



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

Theological Studies Faculty Works

Theological Studies

---

Spring 2001

## Listening, Reading, Praying: Orality, Literacy and Early Christian Monastic Spirituality

Douglas E. Christie

Loyola Marymount University, [DEchristie@lmu.edu](mailto:DEchristie@lmu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac)



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Digital Commons @ LMU & LLS Citation

Christie, Douglas E., "Listening, Reading, Praying: Orality, Literacy and Early Christian Monastic Spirituality" (2001). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 106.

[https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/106](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/106)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theological Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

## Listening, Reading, Praying: Orality, Literacy and Early Christian Monastic Spirituality

DOUGLAS BURTON-CHRISTIE\*

Sitting near the threshold of his monastic cell, I listened as Father Wadid talked about what it meant for him to live the monastic life in Egypt today. “The center of our life,” he said, “is the practice of the gospel. This was true of primitive Christian monasticism. It is still what we aspire to today. Monasticism at its deepest level is a lived response to the gospel—a gospel life.” He paused for a moment, letting the silence gather before proceeding. I paused too, trying to take in the meaning of what he had just said. The idea itself was simple enough. I had encountered it often in my reading of the literature of early Christian monasticism. “Whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures,” said Abba Antony, expressing simply and directly a bedrock principle of the ancient monks. Still, sitting in the open desert listening to Father Wadid express his own sense of this principle, I found myself struck, for the first time really, by the *power* of this idea. Suddenly, I was full of questions. What exactly did it mean to conform one’s life to the gospel, to act according to the testimony of the scriptures? More to the point, *how* was one to do it? And what was involved, personally and existentially, in the attempt to fulfill this injunction in one’s life?

For the next two hours we pursued these and many related questions in a conversation that seemed only to gain in energy and momentum as we proceeded. We paused from time to time to sip our tea or to drift for a moment within the immense silence of the surrounding desert. Then we would begin again, probing the questions before us. As the conversation unfolded, it became more and more clear to me that for Father Wadid these questions could only be considered within the entire context of his life—that is, within the context of community, liturgy, and a disciplined life of prayer, silence and solitude.

---

\* Douglas Burton-Christie is Associate Professor of Christian Spirituality, Department of Theological Studies, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.

Seen and understood within this rich web of life, “practicing the gospel” was something much more complex and demanding than an ethical imperative. It was an immense, all-encompassing interpretive and spiritual challenge. It was a call to open oneself to the vital, unsettling power of the gospel. It was a call to spiritual transformation.

I think on some level I already knew and understood this. My reading of the ancient monastic literature had convinced me of the centrality of scripture in the lives of the monks. But I had not understood the full complexity and intricacy of the interpretive process. In part this is because I had been too focused on scripture as *text*. I had imagined the interpretive process as something unfolding primarily through the act of *reading*. I had not yet grappled seriously with the idea that scripture could also exist as a *spoken discourse*, or understood the extent to which the interpretive process could be rooted in the act of *listening*. It is possible I could have arrived at this realization from a careful study of the ancient monastic texts. But I doubt it. It took the back-and-forth, open-ended conversation with Father Wadid that morning to bring home to me the distinctive power and mystery of spoken discourse and its importance in the spiritual journey.

The words and ideas that I was being invited to consider that morning did not lie inert on a page, but swirled about me; they were carried on the wind, mixed with sand and silence. Listening, and considering the meaning of what I heard, it felt as though I were *inside* something, alive and mysterious and moving with its own unpredictable dynamism. How often it happened in the course of my conversation that morning that the meaning of certain words or phrases could be gauged only by interpreting them in the light of something else—a gesture, a facial expression, a considered pause. I became acutely aware of how important these seemingly insignificant expressions were to my understanding. So too I began to see how the place itself affected my understanding of what it might mean to “practice the gospel.” The night before, I had stood with the monks for long hours in the monastery chapel, immersed in the vibrant, rhythmic chanting of the psalms and prayers, little by little beginning to open myself to the power of the mystery unfolding before us. I considered also the eloquence of this tiny monastic cell where we now sat drinking tea and talking. It was built like a bunker into the side of a hill, its corrugated steel roof sagging under the weight of sand deposited there by the shifting winds. Father Wadid’s few possessions—a couple of books, a small stove and a pot for making tea, some blankets—were

just visible through the low door. This poor and simple place, utterly solitary and suffused with a deep silence, was as important to the meaning of our conversation as the words and ideas and gestures we exchanged that morning.

This encounter in the desert near St. Macarius Monastery in Egypt confirmed for me something I had long suspected but had not been able to articulate until that moment: the search for meaning unfolding within the context of oral discourse has its own distinctive character and differs in important ways from the search for meaning that takes place between a reader and a text. Sometimes these two processes converge in interesting and fruitful ways, as for example when a conversation about a text yields new understanding that allows one to return to the text with a heightened awareness of its meaning. Father Wadid, a well-educated monk who values the richness of written texts but who also cherishes the particular power of oral discourse, is in some ways an exemplary embodiment of this convergence. Still, the differences between oral and written discourse can be real and deep. When literacy is introduced into predominantly oral cultures, profound tensions often arise concerning the understanding of language and how to interpret experience.<sup>1</sup>

This was true, I believe, of the early Christian monastic movement. Much of the complexity and richness of that movement, including some of the tensions that often seemed to divide monks from one another as well as certain differences in the understanding of spiritual life, can best be understood by acknowledging the influence of orality and literacy upon early monastic discourse. There are two primary issues I want to explore here. First, in what ways might the categories of orality and literacy help shed light on the role of learning in ancient monastic culture? This issue has received renewed attention recently as scholars have begun reexamining the oft-repeated notion that early Christian monks were generally uneducated and illiterate. Second, how might a consideration of the distinctive attitudes toward language

---

<sup>1</sup> On the tension between oral and written culture, see: Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982); Werner Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) and *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Lou H. Silberman, ed., *Orality, Aurality and Biblical Narrative* (*Semeia* 39 [1987]).

found within oral cultures help us understand better the early monastic attitudes toward language and the role of language within the spiritual life? It seems to me that a consideration of the categories of orality and literacy has the potential to help us address both of these questions and in so doing to illuminate the power of language, as written text and oral discourse, within early Christian monastic spirituality.

### *Orality, Literacy and Early Christian Monasticism*

Recent discussions of monastic origins have raised new and intriguing questions about the social and educational profile of the early Christian monks. One of the most important contributions to these discussions has been the work of Swedish scholar Samuel Rubenson, whose fresh examination of the *Letters of Antony* has called into question an earlier, widely held view that saw Egyptian monasticism as arising from the ranks of rustic, unlearned peasants. Rubenson argues that Antony, his immediate followers, and a good number of their fellow monks enjoyed higher levels of literacy and learning, and were much more theologically and philosophically sophisticated than has previously been imagined.<sup>2</sup> The *Letters of Antony* present us with a picture not of an illiterate monk but of someone who “shared a Platonic view of man, his original nature and destination and [who] was dependent for the integration of Christian thinking into this framework on Clement of Alexandria and Origen.”<sup>3</sup>

Rubenson cites two kinds of evidence, papyri and monastic sources, to argue for a relatively high level of education and literacy in rural Egypt. The papyri provide evidence of consistent contact between Alexandria and the towns of upper Egypt—something which, he says, “should caution us against repeating the traditional view of an opposition between Alexandria [as] urban, Greek, philosophical and international, and Egypt [as] rural, Coptic, illiterate and nationalistic.” The papyri also suggest the presence of a wide variety of scholars, philosophers, poets and bibliophiles in Egypt and present examples of book trade, calligraphers and Greek literature in the villages. Al-

---

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint*, Bibliotheca Historico-Ecclesiastica Lundensis 24 (Lund: Lund University Press, 1990) (reprinted, with new translation of the *Letters*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 12.

though Rubenson acknowledges that we cannot reach a firm conclusion about the degree of literacy in Egypt in the fourth century, he contends: "It is clear that Egypt was not less literate than other parts of the Graeco-Roman world."<sup>4</sup>

The monastic sources add important supporting evidence to this view. Even in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the monastic document that is most suspicious of books and theological speculation, one hears frequent mention of books, writing, reading and commentary upon Scripture. There is clear evidence in *Apophthegmata* regarding the presence of books, the practice of reading, and scribal activity. Abba Gelasius, for example, is said to have possessed a beautiful and extremely valuable copy of the scriptures in parchment. Theodore of Pherme is said to have possessed "three good books"; Abba Ammoes tells of some monks who possessed "books of parchment" in their cells.<sup>5</sup> All of this suggests the presence of a literate culture and rela-

<sup>4</sup> Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 96–97. In this assessment, Rubenson has the support of papyrological scholars such as Eva Wypzicka and Roger Bagnall, who have argued that levels of literacy among the early monks were probably higher than has generally been acknowledged. See Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 230–260; Eva Wypzicka, "Le degré d'alphabétisation en Égypte byzantine," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 30 (1984): 279–96.

<sup>5</sup> Gelasius 1 [PG 65: 145CD]; Theodore of Pherme 1 [PG 65: 188A]; Ammoes 5 [PG 65: 128AB]. See also Serapion 1 [PG 65: 413D–416C]; Sisoës 35 [PG 65: 404B]; CSP I 2 [SPTr, 129]; J 676 [SPAn, 289]; Pa 40, 1 [SPN, 212].

References are taken, for the most part, from the *Alphabetic-Anonymous Collection*. For the Alphabetical collection, see J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 65: 72–440 [PG], supplemented by Jean-Claude Guy in: *Recherches sur la tradition Grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum. Subsidia Hagiographica* 36 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1962, reprinted with additional comments, 1984) [*Recherches*]. English translation: Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (London: Mowbrays, 1975). For the Anonymous Collection, see F. Nau, ed., "Histoire des solitaires égyptiens." Nos. 133–369. *Revue d'Orient Chrétien* 13 (1908): 47–57, 266–83; 14 (1909): 357–79; 17 (1912): 204–11, 294–301; 18 (1913): 137–40 [ROC]. English translation: Benedicta Ward, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: Apophthegmata Patrum from the Anonymous Series* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1975). I have occasionally modified these translations (indicated by: m).

Other collections of the *Sayings* referred to: Lucien Regnault, *Les sentences des pères du désert: collection alphabétique* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Solesmes, 1981) [SPA $\alpha$ ph]; Lucien Regnault, *Les sentences des pères du désert: Nouveau recueil*. 2nd ed. (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Solesmes, 1977) [SPN]; Lucien Regnault, *Les sentences des pères du désert: Série des anonymes* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe/Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Solesmes/Bellefontaine, 1985) [SPAn]; Lucien Regnault, *Les sentences des pères du désert: Troisième recueil et tables* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Solesmes, 1976) [SPTr].

Rubenson notes that even the practice of learning and reciting texts by heart,

tively high levels of education among at least some of the monks. Rubenson concludes from this that “a large number of the first monks had a fairly high social background and some education and cannot have been strangers to the philosophical and religious ideas around them.”<sup>6</sup>

Such high levels of learning and literacy correspond, for Rubenson, to a distinctive spirituality, reflected most clearly in the *Letters of Antony*, but also seen more obliquely elsewhere. The *Letters* show Antony to have been well acquainted with current philosophical ideas arising from the Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions. They emphasize that to gain true knowledge is not to attain something new and previously unknown, but to wake up and realize what was originally beheld. For Antony, it is by being rational, *logikos*, that the monk can know himself, that is know his “spiritual essence,” something acquired through moral and intellectual purification. This purification is understood as entailing the freeing of the soul from undue bodily influence, achieved by seasoning the body with virtue and *ascesis*. The Antony we meet in the letters shared the basic Platonic view of corporeality, and thus often refers to the body as something “heavy” which ties one down, something corruptible to be freed from. Purification is the search for the essence of things, for that which lies behind the forms apprehended by the senses, and is achieved by dialectics (abstraction) and contemplation. In Antony’s letters, these basic concepts lie behind his teaching on repentance as a matter of purification. The process of purification and the quest for knowledge are aimed ultimately at self-knowledge, a prominent theme in the *Letters*.

These frankly philosophical themes are combined in the letters with an approach to biblical interpretation through which Antony seeks not the literal meaning of the text but its allegorical, spiritual meaning. The biblical story is the story of how God as Creator cares for human beings and restores them to their original constitution, how God seeks to resurrect human beings’ spiritual essence, i.e., to restore order and knowledge. Only once does Antony support his exhortation by calling it the commandment of God (Letter 7: 63). Instead of a moral teaching based upon the biblical commandments, we find an emphasis on Scripture as an aid to the reconstitution of the inner per-

---

usually seen as a sign of illiteracy, was “more likely to be the result of repetitive reading than the result of memorization of oral tradition.” *The Letters of St. Antony*, 120.

<sup>6</sup> Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 121.

son. The Bible, according to the *Letters*, elucidates what is difficult to grasp. It helps one to understand oneself and God. It teaches us how to turn back to our original nature. Such a view of early monastic spirituality suggests a close correspondence between learning, literacy and a particular understanding of spirituality—in this case a spirituality that fits easily within the platonic Christianity of Origen of Alexandria and others.

This picture of Antony and of early monastic spirituality stands in notable contrast to the one presented in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* which, despite its occasional allusions to a culture of literacy, generally expresses a suspicion of books and reading, a reticence toward speculation upon the meaning of Scripture and a skepticism about the value of theological speculation of almost any kind. The monks of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* tend to respond to their questioners simply and directly. Rather than engaging in discursive reflection on complex theological questions, they prefer to tell stories.

An important question arising from this new research is how to assess the apparently irreconcilable differences toward literacy and learning reflected within ancient monastic literature. One way of understanding these differences, suggests Rubenson, is to see the image of rusticity found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* as a rhetorical device. This picture of the early monks arose, he suggests, mainly from the apologetic interests of the later compilers of those monastic texts who wished for their own reasons to portray the early monks as simple, illiterate and relatively lacking in theological sophistication. From this perspective, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* does not reflect the cultural and religious patterns of primitive Christian monasticism, but rather a later, somewhat nostalgic view of early monasticism. By contrast, the vision of early monasticism presented in the *Letters of Antony* should be understood as both authentic and reliable. The early Christian monks, in this view, were almost certainly more literate and more learned than we have previously thought.

Rubenson's work offers an important corrective to earlier perceptions of primitive monasticism as rooted primarily in the experience of the simple and the unlettered. Certainly we will need to consider more critically and carefully than we have done the evidence in the early monastic sources concerning learning and literacy. Still, one may ask whether Rubenson's assessment of the evidence is entirely adequate. Three issues are worth examining here, if only briefly: first, how to assess the value of the early monastic literature; second, how to



evaluate levels of literacy among the early Christian monks; and third, how to ascertain the extent to which tensions arising between oral and literate cultures may have contributed to the differences reflected in the early monastic documents.

It should be acknowledged that some scholars with an intimate knowledge of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, such as Lucien Regnault and Graham Gould, propose a very different understanding of this text. According to these scholars, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* not only reflects a considerable diversity of early monastic experience, but also contains within it many traces of primitive Christian monastic experience.<sup>7</sup> It is, they argue, a credible source, certainly reflecting attitudes arising from particular apologetic concerns, but still useful to us in our attempts to understand the emergence and development of early Christian monasticism. If this is true, then we will be obliged to take seriously its particular testimony regarding early monastic experience, in particular its testimony concerning monks with little learning or ability to read.

Recent studies of levels of literacy in the ancient world raise questions about the accuracy of Rubenson's assessment of levels of early monastic literacy. Using a broad definition of literacy as the ability to read or write at any level, William Harris, in his book *Ancient Literacy*, reaches a largely negative conclusion for western antiquity generally. The extent of literacy was, he argues, about ten percent and never exceeded fifteen to twenty percent of the population as a whole.<sup>8</sup> Harry Gamble, in his *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*, argues that there is little evidence to suggest that "the extent of literacy of any kind among Christians was greater than in society at large. If anything, it was more limited."<sup>9</sup> Roger Bagnall, whose book *Egypt in Late Antiquity* generally confirms Rubenson's assessment of a relatively high level of literacy among the monks, nonetheless admits that this does not mean that lit-

---

<sup>7</sup> Lucien Regnault, "La transmission des Apophthegmes," in *Les pères du désert à travers leurs Apophthegmes* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Solesmes, 1987), 66–67; see also Regnault, "Aux origines des Apophthegmes," 57–63; Graham Gould, "Recent Work on Monastic Origins: a Consideration of the Questions Raised by Samuel Rubenson's *The Letters of St. Antony*," *Studia Patristica* Vol. XXV (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1993): 405–416.

<sup>8</sup> William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 323–37.

<sup>9</sup> Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 5.

eracy levels in the desert were particularly high. Even given the significant amount of papyrological evidence regarding reading and writing in monastic circles—copied manuscripts, correspondence, accounting, informal inscriptions—Bagnall concludes: “it is not clear that these activities required more than the normal minority of literate personnel found in any Egyptian village.”<sup>10</sup>

These studies also reveal how ambiguous and fluid the experience of literacy and learning in the early monastic world really was. Literacy, it must be acknowledged, is certainly not synonymous with learning. To suggest that the number of monks who were actually literate is quite small should not be taken to mean that they had *no* experience with literacy or were completely unlearned. Rather, as Gamble notes regarding the wider Christian community, “if most Christians were illiterate, it did not prevent them from *participating* in literacy, or from becoming familiar with Christian texts.”<sup>11</sup> The ambiguity of this expression—“participating in literacy”—captures perfectly the ambiguity of the experience of so many of the early monks. They *participated* in a literate culture, a culture of the word—but often through hearing rather than through reading, and even when reading, with widely varying levels of competence and ability.

The evidence cited by Harris, Gamble and Bagnall makes one wonder about the accuracy of Rubenson’s contention that “a large number of the first monks had a fairly high social background and some education and cannot have been strangers to the philosophical and religious ideas around them.” This was certainly true of some monks. But on what basis may we say it was a “large number”? And how are we to judge the extent of their influence? Further, if the general levels of literacy and learning cited by these studies is accurate, should we perhaps look differently at the evidence found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* regarding tensions between learned and unlearned monks? Is it possible that such evidence reflects not so much a theological rearguard action on the part of later generations of monks (though its presence should not be discounted entirely), as it does the complexity of the relationship between learning, literacy and spirituality in the emerging fourth-century monastic world?

I think it is not only possible but likely. There was certainly a sharp tension at times between those monks at home in an oral culture

---

<sup>10</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, pp. 249–50.

<sup>11</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, p. 8.

and those with greater levels of learning and literacy. Thus we hear criticism in the *Sayings* of copyists who possess technical skill but no real understanding of the texts they are copying.<sup>12</sup> This sounds very much like what Eric Havelock has called “craft literacy”—literary skills restricted to specialized craftspersons—something which often develops in oral cultures shortly after the introduction of writing or where reading and writing are relatively rare.<sup>13</sup> So too, we encounter criticisms of those who possess books but do not know how to bring the teachings of such books into concrete practice. Monastic discussions about learning reflect, I think, a similar tension. Arsenius confesses that in spite of his Latin and Greek education, he does not know even the “alphabet” of the Egyptian peasant to whom he was speaking.<sup>14</sup> Evagrius is pierced to his depths by a word of an elder, declaring “I have read many books before, but never have I received such teaching.”<sup>15</sup> Such sayings may well reflect in part a self-conscious “rhetoric of simplicity,” aimed at promoting a rustic vision of monasticism.<sup>16</sup> But they also suggest, I would argue, traces of a cultural rift within the desert regarding the locus of true wisdom, and regarding the medium through which revelatory discourse was most likely to arise.

<sup>12</sup> Note the blunt response of one elder to a brother who boasted of having copied with his own hand the whole of the Old and New Testaments: “You have filled the cupboards with paper.” Nau 385 [ROC 18, 143].

<sup>13</sup> Abraham 3 [PG 65: 132BC]. On craft literacy, see Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 39; Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 94. Similarly, consider Abba Serapion’s sharp rejoinder to a brother who approached him for a word: “‘What shall I say to you? You have taken the living of the widows and orphans and put it on your shelves.’ For he saw them full of books.” Serapion 2 [PG 65: 416C]. Here we see not so much a blanket rejection of books and learning—Serapion himself is said to have owned a small pocket codex containing the psalms—than a criticism of the tendency to collect and accumulate books for their own sake, to reduce them to useless objects. See also Nau 392 [ROC 18, 144]; Theodore of Pherme 1 [PG 65: 188A].

<sup>14</sup> Arsenius 6 [PG 65: 89A], [m]. See also Arsenius 5 [PG 65: 88D–89A], [m].

<sup>15</sup> Euprepus 7 [PG 65: 172D], [m]. The saying is contained under the name of Euprepus in the *Alphabetico-Anonymous* collection, but there is strong evidence from other manuscripts that the saying comes from Evagrius. See Regnault’s remarks in *SPAlph*, 91.

<sup>16</sup> James E. Goehring, in his essay “The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt,” argues for something very much like this with regard to the effect of Athanasius’s *Life of Antony* upon our understanding of early Christian monasticism. Goehring suggests that in mythologizing the desert to the extent that it did, the *Life of Antony* helped define early monasticism as a solitary *desert* practice. In so doing it helped obscure from view other ascetic experiments, some of them more urban in character, that flourished in the fourth-century world. See James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), pp. 73–88.

This same tension helps to account for the reticence of many monks to speak about or speculate upon Scripture. Abba Amoun warns against talking about Scripture simply on the grounds that it was too “dangerous.” Antony praises the monk who refused to answer a question about the meaning of Scripture. Abba Poemen refrains from speaking to a visiting anchorite who wants to engage him in speculation about the meaning of a biblical text.<sup>17</sup> Throughout this literature, the monks insist that understanding of such texts is inseparable from practice and from moral purity. Thus reticence to speak about or speculate upon Scripture should not be mistaken for simplemindedness or ignorance; nor should it be seen merely as an expression of the concern of those monks who, in the light of the Origenist controversy, wished to eschew all intellectual speculation. The reticence can be more easily explained, I think, as an expression of the monks’ deep respect for the numinous power of biblical discourse, an attitude rooted deep within the patterns of an oral culture.<sup>18</sup>

This resistance to books, suspicion of learning too dependent upon books, and sensitivity to the dangers inherent in speculation upon Scripture accords well with a cultural pattern Walter Ong has described as “residual orality.”<sup>19</sup> In such a setting, we find both a growing facility with literacy and a residual sense of uneasiness towards the culture of textuality. William Graham, who has identified a similar tension within Pachomian monasticism, describes it this way: “The fixing of the holy word in writing always carries with it potential threats to the original spontaneity and living quality of the scriptural text, for it places it ever in danger of becoming only a ‘dead letter’ rather than the ‘living word.’”<sup>20</sup> The early Christian monks were only too aware of this danger. This is perhaps one of the reasons why they were so insistent in their attention to the living, spoken word. It is not that they were unwilling to acknowledge the written word as a legitimate source of

<sup>17</sup> Ammoun of Nitria 2 [PG 65: 128C]; Antony 17 [PG 65: 80D]; Poemen 8 [PG 65: 321C–324B]; See also PA 87, 1: [SPT<sub>r</sub>, 126]: “[I]f someone speaks with you of the Scriptures or any subject, do not discuss it with him.”

<sup>18</sup> Indeed many of those who refused to talk about Scripture were entirely capable of doing so, as Abba Daniel’s comment about Arsenius makes clear: “He never wanted to reply to a question concerning the Scriptures, though he could well have done so had he wished.” Arsenius 42 [PG 65: 105D–108B].

<sup>19</sup> On residual orality, see: Walter Ong, “Text as Interpretation: Mark and After,” *Semeia* 39 (1987): 14. This is a common and recurring theme for cultures poised between these two worlds.

<sup>20</sup> Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 59–60.

learning and wisdom. But drawing deeply on the resources provided by an ancient oral culture, they cultivated a distinctive spirituality and an interpretive approach of considerable power and subtlety.

### *Oral Culture and the Spirituality of the Word*

Two aspects of oral culture are particularly prominent in the sayings and stories of the early Christian monks. One is the sensitivity to the *power of language*, which for the early monks was reflected both in their attitudes toward everyday speech as well as in their attitudes toward the Word of God. The other is their sense of the significance of the back-and-forth *conversation* between elder and disciple and the fluid, dynamic “negotiation of meaning” that took place in such conversations. Together these elements contributed significantly to what one might call a “spirituality of the Word” in ancient Christian monasticism.

*The power of the word.* One of the characteristic features of oral cultures everywhere, and one that was certainly in evidence among the desert monks, is an appreciation and sensitivity toward the *power of language*. Walter Ong has noted that the power of language within oral cultures is connected to the experience of words as spoken, *sounded*:

Oral peoples commonly, and probably universally, consider words to have great power. Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power. A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out: something is going on. In this sense, all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is “dynamic.”

The fact that oral peoples commonly and in all likelihood universally consider words to have magical potency is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with the sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven.<sup>21</sup>

We see both negative and positive expressions of this in the desert.

The sense of words as power-driven certainly lay behind the perception in the desert of the destructive potential of words, what Swift called “th’ artillery of words.” The desert monks learned through ex-

---

<sup>21</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 32.

perience that, in the desert, where the sound and effect of words could be greatly magnified, it was especially important to learn to take care with words. They showed themselves to be acutely aware of the myriad ways that words could be misunderstood and abused, of the resulting harm that could be done to others, as well as the loss of sensitivity to words of value.

A veritable corpus of case law grew up concerning the havoc that could be wreaked by the tongue and the mouth and what should be done to curb it. Abba Joseph's question to Abba Nisterus captures the sense of frustration felt by many in the desert concerning their inability to control themselves: "What should I do about my tongue, for I cannot master it?"<sup>22</sup> For one brother, his inability to control his tongue was so destructive that it led him to the edge of despair. He pleaded with Abba Matoes, "What am I to do? My tongue afflicts me, and every time I go among people, I cannot control it, but I condemn them. . . ." Matoes tells the brother that this verbal incontinence is indeed "a sickness," for which the only cure is to "flee into solitude."<sup>23</sup> Words could wound, as Abba Achilles testified from his own experience. One day, some brothers found him spitting blood from his mouth. They asked him what had happened and he responded: "The word of a brother grieved me, and I struggled not to tell him . . . so the word became like blood in my mouth and I have spat it out."<sup>24</sup> The monks knew, then, that it was no exaggeration when Abba Or declared, "Slander is death to the soul."<sup>25</sup> Words were capable of vicious power and could tear apart an individual or a community.

Yet words could also be a force for healing, comfort and protection. The positive power of Scripture as oral expression can be seen in attitudes toward meditation, which was itself an oral practice, involving the constant repetition of words and sayings from Scripture. Beyond the weekly recitation of Scripture at the *synaxis*, it was a common practice for the desert monks to meditate upon one or two verses of a psalm or other verses from Scripture. They would slowly *utter* the words of the text over and over to themselves, and in so doing, begin to digest and interiorize the word. The oral character of meditation is conveyed by the fact that witnesses are said to both *hear* and *see*

<sup>22</sup> Nisterus 3 [PG 65: 308AB].

<sup>23</sup> Matoes 13 [PG 65: 293C].

<sup>24</sup> Achilles 4 [PG 65: 125A].

<sup>25</sup> Or 15 [PG 65: 440D].

monks meditating on Scripture. In one such story, Abba Ammoes relates that he went with a companion to see Abba Achilles, and “We heard him meditating on this saying, ‘Do not fear, Jacob, to go down into Egypt’ (Gen 46:3). For a long time, he remained, meditating on this word.”<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, someone relates having “seen a brother meditating in his cell,” meaning that he had seen him engaged in the activity of meditating, the recitation of words.<sup>27</sup>

The monks viewed such meditation, on its most basic level, as a means of protection against the snares of the evil one. Short bursts of prayer, either using the words of Scripture or words modeled upon Scripture, were believed, by virtue of the power inherent in the words, to protect one from even the most violent assaults from the demons. A brother who was beset by temptations was advised by Macarius to “meditate on the Gospel and the other Scriptures” as a way of overcoming them.<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, Macarius advised one of his disciples that the best way to pray in the midst of any struggle was simply to cry out, “Lord, help.”<sup>29</sup> In another instance, a monk was kept from being overcome in his struggle with a demon by crying out, “Jesus save me.”<sup>30</sup>

Even in less extreme circumstances the recitation of psalms was advocated as a means of restoring one to a certain inner equilibrium

<sup>26</sup> Achilles 5 [PG 65: 125AB].

<sup>27</sup> Nau 366 [ROC 17, 138]; see also J 76 [SPAn, 289]: “We must chew the good food but not the bad . . . the soul of him who loves God must always meditate on [the Scriptures]”; PA App 8 [SPTr, 127]: “After the meal sitting until evening, they meditate upon the holy Scriptures”; Eth. Coll. 13, 13 [SPN, 290]: A brother who asks whether he should meditate upon what he reads in the Scriptures, is told by an old man, “It is to the source of life that you are going (*Ad fontem vitae vadis*).”

<sup>28</sup> Macarius the Great 3 [PG 65: 264A]. Elsewhere, N 626 [SPAn, 269], it is said to be “good for a person to study the Sacred Scriptures against the attacks of the demons.”

<sup>29</sup> Macarius the Great 19 [PG 65: 269C].

<sup>30</sup> Elias 7 [PG 65: 185A]. The reliance on the power of the Name of God has a long history in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Old Testament, as in other ancient cultures, there is a virtual identity between a person’s soul and name. One’s whole personality is present in one’s name. To know a person’s name was to gain a definite insight into his or her nature, and thereby to establish a relationship. In the Hebrew tradition, to do a thing *in the name* of another, or to *invoke* and *call upon his name* are acts of the utmost weight and potency. As Kallistos Ware suggests in *The Power of the Name* (Oxford: Fairacres, 1974), “Everything that is true of human names is true to an incomparably higher degree of the divine Name. The power and glory of God are present and active in His Name. The Name of God is *numen praesens*, God with us, *Emmanuel*. Attentively and deliberately to invoke God’s Name is to place oneself in his presence, to open oneself to his energy, to offer oneself as an instrument and a living sacrifice in His hands.”

after the pressures and distractions of a hard day's work. John Colobos is said to have noticed the dissipating effect that working in the harvest could have upon him, making him vulnerable to diverse thoughts. Thus it was his habit that, upon returning from the harvest, he would give himself to "prayer, meditation and psalmody until his thoughts were re-established in their previous order."<sup>31</sup> Abba Isaac sheds further light on the psychological benefits of such practice, suggesting that the effectiveness of meditation is largely due to the unity it produces in the mind. He says that the mind will go on grasping a single verse of Scripture "until it has been strengthened by constantly using and continually meditating upon it, and until it renounces and rejects the whole wealth and abundance of thoughts [and becomes] straightened by the poverty of this verse."<sup>32</sup> Thus the repetition of a single verse unifies the mind, and helps it to overcome the kind of dissipation and distraction which leaves one open to the diverse attacks of the demons. These Sayings convey a common and pervasive conviction among the desert monks regarding the power of certain spoken words—especially words from Scripture. The oral character of such words—the fact that they were spoken and experienced as "sounded"—contributed much to the monks' sense of their transformative power.

The repetition of words of power from Scripture was part of a larger, longer purification process in which the monks were engaged. An important part of this purification involved something we might call an "asceticism of language" in which words of all kinds were subject to fierce scrutiny. The monks learned to exercise vigilance over what they called "strange," "alien," "worldly," or "careless" words. They tried as far as possible to avoid these kinds of words, to maintain silence when they felt themselves being drawn into rancorous speech of any kind. Yet they sought to go even further than this. They wanted

<sup>31</sup> John Colobos 35 [PG 65: 216A].

<sup>32</sup> Cassian, *Conference* 10: 11., *The Conferences*, translated and annotated by Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 383. This is discussed in slightly different terms in *Conference* 1: 18, where Cassian describes how the soul which is a torrent becomes redirected through meditation on Scripture: "In the same way the mind cannot be free from agitating thoughts during the trials of the present life, since it is spinning around in the torrents of the trials that overwhelm it from all sides . . . if, as we have said, we constantly return to meditating on Holy Scripture and raise our awareness to the recollection of spiritual realities . . . it is inevitable that the spiritual thoughts which have arisen from this will cause the mind to dwell on the things that we have been meditating on." *The Conferences*, p. 57.



to uncover the deeper sources of such words within themselves and to root them out, to reach a level of detachment where their words and actions were no longer driven by poisonous compulsions. Their hope was that, freed from these compulsions, their words and gestures and very lives might come to express healing and compassion.

The shape of this ideal and the difficulty of realizing it can be seen in Abba Ammoun's confession to Abba Poemen concerning his struggle with words. He told Abba Poemen: "When I go to my neighbor's cell, or when he comes to mine for some need or another, we are afraid of speaking together, for fear of slipping into strange conversation." Poemen replied, "You are right, for young men need to be watchful." Ammoun, uncertain about the meaning of Poemen's words, pressed him further, asking, "But the elders, what do they do?" Poemen replied, "The elders, who have advanced in virtue, have nothing evil in them, nor anything strange in their mouths, of which they could speak."<sup>33</sup> The elders are shown to be "incapable" of uttering destructive words, having been purified of the false motivations and desires which drive them. The story suggests that it was possible to realize such a depth of integrity and self-knowledge, that the fetid source of destructive and negative words could be transformed into a pure spring.

Of course becoming an elder was not merely a matter of growing old in the ascetic life. As Abba Antony says in one place: "Neither the way of virtue nor separation from the world for its own sake ought to be measured in terms of time spent, but by the aspirant's desire and purposefulness."<sup>34</sup> The monk Agathon must have impressed his contemporaries in just this way, for in spite of his youth, he was accorded the esteemed name of Abba—suggesting he had reached a level of holiness and authority usually found only among those with many more years of experience. But the reason given for his having been accorded this title is, at first glance, surprising. When asked how this had come about, Poemen responds simply: "Because his mouth makes him worthy to be called Abba."<sup>35</sup> It is not clear precisely *what* it was about Agathon's mouth that resulted in his having been given this hon-

<sup>33</sup> Ammoun of Nitria 2 [PG 65: 128C].

<sup>34</sup> Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, trans. Robert Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980), p. 36.

<sup>35</sup> Poemen 61 [PG 65: 336D], [m]. Abba Poemen himself was said to have "the gift of speaking," although interestingly, one of the characteristic aspects of this gift in his case was its relationship with silence; see Poemen 108 [PG 65: 348D].

orific title. Was it his reputation for wisdom? His capacity to maintain silence? However one understands it, this striking comment offers yet another indication of how intricately the power of language and spiritual wisdom were bound together in the early monastic experience.

How did such a verbal/spiritual transformation come about in a person? We can learn something about this by observing the way the monks struggled with the power of anger, especially the desire to retaliate against another person. The monks took seriously the biblical call not to “return evil for evil.” Abba John Colobos cautioned, “When you are insulted, do not get angry; be at peace, and do not render evil for evil (Rom. 12: 17).”<sup>36</sup> The fulfillment of this biblical injunction eluded most monks, for the impulse to retaliate was rooted in what Evagrius called “the most fierce passion”—anger. The desert monks recognized that fulfilling this text required one to do more than simply moderate one’s behavior. The impulse to injure others was rooted deep within and could express itself inadvertently. A person could convey anger or spite without uttering a single word. As Abba Isaiah noted, even the most subtle gesture, if it proceeded from an impure heart, could injure another: “When someone wishes to render evil for evil (Rom. 12: 17), he can injure his brother’s soul even by a single nod of his head.”<sup>37</sup>

A saying of Abba Poemen’s offers a remarkable phenomenological exploration of this process, detailing how passions such as anger take hold within a person as well as what it means to root out from within oneself the compulsions that lead one to express those passions in a destructive way. The process of verbal purification is shown here to be part of a larger cleansing process that touches ultimately on every aspect of a person’s life and being.

What does “See that none of you repays evil for evil (I Thess. 5:15)” mean? [a brother asked Abba Poemen]. The old man said to him, “Passions work in four stages—first, in the heart; secondly, in the face; thirdly, in words; and fourthly, it is essential not to render evil for evil in deeds. If you can purify your heart, passion will not come into your expression; but if it comes into your face, take care not to speak; but if you do speak, cut the conversation short in case you render evil for evil.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> John Colobos 34 [PG 65: 216 AC].

<sup>37</sup> Isaiah 8 [PG 65: 181 D].

<sup>38</sup> Poemen 34 [PG 65: 332 AB].

The question posed by the brother touches on an issue of fundamental concern to the early Christian monks: how to undo the deep-seated tendency toward recrimination and retaliation that so often corrupted their relationships with one another and with God. That the question turns on the meaning of a passage from Scripture is not insignificant. So many of the monks' most crucial questions arose in encounters with the word. To inquire into the meaning of the word was to open oneself to a powerful, numinous presence that had the capacity to transform their lives. But opening oneself to this presence could be costly, for it involved taking seriously the practical changes one was being asked to make in one's life in response to the challenge laid forth by the text. That I think is the real significance of Antony's comment—"Whatever you *do*, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures." To interpret, to respond to the word meant *doing* something, becoming someone different.

This is why Poemen directs his brother's attention to the passions. Here, he suggests, lies the key to knowing how one might actually learn the difficult art of not returning evil for evil. In observing how the passions work, one comes to understand the complex web of one's inner impulses and how these impulses manifest themselves in one's life. One also begins to see how to unravel this web. Understanding the meaning of the biblical word, "See that none of you repays evil for evil," involves the most demanding ascetic practice of purification. The only way one will truly be able to fulfill the meaning of this text in one's life, Poemen suggests, is by acquiring a pure heart. Only then will anger and resentment cease from welling up and consciously or unconsciously casting a shadow over every aspect of one's life.

This is a daunting ideal. One could well imagine even the most experienced monks feeling overwhelmed by the challenge of ever realizing it. Poemen clearly understood this, which is presumably why he did not stop with the heart, but continued on to indicate how the passions can affect one's visage, enter into one's speech and finally infect one's gestures and deeds. The implication is clear: just as the passions flow from the heart and enter eventually into every dimension of a person's being, so that flow can be stopped only if one is prepared to *practice* the art of not returning evil for evil, beginning at the simplest level—deeds. Eventually, Poemen implies, one may begin to see other more complex areas of one's life transformed—for example, one's tendency to utter cutting, biting words. It may even happen that one will reach a level of purity where one's face and gestures no longer register

feelings of anger and resentment as they often and easily seem to do. This will be, Poemen suggests, because they have mostly disappeared, because one has at last arrived at the threshold of purity of heart. How this happens is a mystery. Poemen does not pretend otherwise. But one comes away from this exchange with a clear sense that purity of heart is something that actually can take hold in one's life.

This new horizon of understanding arises from something quite simple: a question about a biblical text that one monk poses to another. The question is not so simple, of course. Nor, it turns out, is the interrogation of the text that follows. But the complexity of the question and the new possibilities that emerge for understanding and interpreting this text emerge only in the course of a *conversation*. One wonders whether the brother, examining this text on his own, would ever have arrived at the depth of understanding that emerges through his encounter with Poemen. Perhaps he would have come to a different understanding, equally useful to him. But one has the sense that he had come to see Poemen precisely because he had been unable to arrive at a satisfactory answer to the question that was troubling him. This is presumably why he put the question to the elder in the first place. This is another clear indication of the subtle but crucial power of oral discourse among the early monks. A real meeting occurs here, a face-to-face meeting in which the possible meanings of a difficult question are teased out and laid bare with honesty and courage. Such a serious inquiry into the meaning of a question can of course take place when a reader scrutinizes a text. But the dynamics of the process are different. In oral discourse, one encounters something important and distinctive: the "negotiation" of meaning.

*Conversation: negotiating the meaning of words.* In oral cultures, suggests Walter Ong, human beings "learn by apprenticeship—hunting with experienced hunters, for example—by discipleship, which is a kind of apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they heard, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, by participating in a kind of corporate retrospection—not by study in the strict sense."<sup>39</sup> This was true to a very large degree for the desert monks. The conversation between the monk and the elder was the primary setting in which the wisdom and spirituality of the desert was encountered. The dynamics of interaction between the master and disciple were rooted in and

---

<sup>39</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 9.

shaped by the habits of an oral culture. One of the most important things to note about this master-disciple relationship is its wholeness, its round, three-dimensional quality, its intimate connection to a life-situation, an existential setting: "Words [in oral discourse] acquire their meanings only from their always insistent habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs."<sup>40</sup> The concrete setting for such oral discourse was always "dense, never fully verbalizable, involving all sorts of elusive but real imponderables."<sup>41</sup> Many of these characteristics of oral discourse can be found in the exchanges between the monks and elders. Such characteristics can help us to understand and explain much that is puzzling or opaque in the sayings of the monks, clarifying in particular their attitudes toward language.

The ubiquitous and seemingly standardized request which sounds throughout the literature—"Abba, speak to me a word"—illustrates the difficulties of getting to the bottom of the verbal exchanges between the elders and their disciples. Were the supplicants seeking any word that the elder might speak to them? Or, a particular word, aimed at their own personal needs? And what was the elder to make of such requests? A question, even the same question, could mean a thousand different things, depending on the person and the situation. The elder's capacity to address a question in a meaningful way often depended on his or her capacity to "size up the situation," to take note of "all sorts of elusive but real imponderables"—such as the disposition or intentions of the one putting the question, or tensions existing within this or that monastic group. The presence of these "innumerable imponderables" behind every question required a willingness, on the part of both the elder and the disciple, to *negotiate* an answer or resolution. It meant really opening oneself to a conversation, that most fluid and unpredictable of verbal forms in which one utterance gives rise to another, that to still another and so on. As the conversation unfolded, the elder would then be in a position to assess the accuracy of his original conjecture and, if necessary, to revise his words in light of the questioner's response. Thus, the fuller meaning of an elder's words was not always revealed at the beginning, but often

---

<sup>40</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 47.

<sup>41</sup> Ong, "Text as Interpretation," p. 13.

emerged only through negotiation over the course of an entire conversation.<sup>42</sup>

Interestingly, this “negotiation” could sometimes begin even *before* the utterance of a question. What an elder said in response to a question, or whether an elder chose to say anything at all, often depended on his perception of the supplicant’s *willingness* to engage seriously the question before them. In one such case, we hear of a brother who begged Abba Theodore for a word for three days. Theodore refused to speak to him, and in the end the brother went away, grieving. Theodore’s disciple, who had witnessed this encounter, asked the elder why he had refused to speak to the brother. Theodore responded: “He is a trafficker [in words] who seeks to glorify himself through the words of others.”<sup>43</sup> Clearly, Theodore did not take this action lightly; only after carefully sizing up the brother’s intentions and determining that he was not putting genuine questions to him did Theodore decide to act. How did he arrive at his assessment of the brother’s disposition? We are not told. But one senses behind this story the likely presence of those very “imponderables” which exist in face-to-face encounters but do not translate easily to the written word: tone of voice, body language, facial expression. Any one of these could well have been enough to convince Theodore that this was not the time or place to try to formulate a response to the brother’s questions.

On the other hand, to those who showed that they took the challenge of engaging questions seriously, the elders were capable of opening themselves generously. We see this in a story of a certain brother who asked Abba Ares for “a word.” In response, Ares gave him some particularly difficult commands to carry out. The brother received the commands and did his best to fulfill them. In the meantime, many others came to seek a word from Abba Ares. But to these, he spoke much less demanding words. Abba Abraham was visiting Ares at the time and asked about this discrepancy. Ares responded: “*How I send them away depends upon what the brothers came to seek.* Now it is for the sake of God that this one comes to hear a word, for he is a hard worker and what I tell him, he carries out eagerly. It is because of this that I speak the Word of God to him.”<sup>44</sup> This is an intriguing example of how an elder would “size up a situation,” by dis-

<sup>42</sup> Ong, “Text as Interpretation,” p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Theodore of Pherme 3 [PG 65: 188 C], [m].

<sup>44</sup> Ares 1 [PG 65: 132 CD–133 A]; (emphasis mine).

cerning the attitude or disposition of the disciple in order to utter the word most appropriate to that situation. To speak the appropriate word, the elder had to draw upon previous knowledge of the particular disciple, or note the way a question was put, or perhaps observe a gesture or facial expression. All of these aspects of the conversation were important for discerning how one might respond in each different situation. Taking into account these numerous “imponderables” was an important expression of the elder’s capacity for discernment. In this case, it meant that Abba Ares had to size up the situation of each individual disciple and measure his words accordingly.

A certain amount of discernment was also required of those who came seeking words from the elders, for the elders sometimes chose to speak in puzzles and riddles. A brother who came to see Abba Joseph of Panephris complained that it was often impossible to understand the meaning of the elder’s words. Abba Joseph had commanded the brother to eat some of the fruit of a nearby mulberry tree. But because it was a day of fasting, the brother hesitated, uncertain as to whether he ought to eat or not. After struggling with this question for some time, he finally went to ask Joseph for an explanation. Why had he been given this particular command? Joseph explained his rationale this way: “At the beginning the Fathers do not ‘talk straight’ to the brothers, but rather in a twisted manner. If they see that they *do* these twisted things, then they no longer speak like that, but tell them the truth knowing that they are obedient in all things.”<sup>45</sup> This strange procedure apparently had a purpose: to see who was in earnest and who was not. Words of genuine weight and significance were not to be shared indiscriminately; a period of testing was necessary. For some disciples, this process was no doubt brief, while for others it was more protracted. In either case, this weighing and testing of intentions that took place between elders and disciples serves as an important reminder of the dynamism and elasticity in the quest for meaning within the context of face-to-face encounters. The elder’s sensitivity to a disciple’s intentions, often revealed through such “imponderables” as gestures, facial expressions and vocal inflections, was crucial to the quality and meaning of those encounters.

Still, the elders were not the only ones who needed to cultivate a feeling for the subtleties of oral discourse. Their disciples had to develop the capacity to “read” the gestures and actions of the elders or in

---

<sup>45</sup> Joseph of Panephris 5 [PG 65: 229 BC].

some cases determine even the meaning of silence. A story of Abba Isaac describes his frustration at the lack of direction Abba Theodore of Pherme gave him. He complained about this to some other elders, who took the matter to Abba Theodore himself. Theodore told them: "I do not tell him anything, but if he wishes *he can do what he sees me doing*." Hearing of Theodore's response, Isaac altered his approach, no longer seeking or expecting verbal teaching from the elder but rather observing his behavior and modeling his own life upon Theodore's. As Isaac noted of Theodore: "What he did, he did in silence; so he taught me to work in silence."<sup>46</sup> One hears something similar from Abba Pistus who, reflecting on what he has learned from observing the obedience of Abba Athres and Abba Or, says: "What I have *seen* [from the elders], I have done everything in my power to keep."<sup>47</sup> Here, as in numerous other places in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, gestures or actions become a kind of language, an effective means of communicating the meaning of the spiritual life to another.

One senses again and again in these stories that for the desert monks, the very presence and power of the word in their lives depended on their capacity to listen and to discern the meaning of what they heard. Within the context of a conversation between elder and disciple, the word of God existed less as scratchings on a piece of parchment or papyrus, to be studied and puzzled over in solitude, than as a living response to a question. The utterance of the word, the reception of it, and the possibility of life which the word offers, all depended on the dynamics of a conversation, and the chance to test the ground into which the seed would fall. The word, ever mysterious and elusive, could be drawn forth and discovered only by genuine questions from an honest heart.

It may appear that in proposing a greater awareness of oral culture within early Christian monasticism, I am accentuating just the kind of neat divisions—between orality and literacy, the unlearned and the learned, popular and elite spiritualities—that I questioned earlier. In fact, if as I have suggested, oral culture was a prominent part of early Christian monasticism, it may help us to see the complexity and fluidity of the early monastic world in a new light. Some scholars of oral culture, such as Walter Ong, Eric Havelock and Werner Kelber, have at times posited a radical differentiation between oral

<sup>46</sup> Isaac, Priest of the Cells 2 [PG 65: 224 CD]; (emphasis mine).

<sup>47</sup> Pistus 1 [PG 65: 372 C–373 B], [m]; (emphasis mine).



and written cultures. In this view, the two ways of seeing and moving through the world are always in fundamental tension with one another, each possessing its own psychodynamics and its own interpretive logic. But it is far from certain, as recent scholarship by Harry Gamble, Ruth Finegan and John Halverson suggests, that such sharp distinctions between these two ways of knowing can be sustained. Gamble argues that: "In the ancient societies about which we are best informed the oral and written were certainly not mutually exclusive." Despite certain tensions, they often "coexisted and interacted in a fruitful symbiosis."<sup>48</sup> Such a symbiosis, with all its tensions, seems to have existed within the early Egyptian monastic world.

What emerges from a careful examination of monastic sources is both a deep ambivalence toward the written word and a tremendous range of attitudes toward literacy, learning and piety. Monks kept books and valued them, but were suspicious of careless inattention to their contents. They gained access to Scripture through both hearing and reading. Reading itself was a fundamentally oral experience with the monk reciting aloud what he read; at the same time, recitation was often translated back into writing. Monks engaged in sophisticated allegorical interpretation of Scripture, but also valued simple, direct, practical fulfillment of the text. They read texts in solitude and worked out their meaning in face-to-face encounters with charismatic elders. Nor can attitudes toward literacy and orality be easily fit into expected categories. Largely illiterate monks were taught to read, if only in a rudimentary way (as we see in the Pachomian communities), and thus came to gain an appreciation for the written word. Among the more learned monks there was often a deep respect for the dynamism of the word experienced through spoken discourse. Nor was it unheard of for a learned, Greek-speaking monk to seek the advice of an unlearned Egyptian monk.

It may be that our categories for understanding and interpreting the spirituality of early Christian monasticism have not been sufficiently textured or nuanced. Rather than arguing for the primacy of either the unlettered or the philosophically sophisticated, it seems that we should perhaps give more thought to the kind of *relationships*

---

<sup>48</sup> Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 29 ff., argues for a less radical division between orality and literacy among early Christians. See also Ruth Finnegan, "What is Orality—if Anything?," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 14 (1990): 130–149; John Halverson, "Oral and Written Gospel: A Critique of Werner Kelber," *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994): 180–95.

that existed between them. Rather than holding too firmly to such categories, it is perhaps time that we gave renewed attention to the variety and complexity of ways in which monks negotiated and represented the ever-shifting worlds of meaning that comprised the early monastic experiment.



#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.