastic withdrawal as departure from the dead. It functions as a call to press forward in repentance and obedience,⁶³⁰ as a command to ignore bodily needs⁶³¹, and as a reminder of the urgency of ascetic progress. Barsanuphius several times couples Luke 9.60 with a command to 'wake up' or a warning not to sleep too long. To Theodore, he argues that a sign of having left the dead is to be awake;

⁶²⁶ Though see N 203. Cf. Diadochus, *Capita*, 82; and Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 183: these mostly point out that death leads to resurrection. Resurrection, though made possible by Christ, need not be construed as an 'imitation' of Christ.

⁶²⁷ De Angelis-Noah, 'La Méditation de Barsanuphe sur la lettre *Ἦτα*', 505. See also Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *The Monastic School*, 93-94; Regnault, 'Théologie de la vie monastique selon Barsanuphe et Dorothée', 320-21; and Neyt, 'La Formation au monastère', 156-57

⁶²⁸ Havelone-Harper, *Disciples*, 105

⁶²⁹ John never alludes to Luke 9.60. It is a favorite only with Barsanuphius and its deployment, therefore, a helpful witness to his theology. On which, see Neyt and de Angelis-Noah, 'Introduction', *Correspondance*, I.1:78-81

⁶³⁰ QR 4, 37, 68, 495

⁶³¹ QR 517

so those who have claimed to do so ought to act like it.⁶³² This wake-up call sometimes carries an eschatological overtone. Barsanuphius writes to Euthymius, ‘Remember how the Lord says, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead.” Pay attention to yourself, for those will not deliver you in the fearful hour [ἐν τῇ ὥρᾳ τῇ φοβερᾷ]. Often I say to you, “wake from your heavy slumber—for you do not know at what hour the Lord comes—so that he will find you prepared” (cf. Luke 12.39-40).’⁶³³ Here, Barsanuphius motivates his exhortation to ‘wake up’ by recourse to death (the ‘fearful hour’) and Christ’s *parousia* with its implied judgment. Barsanuphius’ usage of Luke 9.60 reinforces the urgency of ascetic withdrawal as well as the absolute dichotomy which we have already seen in his language of ‘earth’ and ‘heaven.’

What is interesting about this is that Barsanuphius is as happy to use language of ‘the dead’ to describe those whose lifestyle ascetics renounce as he is ascetics themselves. This points us to a crucial ambiguity in the language of death. In terms of ends, it can describe either a heavenly or a worldly, a saintly or a sinful existence—death ‘to the world’ and death ‘for the soul’ are both, in different senses, death. Of course, this particularly equivocity can be seen already in Paul’s epistles and allows also for the development of alternative definitions of death by Philo, Clement, and Origen. Like those authors, Barsanuphius talks about spiritual ‘death’—a death which comes not to the body but the soul.⁶³⁴ A brief comparison of passages by Barsanuphius and Ps-Macarius exemplifies this ambiguity. Ps-Macarius describes the soul no longer bothered by passions in the following vivid terms:

It is as if someone dies in a city: neither does he hear the voice of those there or the chatter of the sounds, but he has died once and for all and is transported to another place, where there are no sounds or cries of the city. So also the soul, when it is sacrificed and dies, in which city it resides and lives—the city of the evil of the passions, neither does it hear the voice of the thoughts of darkness. No longer does it hear in itself the chatter and cry of vain thought and perturbation of spirits of darkness...Let us strive now also to be sacrificed by his power and to die to the age of the wickedness of darkness...⁶³⁵

In this passage Ps-Macarius establishes the insensibility of the corpse as analogous to ascetics shutting their senses to the thoughts and impulses of the passions and the demons. Barsanuphius uses a

⁶³² QR, 130, 138; Poemen 124

⁶³³ QR, 138

⁶³⁴ QR, 229, 230, 233 (using the language of ‘second death’ from Revelation), 354, 379, 501 (where he adduces anger and lust as the twin causes of death), and 553. Cf. Poemen

⁶³⁵ Ps-Macarius, *Collectio* H, 1, ll. 182-192; so also Evagrius, *Spiritibus*, 3 (PG 79:1148B): ‘Ἐξολόθρευσον ἐκ σοῦ πᾶν ἔμπνεον κακίας, καὶ μέλη σαρκός σου νέκρωσον ἰσχυρῶς. Ὅν τρόπον γὰρ ἀνηρημένος πολέμιος, οὐ παρέξει σοι φόβον, οὕτω νεκρωθὲν σῶμα οὐ ταράξει σου τὴν ψυχὴν. Οὐκ οἶδε πυρὸς ὀδύνην σῶμα νεκρὸν, οὐδὲ ἐγκρατῆς ἡδονὴν ἐπιθυμίας νεκρᾶς.’

strikingly similar image to a precisely opposite end. He tells a hermit who has asked ‘how someone comes to self-control and how he distinguishes physical infirmity from demonic and how much he ought to drink’:

...I consider that no one can discern what you request of me, save the one who comes up to this measure. For a living human has a sense of hotness and of coldness in those things which are offered to it—but a dead body has no sense of these things, for its sense is destroyed. Likewise, someone who learns them comes to the measure of understanding of letters and knows to discern them—but someone who neither studies them neither comes to them, even if he asks and hears ten thousand times what the letters are is still unable to grasp their meaning. So also with what you have asked: however much you say to someone, it is more necessary to gain the experience.⁶³⁶

To understand the proper limits of even *basic* ascetic practices—like self-control in one’s diet, or real versus false physical exhaustion—requires discernment only gained from lived experience. Thus, the image of the senseless corpse serves very nicely as a *negative* example, since its insensibility, like the ignorance of an illiterate, precludes the possibility of discernment. Barsanuphius is, therefore, as comfortable using death to caution ascetics as he is modeling their monastic life on it.

Barsanuphius, at least, reminds us that death remains a highly ambiguous image and certainly a precariously perched conception of the ascetic life. There is a fine line between the ‘τύπον νεκροῦ’ and ‘the dead’ who ‘bury their own dead.’ Barsanuphius never explains the distinction, but the ambiguity appears to be inherent to the language of θάνατος and, especially, the νεκρός.

Bearing the Death of Christ

What, then, is the distinction between good and bad metaphorical deaths? It is worth recalling John’s description of Barsanuphius cell as his ‘cemetery.’ He claims that there Barsanuphius ‘rests from all passions. For he has died completely to sin, and his cell in which he has been captured [ζεζώγηται] as in a grave, for the name of Jesus.’⁶³⁷ Barsanuphius has not simply died, but died ‘for the name of Jesus.’ Barsanuphius dies for Jesus’ sake—he dies a kind of martyr’s death. But, more generally, his death is contextualized in relation to Jesus. He does not undertake a self-serving asceticism, but, rather, seeks to offer himself to Christ. We must view the Gazan deployment of ‘practices of death’ in view of service to Christ. For example, John offers some illuminative advice ‘περὶ ὑπομονῆς καὶ ὑπακοῆς.’ He

⁶³⁶ QR 154; cf. Evagrius (*Rationes*, PG 40:1257A), who draws a negative connotation from the image of a νεκρός.

⁶³⁷ QR, 142; so Brown, *Body and Society*, 219

says that ‘Whoever seeks life eternal, should seek to keep Christ’s word “unto shedding of blood” (cf. Heb 12.4) in cutting off the personal will. For no one seeking the personal will, which is displeasing to God, has a portion with Christ.’⁶³⁸ While John’s language certainly recalls the phenomenon of Christian martyrdom, more generally he is arguing that the fundamental practice of ‘cutting off one’s will’ is an act of obedience unto death. The metaphorical death to which the ascetic submits becomes, therefore, the limit of his obedience to and, more than that, his participation in Christ. Christ is the reference for ascetic practices and, therefore, the criterion by which to determine whether one’s ‘death’ is beneficial or merely an expression of damnation.

We may go further, though and say that the ascetic’s ‘death’ is an act of imitation of Christ performed out of obedient devotion. To explain, Barsanuphius writes to John of Beersheba at a point when John has reprimanded Seridos for the latter’s administration of the monastery. Barsanuphius responds with a scathing rebuke, telling John to recall that he is ‘earth and ashes’, that he should weep and mourn rather than slander, that he should never forget the abbot’s position of responsibility for and authority over him, that he should count himself as nothing, and much more. Finally, Barsanuphius concludes:

‘Pass over from the world; mount the cross. Be lifted from the earth (cf. John 3.14, 12.34), “shake off the dust from your feet” (Mat 10.14).’⁶³⁹

We have already seen the language of ‘passing over from the world’—it is the language of dying to oneself. Here, though, Barsanuphius describes that passage in terms of an ascent to the cross and escape from hostile territory (the reference to Mat 10.14). Christ’s crucifixion provides, here, the motive, the model, and the means of ascetic practice: to become new one must die Christ’s death. Another time, a layman asks Barsanuphius how to ‘worthily give thanks to God’.⁶⁴⁰ Barsanuphius responds eloquently: ‘If people give thanks and gifts for sensible [αἰσθητῶν] and corruptible deeds, what can we possibly offer to the one crucified for us, if we wish to repay him? We ought to endure unto death for him.’⁶⁴¹ Imitation of Christ is, Barsanuphius argues, the only possible means of worthy thanksgiving. He also implies that all the enormities of monastic practice and in particular its focus on ‘dying’ to oneself and the world, is

⁶³⁸ QR, 583

⁶³⁹ QR, 48; see also 88, 112, wherein Barsanuphius describes the monk’s severance from ‘the old self’ in Pauline terms of crucifixion, whether of oneself (Gal 6.14) or the flesh (Gal 5.24). Cf. 351.

⁶⁴⁰ Perhaps taken from Tobit 13.11, more likely the phrase is liturgical, being part of the ‘Litany of Thanksgiving’ and the priest’s prayer of thanksgiving after the Eucharist.

⁶⁴¹ QR, 404. For the theme of thanksgiving more generally see 6, 20, 29, 70, 114-116, 137b, 182, and 199.

founded on a principle not of legalism or fear, but instead on gratitude for the indescribably great gift which God gave humanity on the cross. Jesus' crucifixion which salvifically draws all humankind to himself demands and describes the 'death' which the monk must die.

At the heart of the practice of death, we have seen, is the excision of will. This too the Old Men conceive as an imitation of Christ. Indeed, Barsanuphius explains to Dorotheus that Matthew 16.24 ('Whoever desires to follow after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross') means 'to cut off the will in all things and not to think of oneself as someone.'⁶⁴² John explains the same verse in terms of 'obedience unto death.'⁶⁴³ Crucifixion, then, comes to refer specifically to the core practices of monastic 'death.' Moreover, both Barsanuphius and John cite John 6.38 ('I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one sending me') as an explanation of obedience and the excision of will.⁶⁴⁴ It is an interesting facet of Gazan theology that Jesus the teacher and giver of commandments is also the model of obedience. The Old Men derive this conception from their scriptural formation and, as François Neyt and Paula de Angelis-Noah write, 'typologie s'oriente vers la croix du Christ qui est le symbole central du solitaire de Gaza, pèlerin sur les chemins de cette terre.'⁶⁴⁵ For the Great Old Men, obedience to one's abbot—obedience even and, perhaps especially, unto death—is ultimately both justifiable and comprehensible as an imitation of Christ's obedience to the Father in the incarnation, though with particular reference to his obedience unto death.

This latter aspect of Christ's life both Barsanuphius and John, like Basil of Caesarea before them, draw from Philippians 2.8. The Great Old Men draw on Paul's eulogy of Christ to portray endurance unto death as singularly Christ-like and use the characterization to underpin various virtues, of which thanksgiving to God is foremost.⁶⁴⁶ Thus, Jesus' death exemplifies obedience and endurance,⁶⁴⁷ certainly, but it also models humility.⁶⁴⁸ According to John, bearing one's cross actually brings a monk to ἡσυχία.⁶⁴⁹ Finally, humility, obedience, and endurance find their personal confluence in Christ's kenotic love. Barsanuphius sums up for Euthymius

⁶⁴² QR, 257

⁶⁴³ QR, 359

⁶⁴⁴ QR, 150 (by Barsanuphius) and 288 (by John); cf. Kofsky, 'Renunciation of Will', 335-36

⁶⁴⁵ Neyt and de Angelis-Noah, 'Introduction', *Correspondance*, I.1:88

⁶⁴⁶ QR, 70

⁶⁴⁷ See, e.g., QR 359 and 551 where the language of obedience μέχρι θανάτου echoes Paul's language in Phil 2.8; cf. also 251, where Barsanuphius argues that obedience makes humans like Christ.

⁶⁴⁸ QR, 455; cf. 307 which makes the same claim without reference to Phil 2.8.

⁶⁴⁹ QR, 314

...our great and heavenly doctor gave us cures and balms...Above all he gave us humility which banishes every vainglory and “every exalted thing which sets itself against the knowledge of the glory of the Son of God” (2 Cor 10.5); obedience which extinguishes all the “flaming darts of the enemy” (Eph 6.16⁶⁵⁰); and cutting off our will in all things for our neighbour...But the great balm, strengthening “all the members” (cf. Rom 12.24, 1 Cor 12.12) and “healing every disease and malady” (Mat 4.23), he gave us love like his own. For he himself became our example. For it says, “He humbled himself, becoming not simply obedient, but even unto death” (Phil 2.8). And “laying down his own life for us” (1 John 3.16), he taught us, saying “Love one another, just as I have loved you” (John 13.34).⁶⁵¹

Each virtue offers a cure for something, but all the virtues come together in love. Likewise, in Phil 2.8, Deutero-Paul draws together humility and obedience in his description of Christ’s actions. But Barsanuphius must explicate their unity as *love*, which he accomplishes by referring the interpretation of Phil 2.8 to John’s gospel where love is expressed through self-giving in death for others.

Conclusion

Barsanuphius takes up the metaphorical references which death holds for ascetic practice and moulds them to crucifixion. Revolving the constellation of ascetic practices around Christ’s life, Barsanuphius distinguishes a spiritually beneficial ‘death’ from a state which simply expresses perdition. The ascetic dies out of obedience to Christ and in thanksgiving for his death. However, the ascetic’s ‘death’ becomes a means of imitating Christ—to ‘die’ for Christ means being ‘crucified.’ By such language, Barsanuphius contextualizes ascetic practices and ideals within an incarnational framework. Thus ‘death’—and particularly that obedient form of death which excises the will—underpins the Christlike virtues of obedience, humility, and love.

Barsanuphius, however, goes somewhat further, turning to the existential radicality which attainment of those virtues implies: a slow, painful death on the cross—but one whose very instrument becomes the means of a paradoxical victory. The cross works wonders, but the greatest wonder is that it not only kills but that, since crucifixion is a death ‘to sin,’ the cross brings the monk to resurrection.

If you wish, therefore, not to limp [μὴ χωλεύειν], take the staff of the cross and affix your hands to it and die, and you will no longer limp [οὐκέτι χωλαίνεις], for a corpse does not limp. And if you have this staff, you have no need of a door-keeper. For with this

⁶⁵⁰ Again, Barsanuphius has substituted another virtue for Deutero-Paul’s ‘shield of faith.’ In 461, Barsanuphius substitutes ‘weeping’ and here ‘obedience.’ It is illuminating of his hermeneutic that he sometimes pastes virtues near to his own heart into a Pauline framework of apocalyptic ‘spiritual warfare’.

⁶⁵¹ QR, 61

staff you may pursue not only the dogs, but also the leader of the beasts, the “roaring lion” (1 Pet 5.8)...And whoever is nailed to this rod is delivered completely from the hemorrhagic flow. For dying he dies to sin. And what hope is expected after these things except the third-day resurrection? It is enough for the one crucified to be raised with Jesus.⁶⁵²

The ascetic dies, yes, but not just any death. This death makes a person whole—no longer ‘limping.’ Barsanuphius here magnificently inverts Jesus’ admonition at Mark 9.45, that ‘καλόν ἐστίν σοι εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν ζωὴν **χωλόν**, ἢ τοὺς δύο πόδας ἔχοντα βληθῆναι εἰς τὴν γέενναν.’ We have seen how, not only for Antony and the Desert Fathers, but for Barsanuphius and John as well, the prospect of judgment devalues temporal goods, health, even one’s own life. Barsanuphius does not contradict that line of thought in this passage. Rather, he spiritualizes the ‘limp’ and argues that through death, whatever physical suffering it may entail, one can become a whole being. Death is not the end for the monk who imitates Christ’s death through renunciation and obedience. Not even resurrection is the end. The end— if I may even call it that—is eternal life:

Depart from oldness that you may find newness. And believe in Christ that you may be crucified with him and killed with him and buried with him and raised luminously with him and caught up gloriously from the earth with him and live eternally with him.⁶⁵³

⁶⁵² QR, 61

⁶⁵³ QR, 209

4. *THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT*

He thought to keep himself from Hell
By knowing and by loving well.
His work and vision, his desire
Would keep him climbing up the stair.

At limit now of flesh and bone,
He cannot climb for holding on.
“I fear the drop, I feel the blaze—
Lord, grant thy mercy and thy grace.”

---Wendell Berry, '1989, IV'

Thus far this study has traced the development and elaboration of a ‘memory of death’ and a ‘practice’ of death among Greek Christian ascetics. The memory of death incorporates contemplation of mortality and judgment. Contemplation of judgment means fear of punishment and hope of beatitude, and the two operate best together. At the same time, not all authors surveyed think so highly of these practices, some out of mistrust of memory itself, some on account of possibly extreme results. Nevertheless, the literature’s trajectory is to view memory of death as integral to asceticism.

Language of death has also been used as a conceptual framework to describe the ascetic life as a whole. This did not arise in *VA*, though Antony’s admissions about ‘daily dying’ hint at it. Some Desert Fathers speak of ‘dying’ to oneself or others, but others display ambivalence about the language of death. This is because, when the Desert Fathers describe asceticism as ‘death’ they rely implicitly on an optimistic assessment of what renunciation can accomplish. The Gaza Fathers take up ideas common among in the Desert—severance of relationships, contemplation of spiritual things and the denial of one’s own will by means in obedience—and speak of these as ways of ‘dying.’ Barsanuphius, following Basil’s *Asceticon*, sees death as the limit of withdrawal and, especially, obedience. For them also the opposition of the present life and the next, found among the Desert Fathers, is balanced against an important continuity of spiritual relationships. The conceptual material for this ‘continuity’ can be found as far back as *VA*’s visions of death. The Gaza Fathers, I note, do not *resolve* the tensions which emerged in Desert literature, and do not speak at all to the ambivalences found there. Rather, in their tacit acknowledgement of the ambiguity of death, they hint at the same kind of mistrust found earlier.

As we turn to John Climacus, we have elaborated a trajectory in traditional which increasingly utilizes language of death to motivate, develop, and describe the aims and ideals, as well as the practices, of Christian asceticism. Rough edges remain—there is as much ambiguity to death and ambivalence towards its achievements as there is utilization of its language and practice.

In this final chapter, I will argue that, for Climacus, death is not one among many means of cultivating the ascetic life. Nor is it beholden to an undue optimism. Rather, he draws on, moulds, and even harmonizes the themes and material laid out above to craft a comprehensive vision of asceticism as imitation of Christ. I shall argue first, that his vision takes shape through an engagement with time made possible by the memory of mortality and judgment. I will then show that the monk works out this engagement as a practice of death in obedience. Finally, I will show that Climacus conceives of monastic identity as an imitation of Christ through the practice of death, and that this lifestyle incorporates repentance which allows for failures and earthy realism about what is and is not achievable for ascetics.

I. THE LADDER AND ITS AUTHOR

John of Sinai

Though we have discussed him already at some length in the Introduction, it would be good to introduce our author. This is difficult, though, since little is known with any kind of certainty of the man who wrote the *Ladder*. He is a shadowy figure, remembered more for his writing than anything else. Even his commonest epithet, Κλίμακος, merely means ‘of the *Ladder*’, suggesting that the most important thing to know about John is not where or when he lived or what profession he held but that he wrote the *Ladder*.

Our primary source is a biography written by one Daniel of Raithou, about whom we know nothing—save that he was a monk at the monastery of Raithou.⁶⁵⁴ As Chryssgavis puts it, ‘Daniel writes as an eyewitness, or at the very least as a contemporary...Yet we cannot be entirely sure of this; after all, in his *Life*, which resembles an edifying eulogy, Daniel too is imprecise.’⁶⁵⁵ With Chryssavgis’ caveat in mind, we can nevertheless use Daniel’s piece to trace a career for John Climacus from its pages. He came to Sinai at sixteen—likely from Egypt, with at least some education.⁶⁵⁶ When John arrived, Sinai had already a long history and had become a thriving spiritual centre. Christians had lived in the wilderness there since at least the Decian persecution (ca. 254).⁶⁵⁷ When Egeria visited Sinai at the end of the Fourth century, she found a monastic centre well-equipped for pilgrims.⁶⁵⁸ Various ascetics travelled to the wilderness for solitude, and after the ‘devastation of Scetis’ many Scetiote monks settled in Sinai.⁶⁵⁹ By

⁶⁵⁴ *Vita Joanni cognomento Scholastici, vulgo Climaci*, in Rader’s edition, reprinted in PG 88:596-608, with other material—miracle accounts (608-09) and the Menological entries (609-612); and in Société des Bollandistes, *Acta Sanctorum*, vol. 3: March, part 2, (Antwerp: Jacob Meursium, 1668), 834F-838F. I will use PG 88, and refer both to biographical material and the *Ladder* itself only by section and column number.

⁶⁵⁵ Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 15

⁶⁵⁶ Though Daniel admits ignorance of John’s birthplace (596A), he does tell us that John was sixteen (597A) when he came to Sinai.

⁶⁵⁷ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.42.4

⁶⁵⁸ *Itinerarium Egeriae*, 1.1-1.5

⁶⁵⁹ The narratives associated with Nilus of Ancyra (PG 79:589-694) describe semi-eremitic monks living in seclusion on Sinai in probably the early Fifth century. Ammonius’ described Christians killed by Saracens in raids on Sinai: Lewis, Agnes Smith (ed. and trans.), *The forty martyrs of the Sinai desert: and the story of Eulogios from a Palestinian Syriac and Arabic palimpsest* (Cambridge: CUP, 1912), 1-24. However, Chitty gives good reason for mistrusting the historicity of either account, locating them instead as examples of Sixth-century hagiography, what he calls ‘the mood of its time’ (*Desert a City*, 170-71).

On Scetiote colonization, see Cronius 5 (Joseph of Peleusia lived in Sinai), Nicon 1 (who lived at Sinai), Netras 1 (Netras lived in a cell at Sinai), and Silouan 5 (Silouan also lived at Sinai). Cf. Sisoës 17, 26; Megethius 2. On which

the time Justinian ordered the building of a *castrum* (in this case a fortified coenobium) at the base of Gebel Musa, the mountain had long been associated with Mosaic Sinai and Elijah's Horeb.⁶⁶⁰ The monastery there was called 'Βάτος,' since it was dedicated to the Mother of God of the Burning Bush.⁶⁶¹

At Sinai, John became disciple to a monk named Martyrius⁶⁶² who, four years later, tonsured him in the chapel atop Gebel Musa.⁶⁶³ John lived for either three or nineteen years under Martyrius' direction in a cell near the central *castrum*.⁶⁶⁴ This type of life, 'practicing stillness with one or two others,' John would term *hesychastic* and would laud above either eremitic or coenobitic lifestyles, even while affirming the validity of each.⁶⁶⁵ Indeed, John experienced firsthand all three forms of monastic life. After Martyrius' death, John moved further up the mountainside and became a hermit in a cave near Tholas.⁶⁶⁶ There he dwelt for forty years, Daniel tells us, in what solitude he could, as his reputation increased among the brethren and visitors to the monastery. John received visitors, gave counsel, worked signs, and, above all, became 'a font of tears.'⁶⁶⁷ Daniel draws particular attention to this detail, probably because John placed so much importance on πένθος and δάκρυα in the *Ladder*. The length of John's sojourn is less historically precise than religiously allusive, recalling Moses' forty days atop Sinai (Exod 24.18f), Elijah's sojourn there (3 Kgs 19.8) and the Israelites' forty years in the wilderness of Sinai (Num 32.13). During this time John accepted a disciple—aptly named Moses—to live with him. Eventually, John was persuaded to become abbot of the monastery, and he dwelt there in old age—though it is

see Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 2-7. Cf. also Van Parys, Michel, 'Abba Silvain et ses disciples. Une famille monastique entre Scetis et la Palestine a la fin du IV^e et la premier moitie du V^e siècle', *Irenikon* 61 (1968), 313-30 and 451-80.

⁶⁶⁰ Sinai and Horeb refer to the same mountain.

⁶⁶¹ Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, 5.8.2-10, in G. Wirth (post J. Haury), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vol. 4 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1964); cf. Euty chius of Alexandria (Sa'id Ibn-Batriq), *Annales*, PG 111:1071-1072. Euty chius is perhaps more reliable than Procopius: Dahari, Uzi, *Monastic Settlements in South Sinai in the Byzantine Period: The Archaeological Remains*, IAA Reports 9 (Jerusalem: Israeli Antiquities Authority, 2000), 56.

⁶⁶² 608B

⁶⁶³ 608B-C

⁶⁶⁴ 597B; Daniel's language is ambiguous. Ware ('Introduction', 4) reads it as 'when John was nineteen years old', while Chryssavgis assumes that 'nineteen' refers to the number of years that John spent with Martyrius (*John Climacus*, 17). Both are possible, though the latter seems to have been preferred by the compilers of the *Menaion* who assume John to have died at the age of eighty. The forty years at Tholas followed by an estimated five as abbot would give precisely that age. If we follow Ware, then either the *Menaion* is wrong (entirely possible, since it is also likely wrong about John's era) or sixteen years need to be accounted for.

⁶⁶⁵ §1, 641D-644A

⁶⁶⁶ 597C

⁶⁶⁷ 597C-600C; an alternative account is given at 608C-612A, which speaks of numerous miracles. Daniel notes that John was renowned as a healer (604C) but is more interested in his pastoral prowess.

possible that, at the end of his life, he returned to solitude.⁶⁶⁸ Somewhere in all this, John found time for reading both spiritual and secular, and at least some rhetorical training.⁶⁶⁹

The writing of the *Ladder* dates in all likelihood to John's abbasial period. If the correspondence between John Climacus and John, abbot of Raithou, is genuine,⁶⁷⁰ then Climacus was asked in his capacity as abbot and with his experience as a shepherd of souls, to give advice to another abbot for use in his monastery. Indeed, the supplement called *Pastor* is clearly written from one abbot to another, and so we may think of the *Ladder* as the work of one in authority, but who also had spent most of his life, sixty-one years, in the monastic trenches, and so he draws not only on his own wide learning and rhetorical education but also on a lifetime of experience as both disciple and guide.⁶⁷¹

Throughout John's deceptively simple life, the terrain both physical and spiritual of Sinai—the history of desert withdrawal and wandering written into the fierce landscape of Gebel Musa—shaped his character and his thought. Traditionally, scholars have understood Climacus as having come from Egypt and having at least travelled to Alexandria. This is evidenced by his remarkable memory for details of a 'Great Monastery' which, based on two allusions to Alexandria, scholars have believed to have been located near that city.⁶⁷² There are, at most, two places in John's world: Egypt and Sinai. Marie-Joseph Pierre has recently argued eloquently, though not always persuasively, that there is really only one place: Sinai.⁶⁷³ Pierre attempts to recast each scene which might suggest Alexandria or Egypt—especially those of the 'Great Monastery' (§4) and the 'Prison' (§5)—as being veiled references to the Vatos Monastery itself.⁶⁷⁴ Pierre's argument is speculative, but he is right that Climacus was not simply a resident of Sinai: he was *formed* there and his life of discipleship, solitude, and pastorship, has as its reference a world bounded by the spiritual and historical evocations of the Sinaite wilderness wherein he sought the

⁶⁶⁸ 605B-608A; cf. the other account at 609A-B.

⁶⁶⁹ Once, scholars like Krumbacher assumed that Climacus was unlettered. However, not only his biography but also the *Ladder*, of which more below, testify to his learning and skill as a writer and divine. Most recently, Johnsén argues at length that the *Ladder* is a highly structured example of late antique rhetorical argumentation, and that Climacus wrote in the 'Jewelled style' advocated by Longinus (*Reading John Climacus*, 30-195). Cf. Ware, 'Introduction', 10; and Bogdanovic, 'Jean Climaque dans la littérature byzantine', 221-22.

⁶⁷⁰ In PG 88: 623A-628C; Bogdanovic picks this correspondence out as authentic ('Jean Climaque dans la littérature byzantine', 217).

⁶⁷¹ So Ware, 'Introduction', 6-10; Johnsén, *Reading John Climacus*, 23-25; cf. Völker, *Scala Paradisi*, 153

⁶⁷² See, e.g., Chryssavgis' extravagant claim that the *Ladder* provides 'significant historical information about the cenobite monasteries in Alexandria...'. (*John Climacus*, 19).

⁶⁷³ Pierre, Marie-Joseph, 'Unité de lieu dans la vie et l'œuvre de Jean Climaque', in *Pensée grecque et sagesse d'Orient*, 455-475

⁶⁷⁴ Pierre, 'Unité de lieu', 458-60, 463-67

'spiritual Jerusalem.'⁶⁷⁵ This world pervades the *Ladder*, as John deploys there images of Israel's flight from Egypt and its sojourn in the wilderness, as well as Moses' theophany atop Sinai.⁶⁷⁶

Dates

Assigning John to a specific place in history brings us into a realm of silence and speculation. That is, we can assign a likely range of dates based on where he is *not* mentioned, but we have very little in the way of positive evidence. Once upon a time, John was assigned by tradition and scholarship alike to the Sixth century.⁶⁷⁷ The last century saw a dramatic shift in thinking, beginning with Nau's groundbreaking work on the *Narrationes* which he ascribed to Anastasius of Sinai and dated to 650 or thereafter.⁶⁷⁸ Combining this dating with contents of *Narratio* 32 concerning 'John the Sabaite', Nau suggested that the Sabaite was, in fact, Climacus and gave the date of his death as 649, based on internal evidence from the *Narrationes*.⁶⁷⁹ Nau's suggestion has not met with universal acceptance. Chitty, for example, argues in his always persuasive way that John the Sabaite could not be John Climacus. Rather, he reads *Narratio* 34—which tells the story of a monk Martyrius bringing a disciple to John the Sabaite and the Sabaite washing his feet and prophesying that this young disciple would be abbot of Sinai—as concerning John Climacus.⁶⁸⁰ In that case also *Narratio* 6 likely concerns Climacus and would suggest that Anastasius, and not Martyrius, actually tonsured John.⁶⁸¹ In either case, Anastasius' narratives are crucial to understanding John's life. However, even then Chitty allows tacitly that Nau may be correct in dating Climacus' death to 649.⁶⁸²

⁶⁷⁵ §3, 662B and §29, 1152A

⁶⁷⁶ See, e.g., Climacus' demand for a spiritual director 'in every way like Moses' who will lead those 'fleeing Egypt and Pharaoh' and who wish to 'turn to flight the Amalek of passions' (§1, 633D-636A).

⁶⁷⁷ Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 42 wrongly claims that the *Menaion* entry for Climacus dates his death to 603 CE. Marginal notes in *Acta Sanctorum* (3.2:834F-838F) give the year 580 (835B, based on correlations with Saba's death in 531). Nevertheless, Karl Krumbacher, in his *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur von Justinian bis zum Ende des oströmischen Reiches (527-1453)* (München: Beck, 1897), probably on the basis of menological passages, gave Climacus' dates as ca. 525-600 (143).

⁶⁷⁸ Nau, F., 'Le texte grec des récits du moine Anastase', *Oriens Christianus* 2 (1902), 58-89

⁶⁷⁹ Nau, 'Le texte grec', 79 n. 6

⁶⁸⁰ Chitty, *Desert a City*, 172-73

⁶⁸¹ So Pierre, 'Unité de lieu', 460-61.

⁶⁸² Chitty, *Desert a City*, 178 n. 36

There is no other direct testimony to the life of John Climacus. It is telling that he is not mentioned by Moschus in *PS*—which means he likely postdates Moschus’ death in 634.⁶⁸³ Yet, that being said, Climacus makes no mention of the Arab invasions which swept through Sinai and into Egypt in 640.⁶⁸⁴ The only hard evidence we have on either side is that Climacus mentions Justinian’s *castrum*, which places the *Ladder* after 566-67;⁶⁸⁵ and that he predates the Sixth Ecumenical Council in 680. Between those years all is silence and contradiction in external sources. Climacus himself seems to be concerned to defend a dyothelite view of Christ, suggesting that he was at least aware of the Monothelite Controversy and, therefore, a contemporary of Maximus the Confessor.⁶⁸⁶ In the absence of further evidence, we can only speculate within these years.⁶⁸⁷ While a late sixth-century dating is possible, it is not, on balance, very likely. While scholars not accepted Nau’s theory whole, they have not departed far from his suggestion of a range of 579 CE – 649 CE. Bogdanovic, for example, argued for a death sometime after 654 CE.⁶⁸⁸ Chryssavgis argues in favour of a later death—659 or even 679 CE.⁶⁸⁹ I will content myself here with admitting the likelihood of a Sixth-century *milieu* and reiterate as plausible a range from c. 579 CE to c. 659 CE.

⁶⁸³ Petit, noting John’s alternative epithet of ‘Scholasticus’, and linking that to Sophronius’ description of one ‘John the Scholasticus’ (*PS* 102), argued that Climacus was born no later than 579 CE (‘Saint Jean Climaque’, col. 692).

⁶⁸⁴ However, this is not decisive. Heinz Skrobucha (*Sinai*, photographs by George Allan, trans. Geoffrey Hunt [London: OUP, 1966], 57-60) notes that we possess little information about Sinai between the Arab invasion and the Crusades save that the monks were able to secure good relations with the Mameluk rulers in Cairo.

⁶⁸⁵ §6, 797A; 7, 812B

⁶⁸⁶ Chitty, *Desert a City*, 174; Ware, ‘Introduction’, 18-19; Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 44-45. The passage is §6, 793B-C: ‘Δειλιᾶ Χριστὸς θάνατον, οὐ τρέμει, ἵνα τῶν δύο φύσεων τὰ ιδιώματα σαφῶς ἐμφανίσῃ.’ This passage resembles Maximus the Confessor’s treatment of Gethsemane at, for example, *Opusculum* 3 (PG 91:48C). It is, therefore, plausible that Climacus draws the distinction of ‘fear’ and ‘terror’ from the dyothelite supposition that Christ had to align his human will with his divine will—thus, though he was afraid of death (and, therefore, did not will it himself), he was not unduly terrified (and, therefore, subjected his human fear to the divine will by which he would die).

In Seventh-century context, such a claim suggests that Climacus is responding to ‘monothelite’ claims. The Monothelite Controversy was confined roughly to the years between 633, when objections were first vocally raised; and 680-81, when ‘monothelitism’ (the doctrine that Christ had only one, divine, will) and ‘monenergism’ (the doctrine that he had only one ‘theandric’ activity or ‘energy’) were formally condemned and the dyothelite Chalcedonians triumphed. It was for the sake of this that Maximus the Confessor suffered so much before dying in exile in 662. If Climacus is, in fact, making a subtle point about the two wills of Christ, then this would militate for a date of composition after 631 (at the very earliest), when Cyrus, a monothelite, was appointed Patriarch of Alexandria, and ‘monothelite’ ideas began to be propagated vigorously in Egypt. See Chitty, *Desert a City*, 174.

⁶⁸⁷ Pace Müller, *Das Konzept des geistlichen Gehorsams*, 21-56.

⁶⁸⁸ Bogdanovic, ‘Jean Climaque dans la littérature Byzantine’, 216-17

⁶⁸⁹ Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 44

II. THE QUEST FOR UNITY

The Way down and the Way up

John Climacus, whatever his other virtues—and I have no doubt that they were many—was neither a clear nor a systematic writer.⁶⁹⁰ I do not mean that he is incoherent, but rather that wherever one traces one line of argument within a chapter, one could also trace three others. If one can discern a particular organization to the *Ladder's* Rungs, one can also find at least three others. This is likely intentional. Chryssavgis writes of John: '...he is a master of the ambivalent, of saying and unsaying the same thing. It is a way of having it both ways. This, after all, may well be the divine way...'⁶⁹¹ Like Johannes de Silentio so many centuries later, Climacus 'neither writes the System nor promises of the System, neither subscribes to the System nor ascribes anything to it.'⁶⁹² Climacus' apparent obscurity serves a didactic purpose—not to frighten readers off, but to draw them in, forcing them to find their own way up the *Ladder* and so be *formed* by it. Cultivating in monks a properly Christian identity is, as I have discussed at length in the Introduction, Climacus' purpose in the *Ladder*. Climacus' purpose and his way of thinking—concerned with the organic and existential reality of asceticism—renders the *Ladder* obscure in part because it is difficult to draw out any kind of linear progression in it. While the image of a 'ladder' naturally suggests some sort of sequential progression through discrete stages, Climacus, concerned with forming identity, constantly anticipates, expounds, and revisits virtues, vices, and ideas. Understanding something of the construction of the *Ladder* will be a crucial aid in drawing out how death defines ascetic spirituality for Climacus.

Scholars have, of course, discerned structure in the *Ladder*. Or, rather, they have discerned a variety of possible structures. So, it may be noted, did the illuminators of the *Ladder* manuscripts. Generally, though, we find two sorts of structure: a bipartite one and a tripartite one. The first is put forward by Couilleau and taken up by Bogdanovic, Ware, and, warily, by Johnsen. This is a structure of opposition and balancing between earlier and later rungs.⁶⁹³ It is a 'bipartite' structure, though it is often folded into a 'tripartite' one. In fact, two competing tripartite models have been put forward, each with its own heuristic validity. I will set these out and analyse their strengths, and will then suggest my own

⁶⁹⁰ Pace Johnsen

⁶⁹¹ Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 12

⁶⁹² Kierkegaard, Søren [as Johannes de Silentio], *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, intro. George Steiner, Everyman's Library 178 (Reprinted 1994 as Everyman's Library 178: *Fear and Trembling. The Book on Adler*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941)

⁶⁹³ Couilleau, 'Jean Climaque', cols. 373-74; followed by Ware, 'Introduction', 14

‘model’ which is, in keeping with Climacus’ style, not really a ‘model’ at all, but rather a way of holding together two different organizing logics, both of which rely on engagement with death.

To explain, there are thirty ‘rungs’ or ‘steps’ in the *Ladder*:

1. Ἀποταγή
2. Ἀπροσπάθεια
3. Ξενιτεία
4. Ὑπακοή
5. Μετάνοια
6. Μνήμη Θανάτου
7. Πένθος
8. Ἀοργησία and Πραότης
9. Μνησικακία
10. Καταλαλιά
11. Πολυλογία and Σιωπή
12. Ψεῦδος
13. Ἀκήδεια
14. Γαστριμαργία
15. Ἀγνεία and Σοφροσύνη
16. Φιλαργυρία
17. Ἀκτημοσύνη
18. Ἀναισθησία
19. Ὕπνος
20. Ἀγρυπνία
21. Δειλία
22. Κενοδόξια
23. Ὑπερηφανία and βλασφήμια
24. Πραότης, Ἀπλότης, Ἀκακία
25. Ταπεινοφροσύνη
26. Διάκρισις
27. Ἡσυχία
28. Προσευχή
29. Ἀπαθεία
30. Ἀγάπη

Among these thirty steps, however, we can discern important relationships and can lay down some very telling divisions.

The Diptych

In this analysis, the *Ladder* has two halves, which mirror each other, and it stresses balance among the various Rungs—laid out in Figure One, below. Though there are actually five divisions in this diagram, the Fifteenth Run, ‘Περὶ ἀφθάρτου ἐν φθαρτοῖς ἐκ καμάτων καὶ ἰδρώτων ἀγνείας καὶ

σωφροσύνης’, as it is titled in Rader’s edition, is the fulcrum.⁶⁹⁴ The *Ladder* balances this central struggle against the body’s demands and on either side, each rung has a mirror self. There is a consistent pattern of ‘types’ and ‘anti-types’. For example, the ‘break from union with the world’ *typifies* ‘union with God’ while ‘fundamental virtues’ *mirror* ‘crowning virtues’. Moreover, the middle section (§§8-23) details the ongoing struggle against passions and temptations, in which physical (§§8-13) balance spiritual (§§18-23) and all centre on the three physical passions which reveal the troublesome relationship of soul to body, and within which all others may be subsumed: Glutton, Lust, and Avarice. These are, for Climacus, the most insidious because the most natural, and so the struggle against them lies at the very centre of the ascetic life.

Perhaps this rhetorical balancing act is inspired by the other image which dominates the *Ladder*—that of Moses and the tablets of the Law given atop Sinai. Climacus refers to his work not only as ‘ladder’ but as Πλάκες πνευματικοί, ‘spiritual tablets’, of which he says:

...faithfully constrained by their commands, those true slaves of God, stretching for a hand unworthy of them in undiscerning obedience, and by their knowledge taking up the pen to write, dipping it in downcast yet radiant humility, resting it upon their hearts smooth and white, just as on sheets of paper or, rather, spiritual tablets, divine words...we will write here, painting them in many colours.⁶⁹⁵

In this polychrome portrait of the ‘spiritual law’ (cf. Rom 8.2), written, fittingly, on ‘spiritual tablets’, the beginner’s work mirrors the contemplative’s prayer, while virtues and vices mirror and balance one another. This ‘diptych’ structure, as Richard Lawrence describes it, is elegant and powerful, drawing the reader inward and always reminding him that each virtue has a shadow, and each step a partner.⁶⁹⁶ The diptych also reminds the reader that one progresses *within* virtues and not simply from one virtue to another. In Climacus’ thought, ‘lower’ virtues compose higher ones just as bread is made from previously separate ingredients, or as a rainbow is composed of various bands of color.⁶⁹⁷ The ascetic’s life can be understood, then, not as progressing from one virtue to another, but as progressing toward

⁶⁹⁴ §15, 880A

⁶⁹⁵ §1, 633C; many manuscripts bear the title Πλάκες πνευματικοί and Chryssavgis goes so far as to claim this was John’s ‘original title’ (*John Climacus*, 21), but there is no clear internal evidence for preferring *Tablets to Ladder*, and in the manuscript tradition *Ladder* is clearly dominant—not only in titling, but in illumination, as Martin’s book demonstrates.

⁶⁹⁶ Lawrence, Richard T., ‘The Three-Fold Structure of the Ladder of Divine Ascent’, *SVOTQ* 32:2 (1988), 104-107

⁶⁹⁷ §25, 989C-D

union with God by a gradual *agglomeration* of the various fundamental and crowning virtues, possible *only within* an ongoing 'break with the world' and struggle against the passions.⁶⁹⁸

FIGURE ONE

1. Breaking with the World

- a. Αποταγή βίου
- b. Απροσπάθεια
- c. Ξενιτεία

2. Fundamental virtues

- a. Ὑπακοή
- b. Μετάνοια
- c. Μνήμη Θανάτου
- d. Χαροποιὸς Πένθος

3. Struggle against Passions

- | | | |
|--|---|-----------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ἀσorgησία and Πραότης b. Μνησικακία c. Καταλαλιά d. Πολυλογία and Σιωπή e. Ψεῦδος f. Ἀκήδεια | } | Non-Physical Passions |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Γαστριμαργία ii. Ἀγνεία and Σοφροσύνη iii. Φιλαργυρία and Ἀκτημοσύνη | } | Physical Passions |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> g. Ἀναισθησία h. Ὕπνος i. Ἀγρυπνία j. Δειλία k. Κενοδόξια l. Ὑπερηφανία and βλασφήμια | } | Spiritual Passions |

4. Crowning virtues

- a. Πραότης, Ἀπλότης, Ἀκακία
- b. Ταπεινοφροσύνη
- c. Διάκρισις

5. Union with God

- a. Ἡσυχία
- b. Προσευχή
- c. Ἀπαθεία
- d. Ἀγάπη

⁶⁹⁸ Cf. Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 29-30

The Triptych

Yet one can just as well discern a tripartite structure at work, drawing us back to the image of a 'ladder.' Figure Two presents a tripartite structure. While scholars have long noticed some such structure,⁶⁹⁹ James Robertson Price, followed by Richard Lawrence, has put forward an interesting model, differing from traditional tripartite schemata in its organizing logic as well as its divisions.⁷⁰⁰ This can be seen—as Richard Lawrence describes it—in Figure Three below.

Lawrence, following Price's model, attempts a reconciliation, though he is by no means always successful. Price had argued that Climacus himself suggests a tripartite structure when he says that 'Repentance lifts us up, mourning knocks on heaven, holy humility opens it. I say this and I worship Trinity in unity and unity in Trinity.'⁷⁰¹ Thus, Lawrence finds parallels between rungs in a repentance-mourning-humility structure. Thus, for him 'renunciation' and the 'memory of death' or 'discernment' and '*apatheia*' must parallel one another. At this point, his model, though imaginative, ends up feeling rather forced. The mirroring between sections is lost as well as the 'type-antitype' relationship between rungs. There are too few clear connections between the divisions he proposes and too much reliance on numerical symbolism which is, of course, notoriously malleable.

Lawrence does, however, have a few important virtues. First, like others before him he points out the centrality of *πένθος* in Climacus' thinking.⁷⁰² His biographer, Daniel, drew particular attention to it, as we have already seen. Symeon the New Theologian and, through him, the later Hesychasts, derived much of their emphasis on mourning from Climacus. Second, Lawrence draws attention to the universality of *μετάνοια*. A superficial reading of the Fifth Rung would suggest that *μετάνοια* means 'penance' when, in fact, it refers to 'repentance' more broadly, of which specific acts of penance are emblematic. The 'holy criminals', as we shall see below, form by no means a limited or isolated group. Moreover, Lawrence rightly discerns in the Sixth Rung on Memory of Death a 'linking' chapter—one whose meaning is only comprehensible in light of its connection to what came before (Repentance) and what will follow (Mourning).

⁶⁹⁹ So Ware, 'Introduction' 12-13, Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 28-29.

⁷⁰⁰ Price, James R. in 'Conversion and the Doctrine of Grace in Bernard Lonergan and John Climacus,' *Anglican Theological Review* 72 (1980), 338-362

⁷⁰¹ §25, 992D; cited by Price, 'Conversion and the Doctrine of Grace,' 358-59.

⁷⁰² See, e.g., Völker's treatment of *πένθος* at *Scala Paradisi*, 164-180

FIGURE TWO

1. Fundamentals of the Ascetic Life

- a. Αναχώρησις
- b. Απροσπάθεια
- c. Ξενιτεία
- d. Ὑπακοή
- e. Μετάνοια
- f. Μνήμη τοῦ Θανάτου
- g. Πένθος

2. The Practical Life

- a. Αοργησία and Πραότης
- b. Μνησικακία
- c. Καταλαλιά
- d. Πολυλογία and Σιωπή
- e. Ψεῦδος
- f. Ακήδία
- g. Γαστριμαργία
- h. Αγνεία and Σοφροσύνη
- i. Φιλαργυρία
- j. Ἀκτημοσύνη
- k. Ἀναισθησία
- l. Ὕπνος
- m. Αγρυπνία
- n. Δειλία
- o. Κενοδόξια
- p. Ὑπερηφάνια and βλασφήμια
- q. Πραότης, Ἀπλότης, Ἀκακία
- r. Ταπεινοφροσύνη
- s. Διάκρισις

3. The Contemplative Life

- a. Ἡσυχία
- b. Προσευχή
- c. Ἀπαθεία
- d. Ἀγάπη

FIGURE THREE

1. Repentance

- a. Αναχώρησις
 - i. Απροσπάθεια
 - 1. Ξεντεία
 - 2. Υπακοή
 - ii. Μετάνοια
- b. Μνήμη του Θανάτου

2. Mourning

- a. Πένθος
 - i. Αοργησία and Πραότης
 - ii. Μνησικακία
 - iii. Καταλαλιά
 - iv. Πολυλογία and Σιωπή
 - v. Ψεῦδος
 - vi. Ακήδεια
 - 1. Γαστριμαργία
 - 2. Αγνεία and Σοφροσύνη
 - 3. Φιλαργυρία and Ακτημοσύνη
 - vii. Αναισθησία
 - viii. Ὕπνος
 - ix. Αγρυπνία
 - x. Δειλία
 - xi. Κενοδόξια
 - i. Ὑπερηφανία and βλασφήμια
- b. Πραότης, Απλότης, Ακακία

3. Humility

- a. Ταπείνωσις
 - i. Διάκρισις
 - 1. Ἡσυχία
 - 2. Προσευχή
 - ii. Απαθεία
- b. Αγάπη

One can, of course, adduce further divisions within either tripartite scheme. Ware and Chrysavgis, certainly, see a tripartite structure operative *alongside* the mirroring which Couilleau described. Thus we can easily see the classic division of the ascetic life into *πρακτική* and *θεωρία* with an introductory framework defined by virtues which one retains throughout both phases of life. In this way we can more easily see Climacus' ideas of progress and ascent and find once more a 'ladder' to follow.

What sort of Ladder?

Though ‘tablets’ are important to him, it is with a ‘ladder’ that Climacus closes, and a motif of ascent dyes the fabric of his great work. Speaking of love, the ‘empress’ who ‘appears from heaven’, Climacus says

How Jacob saw you atop the ladder (Gen 28.12), I long to learn. Show to one who desires what is the form of this ascent; what the way of life and what the joining [ἔρᾶνος] of that fashioning of steps to you, which your lover “has set as ascents in his heart” (cf. Ps 83.6 LXX). What is their number I have thirsted to learn, and how great, therefore, the time of the course. For one who learns your struggle and sight has announced them to those whom he leads by the hand.⁷⁰³

Moreover, the epilogue (probably spurious, but written, if not by Climacus himself, then by a loving disciple) begins thus:

Ascend, ascend eagerly “the ascents placed in the heart”, my brothers, hearing one saying “Come, let us ascend to the mountain of the Lord and unto the house of our God (Isa 2.3) who makes our feet as those of a stag and sets us upon the high places” (Hab 3.19) in order to be victorious in the way.⁷⁰⁴

Climacus calls readers to an ἀνοδος. This ascent may be up the ladder seen by Jacob, or perhaps up the craggy side of Gebel Musa. The ‘diptych’ or ‘mirroring’ extends even to the images adduced by Climacus—one at the beginning, one at the end—to describe his own work: tablets brought down the mountain side and a ladder leading back up; wisdom whose origin and end is in God, come down from heaven to draw sinners to himself.

For all that, Climacus has no interest in linearity or consecuity for their own sakes. Climacus is fonder of the metaphors of ‘family.’ Thus he lays out the tortuous, anarchic familial relations between vices, and the curious, often paradoxical relationships between virtues. His, then, is a ladder shaped like the paths which wind down the side of Gebel Musa, contorted and retorted until every rung and every grain in the wood of every rung seems to intersect every other. It is, therefore, very difficult to find an organizing principle, and would be impossible to communicate it—at least, without speaking of numerous others. We cannot, therefore, ignore the divisions to which Couilleau pointed, for they seem equally as valid. There is a sense in which the monk never progresses beyond, *but only within*, the diptych of Climacus’ spiritual tablets. I think that choosing one model on which to structure the *Ladder*

⁷⁰³ §30, 1160A

⁷⁰⁴ §30, 1160D-1161A: ‘Προτροπή ἐπίτομος καὶ ἰσοδύναμος τῶν διὰ πλάτους εἰρημένων.’

will *always* end up feeling forced. One model is a little like one definition—valuable to scholars but *anathema* to Climacus, who happily runs out lengthy lists of ὄροι when he might have given only one. If we are to speak of ‘structure,’ or of coherence, it is not to be found in the reconciliation of various schematic or systematic models.

Conclusion: Dyad, Triad, Unity

Therefore, rather than a strict bipartite or tripartite structure, I propose a more fluid model of interrelated dyad and triad. The dyad refers to an ascetic life possessing ever two sides which must be held together. The monk who has found *θεωρία* does not thereby forget the benefits of the *πρακτική*. Evagrius once wrote: ‘The Gnostic monk and the Practicing monk met, and the Lord stood between them.’⁷⁰⁵ So too, Climacus happily holds beginning together with end—memory of death (§6) and prayer (§28)—averring that ‘Some say that prayer is better than memory of one’s departure; but I hymn two natures in one person.’⁷⁰⁶ Climacus sees value in holding together apparent opposites, in balancing and mirroring because that is what he sees at work in the Incarnation. Christ’s personal union of divine and human, heavenly and earthly, not only allows but even demands that the most fundamental virtues remain in and alongside the most ethereal.

At the same time, Climacus is concerned with ‘progress.’ For this, the triad defines a trajectory—three points a path—of progress toward divine and heavenly existence. Certainly, one begins with fundamental virtues, and then can cultivate practical ones, and only then contemplative ones. Each section of the triptych *contextualizes* the next. Thus, to return to Climacus’ description of progress above, ‘Repentance lifts us up, mourning knocks on heaven, holy humility opens it. I say this and I worship Trinity in unity and unity in Trinity.’⁷⁰⁷ Climacus can cap his description of progress with a reference to the ‘Trinity in unity’ because progress is always *within* rather than *from*, as the dyad requires. One may more into the life of the Trinity, but one never leaves behind one’s natural composition of soul and an often-contentious and demanding body. This body, ‘fellow worker and enemy, aid and opponent, defender who plots against me’, ‘to which I am bound eternally’, Climacus says, ‘will rise with me’.⁷⁰⁸ As

⁷⁰⁵ Evagrius, *Monachos*, 121: ‘Γνωστικός καὶ πρακτικός ὑπήνητησαν ἀλλήλοις, μέσος δὲ ἀμφοτέρων εἰστήκει κύριος.’

⁷⁰⁶ §28, 1137A

⁷⁰⁷ §25, 992D; cited by Price, ‘Conversion and the Doctrine of Grace,’ 358-59.

⁷⁰⁸ §15, 901C-D; Climacus’ dialogue with his body (901C-904B) is instructive. He dwells on the soul’s contradictory relation to the body at some length. This duality cannot be referred unequivocally to a fallen state to be transcended

Chryssavgis very rightly notes, Climacus has a strongly unitary view of the human being: ‘This seemingly dualistic language denotes ultimately a unitary conception. If there is any “separation” —as in the case of death—it is only temporary. This adds an eschatological dimension to John’s ascetic thought.’⁷⁰⁹ I would add that the human being is a ‘unity’, certainly, but always a ‘composed’ one—body and soul. I speak of triad to convey *motion*—progress; I speak of dyad to recall that motion is always within; I speak of unity to describe the composite personal existence whose progress is toward wholeness.

With dyad and triad in mind, and the quest for unity as context, we may fruitfully ask how Climacus organizes the ascetic life. Though Climacus devotes the Sixth Rung to the Memory of Death, he describes a practiced encounter with death in at least twelve forms⁷¹⁰ in eighteen of the thirty steps⁷¹¹ and connects this directly with twelve distinct virtues.⁷¹² Additional complications arise because the connotations of various terms overlap, and of the virtues to which Climacus connects the memory of death, some precede and some follow it in the *Ladder*. He says in his Sixth Rung, ‘Memory of death gives birth...for those away from the din of worldly concerns, to resignation and constant prayer, and a guard of the mind. But these stand as mothers and daughters of the memory of death.’⁷¹³ The memory of death is interconnected in curious, even paradoxical ways, with other virtues. It runs like a grain of wood through the whole *Ladder* and so, I shall now argue that Climacus develops the ‘triad’ using the ‘memory of death.’ He creates a framework for progress built on a triadic engagement with time in which past, present, and future all illuminate the ascetic’s eternal existence by their reference to death as both

(*pace* Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 57-59)—it is *this* body which will rise, *this* body to which one is eternally bound. Climacus dwells very little on the glorification of the human body. Rather, he calls on the monk to make progress ‘in a material and defiled body’ (§1, 633B).

⁷⁰⁹ Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 56; cf. also his article, ‘The resurrection of the body according to Saint John of the Ladder’, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30:4 (1985), 447-453.

⁷¹⁰ These are: μνήμη θανάτου (§1, §4, §6, §11, §15, §18, §27), έννοια θανάτου (§6, §20, Summary after §26), ύπόμνησις θανάτου (§12), μελέτη θανάτου (§4, §6, §18), μέριμνα θανάτου (§26), μνήμη έξόδου (§6, Summary after §26, §30), αίσθησις θανάτου (§6), δάκρυα έξόδου (§7, §18), πόθος θανάτου (§26), έπειξις θανάτου (§27), δειλία θανάτου (§6), and φόβον έξόδου (§1). Climacus also uses other phrases and terms with similar or analogous meaning.

⁷¹¹ These are: §1 (On Renunciation), §4 (Obedience), §5 (Repentance), §6 (Memory of Death), §7 (Mourning), §11 (Talkativeness and Silence), §12 (Falsehood), §13 (Despondency), §14 (Gluttony), §15 (Chastity), §17 (Poverty), §18 (Insensitivity), §20 (Alertness), §22 (Vainglory), §26 (Discernment), the Summary after §26, §27 (Stillness), §28 (Prayer), and §30 (Faith, Hope, and Love)

⁷¹² These are: combating lust (§4), mourning (§5, §6, §7), detachment (§1, §6), obedience (§6), fighting gluttony (§6), silence (§11), fighting lying (§12), pricking insensitivity (§18), wakefulness (§20), discernment (§26), self-control (Summary after §26), and prayer (§30).

⁷¹³ §6, 793C

mortality and judgment. I shall then demonstrate that Climacus develops the 'dyad' in terms of a practice of mortality in which human and divine interact. In the Conclusion I will show how 'dyad' and 'triad' operate together to cultivate an imitation of Christ which can account for failings and so transcend the ambivalence and ambiguities which so far have accompanied language of death.

III. THE TEMPORAL AND ICONIC FRAMEWORK OF THE ASCETIC LIFE

This next section concerns the memory of death and judgment, and will show how it creates a framework within which ascetic progress is possible. I will elaborate three scenes to which Climacus devotes an inordinate amount of space. The first depicts the death of a penitent monk taking place in a special penal monastic foundation which Climacus calls ‘the Prison.’ I turn then to three visions or ecstasies experienced by unnamed monks of Egypt and Tholas and one Hesychius the Horebite, a companion of John’s at Sinai. The final scene depicts the death of a holy elder, Stephen, whom John clearly held in high esteem. The first will show how the sensible world images the spiritual, and the temporal the eternal. The interlude will show how death as an event of mortality delays what the first scene shows as already present. The final scene will show the importance of the past for the monk moving forward—it will demonstrate the ‘retrospective’ nature of the ascetic life.

Overture: Death in the Desert

To situate Climacus’ treatment of death in the monastery we will first look at what themes and motifs emerge from Desert literature with which Climacus was likely familiar. I have already treated the two visions of death found in *VA*, as well as Antony’s own paradigmatic death-scene depicted there. But Desert literature has many death-scenes. These scenes, many of which were modelled on or in juxtaposition with Antony’s, invite us see the judgment at work which would, at the consummation, eternally separate the righteous from the wicked.

Good and Bad Death

These death scenes divide, then, into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death, in which many of the usual visible signs by which witnesses could discern God’s judgment or comment upon the status of the dead, are spiritualized. Relatives cannot be present, though fellow ascetics might be; burial is of no importance; sickness, violence, and mourning are often signs of nothing. Instead, Desert literature focuses on the ascetic’s *attitude* toward his own death, which expresses his way of life—either as prepared or unprepared for death and the judgment which follows.

For the prepared, death may almost be another episode in his life. Some texts describe the monk dying in the midst of his work, as Pambo in *HL*: ‘After a little while the man of God fell asleep, not from

an attack of fever, nor from any illness, but while he was stitching up a basket, at the age of seventy.⁷¹⁴ Elsewhere, Paphnutius seems almost to die simply because he cannot continue his work: 'When he had also sent this man [a disciple] on ahead to heaven, Paphnutius himself lost the will to live, for he was no longer able to practise *ascesis*.'⁷¹⁵ The monk dies as he lived, allowing the event of death to become a further expression of the sort of character he had become. A tale of Arsenius illustrates this perfectly. He died weeping, but this was not a sign of his impiety or unpreparedness. Rather, it was the final expression of a man who 'had a hollow in his chest channelled out by the tears which fell from his eyes all his life.' His disciples saw him weeping at death and asked him 'Truly, Father, are you also afraid?' They could not fathom that such a man should be afraid, but Arsenius' response was telling: 'My fear at this hour has been mine since I first became a monk.'⁷¹⁶

The story of Pambo, quoted above, illustrates another facet of the 'good' death. The monk is not described as 'dying', but simply 'falls asleep' or 'surrenders his soul.'⁷¹⁷ In one monastery, apparently, 'the monks within the walls were such saints that all could work miracles and none of them ever fell ill before he died. On the contrary, when the time came for each to depart, he announced it beforehand to all the others and then lay down and fell asleep.'⁷¹⁸ When Antony died, he was joyful, 'like one greeting his dearest friends.'⁷¹⁹ At the point of death, Sisoës' face 'shone like the sun.'⁷²⁰ The ascetic approaches death knowing two things: that death leads to judgment and the possibility of beatitude, and that he has spent his life seeking and preparing for exactly that. Thus, the ascetic approaches death calmly, almost voluntarily, with the same imperturbable will with which he has approached everything in life. If he is afraid of death it is only because the fear of death was always his tool for living freely, as one already dead.⁷²¹

For the wicked, death comes unexpectedly and usually involves cruel sickness. John Moschus records the death of 'Thalilaios, the impious archbishop of Thessalonica' who 'feared neither God nor the reward which was in store for him' and, in the midst of his wickedness is found dead with his head in a

⁷¹⁴ *HL* 10.5; cf. 47.4

⁷¹⁵ *HM* 14.23

⁷¹⁶ Arsenius 40

⁷¹⁷ *HL* 5.1-3, 7.6, 60.2, 10.5; *PS* 86, 105, 123, 178, 182, 202

⁷¹⁸ *HM* 17.3

⁷¹⁹ Agathon 29

⁷²⁰ Sisoës 14

⁷²¹ One old man, at the moment of his death, laughs three times. Asked why, he says, "I laughed because you all fear death; I laughed again because you are not prepared; but the third time I laughed because I go from labour to rest." And straightway the old man fell asleep' (N 279).

privy drain. Moschus then compares this death to that of Arius who suffered similarly.⁷²² Moschus describes both deaths as divine retribution for the men's wickedness. At other times, the fact of death itself is a sign of God's judgment. Athanasius makes this point in a tale of Antony, who had a vision of two brothers in trouble, but only one was found alive. Athanasius says of the unexpected death of a brother that,

If someone asks on what account he did not speak before the death of the other brother, he does not ask correctly, putting it this way. For the judgment of death was not Antony's, but God's, who passed judgment concerning him who died and revealed and uncovered the situation of the one who lived.⁷²³

For the wicked, then, death and, especially, an unpleasant death comes through the judgment of God, and expresses that judgment.

The literature does not claim that only the healthy were good monks, or that an unpleasant death is a sign of God's judgment, although it is possible to read some stories in that way. Because of the danger of over-simplification, several tales help clarify the situation. Palladius records the story of Benjamin who had reached 'the perfection of asceticism' and had 'the gift of healing'. He says

In this mountain of Nitria was a person called Benjamin, living to about eighty and practicing asceticism to the end, being judged worthy of a gift of healing...This man, judged worthy of such a gift, for eight months prior to his death had dropsy. And his body was so swollen as to look like another Job. Dioscorus the bishop...said to us, 'Come, see a new Job in this swollen body and incurable suffering acquiring boundless thanksgiving'...Then that blessed man, Benjamin, said to us, 'Pray, children, that my "inner man" not contract dropsy, for this one [i.e., the 'outer man'] neither benefitted me when healthy nor harmed me when ill (cf. 2 Cor 4.16).⁷²⁴

Palladius writes that 'I have felt bound to describe this affliction, lest we should be surprised when some untoward fate befalls righteous men.'⁷²⁵ Clearly, some were worried that a painful death meant that monk was less than perfect, since the best ascetics simply fell asleep while working or teaching. The repeated references to Job, and to the 'inner man' (cf. 2 Col 4.16) point us toward a subtle, spiritualized definition of what makes a death 'good' or 'bad.' The healthy monk dies with clarity and tranquillity. He is, ultimately, able to *approach* death, rather than be overtaken by it. The good death, then, is not simply a voluntary one or an apparently painless one. It is the death wherein the monk can continue to express

⁷²² PS 43

⁷²³ VA 59.5; see also Antony 21 and QR, 599, which relies on it; cf. PS 129, 145

⁷²⁴ HL 12.1-2

⁷²⁵ HL 12.2; so also for the monk Stephen at 24.1-3; see also QR 144, 223, and 599

himself as a 'dead' man and, most importantly, as an imitator of Christ. The will with which the monk approaches death is not his own. That has been destroyed by obedience. It is, instead, a reflection of the will of Christ who offered himself for others. Thus, the monk makes death also a matter of imitation, particularly since the physical event may be understood as a final manifestation of his way of life.

The event of death, when described as 'surrendering the soul' makes it a moment of self-offering. This self-offering, again, accords with the way in which the ascetic has always offered himself to God. Arsenius, though he may have wept at death, approached it confidently. Abba Daniel reported that, 'At the point of death, Abba Arsenius sent us this message, "Do not trouble to make offerings for me, for truly I have made an offering for myself and I shall find it again."⁷²⁶ Arsenius does not seem to expect his death to require anything other than what he has already offered God, and this offering may be said to carry through to his death, when he can finally offer himself fully.

Death's 'goodness' concerns the ascetic's approach toward it: prepared, clear, and expressing even in death his way of life in imitation of Christ. At the moment, the prepared ascetic can imitate one obedient old man: 'When the old man's death came, he saw one angel on the right and one on the left saying to him, "Do you wish to come, *abba*, or should we go away?" And the old man said to them, "I wish you to stay and take my spirit." And thus he died.'⁷²⁷ The ascetic can ask for and accept the 'hour of necessity' and tell those sent that they are allowed to 'snatch his soul.' Death's 'badness' concerns the same: the approach of something fearful and surprising, an expression perhaps of the surprise with which sinners greet the revelatory judgment of God. The wicked do not approach death. They are overtaken by death because they have not dedicated their lives to preparation for it. The ascetic, on the other hand, who has lived with death every day, lived as though dead and about to die every hour, approaches death naturally, joyfully, peacefully—he moves, through death, from his foretaste of eternity to the good things themselves, offering himself to God fully, as he has done partially throughout his ascetic life. A tale of Paternuthius encapsulates the contrast of those who are and those who are not prepared: a monk was terrified of death, because he was not ready; so Paternuthius prays and grants him three years to prepare and at the end that time, Paternuthius 'presented him to Christ no longer a man but an angel...[Paternuthius] set him in the midst of them [the brethren] in good health and [this

⁷²⁶ Arsenius 39

⁷²⁷ N 23

man] spent the whole night teaching them. Then the brother began to feel drowsy, and falling asleep, died.⁷²⁸

Instruction and Silence

At the moment of death, some ascetics offer instruction to those who survive them. The instructions which ascetics give at death generally take their own lives as an example and, perhaps, warning, for the young. The tale of Pambo nicely illustrates this point:

They said about Abba Pambo that when he was dying—and at the hour of death, he said to the holy men standing about, “Since I came to this wilderness place and built my cell and lived in it, I do not remember eating bread which did not come from my own hand, and I have not regretted a word I have spoken, until this hour; and so I go to God as not having begun to serve him.”⁷²⁹

Similar tales are told of Romanus, John Cassian, and Chomas.⁷³⁰ Antony’s death scene contains ethical as well as burial instructions, and Arsenius follows suit at his own death.⁷³¹ The *abba* is not always willing to give advice, but in some cases he can, at least, be coerced into it. Such scenes are generally rather pedestrian manifestations of testamentary literature. It is worth noting how testamentary scenes refract the elder’s life into an exemplary tale, which is why *AP*’s redactors spliced Arsenius’ death-scene together with advice he gave at other points in his life.⁷³²

More interesting are those death scenes which seem to deliberately defy the usual expectations of testamentary literature. In these scenes, the elder is begged for a revelation, but will not give it or offers only a partial version. The tale of Zacharias’ death is instructive: ‘Abba Poemen said that Abba Moses asked Abba Zacharias, who was about to die, “What do you see?” Zacharias said, “Is it not better to silent, Father?” And he said, “Yes, child. Be silent.”’⁷³³ As Agathon died he told his disciples that he stood ‘before the judgement seat of God.’ As they persisted in questioning him about it, he finally responded in exasperation: ‘Please do not speak to me any longer, for I do not have time.’⁷³⁴ These two stories make somewhat different points. The second concerns distraction—Agathon, though willing to

⁷²⁸ *HM* (10.17-19)

⁷²⁹ Pambo 8; so also *HL* 10.6 and *HM* 11.5-8

⁷³⁰ Cassian 5, Romanus 1, Chomas 1; cf. also *N* 22, 63, 341

⁷³¹ *VA* 89-92; Arsenius 40

⁷³² So also Agathon 29, Silouan 2

⁷³³ Zacharias 5; similar is the story of John of Lycopolis, *HM* 1.65; cf. *HL* 1.3.

⁷³⁴ Agathon 29

reveal something of what happens at death, is concerned with his judgment, and not with the questions of his disciples, who do not seem to grasp the importance of the moment. Zacharias, on the other hand, flatly refuses any revelation of death. The speculative or mystical stories of the soul's flight to God through judgment after death, scattered through the desert literature, have no place at Zacharias' death-bed. Instruction is good, revelation better, but neither is given at the risk of usurping or anticipating a judgment which belongs to God alone. Thus, Desert death scenes remind us that the monk lives even until death in uncertainty born of hope and fear. His death expresses and clarifies the character which he had developed in life, even as it may express God's judgment on him. Both are revealed by the ways in which one approaches or is overtaken by death, and by the revelation that death means a judgment whose outcome cannot, for all the preparation one may make, be anticipated. So, with this in mind we turn to Climacus' subversive deployment of similar scenes.

First Scene: Exeunt the Penitents

The Fallen Monks

Our first scene takes place in that most distasteful portion of Climacus' book, the most shocking and disturbing: The Prison.⁷³⁵ This place makes its first appearance in Rung Four, on Obedience, as the place of the penitents to which the abbot of the Alexandrian monastery would send those monks who had fallen and yet wished to remain monks.⁷³⁶ It was not, it seems, for just anyone. And yet, to read Climacus' extended description of it in Rung Five one gets the impression that people did not choose to leave the prison monastery—they die there instead, treating its overseer, Isaac, as their unquestioned abbot. Later copyists seem to have been aware of the universality and tremendous importance of the Prison scenes, since they illustrated it at great length, often including a picture for each group or action described by Climacus.⁷³⁷ Moreover, there exists a fascinating 'penitential canon', a series of hymn verses

⁷³⁵ Ware, 'Introduction', 5, 22; John Duffy calls it 'certainly the strangest part of the work, and easily the most moving... a veritable visit to the underworld, with a catalog, in gruesome detail, of self-inflicted misery, deprivation, and punishment. With the visitor we see the harrowing sights and hear the groans and anguished questions of the tormented' ('Embellishing the Steps: Elements of Presentation and Style in "The Heavenly Ladder" of John Climacus, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 53 [1999], 14). Cf. Chryssavgis, (*John Climacus*, 22-23) who argues that we should 'not suppose that John intended people to be put off by, for instance, the fifth step relating to repentance, and especially by the horrendous account of the monastic penitentiary of Alexandrian Prison [*sic*] in the same step.' The account is certainly disturbing, though, and Climacus' own rhetoric suggests that he, at least, was aware of just *how* disturbing it might be. So argues Derwas Chitty at *Desert a City*, 174.

⁷³⁶ §4, 704A-B

⁷³⁷ On these illustrations, see Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder*, 47-120

dedicated to the ‘holy convicts’, asking forgiveness and promising repentance, which takes its material directly from Climacus’ Fifth Rung.⁷³⁸ This scene, as prurient as it may seem, fired the imagination of Byzantine ascetics, and allowed them to at least mentally place themselves within the Prison, asking with the ἅγιοι κατάδικοι for God’s mercy.

The Prison is a place full of surprise and paradox. First, Climacus does not seem to envision its inhabitants as any more unique or marginal than, for example, their brethren in at the great coenobium (§4). He begins by describing repentance in glowing terms and comparing its relationship to obedience to Peter’s relationship to John—both ran to the empty tomb to find Christ. John got there first, as obedience does; but Peter arrived as well, as repentance does.⁷³⁹ Climacus certainly envisions it as a virtue necessary for his readers (and himself). He exhorts his readers, saying, ‘Let us hear and keep and do, as many of us as have suffered an unexpected fall.’⁷⁴⁰ The ‘Prison’, then, descriptions of which fill out what one should ‘hear, keep and do’ offers an example of repentance for all monks, whether or not they ever visit or find themselves guests there.⁷⁴¹ As I have noted before, repentance shows us the contours of progress, and so, as the penitential canon says, ‘All of you, come and eagerly imitate them; for behold a type of salvation is set before us.’⁷⁴²

The penitents may, therefore, function for readers as types of the ascetic life, whether novice or abbot, fallen, virtuous, and advanced. Unlike the monastery at Alexandria, filled with well-painted characters and named individuals, Climacus eschews all individuating description from the Prison, omitting even Isaac’s name.⁷⁴³ The penitents are referred to as a group, or else as ‘some’ or ‘others’ or

⁷³⁸ Καν(ών) κατασκευτικὸς(ς) τ(ήν) ιστο(ρίαν) διαλαμβάν(ων) τ(ών) ἐν τῇ κλίμακι ἁγίων καταδικ(ων). The ‘canon’ is the standard Byzantine hymn form, composed of nine ‘odes’ (of which the second is omitted, yielding eight in practice) based on nine ‘songs’ found in Scripture. Each ‘ode’ is composed of an initial stanza (or *troparion*) called *irmos*, which gives the melody, followed by a variable number of *troparia* with some kind of refrain between, and closed with a repetition of the *irmos*, called *katavasion*. This canon has four *troparia* per ode, and uses model melodies in the fourth plagal tone. The first letter of each *troparion* (*irmoi* and *katavasiai* excepted) forms an acrostic (a common device in Byzantine canons): ΠΕΝΘΟΥΣ ΕΝΑΡΓΟΥΣ ΚΑΙ ΜΕΤΑΝΟΙΑΣ ΤΥΠΙΟΣ. The canon may be found in Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder*, 128-49.

⁷³⁹ Note also a similar remark at §28, 1133B

⁷⁴⁰ §5, 764C: ‘Ἀκούσωμεν καὶ φυλάξωμεν, καὶ ποιήσωμεν, ὅσοι τι ἀδόκιμον πτώμα πεπόνθαμεν.’ Cf. §15, 885D-888A

⁷⁴¹ So Bitton-Ashkelony: ‘John Climacus stands a part [sic] in this regard. He was fascinated by acts of extreme asceticism performed in the process of penitence...For Climacus these monastic prisoners...were a model of penitence’ (‘Penitence in Late Antique Monastic Literature’, 191).

⁷⁴² First Troparion of the First Ode: Πάντες οἱ...δεῦτε καὶ μιμήσασθε προθύμως· ἰδοῦ γὰρ πρόκειται τύπος σωτηρίας.

⁷⁴³ He only gives it in §4, 704B

‘one of them.’ They are described using quotations from the Psalms, and speak in stock phrases and Scriptural quotations. They are not, I think, flesh-and-blood characters, but rather general types of ascetic looks, responses, and demeanours. There is a sense in which Climacus leaves the penitents empty so that readers may find space for themselves in the Prison. The death of one of these, then, can be the death of any monk.

The Hour of Death

‘The last hour of one these was a fearful and pitiful spectacle.’⁷⁴⁴ In the description of that hour with which he follows this ominous sentence, John does not disappoint. He vividly and harshly dramatizes the final moments of a penitent, who would die surrounded by his brethren, questioned to the last about his own progress and their expectations for judgment:

For when his fellow convicts perceived one departing before them about to die, they circled around him while his mind yet in good health. Thirsty, mourning, with a most pitiful look and sullen word they questioned he who was about to depart: “What is it, brother and fellow convict—how is it? What do you say? What do you hope? What do you expect?...Are you freed or are you still liable [ἢ ὑπεύθυνος ἔτι ὑπάρχεις]?...Have you received confidence or do you still have an uncertain hope [ἢ ἄδηλον ἔχεις τὴν ἐλπίδα]? Have you received freedom, or is your thought still confused and uncertain?⁷⁴⁵

Two things are worth noting. First, the penitents refer to themselves and their fellow as ‘fellow convicts.’ They exist on the same social stratum—brothers bound by their failures. Second, there is their reference to ‘uncertain hope.’ Ἄδηλον, which I have translated as uncertain might also be rendered ‘unclear’ or even ‘unrevealed.’⁷⁴⁶ The emphasis, though, is on uncertainty since the penitents live with an uncertainty formed from their failures.

The questions continue on and on, culminating in Scriptural quotations, which effectively ask whether he has heard a voice within (Ἐγένετό τις ἐν σοὶ φωνὴ λέγουσα ἔνδον) saying something like ‘your faith has saved you’ (Mark 5.34) or perhaps something like ‘Let sinners depart into Hades’ (Ps 9.18).⁷⁴⁷ The dying man then responds in kind by quoting one of several verses of Scripture:⁷⁴⁸

⁷⁴⁴ §5, 772C

⁷⁴⁵ §5, 772C-D

⁷⁴⁶ S.v. LSJ

⁷⁴⁷ §5, 772D: this ‘inner voice’ speaks Scripture, and when speaking of hope it quotes: Jn 5.14, Mt 9.2, or Mk 5.34. When describing fear, it quotes Pss 9.18, Mt 22.13, or Isa 26.10. While descriptions of hope vary, those of fear consistently refer to being dismissed from God’s presence and sent elsewhere.

To these questions some of those dying would respond, “Blessed be the Lord who has not rejected my prayer, and [turned away] his mercy from me” (Ps. 65.20); again, some would say, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us to beasts as prey for their teeth” (Ps. 123.6). But others said sadly, Will our “soul pass through the raging water” (Ps 123.5) of the spirits of the air? These did not take courage as yet, but looked steadily at what would transpire in that accounting. Others, sadder still, responded differently and said, “Woe to the soul that did not keep its vow blameless⁷⁴⁹—in this hour and this only, will it know what is prepared for it.”⁷⁵⁰

After this response, we can only presume that the penitent dies. In the paragraph preceding the death scene, Climacus notes that when one knew he was about to die, he would go to the overseer, Isaac, and ‘beg with oaths to be deemed worthy not of human burial, but of the burial of an irrational animal—to be tossed out into the midst of the river or in the field with the beasts. And often that lamp of discernment [ὁ τῆς διακρίσεως λύχνος] obeyed [ὑπήκουσεν],⁷⁵¹ bidding that he be carried out deprived of psalmody and all honour.’⁷⁵²

Despite its apparently unique formulation, the penitent’s death scene is remarkably similar to those of *abbas* in the *AP*, the *HL*, and *PS*. Likewise, the brethren and the dying all inhabit the same stratum—the dying is not called ‘father’ or in any way distinguished from his fellow convicts. We will use these two points to explore just what the Prison can reveal about the importance of the memory of death.

Penitents and Elders

In the scenes we have examined above, elders die surrounded by disciples eager to learn what the *abba* experiences at death. Such questions, however, often met with rebukes or silence. In the Prison, such questions receive answers—at least, such answers as may be given. It was also a particular trait of

⁷⁴⁸ Climacus uses this technique earlier in §5 as well as at §27, 1116A-B, to illustrate a diverse but indefinite series of possible slogans or responses to a particular issue to which all must respond. He thus preserves an important respect for individuality in the ascetic life. Climacus is particularly sensitive to the fact that, although all ascetics have generally the same goal, and ought to have similar motives, they do not all arrive by the same way (something he elaborates in §26, on Discernment). He gives the reason for this quite bluntly at §28, 1140C: ‘Neither in body nor in spirit are all alike.’

⁷⁴⁹ Cf. §27, 1108D: ‘νεᾶνις μὲν μὴ φυλάξασα κοίτην, ἐμίανε σῶμα καὶ ψυχὴ μὴ φυλάξασα συνθήκην, ἐμίανε πνεῦμα.’ After this ‘defilement’, both bride and soul descend to further crimes and sins (1108D-1109A). Cf. §1, 632B

⁷⁵⁰ §5, 773A-B

⁷⁵¹ Rader lists the even more emphatic ‘ἐποίησεν ὑπακούσας’ as textual variant for ‘ὑπήκουσεν.’

⁷⁵² §5, 772C

holy monks to have foreknowledge of impending death, a trait which here passes to the penitent as well. It was also, from Antony onward, characteristic of the more popular ascetics to ask for secret or at least simple burial. Arsenius' gruff reply put it perhaps better than any other: 'Don't you know how to tie a rope around my feet and drag me to the mountain?'⁷⁵³ Climacus clearly has in mind the scene characteristic for desert elders, but he subverts it to his own unique purpose.

The death of the penitent in the *Ladder* is comparable to the death of a Desert *abba*. The lowest die like the most exalted (and, as will be seen below, the holy die like the condemned). Indeed, the demands which elders put on their disciples for discreet burial are now requests made by the subservient to their overseer. Climacus, by thus subverting a classic topos, emphasizes the fear and uncertainty of the moment—whereas the reader of *AP* knew to be confident for the dying elder (whose soul would not doubt be seen ascending to heaven), no one has any confidence for the dying penitent. And, if one in whom no confidence is possible dies like the best, then we are left to wonder what to make of elders.

Climacus' subversion of the elder's death scene has also a second and very nearly opposite effect. We have examined Antony's profound vision of the soul's ascent after death (in *VA* and echoed in *HL*, discussed in Chapter One above), and both Athanasius and Palladius describe the damned as ὑπεύθυνοι. This word refers to one who owes someone something, and especially an account.⁷⁵⁴ It seems never in Desert literature to have a positive connotation. If a monk is ὑπεύθυνος, it is to sin⁷⁵⁵ or punishment⁷⁵⁶ or, as in Antony's visions, the 'enemy.' Indeed, in those visions of death, the ὑπεύθυνοι are damned, taken by the enemy to whom they have given themselves up through sin and indolence.⁷⁵⁷

In the *Ladder*, however, Climacus uses the term ὑπεύθυνος liberally, applying it in the quotations above to penitent monks.⁷⁵⁸ In paradoxical language, he calls them μακάριοι ὑπεύθυνοι⁷⁵⁹ and τῶν ὑπευθύνων ἐκείνων τῶν ἀνευθύνων.⁷⁶⁰ Yes, these men are κατάδικοι, but of their lives Climacus says, 'Repentance is the daughter of hope and the denial of despair. The one repenting is condemned but

⁷⁵³ Arsenius 40, taken from *VA* 89-90; so also *PS* 178

⁷⁵⁴ *S.v.* LSJ

⁷⁵⁵ *HM* 20.1; Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Cyriaci*; Ps-Macarius, *Collectio* H, 32

⁷⁵⁶ *HL* 24.3

⁷⁵⁷ Obvious in Palladius' vision of the giant: *HL* 21.16-7; as also in Ps-Macarius, *Collectio* H, 22.

⁷⁵⁸ See, e.g., §14, 869C: Gluttony asks monks why they should demand any knowledge of her, they who are 'οἱ ἐμοὶ ὑπεύθυνοι τυγχάνοντες.'

⁷⁵⁹ §5, 769D

⁷⁶⁰ §5, 765A

unashamed.⁷⁶¹ In this paradox of liability and freedom from debt is the essence of the death scene: it is fundamentally uncertain, and yet it remains at least mildly optimistic. Climacus implies that those condemned, those who would be accounted damned in other visions of death, still have hope—in fact, to be and expect to be treated as a convict is ‘the denial of hopelessness.’ The other side of his subversion—that even elders have cause for concern—will find its place below in *Scene Two*.

The Memory of Judgment

The reason for this apparent paradox lies with our penitent’s activities in life, and is intimately connected with the second point the story raised. In this scene the living and the dying occupy the same status. In part, this simply continues Climacus’ subversion of the elder’s death scene. However, it also has a profounder theological importance. Because the dying have the same status as the living, enquiry into their death is, in a sense, inquiry into one’s own. The brethren’s questions are, therefore, far more than idle curiosity or a needless torment. Climacus says approvingly that ‘Silence in knowledge is...a prison of mourning, friend of tears, worker of the memory of death, portrait-painter of punishment, enquirer into judgment...’⁷⁶² The word φιλοπράγμων connotes something like a ‘busybody.’⁷⁶³ The scandal or, at least, surprise, that this word generates is certainly not lost on Climacus, for which reason he includes it in a list of virtues explicitly opposed to contemptible πολυλογία. A φιλοπράγμων is, instead, a blessed σιωπή ἐν γνώσει. Climacus marvelously incorporates the scandalous semantic element into his description of the penitents at their brother’s deathbed. The brethren conclude their questions thus: ‘Speak to us, we beg you, that we may know in what condition we are about to be.’⁷⁶⁴ When they question their brother, the brethren are asking about themselves—what he can expect is what they can expect, if, indeed, they may expect anything at all.

These questions echo those which the condemned brethren ask themselves daily. The same habits which define monastic life also overshadow the moment of death. Earlier in the rung, Climacus said of those in the Prison:

All of them sat always seeing death with their eyes [Πάντες δὲ ἐκάθηντο αἰεὶ ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς αὐτῶν ὁρῶντες τὸν θάνατον] and saying, “What then will be the result?

⁷⁶¹ §5, 764B

⁷⁶² §11, 852D: ‘πένθους δεσμοπήριον, δακρύων φίλη, θανάτου μνήμης ἐργάτης, κολάσεως ζωγράφος, κρίσεως φιλοπράγμων.’

⁷⁶³ S.v. LSJ

⁷⁶⁴ §5, 773A

What the sentences? What our end? Is there restoration? Is there forgiveness for those in shadows, for the humble, for the convicts?...Will the judge be conciliated in the end? At least partially? Even half the deserved punishments? For they are truly great, and in need of many tears and labours.⁷⁶⁵

Their daily activity was contemplation of death, the content of which is judgment. In this presentation, contemplation of death elides into a contemplation of judgment and its outcome. Climacus has already said of these that, 'Among them, if it became necessary to utter a sound, their constant and unceasing conversation was the memorial of death and thought of eternal judgment.'⁷⁶⁶ Of course, in this regard, the convicts are no different from the holy, upon whom Climacus also enjoins memory of judgment. Their memory is simply sharpened by their keen awareness of their failings and generally lowly condition.⁷⁶⁷ Concern with, or memory of, judgment defines the activity of the penitent as well as of monks more generally.

Memory of judgment operates always in the present moment by means of the sensible world. One discerns signs in daily life of an eternally important reality which, whether one has yet experienced it or not, is always at hand. Climacus says in Rung Seven, on Mourning:

Let your reclining on your bed be for you a type of your interment in the grave, and enjoyment of the table be a memorial of the agonizing table of those worms. Neither, receiving a cup of water, be forgetful of the thirst of that flame. And in every way do violence to nature.⁷⁶⁸

Climacus understands that temptations lurk in the mundane activities of daily life. Eating a meal is an opportunity for gluttony; sleep for lethargy; dreams a time for lust to creep in. These temptations do not come from the activities themselves, but from demons using those activities as an opportunity for attack. Climacus can therefore see a spiritual reality through the veil of daily life—the apocalyptic struggle of monks with demons, angelic spectators, God's final judgment, and glimpses of eternity beyond. One can thus counter demonic assault by discerning a sign of judgment in seemingly innocuous activities. As such, memory of judgment functions paraenetically by reminding the monk of the punishments which

⁷⁶⁵ §5, 769B-C

⁷⁶⁶ §4, 685B

⁷⁶⁷ Acute but not inappropriate, if we take seriously Climacus' admonitions at §1, 632B and §27, 1108D-1109A. The penitents, by their flamboyant lifestyle, cultivate this sense.

⁷⁶⁸ §7, 805A-B; so also §4, 685C: a baker who has preserved tears (τὸ δάκρυον) explains that 'Οὐδέποτε...ἀνθρώποις με δουλεύειν ἐννεόηκα, ἀλλὰ τῷ Θεῷ· καὶ τῆς ἡσυχίας πάσης ἀνάξιον ἑαυτὸν καταδικάσας, αὐτὴν τὴν τοῦ πυρὸς θεᾶς ὑπόμνησιν τῆς μελλούσης φλογὸς διὰ παντὸς κέκτημαι.'

await sinners—the negative imagery inculcates fear, a very important response for Climacus and one to which I will return below.

More than paraenesis, though, judgment metaphysically underpins present reality. Climacus relates the story of a robber who became a monk. The abbot received only after making him undergo a public confession, with all the trappings of a convict being dragged to the gibbet—even having other monks beat him ‘lightly.’ When the robber makes his confession, Climacus reports, ‘one of the brothers standing around told me that he saw a fearful figure holding a writing tablet and pen, and, he said, each sin the prostrate man mentioned, that fearful one crossed it out with the pen.’⁷⁶⁹ Thus, while the scene in the Church was an *artificial* judgment, it provided an opportunity for very real spiritual judgment. The judgment has already begun because, as the story suggests, deeds are already recorded. Confession, however, and repentance cross them out and so while one’s sin puts one constantly under judgment, repentance constantly gives the hope of acquittal. In fact, when questioned about the matter, the abbot told Climacus, ‘I did it for two reasons. First so that, having brought him to confession, I might free him from eventual shame through present shame [διὰ τῆς παρούσης αἰσχύνης τῆς μελλούσης ἀπαλλάξω]. And this is what happened. For, brother John, he did not rise from the floor until he received forgiveness for everything.’⁷⁷⁰ The abbot then adduces the above vision of the fearful angel as proof. The second reason, he says, is to exhort others to confession.⁷⁷¹ Memory of judgment certainly functions paraenetically for the robber-cum-monk, who amends his life because of it. But it is not merely an artifice or a hortatory device—there really is an angel marking down deeds and preparing the coming judgment. And because judgment is real, it is all the more a motivator to the monk.

In his various exhortations to monks to act ‘like convicts’ Climacus heightens the sense of judgment as something already begun. While he uses the vocabulary of the convict in reference to the penitents in Prison, Climacus also applies it to apparently holier and more successful ascetics. When discussing stillness, Climacus says,

One fettered in prison dreads fear of the one who punishes [φόβον κολάζοντος δέδοικε]. But one in a wilderness cell has borne fear of the Lord. The former does not fear the court as the latter fears the judgment of the judge [τὸ τοῦ κριτοῦ κριτήριον δέδοικεν]. There is need for you to have much fear in stillness, my marvellous friend. For nothing is able to drive out *acedia* like fear. While a condemned man constantly looks intently for

⁷⁶⁹ §4, 684C

⁷⁷⁰ §6, 684C

⁷⁷¹ Ibid.

when the judge comes around to the prison, the true worker looks for when he who hastens will be freed [πότε ὁ κατεπείγων ἐλεύσεται]. A weight of depression [φορτίον λύπης] is bound to the former, but to the latter a font of tears.⁷⁷²

The prisoner fears an inevitable punishment and so becomes depressed. The one who cultivates stillness fears the Lord, as a judge who is coming, but with the hope of ‘being freed’ and of attaining salvation. The contrast between these echoes Macarius’ injunction that monks must weep now in order not to weep later—for the monk tears are an expression of fear mingled with hope; for the damned tears only express despair. Nevertheless, the analogy serves Climacus well, and he uses it to explain how a monk must act at confession,⁷⁷³ and how he can maintain mourning.⁷⁷⁴ Seeing himself as a convict focuses the monk’s activity. Distractions seem less important in relation to the sentence under which he feels himself to labour. But, again, despite its artificiality, the self-presentation of the convict relies on the reality of judgment already begun.

Interlude: Three Sketches of the Memory of Death

‘Prepare your works for death’ (Proverbs 24.27).⁷⁷⁵ If memory of judgment disengaged from death describes a spiritual reality already present, memory of death as mortality forestalls the terror of that reality to some extent by recalling its inherent *futurity*. Deployed in this way the memory of one’s eventual death continues to urge the ascetic on, but also gives a crucial forward-looking perspective to the ascetic life which keeps the monk from the paralysis to which fear of judgment on its own might lead. Because judgment awaits death and is uncertain until then, the present moment is never a ‘final’ moment. Nevertheless, because of the uncertainty of mortality, every moment should be treated as though it were one’s last. Memory of death serves to allay despair and inculcate humility, and, when coupled with the above-discussed memory of judgment, serves to spur the monk to constant action. The sketches which follow highlight the gravity and efficacy of the memory of death.⁷⁷⁶

⁷⁷² §27, 1088B-C

⁷⁷³ §4, 708D-709A: ‘Τίνου καὶ τῷ εἶδει καὶ τῷ λογισμῷ ὡς κατάδικος ἐπὶ τῇ ἐξομολογήσει· εἰς γῆν νενευκῶς, καὶ εἰ δυνατὸν, τοὺς τοῦ κριτοῦ καὶ ἱατροῦ πόδας, ὡς τοῦ Χριστοῦ, δάκρυσι βρέχων (cf. Lk 7.37-50, Mk 14.1-9, Jn 12.1-8).’

⁷⁷⁴ Summary after §26, 1085C-D: ‘Ὡσπερ ὁ τὴν ἀπόφασιν εἰληφῶς, καὶ πρὸς τὴν καταδίκην πορευόμενος, οὐ λαλεῖ περὶ θεάτρων· οὕτως οὐδὲ ὁ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ πενθῶν, γαστέρα θεραπεύσει ποτέ.’ Cf. §7, 813D.

⁷⁷⁵ §27, 1116A-B: ‘Ἐτοίμαζε εἰς τὴν ἔξοδον τὰ ἔργα σου. In context ‘εἰς τὴν ἔξοδον’ means only ‘outside’ or ‘in the outdoors.’ Climacus, however, relying on the wider possible semantic range associated with ἔξοδος, takes it to refer to ‘death.’

⁷⁷⁶ §6, 796C-797A: these sketches make up a large portion of Climacus’ chapter on ‘Memory of Death.’

One monk had a habit of going into ecstasy as the memory of death and would be found in a state close to death, like an anaesthetized patient on the operating table.

Another related that he found himself unable to escape the memory of death which, ‘firmly established in his heart,’ stood before him and hindered him from slackening his regimen, ‘as though it were a judge.’

Another ‘lived in every carelessness, giving no care whatsoever to his own soul’, although he was himself a monk. Climacus presents here another death scene in which we can see the classic *topoi* of the Desert subtly altered to bring out different details. It is again of a penitent, though one in no Prison save his own cell. He is a flesh-and-blood character, named Hesychius ‘the Horebite.’ Once he fell very sick, and ‘for about an hour was absent from the body [του σώματος ὡς ἐπὶ ὥραν μίαν ἀκριβῶς ἐξεδήμησε].’ Upon his ‘return’, he begged others to leave him, walled up his cell, and lived there silently, in rather extreme bodily asceticism, for twelve years.⁷⁷⁷ When he was ‘about to die’⁷⁷⁸ his fellow monks broke down the door. The change in his appearance and demeanour shocks his brethren, who undoubtedly remembered a better-fed, better-rested man than they found. Climacus describes a changed man ‘always seated, meditating thus on the things which he saw in the ecstasy [ἀ ἐώρακεν ἐν τῇ ἐκστάσει ἐξηστηκῶς σύννουσ οὕτως], never changing his habit, but always out of his mind, and silently weeping hot tears.’ He is at the point of death and so they ask him questions. And, again, he reveals nothing of what he saw or would see. His only words strongly recall Sisoës 19: ‘Forgive me. No one who has known the memory of death will ever be able to sin (cf. Sira 7.36).’⁷⁷⁹ With that he dies. His burial is neither in the field nor the river, but ‘reverently in the cemetery near the castrum.’

The memory of death clearly holds for Climacus an incredible power. It prevents those who have ‘founded it firmly in their hearts’ from slackening their pace of ascetic progress. It sends others into swoons so that they live quite literally as dead. And those who were negligent it makes heedful, turning unrepentant sinners into saints. When the brethren went to look for Hesychius’ remains (presumably to bury them) they found nothing. Climacus treats their absence as a sure sign of Hesychius’ acceptance by God, ‘the Lord demonstrating by this his much cared-for and praiseworthy repentance, for all those

⁷⁷⁷ His actions recall the Gazan practice of ‘extreme enclosure’, discussed in chapter three above.

⁷⁷⁸ §6, 797A: “Ὅτε δὲ ἤμελλεν τελευτᾶν.” This echoes Luke 7.2: “Ἐκατοντάρχου δέ τινος δούλος κακῶς ἔχων ἤμελλεν τελευτᾶν, ὃς ἦν αὐτῷ ἔντιμος.”

⁷⁷⁹ Hesychius here echoes Sisoës 19, discussed in chapter two above.

wishing to correct their ways, even after much carelessness.⁷⁸⁰ Where one might have expected visions of a soul ascending to Heaven, we find instead evidence of bodily assumption—an tomb empty like Christ's.

For Hesychius, the memory of death functioned paraenetically, as a tool first for dissuading himself from sin and second for focusing on repentance, expressed through tears. In this regard it was the same for the unnamed Egyptian monk who was prevented from laziness by the memory of death. Hesychius does not say how, or particularly what he saw, but one may surmise from what Climacus says elsewhere that by undergoing a temporary death (and not just imagining or picturing it⁷⁸¹) he experienced firsthand the judgment which Climacus elsewhere describes in more or less detail. But, together with the judgment, Hesychius experienced the devastating effect of death itself. He encountered his own mortality and the transience of worldly distractions and so when he returned to his body, he shut himself away from all those temptations. The demons could no longer hide behind the veil of the perceptible world. Pleasures could no longer appear innocuous, and he could see the eternal meaning of ephemeral activities. Perhaps this sounds like an exaggeration, but Hesychius' behavior warrants the description. Closing himself off from the sights and sounds of the sensible world, he could see only his own ecstasy—which is to say, he live always with his own mortality, knowing the transience of the world in the blinding light of eternity and judgment. The memory of death as mortality reminds the monk that judgment has not yet overtaken him, and so create space within which he can work and progress, if only through repeated repentance.

Scene Two: The Elder's Soliloquy

Climacus closes the Seventh Rung with a haunting description of the death of 'a certain hermit, Stephen', who lived near Elijah's abode on the far side of Gebel Musa. This was a man who 'came to the eremitic and solitary life having spent many years also in the monastic wrestling school, being adorned with fasts and especially with tears, among other good advantages.'⁷⁸² Becoming famous, he departs and

⁷⁸⁰ §6, 797A-B

⁷⁸¹ Cf., however, §7, 808A-B: 'Κατάνυξις κυρία ἐστίν, ἀμετεώριστος ὁδύνη ψυχῆς μηδεμίαν ἑαυτῆ παρηγορίαν παρέχουσα, **μόνην δὲ τὴν ἑαυτῆς ἀνάλυσιν καθ' ὥραν φανταζομένη**, καὶ τὴν τοῦ παρακαλοῦντος Θεοῦ τοὺς ταπεινοὺς μοναχοὺς παράκλησιν ὡς ὕδωρ ψυχρὸν προσδεχομένη.'

⁷⁸² §7, 812A-B

undertakes a life ‘with scope for more beneficial, more restricted, and painful repentance.’⁷⁸³ Days before his death he returns and becomes sick. The day before his death:

He went into ecstasy, and opening his eyes he looked to the right and to the left of the bed. And as though being accused by some, he spoke so that all standing about could hear, sometimes “Yes, truly, [this is the] truth, but I have fasted for so many years.” Or, “No, not at all, truly you lie, I have not done this.” Or again, “Yes, this is true, yes, but I have wept, I have served.” And again, “No, you falsely accuse me.” But sometimes he said to one: “Yes, truly, yes. And to this I do not know how to respond. In God is mercy.”⁷⁸⁴

Climacus is shaken by this whole episode. He says, ‘And this was truly a marvel, terrifying and fearful, this hidden and unrelenting accounting. And the most fearful thing, was that they also accused him of things which he had not done.’⁷⁸⁵ Even the great and holy come to a fearful end, regardless of their ascetic regimen, their virtues, their deeds, their reputation however well deserved. The angelic or, perhaps demonic, judgment at death lays bare that reputation, and through the combination of true and false accusations demands a perfect self-awareness on the part of the ascetic. What is impressive is less the falsity of the accusations, but the old man’s ability to sift through deeds which were and were not his own.⁷⁸⁶

The Uncertain Judgment

Climacus is most frightened not by false accusations—which one expects, after all, from demons—but that one like Stephen could possibly have been accused of something for which he had no response. He says this about ‘one of his faults [εἰς τινα τῶν ἑαυτοῦ πταισμάτων].’⁷⁸⁷ Πταισμάτα is an important word for Climacus. The penitents dwell on their πταισμάτα, worrying on account of those whether they will see God’s ‘good things’ after death. This is also how Climacus deploys the word in conjunction with the memory of death: ‘As a concept precedes a word, so the memory of death and faults [πταισμάτα] precedes mourning.’⁷⁸⁸ Faults imply that one will come under judgment and make its

⁷⁸³ §7, 512B

⁷⁸⁴ §7, 812C

⁷⁸⁵ §7, 812C-D

⁷⁸⁶ Cf. §4, 701C-D, where Climacus mentions a little book (μικρὸν πτύχιον) that brethren at Alexandria keep attached to their belts, in which they write down their thoughts throughout the day to take to confession. This seems to mirror the χάρτην γεγραμμένον καὶ κάλαμον which an angel uses to record deeds at 684C. Deeds are recorded constantly on both sides.

⁷⁸⁷ §7, 812D

⁷⁸⁸ §6, 793B

uncertainty something frightening. In the story of Stephen, it is important to see that his *πταίσματα* lie in the past, while death is still in the future. This means that one is accused at death about things which can lie only in his past, and the time of accusation and judgment is necessarily a *retrospective* one. This is certainly most true at death, but any accusation, insofar as it is true, must be about something in the past. Thus, the constant self-examination of the monks bespeaks a constantly retrospective attitude, constantly calling up the past in light of a future judgment. Between past and present then lies the iconic present moment, prefiguring judgment based on past deeds.

Drawing out this sense of uncertainty on account of past faults, we see that Climacus finds most terrifying not the accusations or even the ‘more fearful’ false accusations, but rather Stephen’s silence before one of them. Climacus cries out thus:

Good Lord! The hesychast and anchorite said about one of his sins that “to this I do not know how to respond”. This man was a monk for about forty years, and had tears! Woe is me, woe is me, where then was the saying of Ezekiel, that Stephen might say to them “In that which I find you, in that shall I judge you, says the Lord.”⁷⁸⁹ Truly he was able to say nothing of the kind. On what account—glory to Him who alone knows; some told me—as though they were in the presence of the Lord—that he fed [*or*, raised] a leopard by hand in the desert.⁷⁹⁰

Stephen fits the mould of a desert elder. He has been a monk most of his life. He has lived first in obedience in monasteries and then in the desert in stricter *ascesis* with God alone as his master. He is self-aware, and above all has ‘tears.’ For Climacus tears and mourning are very important and remarkably effective for repentance—in a sense, they symbolize the whole of repentance as a ‘second baptism’—a point which I will discuss at length below. Stephen had even come to that freedom and authority before the world which the Desert Fathers saw expressed through an Adamic relationship with animals—feeding or rearing a leopard in the desert is a sign of great purity and holiness.⁷⁹¹ And this man was not only accused but found his defence eventually reduced to silence. Whereas in the Prison the penitents were portrayed like elders, here the elder is portrayed like one of the penitents. He dies in uncertain straits. Climacus says simply ‘Being thus questioned he was separated from the body. What the

⁷⁸⁹ Reference unclear: perhaps Ezekiel 7.5 or 24.14.

⁷⁹⁰ §7, 812D

⁷⁹¹ See, e.g., Paul of Thebes 1; *HM* 4.3, 9.5-7, 12.8, 21.15-16; *HL* 18.28; *PS* 58, 107, 125, 181, etc.; on which Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 292-93

judgment, what the decision, what his sentence or the end of the accounting was not made clear.⁷⁹² Stephen dies in the same uncertainty as a penitent, the same uncertainty with which monastics live their whole lives.

While this uncertainty could give hope to penitents, when applied to elders and solitaries it tempers hope with fear. The ascetic's activity is repentance before the prospect of judgment, and as Climacus has made clear again and again, that judgment is not handed down this side of death. Stephen lived with it in mind, remembering judgment, remembering death, and at the end he could recall himself, his failures and achievements together. But even this is not enough. There are still accusations which *ascesis* cannot answer. What hope, Climacus seems to ask, is there for the rest of us? None, he says, 'of those who mourn expect inheritance at death—for it is hidden and uncertain.' Yet Stephen in his silence did not despair. He knew what Climacus would remind readers of elsewhere: 'Nothing is greater than or even equal to God's mercy. The one who despairs kills himself.'⁷⁹³ Stephen says simply: 'I do not know what to say. In God is mercy.' Stephen has no response because he is not 'able', he cannot redeem himself. But he needs no response because God can save him, and, in Christ, God has done so.

Conclusion: Past, Present, Future

Discerning eternal reality in daily activities, one begins to see the present life not simply as less valuable than the next, but, rather, full of τύποι and εἰκόνες for eternity. The monk who understands the present world as an image of the next learns to pierce the veil of sensible reality and mundane activity, and find its proper, eschatological, meaning. The whole of one's life becomes an image of eternity and so one undertakes every activity as though one were already being evaluated and consigned to an eternal fate based on that evaluation. The nature of the world is such as to divide good from bad, saint from sinner. That is, there is no existence which is not judged according to ethical criteria and, especially obedience to God. God's judgment, however, operates on deeds already done, and so the monk prepares by looking backward. He recalls his sins and so learns to avoid them. The meditation on judgment, made possible by the iconic present moment, requires a constantly retrospective gaze. As in Desert literature, God's judgment is, in a sense, ongoing, because every action is added to the case (although, as above, confession and repentance remove actions as well). But the prospect of mortality serves, in

⁷⁹² §7, 812D: καὶ οὕτω λογοθετούμενος, τοῦ σώματος ἐχωρίσθη, τί τὸ κριμα, ἢ τὸ πέρας, ἢ ἀπόφασις αὐτοῦ, ἢ τὸ τέλος τοῦ λογοθείσου κατάδηλον μὴ ποιησάμενος.

⁷⁹³ §5, 780B

Climacus, not only to highlight the urgency of renunciation, but to remind the monk that he has *not yet been judged*. So long as death looms, the monk still *has* time. This side of mortality has never before been so highlighted as in Climacus' thought. The monk lives constantly in the balance. Thus, memory of judgment shows the ascetic's situation not as it *already is*, but as it is *always becoming*—shaped by the past, but not yet solidified by death and so always open to repentance and progress.

The Opposition of Ages

Climacus' characterization of the memory of death rests on the implicit 'opposition of ages' which was developed in Desert literature and the Gaza Fathers coupled with a strong recognition of their continuity. Climacus' descriptions of death nuance this line of thought. For him, the duality of mortality and judgment reveals the present world in its twofold eschatological significance. On the one hand, as discussed above, memory of judgment shines eternity's light through the ephemeral world and, in its opacity one can see eternal significance in even the smallest action—baking bread can remind the monk of hell, and so aid him in his quotidian discipline, which appears no longer mundane but of vast, eternal importance. At the same time the fact of death as an end to ephemeral existence appropriately values present 'goods' such as family, friends, dignity and wealth. In light of both mortality and judgment the present world's iconic value is revealed as merely that—it is an image of the things to come and never a substitute.

On the other hand, memory of death as mortality implies what I have termed 'futurity.' One only enters eternity through physical death, at which point one is judged for deeds already done and seen only then in their full significance. Because this is always future to the monk death effectively *delays* eternity. The monk looks forward to a time when the iconic world gives way completely to the eternal one, but 'so long as it is called today' the monk has not yet reached the end of his ascetic life.

Climacus has little to say of the delights of eternity. His concern is certainly more in the present and so, although he can imaginatively describe death, judgment, and subterranean terrors, he is consistently reticent about eschatological beatitude. He hints in the final rungs at delights in store for God's servants. For example, when Climacus treats ἀπαθεία, it is in eschatological terms and, indeed, Climacus evinces strong ambivalence as to whether it can be attained in the present life.⁷⁹⁴ Taking up traditional teaching on the subject he pushes it into an eschatological—post-mortem—framework. Within that framework, he describes ἀπαθεία in expansive, yet strongly biblical, terms:

Consider *apatheia* as a palace of the heavenly king in the heavens and the 'many rooms' (Jn 14.2) as dwellings within this city: the fortified Jerusalem,⁷⁹⁵ the forgiveness of failures [τὴν τῶν πταισμάτων ἄφεσιν]. Let us run, brethren, so as to gain entrance into

⁷⁹⁴ See, e.g., §26, 1029D: Οὐ πάντες μὲν ἀπεθεῖς γενέσθαι δυνατόν· πάντες δὲ σωθῆναι καὶ Θεῷ διαλλεγῆναι οὐκ ἀδύνατον; or Gluttony's speech at §14, 869D-872A: ἐχθραίνει μοι εἰς ἅπαν ἔννοια θανάτου, τὸ δὲ ἐμὲ καταγοῦν τελείως ἐν ἀνθρώποις οὐδέν. Cf. §25, 993B *et infra* (on the paradox of being ἀπαθῆς and συμπαθῆς); §26, 1028A; §14, 865A-B; etc.

⁷⁹⁵ Cf. §3, 665B: where Climacus calls Jerusalem the land of *apatheia*, making an etymological argument, on which Luibheid and Russell, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* ET, 86 n. 11.

the palace's bridal chamber.⁷⁹⁶ But if from some anticipation of a burden, or if we run short of time, what misfortune! Let us run to some dwelling near the bridal chamber. And if we slacken, or become yielding, at least let us be found in every way within the wall.⁷⁹⁷

Climacus conflates and develops three classic eschatological images: the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12.22, Rev 21.2), the bridal chamber, and what Jesus describes as 'my father's house.' The eschatological hope of the monk is the *νυμφῶν*, the 'bridal chamber' within the rooms of the city by which image Climacus implies union with Christ as the climax of eschatological hope. Thus Climacus uses topological language to describe a mode of existence defined by union with Christ and freedom from the passions which express fallen existence.⁷⁹⁸ The future hope requires strenuous present activity if the monk is to attain it. Climacus speaks of 'faltering' or 'slackening'—Paul's image of the race to be run in his mind (cf. 1 Cor 9.24, 2 Tim 4.17, Heb 12.1). Climacus envisions a clear connection between present and future ages wherein one's behaviour in the present and, perhaps more to the point, one's *use* of the present time (1 Cor 7.31), determines one's eschatological dwelling. As Barsanuphius put it: 'Here the labour, there the reward.'⁷⁹⁹ Yet Climacus not only exhorts his readers to run, but also depicts the 'holy criminals' as exhorting each other the same way.⁸⁰⁰

Likewise, the fortified Jerusalem is also the 'forgiveness of faults'—the '*πταίσματα*' which we have discussed above in relation to the Penitents. The personal failings which necessitate repentance and make judgment a fearful prospect are not to be found in the 'land of *ἀπαθεία*'—not because it is attainable only for the perfect but, rather, because God is merciful. Such is the point of Climacus' tale of the elder, Stephen: no matter one's personal achievements, one has still failed, and, though these failings will be reckoned, God is merciful and on *that* fact the monk can rely.⁸⁰¹

One lives presently so as to become like Christ, preparing for the bridal chamber and yet already striving to taste something of it—in types of judgment, and more especially in prayer⁸⁰² and desire.⁸⁰³ Preparation for a mode of being possible only after death inculcates a present mode of living which has

⁷⁹⁶ Cf. Mat 9.15, Mark 2.19, Luke 5.34

⁷⁹⁷ §29, 1149D-1152A

⁷⁹⁸ Cf. Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 166-67

⁷⁹⁹ QR, 604

⁸⁰⁰ §5, 769D; cf. §1, 637B; Climacus quotes Heb 12.1, but substitutes *δράμωμεν* for *τρέχωμεν*.

⁸⁰¹ So also §28, 1137B

⁸⁰² §28, 1129A: Πρεσευχή ἐστι κατὰ μὲν τὴν αὐτῆς ποιότητα συνοισία καὶ ἔνωσις ἀνθρώπου καὶ Θεοῦ.

⁸⁰³ §27, 1097D-1100A: Εἶδον ἡσυχαστὰς, καὶ τὴν φεγομένην αὐτῶν πρὸς Θεὸν ἐπιθυμίαν διὰ τῆς ἡσυχίας ἀπληρώτως πληρώσαντας· καὶ πῦρ πυρὶ καὶ ἔρωτι ἔρωτα καὶ πόθῳ πόθον γεννήσαντας.

always a future focus. The perfection of the monk is one thing, and attainable by some in this life but, Climacus claims, the ultimate goal waits for death and resurrection, and so the monk is able to maintain future focus even when tasting it presently. Indeed, whatever taste one has of that future state only heighten the sense that he has not yet achieved his desire. That future existence for which one prepares now is one of more perfect imitation of Christ.

In this passage, Climacus deploys several Scriptures which describe an imitation of Christ made possible by Christ, for which one prepares now and which one receives later. Climacus implies as much by following his description of Jerusalem with a quotation from Psalm 17.30 (LXX): ‘By my God I will climb a wall.’ The thrust of this passage is that, with God’s help, the monk is enabled to enter the heavenly community. Yet Climacus goes on to exhort his brethren to ‘break down the middle wall of separation’, an activity which Paul had ascribed to Christ at Eph 2.14. The ascetic becomes, with God’s help, like Christ.⁸⁰⁴ Or, rather, Christ lives in him—Climacus begins his eschatological vignette by quoting Galatians 2.20.⁸⁰⁵ That is, the dispassionate ascetic imitates Christ but only because Christ enables him to do so. Imitation is as much surrender to Christ as it is response to him.

Memory and Concept

If we recall Hesychius’ life and admonition, discussed above, we see that in light of death, the world loses its solidity. The ages, present and future, resolve themselves in the light of that moment and *all its content*. Hesychius’ story shows how Climacus connects mortality and judgment so that the ‘memory of death’ can inspire virtue and draw the monk into his all-encompassing ἀποταγή. Climacus begins the rung on Memory of Death by telling us that ‘as a concept precedes speech, the memory of death and of faults precedes wailing and weeping.’⁸⁰⁶ Ἐννοια denotes a ‘concept’ as much as anything else,⁸⁰⁷ and so a the content of death provides the ‘conceptual framework’ for mourning—which in turn expresses the crucial practice of repentance. In the *Ladder* as in the whole tradition that came before, death’s content is composed of first, mortality and second, judgment. Climacus makes their connection very clear in his phrase ‘μνήμη τοῦ θανάτου καὶ πταισμάτων.’ ‘Death and faults,’ considered as

⁸⁰⁴ §29, 1152A

⁸⁰⁵ §29, 1149D

⁸⁰⁶ §6, 793B: ‘Παντὸς λόγου προηγείται ἔννοια. Μνήμη δὲ θανάτου καὶ πταισμάτων προηγείται κλαυθμοῦ καὶ πένθους.’

⁸⁰⁷ The phrase ‘ἔννοια [τοῦ] θανάτου’ is used by, e.g., Ps.-Justin, *Quaestiones et responsas ad orthodoxos*, (Morel 447D2-448A7); Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, 3.6.77.1f; Basil of Caesarea, *Epistulae*, 26, 46.5.

mortality and coming judgment are also that about which one must mourn.⁸⁰⁸ The monk weeps because death will take him, prepared or not, and so his time for repentance is limited; and he weeps because, aware of his own failings he foresees future misfortunes when judgment is handed down. The monks mourns because of and about death and judgment.

The relationship of ‘concept’ and ‘memory’ is an important one in the activity of mourning. While one may ‘possess’ a concept, one can not only ‘possess’ a memory, but can actively ‘remember’. Climacus treats memory in all its aspects—as faculty, as object⁸⁰⁹ and as verb.⁸¹⁰ One develops a habit of ‘remembering’ death in which one calls up the ‘memory’ or ‘concept’ of death. It is, perhaps, a way of training the memory to avoid Evagrius’ ‘ἐμπαθῆ νοήματα’ and Mark the Monk’s ‘πρόληψις.’ The memory is dangerous, certainly, but memory of death will purify from ‘passionate’ or ‘polluted’ memories, because it helps the monk view the world with entirely different eyes. With this goes Climacus’ idea of the ‘αἴσθησις τοῦ θανάτου,’ a kind increasingly intuitive perception of one’s mortality and the judgment hidden behind the world.⁸¹¹

As did the whole tradition before him, Climacus see two possible outcomes of judgment: salvation or damnation. This duality, coupled with judgment’s ‘futurity’ through physical death keeps the monk from despair and pride. Climacus carefully warns his readers not to arrogate to themselves a false confidence. He says flatly

Do not be confident until you receive your sentence,⁸¹² contemplating the one who, after sitting down to table at the marriage feast, was bound hand and foot and cast out into the outer darkness (Mat 22.11-14). Do not be stiff-necked (cf. Exod 33.3-5, Acts 7.51, etc.), you who are an earthly [mortal] being, for many, though holy and immaterial, were cast from Heaven (Apoc 12.9).⁸¹³

⁸⁰⁸ So Hausherr, *Penthos*, 26-40

⁸⁰⁹ E.g., §12, 856B

⁸¹⁰ §6, 797B-C: ‘Ὁ πάντων νεκρωθεὶς, οὗτος θανάτου ἐμνημόνευσεν· ὁ δὲ ἔτι σχετικὸς, οὐ σχολάζει ἑαυτῷ ἀντεπίβουλος ὢν; see also §4, 685B and §5, 769B.

⁸¹¹ E.g., §6, 793C: ‘ἐν αἰσθήσει καρδίας’; 796B: ‘Ἀναλγησία καρδίας...τοῦ θανάτου αἴσθησιν’; 796C: ‘μετὰ τὴν ἐν αἰσθήσει καρδίας τῆς τοῦ θανάτου μνήμης παγίωσιν.’ This reflects Macarian sentiments which influenced Diadochus, though differs from Macarian language. On which see Stewart, Columba, *Working the Earth of the Heart: The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts and Language to AD 431* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 116-38; and on its influence on Diadochus, see Plested, Marcus, *The Macarian Legacy: The Place of Macarius-Symeon in the Eastern Christian Tradition*, OTM (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 134-40.

⁸¹² Cf. Elias 1 and Theophilus 4; *HL* 6.4, and Ps-Macarius, *Collectio H*, 26 (l. 352)

⁸¹³ §23, 968C; cf. §26, 1032C-D

Thinking of the penitent monks, we must remember what Climacus says of those who take up the crucial virtue of mourning (§7): ‘None of those mourning would expect inheritance at death. For it is hidden, not definite [Τὸ γὰρ ἄδηλον οὐ βέβαιον].’⁸¹⁴ The appearance of ἄδηλον here parallels its appearance in the penitent’s death scene—his ‘hope’ is unsurprisingly equitable with ‘inheritance’,⁸¹⁵ but both are ‘hidden’ or ‘uncertain.’ The monk must be vigilant until his last day, labouring under the threat of a judgment which he may find as surprising as, I am sure, the underdressed wedding crasher did. He only overcomes this uncertainty when he receives his sentence. That occurs only at or after death,⁸¹⁶ and so the monk has the present time for preparation and repentance possibly only within the context of uncertainty. He can live with fear and hope, rather than despairing expectation of condemnation or prideful confidence in vindication.

Climacus’ anecdotes consistently make exactly this point: the outcome of judgment, for penitents in the Prison or for the holy elder Stephen, is not certain. Its uncertainty—and its fearfulness—rests on the *πταίσματα* which lie in the monk’s past and which will be accounted only after death. Yet, as I have also shown, Climacus is quick to say that the same uncertainty should keep a monk from despair—there is hope as well as fear; not only hope of reward but hope founded in God’s merciful character. As we have seen from Desert and Gazan literature, the monk must meditate on both: hope keeps him from paralysis, fear keeps him from growing slack; and the two together link the renunciation of withdrawal to the cultivation of virtue.⁸¹⁷ We may conclude, then, that the *μνήμη θανάτου* is the habitual revisiting of a concept of death developed in light of its physical and eschatological significance, a habit which helps release the monk from attachment and service to material and transitory goods, and, therefore, from the passionate thoughts and memories to which he is susceptible.

Conclusion: The Framework of Asceticism

The present moment is always illuminated with the light of eternity, allowing the sensible and mundane world to image spiritual realities. To behold this is to contemplate judgment, since the spiritual realm is a moral one. Nevertheless, judgment remains uncertain prior to death. To remember death, therefore, is to behold judgment at a distance and to understand that progress, repentance, and salvation

⁸¹⁴ §5, 780A

⁸¹⁵ The favoured vocabulary of the NT is *κληρονομία*: Eph 1.14, 1.18, 5.5; Col 1.12, 3.24; Heb 9.15, 11.8; 1 Pet 1.4. But one also finds *πληροφορία*: Col 2.2, 1 Thess 1.5, Heb 6.11, 10.22.

⁸¹⁶ §7, 808D, 816D, §26, 1021B; §27, 1116A-B

⁸¹⁷ See Chryssavgis, *John Climacus*, 110-111, 159-161

are always possible. Nevertheless, death is also the moment when sensible and spiritual merge and the image finally becomes its archetype. As such, death is also the limit and scope of ascetic progress, and so memory of death as mortality, held together with contemplation of judgment, spurs the monk on to immediate action in light of the world which is he so fast approaching. Simultaneously, while he looks forward to what is already becoming present, the monk must look back, constantly remembering his beginnings, his sins, and his baptismal and monastic vows. The dynamism of the ascetic life as progress is only possible when every part of this framework is present. Unless the present moment tastes of eternity the monk has no hope, no fear, nothing to love. Yet without delay, judgment would present only a cause for despair. Without memory of his past, the monk has no sense of his own progress and, perhaps more importantly, his own lowliness. The monk lives in a state of tension, looking to the future with fear and hope predicated on the inexorable uncertainty of God's judgment, the futurity of death, and the retrospective awareness of his own faults.

Climacus inherited from *VA*, from Desert literature, especially from Gaza, a powerful tool in the memory of mortality and judgment. He put that inheritance to work and crafted from it a symbolic framework within which he could conceive of the ascetic life more generally. Not only has he deployed the *μνήμη τοῦ θανάτου* to motivate and clarify ascetic renunciation; not only has he connected it to a variety of virtues as did Barsanuphius and John; he has actually made *death* the means by which monks engage with time. The memory of death provides an existential, temporal, iconic framework within which the monk labors functions primarily to make his labor possible—progress is a process bounded ethically and temporally by the virtues and, primarily, humility and hope, the brighter twins of despair and pride. Within this framework, then, Climacus works out his vision of ascetic spirituality as a living death longing for resurrection.

IV. THE ASCETIC LIFE AS DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Procopius of Caesarea, writing about the *castrum* commissioned by Justinian, said that ‘In this mountain of Sinai dwelled monks, for whom life is a sort of careful “practice of death.”’⁸¹⁸ His words echo silently through the whole of the *Ladder*, as Climacus shapes the ascetic life and its eschatological purpose and hope by his imaginative descriptions of death and resurrection. At the end of the Fifteenth Rung, on Ἀγνεία, Climacus describes a pure ascetic as one ‘who, attaining this while in the flesh, has died and risen; and from this time has already grasped the prelude of the incorruption [*or*, immortality] to come.’⁸¹⁹ Merely to *taste* the future age, one must have died and risen. And so the present life becomes an opportunity for precisely that.

Climacus says of ‘those who think about thing above,’ that ‘being separated,⁸²⁰ they ascend in portions, while those who think on things below, return thither again, for there is no middle place for those who are separated [*sc.* who die].’⁸²¹ That is, those who see the age to come typified in the present world and set their minds to its contemplation already live there if only in soul, while their body will follow at the proper time. Those who live only for and in the present world, not discerning its iconic nature, experience it only. For them there is no ascent, because there is nothing between earth and heaven. At another point, Climacus describes the dispassionate monk as one tasting resurrection before the resurrection. Some, he says, ‘declare *apatheia* to be resurrection of the soul before the body.’⁸²² This passage clarifies that ‘resurrection’ life is a *mode*, a way of life defined by virtues like *apatheia*, allowing the ascetic to focus wholly on the things above rather than those below. The iconic world becomes increasingly transparent for the ascetic who focuses on heaven, so that at the heights of πρακτική he lives already in a resurrectional mode untroubled by the vicissitudes of the present life.

⁸¹⁸ Procopius of Caesarea, *De Aedificiis*, 5.8.4; the ‘practice of death’ (μελέτη θανάτου) refers implicitly to Plato (*Phaedo*, 81A) and suggests the by then common idea of φιλοσοφία as a uniquely Christian ascetical enterprise. Climacus is far less fond of that particular wording.

⁸¹⁹ §15, 904C

⁸²⁰ Soul from body—the definition of death discussed in the introduction.

⁸²¹ §26, 1036B-C: ‘οἱ μὲν τὰ ἄνω φρονήσαντες, χωριζόμενοι ἄνω μερικῶς ἀνέρχονται· οἱ δὲ τὰ κάτω, κάτω πάλιν πορεύονται· τῶν γὰρ χωριζομένων οὐδὲν λοιπὸν μέσον ἴσταται.’

⁸²² §29, 1148B-C: Τινὲς δὲ πάλιν ἀπάθειαν εἶναι ὀρίζονται ἀνάστασιν ψυχῆς πρὸ τοῦ σώματος. The ‘some’ most likely refers to Diadochus, *Capita*, 82: ‘Εἰ δὲ τις δυνηθεῖ ζῶν ἔτι διὰ τῶν πόνων ἀποθανεῖν, ὅλος λοιπὸν γίνεται οἶκος τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος· πρὶν γὰρ ἀποθάνῃ ὁ τοιοῦτος, ἀνέστη, ὡσπερ ἦν αὐτὸς ὁ μακάριος Παῦλος καὶ ὅσοι τελείως ἠγωνίσαντο καὶ ἀγωνίζονται κατὰ τῆς ἀμαρτίας.’ This claim echoes Climacus’ words concerning those who have conquered lust in §15, 892D-893A.

To qualify the above, it is important to remember that while Climacus allows the possibility of living a resurrectional life ‘in the flesh’, he understands it as an imperfect or, at least incomplete one. Already ambivalent about ἀπαθεία as a possibility this side of death, Climacus actually attributes the idea of ἀπαθεία as pre-resurrectional resurrection to ‘some people’, while others call it a knowledge ‘inferior only to that of angels’. This is one of those moments where Climacus accepts without adjudication various traditional elements. However, he then explains that he has it on good authority (‘I heard this from one who has tasted it’) that ἀπαθεία *really* is: ‘the perfect uncompleted perfection of the perfect.’⁸²³ This last opinion does not necessarily exclude the first two, but, as Climacus’ lists do generally, each item exposes a different facet of ἀπαθεία. If it is a taste of resurrectional life, or knowledge of God as far as possible for embodied creatures, it is also and above all a process without completion. Climacus preserves, even among the ‘perfect,’ a sense of forward (and upward) progress in God. The tension between ‘τελειότης’, which carries a connotation of completion, and ‘τὸ ἀτέλεστον’ plays out in Climacus’ understanding of the ascetic as a ‘blessed living corpse.’ This section will focus on this trope as a way of constituting the ascetic’s identity through death, conditioned by the iconic and temporal framework of death within which the monk labours.

Obedience and Living Death

Despite his clear claim that death and resurrection are necessary and even possible while still living, Climacus speaks more cautiously than many of his forebears about a monastic ‘living death.’ Climacus does say that ‘Memory of death is daily death; memory of departure is hourly groaning [Μνήμη θανάτου ἐστὶ καθημερινὸς θάνατος, μνήμη δὲ ἐξόδου κάθωρος στεναγμός].’⁸²⁴ He presses on, however, to distinguish between fear and terror at death, and so does not stop to elaborate an idea of ‘daily death.’

Climacus is, like Paul, the Desert Fathers, and the Great Old Men before him, aware of the ambiguities of thanatological language. He recognizes that ‘death’ spoken of in an unqualified way can have as many negative connotations as positive. For example, ‘willing death’ can be understood as ‘suicide’, something of which Climacus clearly disapproves. Climacus demonstrates the ambiguity of

⁸²³ §29, 1148C: ‘...αὕτη οὖν ἡ τελεία τῶν τελείων ἀτέλεστος τελειότης...’

⁸²⁴ §6, 793B

death by his equivocal use of the term ‘living corpse.’ In Rung Two, on Ἀπροσπάθεια, Climacus speaks of these corpses negatively:

We who desirously and zealously desire to run, let us examine with understanding how the Lord has condemned all those living in the world as ‘living corpses’ [πῶς ὁ Κύριος πάντας τοὺς ἐν κόσμῳ διατρίβοντας, καὶ ζῶντας νεκροὺς κατεδίκασεν], saying to one: “Leave the” worldly “dead”, “to bury the dead” (Luke 9.60) with the body.⁸²⁵

In this passage, strongly reticent of Barsanuphius’ treatment of Luke 9.60, the ‘living dead’ are those who still live according to the desires and ways of the world. It is hard not to see in this remark a condemnation of non-monastic ways of life, but for present purposes it is enough to note that the vivified corpse signifies in this instance an untenable state of being.

Two rungs later, when discussing obedience, Climacus uses the same vocabulary to describe a diametrically opposite state. He says of those living in obedience that ‘the blessed living corpse is distressed when he sees himself doing his own will, since he fears the burden of his own judgment [ἀλγυνόμενος ὁ ζῶν [Rader has ζιῶν] νεκρὸς οὗτος ὁ μακαρίτης, ὅταν ἑαυτὸν ὀψεται τὸ οἰκεῖον ποιῶντα θέλημα, δεδουκῶτα βασταγὴν τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ κριματος].’⁸²⁶ Climacus now speaks of the ‘living corpse’ as blessed. In this case, rather than describing a life incapable of detaching itself from worldly desires, living death describes a life which has become so detached as to have given up its own ability to choose and desire. The vocabulary and imagery of death is not, it seems, an inherently beneficial one – death can be good or bad, and so the image requires contextualization.

Climacus takes the up the idea of the ascetic life as a lived death always and only within obedience. He describes obedience as a total state—not an act or even a habit of acting, but a state of being which resembles death. It is worth quoting Climacus’ exuberant description of obedience as death:

Obedience is in every way a denial of one’s own life, revealed actively through the body. Or perhaps obedience is the opposite: mortification of members in a living intellect (cf. Col 3.5). Obedience is unexamined motion, a voluntary death, an uncluttered life, carelessness of danger, an unconcerned defence before God, fearlessness of death, peaceful voyage, a dozing stroll...Obedience is the will’s [*lit.*, willing’s] tomb, and humility’s raising.⁸²⁷

⁸²⁵ §2, 657B; so also Summary after §26, 1089A: Climacus compares one in despair to a dead man.

⁸²⁶ §4, 680B

⁸²⁷ §4, 680A: Cf. John the Sabaite’s story of an obedient disciple (§4, 720A-721A), whom Climacus calls τὸν ἀληθῶς ἐν κοιμήσῃ ζῶντα (720C). The language recalls also Abba Rufus’ encomium of obedience (Rufus 2).

In Climacus' description, one hears echoes of John Kolobos watering his stick, Bessarion commanding a novice to cast his son into the river, Aphrodisius spending thirty years under Saba's watchful eye, and those other tales of unbending, often absurd, obedience for which the Desert was famous. Obedience makes a dead man out of the monk and in doing so, transfers the responsibility for his continued existence to his director or spiritual father, by which Climacus usually mean the abbot of the monastery.⁸²⁸ Climacus says: 'A dead man does not rebut or differentiate among goods or apparent evils. For the one piously putting his soul to death will answer for everything.'⁸²⁹ When the monk dies his 'voluntary death' it is no longer he but his master who lives, and so no longer he but his master will answer for actions which can no longer be properly called his own. Crucially, though, Climacus says that the master puts the disciples' soul to death—it is not like suicide. I note this because Climacus twice uses suicide as a metaphor, and both times it refers to despair.⁸³⁰ The ascetic does not kill himself—that would be pride and despair (really the same thing), an act of his own will or an attempt to take Heaven by his own means. Rather, the ascetic, like the martyr, submits willingly to another who 'kills' him.

Climacus asserts all the usual demands of the monk who would be obedient. As always, the monk denies his family and country, the constellation of relationships which once defined him. In his Third Rung, on Ξενιτεία, Climacus describes the situation with characteristic gusto: 'Exile is separation from all things, through doing the inseparable thought of God. Exile is a lover and work of insatiable morning. An exile is one fleeing relationship with those he knows and those he does not.'⁸³¹ He finds new relations in his fellow ascetics (brothers), his director (father), and the angels who, unlike worldly relations 'are able to help you in the time of your death if they are your friends.'⁸³² Climacus adds to these highly traditional 'spiritual' relations the fruits of the monk's ascetic struggle. He calls the monk's moans his children, the memory of death his bride, compunction his mother, and his body his slave. The monk gains an entirely new family tree. His entire identity is constituted by the ascetic struggle and its context within a community composed of like-minded men and supportive spiritual beings. Like Antony

⁸²⁸ For example, the one giving orders in §4 is *always* the abbot.

⁸²⁹ §4, 680A: οὐκ ἀντερεῖ, ἢ διακρίνει νεκρὸς ἐν ἀγαθοῖς, ἢ τὸ δοκεῖν πονηροῖς. Ὁ γὰρ θανατώσας αὐτοῦ εὐσεβῶς τὴν ψυχὴν, ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀπολογήσεται. The context clearly reveals the subject of θανατώσας as the father and not the son. *Pace Irénée Hausherr, Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, 226.

⁸³⁰ §5, 780B: Οὐδὲν τῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ οἰκτιρμῶν ἴσον, ἢ μείζον ὑπάρχει· διὸ ὁ ἀπογνιώσκων, ἑαυτὸν ἔσφαξε. Climacus also compares despair to suicide in the Summary after §26, 1089D.

⁸³¹ §3, 664C: Ξενιτεία γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ πάντων χρωισμὸς, διὰ τὸ τὸν λογισμὸν ποιῆσαι Θεοῦ ἀχώριστον. Ξενιτεία ἐστὶν ἀνεμπλήστου πένθους ἐραστής, καὶ ἐργάτης. Ξένος ἐστὶν ὁ πάσης ἰδίων καὶ ἀλλοτριῶν σχέσεως φυγὰς.

⁸³² §3, 665C-668A. This is perhaps because they are also God's friends (§1, 632B).

like the novices advised by Macarius, or the monks under Barsanuphius' care, the monk in flight uses the memory of death to overcome the impinging memories of family and friends, who would maliciously draw him back into the world.

Climacus' monk, as in earlier Desert traditions, obeys God through his human master. At the monastery in Alexandria the abbot, wishing to show off the prudence of an old monk, Laurentius, second priest in the monastery and a monk of forty-eight years standing, called him over to table and let him wait for over an hour. Finally, when lunch was over the abbot summarily dismissed poor Laurentius and sent him to Isidore to recite Psalm 39.1 (LXX): 'I waited patiently for the Lord and he answered me.'⁸³³ Climacus later asks Laurentius what he thought about during that hour of waiting, and is shattered by Laurentius' reply:

Considering the shepherd as the image of Christ, I did not consider that I received the command from him, but from God. Thus, Father John, [I considered myself] not as before a table of men, but as before the altar of God, and I stood praying to God. Neither did I entertain any evil thought toward the shepherd, on account of my faith and love for him.⁸³⁴

The human master images Christ, the divine master, whom the monk attempts to obey precisely through his unquestioning obedience—a sort of death to his desires and beliefs, culminating in a willing renunciation of his ability even to *choose*.⁸³⁵ This passage also contextualizes obedience as taking place within the iconic epistemology discussed above. Thus not only does the abbot image Christ, but the luncheon table images the divine altar. Importantly, then, the one who kills the monk is, in a sense, Christ; and the one who lives when the monk is dead, is also Christ. Climacus commands monks in the Twenty-Sixth Rung, on Διάκρισις to 'use our conscience, directed by God, as purpose and rule in everything, so that, knowing "whence comes" the breath of the winds (Jn 3.8), we may set sails accordingly.'⁸³⁶ In this passage the master is clearly God, working through the monk's own faculties, but even in this instance discernment is still a repudiation of one's own will insofar as it does not perfectly follow God's. In the prior Rung, on Humility, Climacus says that 'the humble man always despises his own will as an error, and, making his petitions to the Lord in unswerving faith, learns what he should do...such a worker does and thinks and speaks everything in accordance with God, and never trusts

⁸³³ The story is at §4, 692A-B

⁸³⁴ §4, 692B

⁸³⁵ §4, 692B, 725D-728A; §15, 888C; §15, 1000B-C; etc.

⁸³⁶ §26, 1013B, his quotation from John 3.8 suggests that 'wind' refers in this instance to the activity of the Holy Spirit.

himself.⁸³⁷ Obedience is to God, but often obtained through a human intermediary, a Moses as Climacus says in the First Rung, who can mediate between God and men.⁸³⁸ In Climacus' formulation, obedience describes the entirety of the ascetic life. There is no point at which the monk can choose not to obey. Indeed, he longer chooses at all. Obedience, then, even unto death,⁸³⁹ becomes the scope and limit of the ascetic life. Like the Gaza Fathers before him, Climacus makes pointed reference to death as the limit of obedience.

Obedience, because it describes a mode and scope of existence, also presents the sort of freedom toward the world which Antony found and the Desert Fathers longed—but which seemed so often out of reach. The desires, beliefs, relationships, and judgments which were formerly the monk's own property have been lost to the will of a master, with submission to insults and lowliness until the monk no longer even notices these conditions. He longer has any familial or societal ties to the world, and he no longer has a will with which to sin. He is unbound by the world, and so he is free toward it. When Climacus asked some obedient old men why they lived that way, some responded that 'they gained perfect freedom from sense, and insensibility amid insults and rebukes.'⁸⁴⁰ They no longer take notice of how they are treated or whether they suffer good or ill. One can hear Antony telling his disciples that monks do not seek revenge or concern themselves with honour. Climacus has shown the path to freedom: finding the harshest, roughest master one can, and submitting constantly to abuse and insult.⁸⁴¹ In this regard he adduces the memory of death as an aid. He says, 'Memory of death brings forth, for those in community, troubles and meditations or, rather, a pleasure in dishonour.'⁸⁴² It is not entirely clear how recollection of death accomplishes this, except perhaps that meditation on death as judgment spurs the monk to struggles and virtues now; while recollection of mortality, which denigrates temporal goods, keeps him from struggling against dishonour.

Obedience is therefore not ultimately concerned with the replacement of a sinful will with a healthy one, as one might think—that the monk's will is perhaps sick with sin and, once healed by obedience, can be deployed in a healthy fashion. Rather, even as an old man the monk remains like 'an

⁸³⁷ §25, 1000B-C: for Climacus, as for Evagrius before him, the director's authority does not depend on his brilliance or even his good character. Cf. §26, 1057B and Evagrius, *Eulogium*, 15 (PG 79:1113A-B).

⁸³⁸ §1, 633D-636A

⁸³⁹ §4, 716A; §24, 984C-D.

⁸⁴⁰ §4, 688B

⁸⁴¹ This, he says, was Saba's advice to three would-be monks: §4, 724A-B

⁸⁴² §6, 793C

obedient child', a sight which Climacus calls 'fearful yet befitting angels.'⁸⁴³ Climacus even describes the overseer of the penitent monks as 'obeying' them in their dying wishes.⁸⁴⁴ Indeed, obedience demands the hatred of one's own will, not because it is necessarily 'sick'—although Climacus, like the more ambivalent Desert Fathers, asserts that the monk is beset by temptations until his last breath⁸⁴⁵—but because his will is not God's will. The elder's orders image the commands of God, and so the monk's receptivity to his earthly master is, in fact, receptivity to his Heavenly Master. The things which a master commands his disciple may be stupid, even dangerous, but by learning to be attentive to them, the monk learns to put aside fear and mistrust. But then, as Climacus notes, if a monk is obedient, God will direct him—God who has spoken through sinners and fools and even donkeys. The monk learns to hear in his master's words the voice of God, and so he does not receive his master's faculty of will, but learns instead to have a constant open and attentive receptivity to God's will.

Joy-Bearing Tears

But, of course, perfect obedience is not to be expected from many, maybe not from anyone at all. For all those who fail to obey—even in little ways or unexpectedly—repentance is in order. To understand repentance as an expression of 'living death', I will look briefly at Climacus' emphasis on πένθος, 'mourning.' Climacus' Sixth Run, on Μνήμη τοῦ Θανάτου links the Rungs of Μετάνοια (which assumes a memory of death and judgment) and Χαροῖόν Πένθος, which, as we have seen, is preceded by memory of 'death and faults.' The Sixth Rung does not, then, detail a virtue learned for its own sake. It concerns, rather, a virtue—an activity, really, of remembering—learned only in order to develop others: notably, repentance and mourning. Mourning, though, is central to Climacus' understanding of the ascetic life. He writes, in a tone similar to Barsanuphius', that

We will not be accused, no, indeed, we will not be accused at the soul's departure if we have not worked wonders, or if we have not theologized, or if we have not become contemplatives. But we will give account to God in every possible way if we have not mourned unceasingly.⁸⁴⁶

⁸⁴³ §4, 688B

⁸⁴⁴ §5, 772C

⁸⁴⁵ See, e.g., §13, 860A and Summary after §26, 1088B; here the 'limit' of death is invoked as the extent to which struggle is necessary. We can hear in this invocation *AP* and other Desert literature, as discussed above.

⁸⁴⁶ §7, 816D; recalling Barsanuphius' advice: 'Weep, rather, and mourn' (*QR* 604).

Mourning is one of those activities which the monk never abandons as he ascends toward higher virtues.⁸⁴⁷ Mourning ‘purified from every stain’ is present with ‘much-cared-for repentance’ like flour and yeast in the unleavened bread of humility, baked with a ‘fire of the Lord.’⁸⁴⁸ In the same breath Climacus compares mourning to the water through which dough is then kneaded, which, he daringly claims, unites the soul with God.⁸⁴⁹ The memory of death (as also of judgment) is central in the activity of those repenting and the begetter of mourning and tears. Of course the above quotation also demonstrates that tears are, like the memory of death, begetters of other virtues as well. Climacus, like those before him values fear, but, more than fear, he values hope and love. Joining all these, he says, ‘Tears about one’s departure bring forth fear. When fear has brought forth fearlessness, joy shines forth; but the flower of holy love rises when infinite joy ceases.’⁸⁵⁰ These apparently opposite reactions to the memory of death operate together in Climacus’ understanding. Thus, tears and mourning do not depart, but they do transform, and so are ‘joy-bearing’ and, more than that, ‘love-bearing.’

⁸⁴⁷ On mourning in Climacus see especially Hunt, Hannah, *Joy-Bearing Grief: Tears Of Contrition In The Writings Of The Early Syrian And Byzantine Fathers* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 51-96.

⁸⁴⁸ *N.b.* When Climacus says ‘fire’, he generally means ‘desire’, and this in a positive sense. One of his most beautiful slogans is ‘bringing fire to fire’ to denote the increase of godly zeal. See particularly his lovely encomium of the devout monk at §1, 644A: ‘Τίς ἄρα ἐστὶν ὁ πιστός, καὶ φρόνιμος μοναχός, ὃς τὴν θέρμην τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἐφύλαξεν ἄσβεστον· καὶ μέχρι τῆς αὐτοῦ ἐξόδου καθ’ ἡμέραν [προσθιθεὶς] πῦρ πυρὶ καὶ θέρμην θέρμη, καὶ σπουδὴν σπουδῇ, καὶ πόθον πόθῳ οὐκ ἐπαύσατο;’ Climacus repeats this almost verbatim, when praising those who have attained ἡσυχία (§27, 1100A): ‘Εἶδον ἡσυχαστὰς, καὶ τὴν φλεγόμενην αὐτῶν πρὸς Θεὸν ἐπιθυμίαν διὰ τῆς ἡσυχίας ἀπληρώτως πληρώσαντας· καὶ πῦρ πυρὶ, καὶ ἔρωτι ἔρωτα, καὶ πόθῳ πόθον γεννήσαντας.’ He says much the same at §27, 1105B.

At one other point does Climacus use the phrase πῦρ πυρὶ, and there rather differently. In that instance, godly desire drives out worldly—but both are called πῦρ. Climacus begins the Fifteenth Rung, on Purity, thus: ‘Ἀγνεία ἐστὶν φύσεως ὑπὲρ φύσιν ὑπερφύης ἄρνησις· καὶ ἀσωμάτων σώματος θνητοῦ καὶ φθαρτοῦ παράδοξος ὄντως ἄμιλλα· ἀγνός ἐστιν ὁ ἔρωτι ἔρωτα διακρουσάμενος, καὶ πῦρ πυρὶ αὐτῷ ἀποσβέσας.’

Climacus has a high regard for ἔρωσις, even if he believes it often put to poor use. It is a matter of analogy, though: divine ἔρωσις is good, drawing people to God just as God came to them in Christ; worldly ἔρωσις epitomizes an obsession with all that is false and transient—not only will it inevitably fail, it will destroy the soul with despair. On this topic, see Chryssavgis, John, Chryssavgis, John, ‘The Notion of “Divine Eros” in the Ladder of St John Climacus’, *SVOTQ* 29:3 (1985): 191-200.

⁸⁴⁹ §25, 989D: ‘Μετάνοια, μεμεριμνημένη μέντοι, καὶ πένθος αφηγησόμενον πάσης κηλίδος, καὶ ἡ πανόσιος εἰσαγομένων ταπεινώσις, τοσαύτην ἀπ’ ἀλλήλων τὴν διαφορὰν, καὶ τὴν διάκρισιν κέκτηνται, ὅσην ἔχει παρὰ τὸν ἄρτον ἡ ζύμη καὶ ὁ ἄλευρος. Συντριβεται μὲν γὰρ ψυχὴ καὶ λεπτύνεται διὰ μετάνοιας ἐναργούσ· ἐνούται δέ πως, καὶ ἴν’ οὕτως εἶπω συμφύρεται Θεῷ δι’ ὕδατος πένθους ἀψευδοῦς· ἐξ οὗ καὶ ἐξάψασα πῦρ Κυρίου ἀρτοποιεῖται καὶ στερεοῦται ἡ μακαρία ταπεινώσις ἡ ἄζυμος καὶ ἄτυφος.’ *N.b.* This points also to Climacus’ belief in the universality of repentance, ‘μετάνοια μεμεριμνημένη’ is also the title of §5: ‘Περὶ μετάνοιας μεμεριμνημένης καὶ ἐναργούσ’

⁸⁵⁰ §7, 813B-C: ‘Δάκρυα ἐξόδου ἀπέτεκον φόβον· φόβου δὲ τεκόντος ἀφοβίαν, ἐπιφαίνει [for Rader’s ἐπιφαίνει] χαρὰ, χαρᾶς δὲ ἀκατελήκτου ληξιάσης τῆς ὀσίας ἀγάπης ἀνέτειλε τὸ ἄνθος.’

The Hope of Repentance

All of this is so amazing because tears symbolize for Climacus the whole movement of repentance. Repentance is, according to Climacus the ‘daughter of hope and the denial of despair.’⁸⁵¹ We have seen in the Holy Criminals an image of repentance which Climacus wishes to apply to all monastics. As Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony puts it, ‘In [late antique] monastic culture, where self-criticism and purification of the personal consciousness marked its very existence, *μετάνοια* was a necessity. Indeed, it was seen as the path leading to the gate that offered access to individual salvation, paved with optimism and permanently open.’⁸⁵² Repentance does not, for Climacus, simply mean ‘getting up’ after falls, though it does mean that;⁸⁵³ nor does it denote only an act of ‘penance’, though it incorporates those as well. Rather, repentance is the state of mind in which a monk, through increasing awareness of God’s judgment and his own failures, learns to rely at all times on God’s mercy and to hope only in God’s love. By doing so he denies that the ascent to God is one which he makes under his own strength. But he also denies that it is impossible for him. He has hope—in God; and he fears—only God. Repentance, like obedience, expresses the state of tension of fear and hope, the terror of judgment and the promise of mercy, within which monks live as though dead.

They are certainly the proper activity in face of death and judgment, but only insofar as one has something to mourn. Confidence about judgment would not breed tears. Tears come from recollection of one’s sins and awareness of one’s *lack* of progress (although, paradoxically, this awareness increases with one’s progress). Yet tears are also *effective*. They do not simply bespeak failings, they wash them away—tears are purifying. Climacus boldly describes the various aspect of repentance, from impulse to effect, in terms of tears and mourning. Climacus goes so far as to compare these godly tears to baptism. He says,

The font of tears after baptism stands greater than baptism, even if this saying is rather daring. For the former [baptism] is a purification from previous evils in us (cf. Rom 3.25); but this [font of tears is purification] from later-arising evils. While we received baptism as infants, we have all defiled it. But through tears we cleanse it [our baptism]. For if this were not given philanthropically from God to people, those being saved would be truly few and hard to find.⁸⁵⁴

⁸⁵¹ §5, 764A: ‘Μετάνοιά ἐστὶ θυγάτηρ ἐλπίδος, καὶ ἄρνησις ἀνελπιστίας.’

⁸⁵² Bitton-Ashkelony, Brouria, ‘Penitence in Late Antique Monastic Literature’, in Jan Assmann and Guy G. Stroumsa (eds), *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, Studies in the History of Religions 83 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 181

⁸⁵³ §4, 696D

⁸⁵⁴ §7, 804A-B

In this Climacus follows the Gaza Fathers in their specification and elaboration of a desert tradition especially associated with Poemen.⁸⁵⁵ The idea of tears as a ‘second baptism’ can be traced to *AP*. Barbara Müller sees enough indirect evidence in *AP* to allow us ‘spekulieren, dass die Wüstenväter ihre Tränen glichsam als Taufbad versanden haben könnten.’⁸⁵⁶ We see here Climacus’ belief that no one remains perfectly pure until death. Everyone requires repentance. But repentance can be found in tears, in the process of mourning for oneself which requires a realization of one’s sins, of the judgment which befalls sinners, and a desire to return to the purity conferred in baptism. Tears are the means and sign of repentance, brought on by former misdeeds and keeping the monk from future ones—a new purification like baptism. Climacus says a little later that compunction (κατάνυξις) thinks hourly of death and finds therein the comfort that God alone can give to humble and contrite monks.⁸⁵⁷ Mourning then operates between past and future, transforming the present into a constant baptismal washing, a continuous repentance. What is amazing, though, is that tears then become *constitutive* of virtues like humility, and preparatory for joy and even the love for which all monks strive. Failure is *presupposed* and in no way an obstacle to ascent—provided, of course, that one rises from it through obedience and continues along in tears.

The impetus for mourning always lies in the past. The monk does not mourn for future sins (which he hopes to avoid) or for his own future damnation (since it is always a matter of uncertainty). Despair alone would weep for these things. The monk mourns instead for his own past sins. Thus, mourning introduces a retrospective aspect to monastic development. It reaches its apotheosis in the judgment at or after death, when all deeds are seen retrospectively, but the monk must have developed this perspective along the way. In the story of the elder Stephen, we saw that he could, when accused, recall what he had done and not done, and what penance and atonement he had made for his sins. Yet, while this could imply some self-assurance on his part, Stephen still came to a point where he could not respond. As well as he knew himself, as many labours as he had undertaken, he still could not answer every accusation and so he fell back, as every penitent sinner must, on God’s mercy. Ultimately, this is the value of tears: they aid and express a penitential lifestyle. Penitence requires self-awareness, an

⁸⁵⁵ See *QR* 148, 257, 461, discussed in Chapter Three above; as well as discussion of Poemen on tears in chapter two

⁸⁵⁶ ‘Die Tränen der Wüstenväter,’ 310. The image was already used by Clement of Alexandria (*Quis dives salvetur* 42.14) and with some regularity in Christian martyr-literature.

⁸⁵⁷ §7, 808A

expectation of judgment, a realization of the urgency of change, and, above all, the consistent denial of despair in the hope of God's mercy.

Conclusion

The *Ladder* presents the present life as one of lived death, undertaken through obedience—to God, through a human master. Yet it also depicts the resurrection life as one of obedience—directly to God. If it is a lived death now, it will not cease to be one in the coming age. But this lived death is also life more real than most humans ever experience. The essence of human life, it seems, is found only in death, because only then does one become properly receptive to the will of God and only within a constant self-renunciation is one re-constituted entirely through relationship to God. Yet all fail. None can be proud if they are really aware of their failings, because they cannot expect vindication in God's judgment. That is, none are perfectly obedient, and so all have need need of repentance. Repentance, expressed in tears, becomes constitutive of the 'living death' which monks undertake.

For Climacus, asceticism is best characterized in the curious paradox of the 'blessed living corpse.' It is a state of tension between hope and fear, made possible through consistent engagement with death and the iconic epistemology which that engagement makes possible. To conclude this section, I want to point how far Climacus carries the metaphor of death. He applies to the monastery itself—he understands the whole of the monk's environment in terms of death. He quotes with approval the Alexandrian abbot who calls the Great Coenobium 'an earthly heaven'⁸⁵⁸ That is, in the monastery one tastes one's hope through the anticipatory 'death' of obedience. Indeed, Climacus there continues, 'Therefore, as angels serving the Lord, so ought we to order our heart.'⁸⁵⁹ The monks live, as Barsanuphius once wrote, 'on earth as though in heaven.'⁸⁶⁰ Yet, Climacus elsewhere calls the monastery 'tomb before the tomb...For no one leaves the tomb until the general resurrection.'⁸⁶¹ The monastery may be an 'earthly heaven,' but that makes it as much an 'image' of things to come as anything else in life. Climacus' iconic epistemology reveals the monastery as a foretaste of eternity whose dwellers are dead and waiting for their hope. However, this death is a good one, and not to be confused with the death of

⁸⁵⁸ §4, 713B: 'Κοινόβιον ἐστὶν ἐπίγειος οὐρανός.'

⁸⁵⁹ §4, 713B-C: 'διὸ ὡς Κυρίῳ λειτουργοῦντες ἄγγελοι, οὕτω πείσωμεν διακεῖσθαι τὴν καρδίαν ἡμῶν.'

⁸⁶⁰ See Note 612 above.

⁸⁶¹ §4, PG 88:716B: 'Μνήμά σοι πρὸ μνήματος ὁ τόπος ἔστω. Οὐδεὶς γὰρ ἀπὸ μνήματος ἐξέρχεται ἄχρι τῆς κοινῆς ἀναστάσεως...'

pride or despair. Thus Climacus continues, 'But if some depart, know that they have died.'⁸⁶² Only those who commit the willful act of departure—of disobedience that does not result in repentance—actually 'die.' Those in the monastery are 'dead', yet, but their death gives way to 'the general resurrection' in which their 'dead' existence is revealed as most truly alive.

⁸⁶² '...εἰ δὲ καὶ τινες ἐξῆλθον, ὄρα ὅτι ἀπέθανον· ὅπερ μὴ παθεῖν ἡμᾶς, τὸν Κύριον δυσωπήσωμεν.

IV. IMITATING CHRIST THROUGH DEATH

His epistemic framework of engagement with time and eternity through death, as well as his conceptualization of the ascetic life as ‘death’ through obedience in the tension of hope and fear, both serve to cultivate a particular *identity*. As I argued in the Introduction, identity is Climacus’ driving concern and its cultivation requires organizing principles. Death provides that principle, but only in relation to Climacus’ over-arching understanding of Christian identity. That is, Climacus uses death as the means of creating Christians whose lives reflect Christ by means of asceticism. Climacus begins the *Ladder* by calling the Christian ‘the imitator of Christ, as far as humanly possible, in words, deeds and thought, rightly and blamelessly believing in the Holy Trinity.’⁸⁶³ Imitation of Christ is, as it were, the wood out of which the rungs of the *Ladder* are fashioned.⁸⁶⁴ The phrase, ‘κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν ἀνθρώπων,’ crucially qualifies Climacus’ notion of imitation. He ends an ‘alphabet’ of virtues designed for those ‘being perfected in spirit and body’ with ‘Ω – imitator of the Master with the Master’s aid.’⁸⁶⁵ Imitation of Christ is not simply another human act. It is the development of an identity possible only because of and through Christ himself. Indeed, for Climacus the recollection of Christ’s self-giving in death creates an impossible debt which the monk cannot repay, no matter how much he suffers.⁸⁶⁶

Yet Climacus concludes the *Ladder* by saying ‘Run, I beg you, with that one who said “Let us hurry on until we all reach the unity of the faith, and the knowledge of God, unto perfect manhood, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4.13),” who, being baptized when thirty years old in visible age, fulfilled the thirtieth rung in the *noetic* ladder.’⁸⁶⁷ The monk who achieves love comes to the God who ‘is love’ (quoting 1 Jn 4.16) through imitation of Christ. This imitation, though, is possibly only as an awed response to the overwhelming gift given in Christ. Imitation operates in the curious tension of divine and human in the person of Christ—thirty years old ‘visibly’ yet remaining the ‘invisible God.’ Christ’s death and resurrection are both model and inimitable ground of the ascetic life.

⁸⁶³ §1, 633B: ‘Χριστιανός ἐστιν μίμημα Χηριστοῦ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν ἀνθρώπων, λόγους, καὶ ἔργους, καὶ ἐννοία εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν Τριάδα ὀρθῶς, καὶ ἀμέμπτως πιστεύων.’

⁸⁶⁴ See, e.g., §29, 1149D

⁸⁶⁵ §26, 1017C; Climacus sets out three alphabets, one for beginners, one for those on the way, and one for the perfect. The letters correspond to concepts only as a cipher to an encrypted message. Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky argue that ‘The use of cryptic language here is clearly pedagogical, making it easier to memorize the monastic ideals represented...But it is not simply a program for ascetic progress from the beginning to perfection; rather it is a set of symbols designating a new state of self-consciousness, which can be defined as mystical and spiritual reality’ (*The Monastic School*, 112).

⁸⁶⁶ §23, 968D; also §3, 668B and §25, 996C, on driving out pride by remembering the same fact.

⁸⁶⁷ Concluding Summary, 1161A

Climacus uses this tension between imitation and awe at Christ's death to form the monk's proper attitude toward his own life and death. By doing so, Climacus effectively resolves the tensions to which language of death gave rise in Desert literature--as will become clear, his application of 'death' to the monk betrays no indefensible or, at least, problematic, optimism.

Failure

First, imitation of Christ allows for failure. To remain sinless, Climacus says, is to never see death. If a monk could be perfect he would not have to suffer death. Climacus gets the idea by working through Romans 7.24, where Paul asks 'Who will deliver me from this body of death?' Climacus interprets this 'body' to mean 'the flesh': 'mine and not mine, friend and enemy, the flesh.' He then says that 'If death, as was said above, is the flesh, whoever wholly overcomes the flesh will not die.' Well and good, but Climacus then asks the despairing question: 'Who then is that man, who will live and not see death [cf. Enoch at Gen 5.25 LXX and Heb 11.5] from the defilement of his flesh? I beg that he be sought.'⁸⁶⁸ Climacus sets up a hope for life—to completely conquer the flesh. And then demolishes it by asking rhetorically whether any such victor can be found.

His then moves to restore hope through an imitation of Christ. Climacus asks, 'Who is greater—the one dying and rising, or the one never dying at all? On the one hand, blessing the latter, he is wrong, for Christ, dying, rose. On the other hand, [blessing] the former, he is constrained to believe nothing to be a rejection for those dying, or, rather, lapsing.'⁸⁶⁹ Part of imitating Christ, paradoxically, is lapsing—failing, sinning. Of course, for Christ death did not represent a lapse, which is why Climacus has to say 'or, rather, lapsing.' The experience of death and resurrection provides an appropriate symbolic framework for Climacus to expound the hope that survives failure. If death were the end, then there would be no hope; but one can, like Christ, rise again. Resurrection does not, however, imply leniency in God—a point which Climacus is careful to make immediately after. Claims of leniency, he says, originate with 'the man-hating enemy of fornication', about which Climacus is speaking in the present context. The imitation of Christ, while providing a framework of Christian progress which can incorporate failure, does not dismiss failure as unimportant or in any way acceptable.

⁸⁶⁸ §15, 885D-888A

⁸⁶⁹ §15, 888A

Tension

Second, Climacus uses Christ's example to explain how the monk should properly fear but not despair about death. Climacus says that 'While fear of death [Ps 54.5 LXX] is a property of nature proceeding from disobedience, terror at death is a sure sign of unrepented errors.' The 'disobedience' here likely refers to the human condition following Adam's disobedience, rather than a specific act. We saw in chapter one that Athanasius, for example, saw φόβος θανάτου as a result of humanity's servitude to sin. The Desert and Gaza Fathers, however, tended to see a degree of fear as healthy, provided that it referred to the limited time available for repentance and the fact of God's judgment. Climacus, however, moves in a different direction, drawing the line between fear and terror at death in terms of Christ's attitude. He says, 'Christ is afraid of death, but not terrified, that he might wisely show the properties of the two natures.' Christ certainly did not have un-repented sins, but Climacus, a good Chalcedonian and, perhaps a Dyothelite, affirms that Christ in his humanity took on even the properties of human nature which come from Adamic disobedience. Christ provides the example for the ascetic's attitude toward death. He can, Climacus suggests, approach death like Christ did, so long as he lives in repentance and obedience. Recall Climacus' belief about confession as wiping away past sins, and his emphasis on repentance—the monk, even though he fails, can have hope in Christ and so not despair in his own approach to death.

Along these lines Climacus uses Christology to explain how memory of death functions among the higher virtues. He says in the Thirtieth and final Rung, 'Some say that prayer is better than memory of one's departure; but I hymn two natures in one person.'⁸⁷⁰ As in Christ humanity and divinity held firmly together, so in the monk the memory of death is present even as he ascends to the activity of prayer. It is intriguing to hold this statement of Christ's two natures together with the one from Rung Six. They are, I might note, the only such references Climacus makes. The monk in prayer is united with God. Nevertheless, remaining human, he is still susceptible to temptation, just as Christ was (Heb 4.14). This duality hearkens back to the iconicity of the world in the monk's memory of judgment—sensible and spiritual held together. The monk lives between two worlds or, rather, within two worlds. He lives as a sort of double creature, human and divine, an imitator however imperfect of the perfect God-man Christ.

⁸⁷⁰ §28, 1137A

Unity

In this sense, the imitation of Christ provides the unity of the ascetic life which maintains the ascetic's unique identity as he progresses in God—the more he is united with God, the more he is truly human, and the result is a simple creature, a unity rather than a duality. This person whom Climacus calls childlike (νήπιος), simple (ἄπλος), and single (ἕν)⁸⁷¹ is a Christian. Or, rather, every true Christian—imitating Christ with every aspect of his existence—is 'simple.' This creature lives in contradistinction to the evil person, who, Climacus says, lives a double life. He says, 'Just as the wicked man is twofold—one thing publicly, another privately (cf. Luk 12.3), so the simple man is not twofold, but a single thing.'⁸⁷² The simple are always the same, never having to hide their character. But the wicked are deceitful, cunning, hiding behind a mask of apparent virtue. If one could see behind the mask, though, one would find creatures like the Devil. They appear human, but are become demons.⁸⁷³ The curious thing about the demons is that, while angels obey God, the Devil can do only his own will.⁸⁷⁴ Every being (apart from God) is 'bound' in some way. Obedience, however, frees the monk from bondage to his own will so that he can obey God instead. But the simple man, since he is not a demon, is instead an angel—like the obedient old men Climacus saw in Alexandria, a sight 'fearful yet befitting angels.' Yet, to become such, the monk must make his way through repentance. He will inevitably fail in obedience either to his spiritual father or to the commands of God. And so he must have recourse to the uncertainty which memory of death and judgment provide, as well as the activity of repentance expressed best through tears.

Conclusion: A Ladder of Repentance

The view of time which is defined by memory of death and judgment describes the 'triad' of the *Ladder*. Its contorted 'shape' denies a reader's desire for a too literal interpretation of the image, or an over-extended mapping of the metaphor onto the spiritual life. The *Ladder* is not a ladder. But it is an image of progress, specifically progress as movement toward and within—Christian identity as an eminently human imitation of Christ. The ascent is often halting, beset by obstacles and falls little and

⁸⁷¹ See, e.g., §24, 984C; §26, 1057A; §28, 1129D, etc.

⁸⁷² §4, 688B-C: Ὡσπερ γὰρ ὁ πονηρός δύο ἐστίν, ἄλλο τὸ φαινόμενον, καὶ ἄλλο τὸ κρυπτόμενον· οὕτως ὁ ἄπλοῦς, οὐ διπλοῦς, ἀλλ' ἕν τί ἐστίν. Cf. §22, 949C: Κενόδοχός ἐστιν εἰδωλολάτρης πιστός, Θεὸν μὲν τῷ δοκεῖν σεβόμενος, ἀνθρώποις δὲ, καὶ οὐ Θεῷ, ἀρέσκειν βουλόμενος. Cf. QR 846, which lauds ἄπλοτης against διψύχια.

⁸⁷³ See, e.g., §8, 832A; Völker highlights the importance of simplicity at *Scala Paradisi*, 255.

⁸⁷⁴ §4, 717D-720A: Τῶν οὐκ ἐνδεχομένων ἐστὶ τῷ ἑαυτοῦ θελήματι τὸν διάβολον ἀντιστήναι.

great. In this halting climb we find the 'dyad,' without which the ascetic would be something inhuman, and certainly un-Christian. The upward path is tortuous and as long as he is on the path, the monk resides on a frontier without conclusions, dwelling simultaneously in the uncertainties of hope and fear, rather than the false certainties of pride or despair.

The monk, like all others, is called to perfection and to the perfect imitation of Christ. Yet the monk, like all, has sinned and very likely will sin again. He is not perfect. He must repent. While it would be wonderful never to fall and, therefore, never to die, such is not the lot of humanity which limps beneath the burden of Adam's sin, labouring to pay an unpayable debt.⁸⁷⁵ One who falls need not stay down, and the sleeper can be awakened. But Christ makes this possible. Christ is the ascetic's model—though Christ did not sin, he did suffer what the consequence of sin: death and even a healthy fear of death. So, just as Christ laboured in the fallen human condition, so fallen humans can labour to be like Christ. It would no exaggeration to say that, for Climacus, death bounds and defines progress in becoming like Christ, even as the 'death and resurrection' repentance expresses the existential condition of humanity in light of God's mercy. Death is, therefore, the ontological precondition for progress, its memory the impetus to progress, and its practice the principle of progress. Thus, the memory of death frames the possibility of Christian identity; the metaphor of death shapes that identity as a way of life; and both refer ultimately to Christ, whose life the monk receives in death.

⁸⁷⁵ Cf. §4, 724C-D; following Mark the Monk, *Operibus*, 20.

CONCLUSION

Die now, die now, in this Love die; when you have died in this Love, you will all receive new life.

Die now, die now, and do not fear this death, for you will come forth from this earth and seize the heavens.

Die now, die now, and break away from this carnal soul, for this carnal soul is as a chain and you are as prisoners.

Take an axe to dig through the prison; when you have broken the prison you will all be kings and princes.

Die now, die now before the beautiful King; when you have died before the King, you will all be kings and renowned.

Die now, die now, and come forth from this cloud; when you come forth from this cloud, you will all be radiant full moons.

Be silent, be silent; silence is the sign of death; it is because of life that you are fleeing from the silent one.

--- Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi, *Ode 636*, trans. A.J. Arberry

JOHN CLIMACUS' ACHIEVEMENT

The Parts and the Whole

Climacus took up the various threads of 'death' in ascetic literature and wove of them a brilliant tapestry, stitching together an image of Christ out of the quotidian grind, the frequent failures, and the introspective struggle, of ascetic life. For him, as for those before him, death is event, limit, metaphor, and tool. Yet nowhere was it so holistically deployed as the organizing logic and symbolic meaning of the ascetic life. For Climacus, the ascetic life means progress, in repentance, obedience, and the cultivation of a Christ-like identity. Progress is made possible by the iconic temporality within which the monk finds himself, and which he engages through contemplation of mortality and judgment. Thinking of what the future certainly holds—judgment and eternal destiny—the monk every moment sees the world in light of its eternal significance. Memory of mortality, however, keeps him looking forward to an as yet unsettled future, urging him on in obedient renunciation. Yet he looks back to his failures in obedience and love, and so he mourns in retrospect, repenting so as once more to move forward. Each bite he takes, every drop he drinks, every task he performs, no matter how mundane, each of these remind him of the judgment to come at death, and the eternal destiny to which it will consign him. In this he finds his spur to further renunciation as well as, in mourning and repentance, the content of his labours. Thus, progress is movement forward and upward *within the bounds of death* toward love conditioned always hope and fear. This three-fold engagement with time thus performs the balancing of fear and hope whose necessity the Desert Fathers clearly saw.

Within this framework, Climacus deploys the metaphor of death as the definitive image of the ascetic life. Characterizing obedience as the excision of will, and this as death, Climacus describes a life bounded, as the Gazans and Basil had suggested, by an obedient 'death.' The monk obeys God through a human intermediary. He surrenders himself to another and so opens himself to receive God's will. He progresses in this regard, becoming more and more a dead man—one who has denied his very self, the faculties by which he can perceive and choose. The 'voluntary' and the 'intellectual' alike are killed in Climacus' scheme. The will is cut off, discernment handed over, desires denied—nothing is left, whether in mind or heart. All the ways in which the Desert Fathers and, more especially, Barsanuphius and John, conceived of 'death' to oneself and one's neighbour, come together in Climacus' vision of obedience operative by means of the memory of death.

In this way, Climacus' Christological and Trinitarian reflections on death are particularly brilliant. While the Gaza Fathers had referred ascetic 'death' to Christ's crucifixion and, thereby, clarified

the ambiguity to which language of death is prone, Climacus goes much further. He utilizes language of Christ's natures as well as crucifixion to open up monastic *identity*. The monk becomes like Christ. But his imitation of Christ plays out *precisely through his failures*. Repentance lets the monk turn his 'death' into a prelude to resurrection. Likewise, Climacus' Trinitarian language reminds readers that progress is always *within* a Christian identity and that the monk seeks, ultimately, to become a Christian by living as though dead. Only thus can he hope for resurrection.

Even then, though, Climacus would remind the reader that resurrection continues the mode of existence already defined as dead. We could say, in an appropriately paradoxical fashion, that for Climacus, *resurrection is itself lived death*. Perhaps, though, we simply have it backwards and Climacus wishes to correct our error—what we call death is, in fact, life. Not in a physical sense, as Heraclitus or the Orphics might have put it—physical death really *is* death. Rather, for Climacus, 'death' refers to a mode of existence which is really a way of life: the 'death' to oneself is 'life' in God.

The Gift of Tradition

I have catalogued the work and contributions of Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, of Desert literature, and of the Gaza Fathers, in sufficient detail in the first three chapters of this study. Their work is important and ought to be appreciated as so many unique voices proclaiming the life of ascetic spirituality. Through their engagement with each other, tradition began to take shape—a trajectory of thought emerged, in which death held an increasingly important place for the Christian ascetic.

Climacus, however, achieves something in his conception of ascetic life as 'living death' which previous tradition did not anticipate. He effectively reconciles the optimism which language of death in VA and Desert literature implied with the earthy realism of Gaza, and through his emphasis on obedience and repentance, builds into the practice of death an allowance for the faults which bring a monk under judgment in the first place. Climacus is fully aware that renunciation and withdrawal are difficult and that one falls unexpectedly, but his conception of the monk's engagement with death and judgment actually allows the monk to dwell in uncertainty. More than this, though, Climacus draws all together in terms of a Christ-like identity characterized by death. The language of 'living death' finds in the *Ladder* its fullest expression as a principle of ascetic life which not only expresses the hopes and ideals of ascetic identity, but allows for an even incorporates the ways in which life fails to live up to expectations. Climacus does not attempt to smooth out the rough edges of asceticism. He probably did not have in

mind any kind of conscious 'synthesis.' Rather, his was a genius which saw in what he inherited all that he needed to express what he found through experience.

What did Climacus achieve? What was his contribution to spirituality, his legacy for Byzantine theologians, scholars, monks, and laypersons? It was, this study has demonstrated, no less than a profound and radically original vision of Christian identity which is new precisely by being traditional. Various authors would utilize his work for various ends—drawing here and there, picking out references which particularly suited their own ends. And yet Climacus' monumental achievement stands apart from the more limited usage to which later generations would put it, just as the traditional materials so important to Climacus remain alongside it. Climacus offers not simply a theory of asceticism, but a vision of the Christian life whose practiced reading in monasteries and churches has, throughout twelve centuries that separate his lifetime from our own, inspired and directed generations of Christians.

Of course, Climacus would say, first, that he was following tradition. As this study has shown, his self-assessment would be absolutely accurate: he takes up all that was left to him by centuries of tradition, and puts it together. However, therein lies his creativity. When the threads are woven together, a new picture emerges. Climacus would also say that he simply described what is possible in response to and in imitation of Christ as the person in whom divine and human natures unite. The Son's place in the Trinity, his Incarnation, and his eschatological judgment, create a tensed space—a tomb and forecourt of heaven—within which the ascetic's identity takes shape. Christ's death and resurrection create an unpayable debt, but it is not payment that interests Climacus. It is acceptance. For Climacus, to imitate Christ is to surrender oneself to him. It is to accept that he alone shows a properly human life, and it is to attempt, with his help, to live his life rather than one's own. Climacus teaches his reader that to die is, ultimately, to allow Christ to live within oneself.

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