



The Great Mystery: Death, Memory and the Archiving of Monastic Culture in Late Antique Religious Tales

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The Great Mystery:
Death, Memory and the Archiving of Monastic Culture
in Late Antique Religious Tales

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of the Classics

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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in the subject of
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Abstract

The present study investigates attitudes towards and teachings about the end of life and the soul's passage to the next world, as expressed in late antique religious tales in Greek, particularly from Egypt and the Sinai. The intellectual setting is that of Chalcedonian Christianity, but within those strictures there was scope for a range of creative treatments and imaginings of a topic which canonical Scripture touched upon in mostly vague terms or glancing allusions. While there was much speculation and discussion in what we may call formal theology, the use of arresting narrative, some of it with an almost dramatic character, gave exponents of doctrine the ability to reach a wider audience in a more penetrating and persuasive way. And, as the number of scriptural allusions here will make clear, it was possible to develop ideas and images within the large gaps left by Holy Writ which were nevertheless not inconsonant with the same.

Coupled with the relative freedom allowed for presentations of a universal (death) was an urgency to do so which was particular to the time (one of sweeping social and political changes within, and threats to, the empire). We consider here the connection between the universal and the particular, and some of the most important approaches taken to the subject.

This work builds upon that of a number of scholars, including Derek Krueger, John Wortley, Phil Booth, André Binggeli, Elizabeth Castelli and Aron Gurevich. The first and last chapters of the dissertation are given to thematic treatment of the moments immediately before and immediately after death. The second, third and fourth chapters are each dedicated to one of the three most influential ascetic writers of the period: John Klimakos, John Moschos, and Anastasios of Sinai. We look at how their presentations of death not only frame the ideals of monastic life but to record for posterity the fading ways of a changing world.

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*Exegi monumentum ære perennius
regalique situ pyramidum altius...*
—Ode 3.30

*So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.*
—Sonnet 18

General Introduction

In the Christian thought of Late Antiquity, death presented the ultimate transition: a separation of body and soul; a time of joy and peace for the righteous and of grief and penance for the wicked. Although for most, death was the inexorable conclusion to life in the flesh, a fact which the pious Christian was instructed always to bear carefully in mind, a number of Byzantine text collections belonging to the genre of the religious tales include narratives which show the act of dying not as an immovable absolute in a fixed order but as a variable process that could sometimes be anticipated, delayed, temporarily reversed or even permanently undone. The living could also taste of death, be it in vision or in the flesh, only to return to tell the dread and wondrous tale of their experiences in the Other World.

The prevalence of these motifs within the tales tradition suggests that there was considerable interest in such information. It is indeed surprising that, despite its looming presence in the Scriptures and its monumental importance as a Christian *telos*, the process of death is not more fully addressed in the Bible. Though Scripture reveals the contours of this transition,¹ it does not frequently offer the sort of precise and exhaustive answers an anxious believer might seek: what kind of judgment he would face, the nature of the Other World, and

¹ The Scriptures do offer some more-or-less clear information on both the general judgment (in parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46)) and the particular judgment (the story of Lazarus and Dives (Luke 16:19-31)).

what rewards and punishments would await him there. The tales tradition thus represents an informal and supplementary exploration of man's immediate *ante-* and *post-mortem* experience, often in accordance with and an enrichment of what was already set out in biblical, apocryphal and patristic writing, but sometimes also independent of it. As Aron Gurevich has observed, religious tales drew on "a rich fund of superstition and legend in order to make Christian ideas about the soul, death, resurrection and punishment accessible to the mass of the faithful. It was impossible to communicate with them other than in the simple language of beliefs and 'superstitions.'"²

In partially lifting the veil between worlds and affording readers an opportunity to partake in what lies beyond (a chance, in the canonical story of Lazarus, not fully granted to the brothers of the hapless Dives³), the narratives offer their audience insight by way of others' experiences. And so the tales tradition includes a variety of characters of a wide range of types, from many backgrounds, in many different situations. The most familiar motif is likely the untimely death of a dissolute individual followed by a miraculous revival, after which the undeceased reorients his life, tasked now with conveying to others second-hand what he has seen with his own eyes – a Christian analogue to the Myth of Er. But not all tales have such explicitly moralizing scripts; there are also the lofty visions of great ascetics who witness the heavenly ascent of others or are taken on such journeys themselves, or the temporary reanimation of the long-since departed to protest the conditions of their interment or prevent

² Gurevich 1992:71.

³ Luke 16:21-31. (*Inter alia*, "And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence" (v. 26).)

grave-robbars from violating their rest. The dead also appear to the living in dreams, or the dreamer himself receives a preview of death through the mirror of death's brother, sleep.

The Byzantines conceived of two eschatologies: the "major" one, which deals with "the context of the whole history of Creation,"⁴ and a countless number of "minor," individual ones, experienced by every man, and by everyman.⁵ "Christianity confers on each individual [a] personal responsibility for his choices of the path of righteousness or sin. This is why the judgment of each soul is axiomatic in vision stories."⁶ The church as a whole will need to wait together for the great and terrible day of the Lord,⁷ whose "day and hour knoweth no man – no, not the angels of heaven[;]"⁸ but each particular Christian, living as a microcosm of Christendom, will see his personal eschaton "immanentized" before his eyes. These eyes are given "dual lenses" to see near and far together: the believer is, so to speak, healed of both myopia and presbyopia, and in his experience acquires a necessary and salvific perspective. By nature we respond with greater alacrity to what is immediate and personal than to what is general and distant. But the faithful moribund not only takes his own cross upon himself⁹ but is also «συμπολι[ίτης] τῶν ἁγίων καὶ οἰκεῖ[ος] τοῦ Θεοῦ»¹⁰ and is but a single member of the larger body of Christ.¹¹ As such, he must have a vision of both the immediate and the distant. He is compelled to see the latter by this "spectacular" vision, when *in speculo spectat, expectat,*

⁴ Gurevich 1992:72.

⁵ Gurevich 1992:77.

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ Joel 2:31, Malachi 4:5.

⁸ Matt.24:36.

⁹ Luke 4:27.

¹⁰ Ephes. 2:19.

¹¹ Rom. 12:5; 1Cor. 10:17, 12:12-27.

aspicit, inspicit a universal pattern and macrocosmic law that involves him in the greater tale of the whole of Christian history.¹²

While universals remain universals, the urgency of this greater arch of history was intensified in the late sixth and early seventh centuries by the threats against orthodox Christianity – not threats, of course, to its soul-anchoring celestial truths,¹³ but to the integrity of the terrestrial Christian empire (where the *βασιλεύς*, in the new Roman Jerusalem of the City of Constantine, was what we would call *Dei gratiā rex fidei defensor*, and where rendering unto Caesar constituted rendering unto God). The danger of imperial decay or dissolution came not only from internal weaknesses, but from outside, highly heterodox threats: first were the heretical Monophysites in the East, with their deceptive appeals to common Christian scripture. Then there were the still-Zoroastrian Persians to the Northeast and the newly-Muslim Arabs from the Southeast, both groups pushing in with sword in hand and the latter group, with its own highly detailed rival eschatology, demanding religious and political submission. Haldon finds evidence of this social upheaval in an increase of apocalyptic literature.¹⁴ But, as we have said above that personal and general Christian eschata largely “mirror” each other, the threat to the general state made a “spectation” of its reflection, in the last hours of an individual, all the more pressing. And so tales concerning the death of the individual are not so much in contrast with, as a complement to, the apocalyptic literature of the time.

The political and social unrest of the late sixth and early seventh century coincided with a period of tremendous literary output and featured a particular proliferation of ascetic

¹² Or, as Munitiz has it, “like most of us, the Byzantines were primarily interested in the individuality, the particularity of death, rather than in general theories about its overall nature” (2001:9).

¹³ «Ἡ βασιλεία ἡ ἐμὴ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου» (John 18:36).

¹⁴ Haldon 1997:368.

literature. The texts which form the basis of this study – John Moschos’s *Pratum Spirituale*, John Klimakos’s *Ladder of Divine Ascent* and *The Tales of the Sinai Fathers* by Anastasios of Sinai – emerge from a monastic culture which, having reached its peak about a century earlier, was now under threat from outside forces: invasions, an increasingly heterodox society, religious persecution, plagues and famine, to name but a few. Its response to these challenges was not mere withdrawal but an increase in literary production – a recording and “archiving” of the place’s monastic history and, in the threat of their own annihilation, an affirmation of the place’s power and of its belonging to the god of Orthodox Christendom. This impulse to preserve and celebrate is especially visible in the religious tales tradition, which by the nature of the genre was able to capture a literary image of “things as they are here and now” (or, at the very least, as the author wished them to appear) through an extensive composite of narrative vignettes.¹⁵ The recording of monastic culture in narrative form as an act of memorialization was recently explored by Phil Booth, who sees this tendency to celebrate and remember particularly in Moschos’s *Pratum Spirituale*, which he calls “the final memorial of Greek monasticism’s golden age, and at the same time, an index of its crisis.”¹⁶ We build here, in part, on Booth’s work.

These stories give comfort to the monastic community, by reminding them of their finite earthly lives’ tie to heavenly infinity – to say, in other words, that in the grander scheme of things nothing is truly lost; but they just as importantly also show, at many particular points and together as a corpus or as corpora, that at least in this realm there *can* be loss, which must be guarded against. It is this “archiving” (a present recordation for later *recordatio*) that

¹⁵ PG 87(3).2852B (Wortley 3).

¹⁶ Booth 2013:127.

withstands that perdition. It is not enough for the holy man to work his work here below and receive his reward in heaven; his virtue must be kept and shared with those still walking through this vale of tears below. There is something here of the Lord's own dictum, that "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."¹⁷

Overview

The body of the thesis is divided into five parts. Bookending the middle three chapters, which focus on individuals authors and works, are explorations of man's immediate *ante-* and *post-mortem* experiences; these chapters treat of edifying literature thematically, rather than by work. Our study begins with the tollgates of the air, which find their Christian beginnings in the patristic literature of the third century and with Origen. They achieve "canonical" (or authoritative deuterocanonical) status and prominence in the fourth century, when, in Athanasios's *Life of Antony*, perhaps the most famous saint of all describes his two visions of the judgment in the air. The motif then passes into the religious tales tradition, where we examine three other Egyptian treatments dating from the fourth to the seventh century. The tales envision the condition and experiences of man immediately after death and seek to move the listener to timely repentance and reform by carefully mapping out the heavenly joy that awaits the Lord's good and faithful servants, but especially to the eternal woe and suffering that will befall those who at the hour of death have been weighed and found wanting. A seventh-century

¹⁷ John 12:24.

popular homily will also be considered, which takes one of the religious tales as its narrative centerpiece.

The second chapter keeps us in the late sixth and early seventh centuries with John Klimakos's *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the most influential monastic text to emerge from the late antique period. Each chapter of the work represents a "rung" on the ladder to spiritual perfection and the fifth rung, *On Repentance*, describes a visit that the saintly abbot paid to a colony of self-styled monastic convicts outside of Alexandria. The chapter offers a fresh interpretation of Klimakos's visit to "the Prison" and places his experiences and observations in the context of a "journey to the underworld" using narratives from the tales tradition as literary models.

The third chapter draws its material from a contemporary and equally famous text, John Moschos's *Pratum Spirituale*, and moves beyond the cusp of death and well into the grave. Moschos and his companion Sophronios, later to become archbishop of Jerusalem, traveled around Egypt and the Levant collecting tales about holy men and women from all walks of life, in an effort to produce an extraordinary panorama of sanctity and preserve its memory in a changing world. Our attention will be focused on where this impulse to record and preserve seems the strongest – in tales where the memory of a hermit is miraculously recorded after he has already passed away.

The fourth chapter also has preservation as one of its principal themes, but instead of documenting monastic culture in a broad sense, Anastasios of Sinai's *Tales of the Sinai Fathers* celebrates and commemorates the lives of the holy monks who dwelt around God's Mountain and on the Sinai peninsula. We will read Anastasios's tales against earlier monastic texts

associated with Sinai and, given his incredibly prolific writing career as a monastic teacher and itinerant priest, against some of his own other writings as well.

The fifth and final chapter serves as a complement to the first and looks at what the tales tradition has to say about man's interactions with the fearsome beings that appear at his bedside to drag him from this world into the next, invisible to all but the moribund. We will end our discussion by examining a popular homily which, as in the first chapter, has taken this motif as its narrative core and will consider what happens to a tale when it crosses the boundaries of genre.

Current Scholarship

The study builds on important current scholarship; the 2001 volume of the *Dumbarton Oaks Papers on Byzantine Eschatology* has been fundamental, particularly the work of Nicholas Constas, John Wortley and Joseph Munitiz. The writings of Aron Gurevich on perceptions of death and the afterlife in the Western Middle Ages have provided many useful parallels and a theoretical framework for the discussion of the *Spiritual Meadow* in addition to the aforementioned work of Phil Booth. For the chapter on the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, John Duffy and Henrik Rydell Johnsén's studies have proved especially useful, as has Jonathan Zecher's 2011 thesis on the representation of death in early patristic sources. For the Anastasian texts, André Binggeli's edition of the *Tales* from his doctoral dissertation (published version forthcoming) provides an indispensable and a philologically thorough foundation, as does Caner's sourcebook of Sinai-related texts, which draws very diverse texts into a coherent and tractable whole.

The Place of the Dissertation

This dissertation does not seek to give a complete portrait of death as represented in the late antique tales tradition. We have decided to focus particularly on what the moment of death meant as a transition and how this transition reflects simultaneously both the temporal and eternal views of life which form the core of ascetic thought in that period. Other important topics central to the Christian view of death, such as the great eschaton and the resurrection of the flesh at the end of time, can thus, within the narrow scope of this study, be only touched upon.

These works were not intended exclusively for a select group but for a broader audience and in response to the far-reaching changes that in this century affected the people of the East Roman empire in general. In them we see death as a telling and particularly concentrated expression of the spirit of that age, and we argue among other things that these narratives focusing on the individual reflect concerns about the order of the wider society: every man must pass (usually) once and for all from this present life, and the present shape of eastern Christendom is also undergoing changes that will prove permanent. The writers have little power to “stand athwart history, yelling stop,”¹⁸ but they *can* stand briefly against the currents of their age and, in netting together a web of stories mostly about individuals or tiny groups, “re-cord” the region’s larger-scale and centuries-old spiritual and intellectual architecture which they’ve inherited, «ὡς μήτε τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται, μήτε ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά.»¹⁹

¹⁸ Buckley 1955:5.

¹⁹ Herodotus 1.1.

Chapter 1

Τελωνεῖα: The Tollgates of the Air as an Egyptian Motif in Patristic Sources and Early Byzantine Hagiography²⁰

The tollgates of the air have a long and rich history in Byzantine literature as one way of explaining and envisioning the condition and experiences of man immediately after death, a part of the eternal journey left shadowy and ill-defined in Scripture. Through texts such as the ones that I will discuss in this chapter, Christian writers sought to establish some kind of practical and theoretical guidance for what the soul could expect after leaving the body. Several good studies of Byzantine thinking on the immediate *post-mortem* state already exist, but they cover a large sweep of themes and times.²¹ In this chapter, I will consider the tollgate motif specifically, and draw my examples mainly from hagiographical texts emerging from Egypt in the third through seventh centuries. By mapping out the Christian use of the motif over time, from its first attestation in Egypt, I wish first to establish that it was in this country that its adoption by Christianity began and to which, for the first few centuries of its Christian use, it was principally tied – introduced by Origen and developed by, among others, Athanasios and the writers and collectors of beneficial tales. These authors used this motif as an urgent and dramatic vehicle for discussing the weighing of man’s sins committed in the flesh and the supreme importance of sincere repentance and good works. I also suggest that the tollgates’ theological lesson required narrative illustration, with characters, setting and plot. Further consideration of the question of the motif’s ultimate origins—quite possibly in pre-Greco-

²⁰ An earlier version of this chapter appeared in Roilos 2014:41-54.

²¹ For instance, Conostas 2001:91-124 and Wortley 2001:53-69.

Roman Egyptian religion²²—will have to await future investigation; here we examine only its Christian development.

One of the earliest Christian formulations of the motif appears in a section of Origen's

23rd *Homily on Luke* (on Luke 3:9-12), in reference to John 14:30:

When we depart from the world and this life of ours has been transformed, some beings will be seated at the boundary of the world, as if they were exercising the office of tax collectors, very carefully searching to find something in us that is theirs. It seems to me that the 'prince of this world' is like a tax collector. Hence, the Scripture says, "The prince of this world cometh, and he [shall find] nothing in me" (§144).²³

Origen gives the toll collectors a Christian overlay by likening them to delegates of the prince of this world and securing them within a scriptural framework.²⁴ Origen's description sets forth a bare-bones version of the plot that forms the template for subsequent iterations of the motif: the recently deceased soul must undergo a reckoning with a liminal and adversarial force in order to give account of the deeds committed in the body.²⁵ The narrative accounts of the motif "flesh

²² See discussion in Wortley 2001:63-64.

²³ «Οἶδα καὶ ἄλλους τελώνας, οἱ μετὰ τὴν ἐντεῦθεν ἡμῶν ἀπαλλαγὴν ἐπὶ τοῖς τέρμασι τοῦ κόσμου καθεζόμενοι οἰοεὶ τελωνοῦσι ἡμᾶς καὶ κατέχουσι, μὴ τι αὐτῶν ἐν ἡμῖν ἐστίν. Διὸ γέγραπται· Ἔρχεται ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, καὶ ἐν ἐμοὶ εὐρήσει οὐδέν» (ed. Rauer; trans. Lienhard 1996:99). Origen here is quoting loosely from John 14:30, or perhaps an alternative version of the same, which in our Bible generally reads "Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and *hath* nothing in me" («Οὐκ ἔτι πολλὰ λαλήσω μεθ' ὑμῶν· ἔρχεται γὰρ ὁ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἄρχων καὶ ἐν ἐμοὶ οὐκ ἔχει οὐδέν»). Origen's reference is to Jesus' fairly lengthy speech to his disciples (John 13-17) just before he willingly faces his own trials and scourging, as recorded in that most gnostic book of the canon, and the speech is a collection of themes in a Christian context that believers from an Egyptian context (where it is *possible* that the motifs from the *Book of the Dead* and the *Book of Breathings* continued in some way to be passed down) could easily accept: other-worldly peace (John 14, vv. 17-19, 22, 27); divine reminder (v. 26); love, comfort and protection from fear (vv. 1, 16, 18, 21, 23, 27); the right path to follow (vv. 4-6); and an eventual reunion with the Gods – that is, with the Father and the Son (vv. 2, 3, 18-20, 28) by means of the Holy Ghost. See further *inter alia* 12:35sq. and 17:11-19 (walking in the light as children of light, clean from the world); 12:50 (life everlasting); 13:5-11 (apparently ritual/purificatory washing); 13.33-36, 15.9-19, 16.16-22, 16.27sq. and 17:27 (separation from divinity, the way back, and love); and 15:26, 16:7 and 16:13 (the Comforter and the inspiring spirit of truth).

²⁴ Bartelink 1984:8. Bartelink also draws a distinction here between Origen's description of the soul's journey to the "ends of the earth" and the gnostic belief in the soul's travels through planetary spheres. Origen's toll-collectors reside "at the limits of the cosmos, that is to say: in the air that envelops the earth" (non-scriptural translations mine throughout, except where indicated).

²⁵ It seems that the idea of the soul being judged twice after death – once in the temporary and individual judgment at the tollgates and then again in the ever-lasting and general one of the resurrection – was introduced and developed after Origen. Hennessy (1988:303) notes that "in Origen's writing there is no difference between

out” this basic frame with other recurring details and innovations not found in Origen’s homily: the soul’s journey may occur at the moment of death but can also take place in a dream or in a waking vision, when the soul is temporarily loosed from the confines of the body. Either way, “the event is described so vividly that the subject seems actually to ‘go’ to the place seen in vision. In both, the body lies flat in this world while the spirit moves through the Other World.”²⁶ The lesser, individual judgment that follows foreshadows the “final and general judgment at the end of time.”²⁷ In this intermediary stage, the disembodied soul is represented as a passive and etiolated entity, guided and goaded by the threats and directions of others and subject to overwhelming and crippling emotions, especially terror. While the soul loses agency and direction upon exiting the fictile body, it remains a cognizant repository of the thoughts and actions stored up during its lifetime: memory and vision become perfect and the soul is suddenly able (or made) to recall every event from the past with devastating clarity.

The details of the soul’s intermediary journey begin to take shape in the Greek *Life of Antony the Great* by Athanasios of Alexandria.²⁸ This fourth-century *vita* is one of the earliest Christian texts to set the motif in hagiography’s narrative framework, a genre which through vivid descriptions and dramatic dialogue easily lent itself to pressing home the immeasurable terrors of the ordeal.²⁹ The *Life of Antony* represents a particularly interesting case-study for the Christian development of the tollgate motif because it offers two differing accounts of the soul’s

particular judgment and general judgment, nor is there any speculation about the intermediate period between time and eternity, which would extend from the death of the individual until the general resurrection. This will be the preoccupation of later theology.”

²⁶ Baun 2007:120.

²⁷ Wortley 2001:61.

²⁸ BHG 140.

²⁹ Rivière (1924:49) viewed this episode in Antony’s *vita* as “a dramatized application of Origenist eschatology to the individual case of Saint Antony.”

post-mortem journey into the air: two visions presented as discrete episodes in consecutive chapters.

The first vision (ch. 65) describes the soul's ascent as an aerial journey in the presence of benevolent guides through tollgates operated by hostile forces – in other words, “what became the usual scenario.”³⁰ The vision is an intensely personal experience for Antony: while praying before supper, he feels his spirit leaving his body and senses that he is being taken “up through the air by some (beings)” (*ὡς εἰς τὸν ἀέρα ὀδηγούμενον ὑπό τινων*). As they ascend, Antony sees “terrifying and bitter (figures)” (*πικροῦς καὶ δεινούς τινας*) wishing to hinder his ascent.³¹ Although the saint remains aware during his aerial voyage, which allows him to be both actor and spectator in the “process,” his role is a non-speaking part. His soul can only thrill with speechless agony and awe while his companions engage in heated discussion with their demonic counterparts. At stake is the saint's right to proceed through the tollgate, the demons demanding a full report of his deeds from birth to see whether he can be held accountable for his sins. His companions declare that the Lord “erased” (*ἀπήλειψεν*) Antony's past sins when he became a monk.³² For this reason, they argue, he ought only to be held responsible for his deeds from that moment on and can thus be considered blameless. This testimony of the redemptive power of withdrawal into the contemplative life was likely intended both as a promise and a warning to the *vita's* monastic audience and as a compelling endorsement for those considering conversion. As has been argued, “like baptism and repentance, entry into the

³⁰ Wortley 2001:62.

³¹ Recheis (1958:166) observes that Athanasios is reluctant to supply these aerial beings (both the sympathetic and inimical ones) with names and titles.

³² Cf. Book 12.30 of Origen's *Commentary on Matthew*. On the recording and erasing of sins at the tollgates, see in particular Rapp 2009:195-98.

monastic state is seen as a complete turning point and a way to reset the counter of one's sins to zero."³³ While sincere repentance and withdrawal from the world offered a powerful safeguard against the harrowing demands of the "terrifying and bitter" beings, only they could pass unfettered who, like Antony, maintained their souls' spotlessness by avoiding sin. Antony's spiritual perfection ensures that his passage through the tollgates represents a best-case scenario; the narrative does not reveal the experience of less-exalted souls who at the tollgates are weighed in the balance and found wanting. (This horrifying experience would be the narrative preoccupation of the later authors considered below). When it becomes apparent that Antony's vicious prosecutors cannot ensnare him, the trembling saint is given free passage and returns to his body.

The second vision in Antony's *Life* follows immediately after the first and differs from it quite significantly: after some of his disciples question him about the fate of the soul and its destination after death, Antony on the following night hears a voice calling to him, telling him to go out and look. There "he beheld a giant – horrible and fearsome – standing up and reaching to the clouds, and beings ascending as though on wings. Stretching out his hands, the giant hindered some of them; but others flew over and, having passed, were led up without further care" (66). The voice then explains this terrible spectacle in the sky, revealing that the beings that drift past unfettered are souls of the blest, while the giant who blocks the way and claims the souls of the wicked as his own is the Adversary (*ἐχθρός*). Antony's own ascetic resolve is galvanized by the experience but the saint remains reluctant to share his vision with

³³ Rapp 2009:194. See also Bartelink 1994:307n1.

the disciples until, after a careful examination of his conscience, he decides that “the tale is beneficial for them...and visions are often a consolation (*παραμύθιον*) for [ascetic] exertions.”³⁴

Athanasios’s side-by-side placement of these two visions was not an arbitrary choice but rather, it seems to me, a subtle move to privilege the vision of the heavenly tollgates over that of the menacing giant by giving the former “top billing” and a longer treatment. Another version of the saint’s vision of the giant, preserved in the more recent *Lausiac History* but longer than the one here and possibly retaining older features, suggests that the account in Athanasios work represents, as Wortley puts it, “a remnant of a different tradition (as yet unrecognized),” which Athanasios has stripped of some of its colorful elements.³⁵ For in the *Lausiac History* we read that Antony prayed for a year before being granted the vision, where the rising souls of the dead are likened to birds and where the giant, with his sable visage, stands over a lake “the size of the sea” (ch. 21, §17). While Athanasios infuses his description of the tollgate vision with verses from Paul and likens Antony’s aerial voyage to the Apostle’s ascent to the third heaven, he frames the second vision almost as something of an afterthought: “and he had this [vision as a] gift as well” (*Life of Antony*, ch. 66). The focus here seems to be not so much on the vision of the giant itself but on Antony’s generosity as a teacher in sharing his visions with his disciples.

The image of a large, menacing creature hampering the ascent of those who try to reach heaven had already established itself elsewhere in early Christian hagiography, notably in the *Passion of Saint[s] Perpetua [and Felicity]*,³⁶ and was thus likely an older and more familiar motif –

³⁴ If the word *παραμύθιον* already had at that time something of the modern word *παραμύθι* (“folk-” or “fairytale”), then it would reinforce the idea that these recountings had a “moral to the story.”

³⁵ Wortley 2001:62. See *Lausiac History* ch. 21, §§16-17 (ed. Bartelink) for the more extensive version, as well as Wortley’s article (p. 61) for his translation of these particular sections.

³⁶ In her vision, Perpetua sees a narrow golden ladder extending to heaven with all manner of weapons affixed on

indeed, it was known to educated writers from Plato's Myth of Er. It becomes apparent, however, that in the tales tradition hereafter the aerial bureaucracy fashioned by Athanasios effectively edges out the image of the fluttering souls that rise up through the air to contend with the dark, looming, dreadful giant of the second vision.³⁷ The motif of the tollgates was able, by its own striking nature and by its inclusion in a semi-canonical work, to gain currency and eventually replace alternative representations like that of the giant.³⁸

* * *

Although Antony's passage through the tollgates offers an exceptional model for the audience to emulate through their virtuous living, it leaves untapped some of the rich narrative possibilities that become the focus of Athanasios's successors: the posthumous trials and terrors of the common man in the immediate afterlife. Two fourth-century tales attributed to a certain

either side. Under the ladder lurks a great serpent whose task is to terrify and hinder the climber (*Passion of Perpetua* 4; see also Daniélou 1956:141).

³⁷ Constan 2001:107.

³⁸ The figure of the gigantic adversary, whose archetypal nature makes it almost bound to recur (well known, for example, in that most popular of English folktales, "Jack and the Beanstock"), does occasionally make later appearances, as briefly in "The Life of Theodosios the Solitary" (*Spiritual Meadow* ch. 66, mentioned by Wortley 2001:62n47) as an obstacle for the protagonist to confront and overcome in order to enter the monastic life. But in tales about the *post-mortem* ascent of the soul, the giant soon loses his place to the newer motif.

Indeed, the *τελωνεῖα* or *τελώνια* become so closely identified with the demons that (so to speak) "man" them, and the image becomes so widespread, that the very word *τελώνιο* comes to mean a kind of demon itself (specifically, as the idea develops, the terrifying not-quite-alive, not-quite-dead bodies of unbaptized babies). In Politis 1904:860-862 we read that «Τὰ μωρὰ παιδιὰ πού πεθαίνουν ἀβάφτιστα γένονται μικροὶ δαιμόνοι μὲ μαῦρα φτερά. Κι ἐκεῖ πού πετοῦν στὸν ἀγέρα καταρειαῶνται τὸν παπᾶ πού τ' ἀφήκε ἀβάφτιστα καὶ πετροβολοῦν τοὺς διαβάτες καὶ τοὺς βιστηροῦν [βλαστημοῦν?], σὰν τοὺς ἄλλους δαιμόνους. Ἄν περάση κανεὶς τὴ νύχτα καὶ μάλιστα τὰ μεσάνυχτα ἀπὸ τὸ μέρος πού τὰ ἔχουν θαμμένα ἢ ὄηγμένα, τ' ἀκούει πού κλαίγουν καὶ θωρεῖ σπίθες καὶ φωθιές» (entry 579, from Crete). See further, entries 237, 584, 932, 975-977 and Politis's learned commentary on pp. 860-862 (*ad fab.* 237) and 1234-1236 (*ad* 579), where he traces the word and its idea(s) from antiquity through Byzantium.

Makarios use the choices of imperfect men during life and their experience at the tollgates as vehicles to reflect upon free will, sin and the power of repentance.³⁹

In the first tale, Makarios visits Constantinople, wanders through a portico, and then with his “spiritual eyes, the ones given to [him] by the Lord in order to understand his wonders,” observes a young man weeping and lamenting at the entrance of a brothel (PG 34.221).⁴⁰ The angel explains that as soon as his troubled ward deviated from the strait and narrow path leading to salvation, he (the angel) could not approach him, and so the unhappy man remained a thrall to sin. Although the angel sees clapping, singing and laughing demons circling predatorily around his *protégé*, he maintains hope and prays vigorously to the Lord that the man will repent of his wicked ways.

Whereas in the first tale there is still the hope and possibility that the angel’s ward may come to sincere repentance of his sins, the second is meant to convey with fearful urgency that what is done in life cannot be undone in death. Makarios witnesses the passage of four souls. Two of them represent men on either extreme of a range of possible moral choices: a pious man who performed many good works in his life is welcomed at the gates of heaven by flights of angels and brought into the presence of the Lord, while a servant who died by his own hand is led away by demons, his angel looking sadly on. The primary importance of this set of extremes is that it delimits the field for a more problematic (and interesting) set of cases. In these stories of the weighing of souls, we might say that such unambiguous cases calibrate the scales for “pondering” more difficult ones. In a literary type whose very aim is clear moral direction, one

³⁹ The two tales attributed to Makarios are in PG 34.221A-229A (BHG 999n).

⁴⁰ Alexiou (2001:26) notes an important classical parallel to the Christian guardian angel in Plato’s *Phaedo*.

might be surprised to find that the most instructive examples are actually treatments of a rather casuistic nature; but, since most individuals will presumably consider themselves neither perfect nor irredeemable, it is on this middle ground that the writer can say to the listener, “thou art the man” and, by presenting another’s case, convey to the individual audience member the pitfalls of condemnation and possibilities for redemption and the urgency of making correct decisions during the listener’s own lifetime.

Let us examine then in greater detail the two more challenging cases that Makarios witnesses during his vision. It begins when the saint looks up to the heavens and sees “the angels of the Lord, some going up and others going down, bearing souls. But some dark and dismal beings were causing a commotion in the air, trying to snatch and break the souls of men. The angels resisted them strongly and forcefully, scourging them sorely and saving the souls” (224C).⁴¹ The narrative then zooms in on what he sees – two angels escorting a soul to the tollgate of fornication, adultery and homosexuality (*πορνεία, μοιχεία, ἀνδρομανία*), which (he editorializes) is the most dreadful of all the tollgates. At this point the frame established by Athanasios is being expanded by details of a more precise nature: we learn that each tollgate has its own set of vices and that there is a hierarchy among them. The angels and demons that oversee the passage of the souls also gain definition by means of direct speech and dramatic dialogue, the exchange taking on the characteristics of a courtroom procedure. The soul of the man in question, in a nice instance of continuity from the first tale, is refused passage at this tollgate because, *per* his accusers, he was in his lifetime often guilty of sexual vice. His advocate responds that the man made (so to speak) a clean breast of things before his death, and when

⁴¹ For a discussion of the tumult and disorder that demons habitually cause in the air, see Daniélou 1956:139-40.

the prosecution refuses to accept this, they summon his guardian angel, “the one given to him at baptism,” to give the decisive evidence (225B). In a delightful vignette of the relationship between a Christian and his guardian angel, the angel is called forth from the man’s tomb, where he is performing ministrations on behalf of the deceased. The guardian angel, as the man’s closest associate, is able to guarantee that the man confessed his sins to a priest and repented before his death, and so his soul is allowed to pass.

The second ambiguous case concerns a Christian eunuch whose catalogue of sins is so great and varied that the demons, in exasperation, declare their intention of throwing in the towel if the soul of such a man should pass the tollgate: “If salvation can come to *this* fellow, then just take the whole world and save all its sinners *gratis*, for we’re toiling in vain!” (228A). Though in his life the eunuch was abusive, guilty of all manner of sexual vice and a murderer to boot, the angels remain steadfast in their support of him. They tell the demons, “take heed, wretched ones: he has distanced himself from all the sins he committed in his youth and extirpated them. And through priests he gave alms and made offerings to the Lord God for the salvation of his soul” (228A). They continue with what is perhaps the most programmatic statement in the entire tale: “for whatever [sins] men confess to priests in lowliness of soul and whole-hearted lamentation, if they should cease from their wicked deeds, the Lord reckons these not” (228B). The real focus of the tale seems to be on the salvific value of repentance and good works, while the happenings at the tollgates feature more as a dramatic platform for this discussion.

Repentance also seems to be the main narrative purpose of a seventh-century tale of the vision of the magistrate's officer (ταξεώτης) ascribed to Anastasios of Sinai.⁴² In this story, a dissolute *taxeōtēs* living in Carthage during the time of Niketas the Patrician⁴³ is brought to repentance by the onset of an epidemic in the city. Shortly thereafter he withdraws to the suburbs with his own wife,⁴⁴ but then with a farmer's wife is once again led into temptation and dies soon thereafter without having confessed his sins to a priest. His wife arranges for his burial at a nearby monastery and the monks bury the man in the church at the third hour of that day. At the ninth hour, as the monks are singing, they hear a voice from the grave calling for mercy. They find the recently deceased man in the grave – physically hale but suffering great emotional distress. He asks only to be brought to Thalassios, a famous abbot of the region.⁴⁵ This illustrious servant of God is finally able to calm the terrified man, who has by now somewhat collected his wits, and hear his story. The narrative now switches over to a first-person account:

...as I lay dying, I saw swart-faced beings standing round me, whose aspect alone was far worse than any scourging, and on seeing them my soul was afflicted and shrank back. As those demons

⁴² Nau 1902a:83-87, tale 40 (BHG 1318). Ταξεώτης is translated by Nau (1902b:40) as *huissier* ("baillif") and by Kaegi (2003:104) as *soldier*. On the identity of Anastasios of Sinai and the composition of the tales ascribed to him, see Haldon 1992:109-16. The most recent editor of Anastasios's tales, André Binggeli, does not include this tale in his edition but relegates it to an appendix without reproducing the text. See Binggeli 2001:290-291.

⁴³ The *PLRE*'s "Nicetas 7" (Martindale 1992:940-43, *q.v.*): *Comes Excubitorum*, successful general, cousin german of the emperor Herakleios and "ritual brother" by ἀδελφοποίησις of John of the Almsgiver (Kaegi 2003:59f.; also pp. 53, 77f., 87, 91f.), whom he helped raise to the Alexandrian patriarchate (see Sophronios's [attrib., as at Martindale 1992:xxxii] *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii* 4 (ed. Delehayé), as well as that of Leontios of Naples (Gelzer chs. 12, 14, 15, 44b; Festugière and Rydén pp. 357, 359, 361, 402sq.). Niketas was apparently "miraculously cured by Theodore [of Sykeon] at Constantinople" (Martindale 1992:941). Nau (1902b:3) dates the composition of our tale here to 650 at the earliest.

⁴⁴ The verb here is *ιδιάζω*, which means to withdraw into a contemplative life, perhaps into some style of domestic asceticism (*cf.* Lampe *s.v.*).

⁴⁵ This renowned Thalassios, "who set all of Africa in good order" or "was an adornment to all of Africa" («...τὸν πᾶσαν τὴν Ἀφρικὴν κοσμήσαντα» 84), can perhaps be identified with Thalassios the Libyan (PMBZ no. 7253), a personal friend and correspondent of Maximos the Confessor and an authority on theology and Church matters in his own right. For more on his works and his inclusion in the *Philokalia*, see Palmer *et al.* 1981 (vol. 2):22sqq.

stood around me, I saw two brightly-clad young men approaching, and as soon as my soul saw them it jumped into their arms (p. 84 ed. Nau).

The soul of the *taxeōtēs* is taken along the tollgates and it is revealed that “each passion has its own customs officers (τελωνάρχαι) and tax-collectors (φορολόγοι) in the air” (85). Where in Makarios’s vision the exchange between the soul’s angelic escorts and the diabolical telonarchs resembles a courtroom where lawyers for the defense do their best to refute the prosecution, the *taxeōtēs* here is witness to a scene much more fiscal in nature: “I saw that those who escorted me carried all the good deeds I had ever done as if in a purse and, taking them out, weighed them against my wicked deeds, all of which were produced [at] the tollgates of the air” (*ibid.*). The scales seem calibrated in such a way that one good deed is equivalent to one wicked deed.⁴⁶

At each tollgate the heavenly escorts take good deeds from the purse to balance the weight of the man’s wicked deeds, until they reach the last tollgate, which “stood near to the gate of heaven” (*ibid.*) and is the tollgate of fornication. To the anxious soul’s great dismay, the purse has been emptied of all its good deeds, but the diabolical toll-collectors still have a score to settle concerning the man’s adultery. Since this is the pivotal moment in the tale, the proceedings are described in great detail: the soul must undergo the disturbing experience of a forced total recall, where all his bodily sins from the age of twelve are set before him with extreme accuracy and abundant volume. His angelic defense attempts to stay the flood of incriminations by arguing that God forgave all those sins when the *taxeōtēs* relinquished the city, but the demons respond that the man once again fell into fornication and died in his sins. The angels, having no good deeds left to compensate for this final sin, are forced to yield the

⁴⁶ Cf. Matt. 5:26, “Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.” The tenth-century *life* of Basil the Younger includes a similar scene, where a *protégée* of the saint is able to pass the tollgates after being given gold (accrued from his good deeds) from the purse of her spiritual adviser Basil. See Conostas 2001:109; Every 1979:145 and Sullivan 2014:242sq.

soul to the prosecution. Here the part of the tollgate experience not explained in the *vita* of Antony, and which receives only cursory attention in Makarios's second vision – that is, what happens to the souls who are held back – is explored in rich and terrifying detail.

The *taxeōtēs*, having stood at the threshold of Paradise, is shaken with great emotion as he describes what it is like to see “the Gate of Heaven,” only to be dragged down to spirit prison for unrepented-of sins. The experience of having one's misdeeds represented with such piercing clarity and harrowing abundance seems to have the purpose of drawing the soul to absolute self-knowledge, a step in the process of true repentance that can in no wise be omitted. The soul's fall from grace is accompanied by a literal plummeting as the demons pull it down to the chasms of the earth, abusing it all the while. Anastasios's description of spirit prison is as a dank, dark, cold place of never-ending wailing and gnashing of teeth, but it seems to be the spiritual and physical darkness and the distance from God which causes the souls such agony. The *taxeōtēs'* soul is abandoned by the demons in these gloomy parts for a period of six hours. Interestingly, the passage of time beyond the grave, at least in this tale, seems to be synchronous with that of the world of the living. He then sees the same two angels that escorted him along the airways and pleads with them until they finally allow him to return to his body, on condition that his repentance is sincere. The account of the re-entry of the *taxeōtēs'* soul into his body reveals some fascinating details:

I saw my own nature (*φύσις*) as a gleaming, crystal-like pearl, and also the form of my dead body, like dirt and clay, malodorous and dark. And I was vexed and unwilling to go back into my body, but they said to me, “it is impossible for you to repent unless it be in the body wherewith you sinned.” And again I besought them not [to make me] return to it, but then they said “be assured that either you return to your body so that others may profit from what you have seen and experienced, or we will bring you back thither whence we took you” (86sq.).

The purpose then of the soul's return to the world of the living is twofold: first, the *taxeōtēs* must repent for his sins in the flesh; and second, he is to serve as a terrible example and an educator for the living.⁴⁷ His reluctance and disgust at having to re-enter the odious fictile vessel that is his body is also remarkable, because when he returns he begins living the life that puts ascetic (and particularly monastic) men and women apart from the larger community of believers, in imitation of those blessed and incorporeal beings.⁴⁸ He begins to live as though he had no body, and refuses food and rest. He also becomes a witness of God's power and mercy by traveling from church to church to share (like the ancient mariner) his terrifying experiences with anyone who will hear them (87). The manner of the *taxeōtēs'* (real) death is perhaps the most descriptive of his new status: "having done this [traveling and preaching repentance] for forty days, the man went to the Lord [now] pure, having had foreknowledge of his death three days prior [to it]" (*ibid.*). Foreknowledge of death is a characteristic spiritual gift of holy men, and so the *taxeōtēs* leaves the world with the spiritual talents of an ascetic.⁴⁹

* * *

What the homilist Origen sowed in his sermon on Luke, and which the tales tradition nourished through the following centuries, was reaped by another homilist in the seventh century, the

⁴⁷ Compare on the one hand the obligatory conditions laid upon the *taxeōtēs* by the angel (that he publish abroad his own sinful past and his afterlife adventure) with Antony's own decision to share the story of his aerial journey because "his conscience was clear" (66.8).

⁴⁸ Constan (2001:106) makes an important observation about the appeal of this sort of angelic imagery might hold for both authors and audiences of the tales: "these narratives occur primarily in monastic writers and in the *lives* of monastic saints, who understood themselves to be 'living like angels' and thus locked in spiritual combat with demons."

⁴⁹ Cf. *Life of Antony* 91, where the famous saint predicts his own death. Also Pratsch 2005:320-25 for a discussion of this *topos*.

author of the pseudo-Cyrillic *On the Soul's Exit and on the Second Coming*.⁵⁰ This sermon is important as a clear example of the influence of the tales tradition and its themes on contemporary religious literature. In 1896 Carl de Boor neatly demonstrated the cento-like nature of the homily by showing that certain parts of the sermon were drawn word for word from a version of the *taxeōtēs'* vision resembling the one published by Combefis in the 17th century, a short discourse on the tollgates by a certain Theophilos preserved in, among other texts, the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.⁵¹ In his baroque rhetorical style, pseudo-Cyril meshed these fragments with his own innovations to describe the nature and workings of an infernal organization whose tollgates are operated by a host of diabolical bureaucrats (1073B). Salient is that these first five tollgates, discussed individually, deal collectively with sins that the soul has committed in the body it has just left below and correspond to the five senses: those of the eye, the nose, the hand, the ear and the mouth – though in the last of these, taste is replaced by the abuse of speech, specifically slander (1073B-1076B). The body is represented as the main instrument for the perpetration of sin and, as we saw in the vision of the *taxeōtēs* earlier, correspondingly emphasized as the *locus* for repentance of sins of the flesh, which the disembodied soul alone cannot atone for. The remaining tollgates are listed in groups and deal with other cardinal sins such as pride, adultery, murder and sorcery (1076A).

⁵⁰ *Περὶ ἐξόδου ψυχῆς καὶ περὶ τῆς Δευτέρας Παρουσίας* (PG 77.1072B-1089B). For a discussion of the dating of this text, see De Boor 1896:306-10 and Bartelink 1994:13. De Boor also discusses the question of which text came first, the homily or the tale, concluding that in all likelihood pseudo-Cyril had the tale at his disposal when composing his sermon. See De Boor 1896:309.

⁵¹ De Boor 1896:307-10. For Combefis' text, see Combefis 1672:324-26. Combefis marks the author of the text as *incertus*. When Nau published his edition of the vision of the *taxeōtēs* in 1902, he was presumably aware of Combefis' edition and De Boor's study, but did not identify Combefis' *incertus* with his own attribution of Anastasios. It seems very likely, however, that these two texts are either two forms of the same work or closely derived from a common source. We are unfortunately somewhat limited in our comparisons by the absence in Combefis' text of a critical apparatus. For the Theophilos text, see PG 65.200B-202A and Ward 1984:81-82.

Pseudo-Cyril emphasizes that no sin is left unpunished, but “each passion of the soul and each sin has its particular tax-collectors and toll-leviers” (*ibid.*). The proceedings at each tollgate are also described in greater detail than in the previous texts we have examined: the officials examine the soul, which wears the shackles fashioned from its own sins (1076B), while the heavenly powers stand by to act as advocates reporting all good deeds, words and thoughts. If the soul is found worthy of passage, it is free to go up to heaven; otherwise it is condemned to the netherworld. Interestingly, there is no mention of how the judgment is made, nor is there the weighing or exchange of spiritual currency we find in several of the tales. Pseudo-Cyril does evoke the curious image of the storehouse of sins: each sin and its particular gate will not be related at present, but “let [the sins] be stored up for another time” (1076A). This recording and storing up of sins committed alludes to the Final Judgment after the resurrection of the body, which is prefigured in the temporary sentences given out at the tollgates of the air.⁵² The writer contrasts the two judgments at various points in the text: whereas at the minor judgment of the tollgates, the terrified soul has the assistance of spiritual guides who bring the infernal customs officials evidence to offset the soul’s spiritual ballast, the Final Judgment is carried out in the presence of angels who are “merciless” and the Judge has no need of “prosecutors, witnesses, evidence or refutations” (1072C). The comprehensive descriptions of the terrors that the soul experiences while passing through the gates – the fearsome aspect of demonic toll-collectors and the awful torments awaiting the souls of the sinners in spirit prison – give force to the author’s dramatic plea that his audience turn away from the sinful behaviors that lead to this frightening place and that they repent in the flesh while they still can.

⁵² Every (1979:148) terms them “the particular and the universal judgment”.

The last text we will examine is roughly contemporary with Anastasios of Sinai's tale and comes from Leontios of Neapolis's well-known seventh-century *Life of John the Almsgiver, Patriarch of Alexandria*.⁵³ This *vita* is unusual because of the composite and episodic nature of the text. Interspersed with the usual biographical and narrative *topoi* concerning the saintly cleric is a large number of beneficial tales. These tales are mostly narrated by the Patriarch himself but some are attributed to his associates Sophronios of Jerusalem and John Moschos or are cited as coming from another credible source.⁵⁴

The motif of the particular judgment immediately following death occurs twice in the *vita*. The first instance takes place during the Patriarch's meditations on death, where he relates what the famous stylite Symeon learned through revelation: that "when the soul leaves the body, as it rises up from the earth, it is met by troops of demons, each in his own regiment" (edd. Festugière and Rydén, p. 369). The soul is then assessed by consecutive demonic regiments, which each have jurisdiction over a particular sin, and so it makes its way to heaven. Although the procedure seems largely identical to the ones outlined by Anastasios and pseudo-Cyril, John makes no mention here of *τελωνεῖα*. This comes later in the text when the Patriarch relates a story that he heard from one of his agents⁵⁵ about a taxman (*τελώνης*) who gets a taste of his own medicine.⁵⁶ The story is actually the first part of a narrative triptych where the toll-

⁵³ BHG 886.

⁵⁴ The credibility and trustworthiness of the source of the tale is also emphasized at the end of the story of the *taxeōtēs*. Anastasios concludes the tale by saying, "It was the trustworthy fathers, who set forth and saw these things (themselves), who recounted them to us for our benefit" (86). For editions and for Sophronios see n. 22 above; for more on this subject, Rapp 1998:431-48.

⁵⁵ *Παραμονήτης*, a rather unusual word.

⁵⁶ Like the tale of the *taxeōtēs*, this story is also set "in Africa" (368).

collector undergoes a dramatic personal transformation from a proud and cold-hearted publican to a humble servant of God, so pious and charitable that he sells himself into slavery for another's good – in fact, for his own erstwhile slave. The toll-collector's first adventure is one of the most entertaining stories in the whole work: a group of beggars have gathered to warm themselves in the winter sun, when they begin discussing the alms given by the various houses of the well-to-do. They praise many charitable people but all agree that a certain tax-collector named Peter is the most pitiless and tight-fisted man they know. One beggar challenges his companions to a wager, saying that he will receive alms from this Peter before the day is over. Later that day, when Peter comes out briefly to collect a delivery of bread for his meal, he is so enraged at the waiting beggar's request for alms that he throws at the poor man the first thing he can find, which happens to be a loaf of bread (*σιλιγιον*). The beggar returns triumphantly to his friends, trophy in hand. Two days later the tax-collector "falls ill to the point of death" (368) and sees a vision in his sleep where two parties, one dressed in white and the other in black, are standing around a scale (*πλάστιγγ*) measuring out his good and bad deeds.⁵⁷ His angelic counsel despairs because they have no good deeds to counter-balance the surfeit of wicked ones:

"Have we nothing at all?" Then one of them said, "Indeed we have nothing except this one loaf of bread which he gave to Christ two days ago, and unwillingly at that." As they threw the loaf onto the scale, the balance stood even. The men dressed in white who had appeared to him said, "Come on and add to that loaf of bread, or these swarthy figures shall take you indeed" (368sq.).⁵⁸

⁵⁷ We should point out that this scene is perhaps strictly speaking a *psychomachia*, where angels and demons fight over the soul of a person who is about to die, but this is essentially a more localized variant of the judgment at the tollgates of the air: the "infernal revenue service" (Constas 2001:107) also makes house calls.

⁵⁸ It is symbolically appropriate that the sinner-publican's one good deed is not represented figuratively by the "currency" of his famously oppressive trade (say, in the shape of a golden coin) but "in kind" and in the form of life-giving bread. An interesting counterpoint to Peter's tale in which a single unwilling act of charity covers a multitude of sins occurs in the well-known seventh-century tale of Philentolos, son of Olympios, originally edited and discussed by Halkin (1945:56-64).

The story of Peter the tax-collector's nighttime vision offers a number of interesting variations on the tollgate motif as we have encountered it so far: in the *Life of Antony* and the visions of Makarios, the holy man is granted the privilege of a vision, or greater light and knowledge based on his own ascetic merit, much as the stylite Symeon learns of the demonic regiments in the air through revelation. The saint is then able to instruct his followers in what he has seen: Anastasios's *taxeōtēs* returns from his harrowing subterranean adventure with express instructions from his heavenly escort that he be of profit to others by telling his tale; when he has fulfilled this task as witness, he is allowed to pass peacefully away. The angels that defend Peter do not give such explicit proselytizing instructions but rather confine their exhortations to his improvement alone: it is the beginning of his career as a holy man. He does not teach by precept (that is, by recounting his visions) but by the example of his extreme charity, which comes as a result of his experience and causes others to wonder at his conversion. Self-discovery and self-knowledge are closely connected with the education of others, a lesson to one for the salvation of many.

* * *

Through the six texts discussed in this chapter it can be seen that the old, probably pre-Christian motif of the tollgates was defined, refined, developed and embellished, in a distinctly Egyptian milieu, so as powerfully to supplement the limited information provided by Christian Scripture about what one could expect when passing from this life into the next and how one might best prepare oneself for the unknown and terrifying journey into "the undiscover'd country, from whose bourne [only the rarest of travelers] returns[.]" The popularity of the motif comes at least partly from the dramatic urgency wherewith it calls the sinner to repentance,

letting the hearer see his own potential end through stark images of judgment and evaluation, emphasizing that it is in his hands whether he can expect “the joy of [the L]ord” and the bliss that awaits the “good and faithful servant” or the “outer darkness [of]...weeping and gnashing of teeth” that threaten the sinful and dissolute.⁵⁹ It warns; in its warning it exhorts; and in its exhortation it teaches that man must live like the angels in this life, if he would dwell with them in the next.

⁵⁹ Luke 19.21-22, 29.

Chapter 2

A Ladder Over the Wall, or, Klimakos and A Prison of One's Own Making

*[B]ut to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot,
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clot, and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbèd ice;
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world! Or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling, — 'tis too horrible.
The weariest and most loathèd worldly life
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death.*

—Claudio to his sister Isabella, *Measure for Measure* 3.1

*I the LORD have called thee in righteousness [...] for a light of the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes,
to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.
Ἐγὼ Κύριος ὁ Θεὸς ἐκάλεσά σε ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ [...] εἰς φῶς ἐθνῶν, ἀνοῖξαι ὀφθαλμοὺς τυφλῶν,
ἐξαγαγεῖν ἐκ δεσμῶν δεδεμένους, καὶ ἐξ οἴκου φυλακῆς καθημένους ἐν σκότει.*

—Isaiah 42.6-7

*Look upon mine affliction and my pain; and forgive all my sins.
Ἴδέ τὴν ταπεινώσιν μου καὶ τὸν κόπον μου, καὶ ἄφες πάσας τὰς ἁμαρτίας μου!*

—Psalm 24:18 (Masor. 25:18)

Introduction

In his article on presentation and style in John Klimakos's *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, John Duffy singles out a passage on the ladder's fifth step (*On Penitence*) for its narrative and dramatic intensity.⁶⁰ The episode is part of a larger narrative arc describing Klimakos's travels in and

⁶⁰ Duffy 1999:14.

around Alexandria and his interactions with several local monastic communities and their prominent members.⁶¹ In the passage, which forms the centerpiece of the fifth chapter as well as its narrative platform for spiritual instruction, Klimakos describes his visit to a place known as “the Prison” (ἡ Φυλακῆ). Located a mile away from the main monastery, this satellite community operates as an ascetic penal colony where brethren in urgent need of spiritual remediation spend their time in deep mourning, self-mortification and penitence.⁶² By the abbot’s leave, Klimakos spends a month observing the inmates’ way of life and describes their daily rituals of voluntary self-torment. “It is certainly the strangest part of the work,” Duffy notes, “and easily the most moving.”⁶³ Klimakos’s description of the inmates’ penitential regimen is intense and shocking for his audience; difficult to accept and perhaps even more difficult to understand.⁶⁴

Duffy identifies it as “a veritable visit to the underworld, with a catalogue, 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.”⁶⁵ Building on

⁶¹ See PG 88.786D-776B (Luibheid 93-105) for the Alexandrian portion of the story.

⁶² This arrangement of having monastic settlements located near a central monastery would have been familiar to Klimakos from his own experiences at Sinai. At the time of John’s tenure as hegumen, Sinai was a monastic colony rather than a monastery. At its heart – located near the site of the Burning Bush – was a church built by Justinian, which is still extant today. Its satellite establishments, however, were numerous and often situated at a very great distance. The anachoretic retreat at the desert of Sidid was around seventy miles away from the central site (Flusin 2005:197). See Flusin 2005:193-197, 205 for an overview of Sinai at the time of Klimakos and the placement of its subsidiary establishments.

⁶³ *Loc. Cit.*

⁶⁴ See Luibheid 1982:xv on on the distaste such extreme horrors provoke. But for the idea that a monk should be like a prisoner, cf. this saying from the *Systematic Collection of the Apophthegmata Patrum*: «Ἀδελφός ἠρώτησε τὸν ἀββᾶ Ἀμμωνᾶν λέγων· Εἰπέ μοι ῥῆμα. Λέγει ὁ γέρων· Ὑπαγε, ποιήσον τὸν λογισμόν σου ὡςπερ οἱ κακοῦργοι ποιοῦσιν οἱ ὄντες ἐν τῇ φυλακῇ. Ἐκεῖνοι γὰρ ἐρωτῶσιν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ποῦ ἐστιν ὁ ἡγεμὼν καὶ πότε ἐρχεται, καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς προσδοκίας κλαίουσιν. Οὕτως καὶ ὁ μοναχὸς ὀφείλει διαπαντὸς προσέχειν καὶ ἐλέγχειν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λέγων· Οὐαί μοι, πῶς ἔχω παραστῆναι τῷ βήματι τοῦ Χριστοῦ, καὶ πῶς ἔχω αὐτῷ ἀπολογήσασθαι; Ἐὰν οὕτως μελετήσης διαπαντὸς δύνασαι σωθῆναι» (Sys. Ap. III.4, p. 150 ed. Guy).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Duffy's observations, we here explore Klimakos's dramatic and emotionally arresting descriptions of the bodily suffering and mental anguish of these monastic penitents as a reinterpretation of a familiar *topos* from the Byzantine tradition of soul-benefitting tales: the tour of hell. As we have seen previously, the journey to the underworld allows the sinner to temporarily enter that "undiscover'd country from whose bourne no traveler returns," so that the horror of this brief sojourn may stir him to sincere repentance and so prevent a permanent stay after life's end. The penitent monks at the Prison, however, have not been privileged with that first-hand knowledge obtained in divinely granted visionary experience (in the usual religious sense of "vision") and so, in their already-existent fear of eternal punishment, feel impelled to seek powerful substitutes of their own devising: not the unlooked-for revelation to the mind's eye of a divine comedy, but a man-made morality play for the quotidian, physical senses of hearing and sight. (The inmates at the Prison, in other words, are not only open to being convinced of the need for purificatory repentance, but are keenly dedicated to convincing themselves. They have "the motive and the cue for passion" and their performance can "drown the stage with tears / and cleave the general ear with horrid speech, / make mad the guilty and appal the free, / confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed / the very faculties of eyes and ears."⁶⁶) The Prison is a reflection not of a heavenly paradise, but of "the other place,"⁶⁷ of which a limited, carnal experience might allow paradise to be regained. The inclusion of this scenario in the larger work, as of a play within a play, has the effect of heightening the reality and vividness (and hence the urgency) of the framing action, a narrative throughout which Klimakos

⁶⁶ *Hamlet* 2.2.

⁶⁷ *Hamlet* 4.3.

weaves terminology and images strikingly evocative of already-established visionary literature – a tradition of accounts of actual heavenly or hellish visions of a kind which most of Klimakos’s audience will not have been personally granted, but which they are well familiar with as listeners and which will resonate powerfully with them, prompting them to strong action – to repentance.

We have called their production a “scenario” and it is important to point out that the mimesis is conscious and intentional, the holy precedents for descending into prison and into the lowest of lows including figures no less than Joseph, Hoshea, Hanani the Seer, Jeremiah, Daniel, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul (the self-styled *δέσμιος* of Christ⁶⁸) and John on Patmos, besides Samson, the Hebrew youths, arguably Jonah, various kings⁶⁹ and even Jesus himself⁷⁰ and many that he saves.⁷¹ Not least among these is the prophet-king David, whose songs give the monks their vocabulary of expression and who (for his sin of murder) suffered a prison of the mind and besought Jehovah, “Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name: the righteous shall compass me about; for thou shalt deal bountifully with me!”⁷² That this *via*

⁶⁸ Eph. 3:1, 4:1, 2Tit. 1:8, Phil. 1:1, 1:9.

⁶⁹ Actual kings, some of whom emerged or (like Croesus at Cyrus’s court) found a place of honor (*ex. gr.* Jer. 52:33, «Καὶ ἠλλάξεν [Ἰωακὶμ βασιλεὺς Ἰουδα] τὴν στολὴν τῆς φυλακῆς αὐτοῦ καὶ ἦσθιεν ἄρτον διαπαντὸς κατὰ πρόσωπον [Οὐλαιμαραδὰχ βασιλέως Βαβυλωνος] πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἃς ἔζησεν»), or the Preacher’s unnamed rags-to-reigning wise youth (Eccl. 4:13-14, «Ἀγαθὸς παῖς πένης καὶ σοφὸς ὑπὲρ βασιλεία πρεσβύτερον καὶ ἄφρονα, ὃς οὐκ ἔγνω τοῦ προσέχειν ἔτι, ὅτι ἐξ οἴκου τῶν δεσμιῶν ἐξελεύσεται τοῦ βασιλεῦσαι, ὅτι καὶ γε ἐν βασιλείᾳ αὐτοῦ ἐγεννήθη πένης»).

⁷⁰ Both literally during the trial and through “the least of these” in Matt. 25:33-45.

⁷¹ «Ὅτι καὶ Χριστὸς ἅπαξ περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἔπαθεν δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων ἵνα ἡμᾶς προσαγάγη τῷ Θεῷ θανατωθεὶς μὲν σαρκὶ ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ τῷ πνεύματι, ἐν ᾧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν» (1Peter 3:18sq.).

⁷² Ps. 141:8 (Masor. 142:7) «Ἐξάγαγε ἐκ φυλακῆς τὴν ψυχὴν μου, τοῦ ἐξομολογήσασθαι τῷ ὀνόματί σου, Κύριε, ἐμέ. Ὑπομενοῦσιν δίκαιοι ἕως οὗ ἀνταποδοῦς μοι.»

dolorosa of the Lord and his saints – a place to pay one’s all⁷³ – is one for sinners to walk down in imitation is made clear by the brother of the Lord:

Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter. Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you. [...] Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for *an example of suffering affliction*, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.⁷⁴

The pathos of the penitent is genuine, but the script has already been written.

We might add here that, while for our present purposes the primary meaning of the word *φυλακή* is “prison” or “jail,” it comes at the same time with three further scriptural resonances, all of which are appropriate and complementary: it can be a sacred “charge” or commission,⁷⁵ a “watch” or time of wakefulness and prayer,⁷⁶ and a ward or protection (phylactery).⁷⁷ And for our actors here, it can be the *prélude* to the crown of life.⁷⁸

⁷³ «Ἀμήν λέγω σοι οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃς ἐκεῖθεν [ἐκ τῆς φυλακῆς] ἕως ἂν ἀποδώσῃ τὸν ἔσχατον κοδραντήν» (Matt. 5:26).

⁷⁴ James 5:10-11 (my emphasis). «Ἐτρυνήσατε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐσπαταλήσατε. Ἐθρέψατε τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν ὡς ἐν ἡμέρᾳ σφαγῆς. Κατεδικάσατε, ἐφονεύσατε τὸν δίκαιον· οὐκ ἀντιτάσσεται ὑμῖν. [...] Ὑπόδειγμα λάβετε τῆς κακοπαθείας, ἀδελφοί μου, καὶ τῆς μακροθυμίας τοὺς προφήτας, οἱ ἐλάλησαν τῷ ὀνόματι Κυρίου. Ἴδού, μακαρίζομεν [he might as well have said *ὀλβίζομεν!*] τοὺς ὑπομένοντας. Τὴν ὑπομονὴν Ἰώβ ἠκούσατε καὶ τὸ τέλος Κυρίου εἶδετε, ὅτι πολὺσπλαγχνὸς ἐστὶν ὁ Κύριος καὶ οἰκτίρων.» (“[B]lest are those / whose blood and judgment are so well commedd’ d, / that they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger / to sound what stop she please.”)

⁷⁵ «Καὶ φυλάσσονται οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ τὴν φυλακὴν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ οὐ μὴ ἐξάρωσιν» (Num. 9:19). «Καὶ ἐφύλαξαν φυλακὰς θεοῦ αὐτῶν καὶ φυλακὰς τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ» (Neh. 12:44). «...φυλάσσοντες τὰς φυλακὰς τῶν ἁγίων [...] καὶ ἡ φυλακὴ αὐτῶν ἡ κιβωτὸς καὶ ἡ τράπεζα καὶ ἡ λυχνία καὶ τὰ θυσιαστήρια καὶ τὰ σκεύη τοῦ ἁγίου, ὅσα λειτουργοῦσιν ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ τὸ κατακάλυμμα καὶ πάντα τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν» (Num. 3:28-31). Cf. Lev. 24:12; Num. 1:53, 3:7-8, 8:26, 9:23, 18:3-5, 31:30, (Deut. 33:5, Prov. 4:5), Ezek. 48:11, etc.

⁷⁶ «Ἦλπισεν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἐπὶ τὸν Κύριον ἀπὸ φυλακῆς πρωΐας μέχρι νυκτός· ἀπὸ φυλακῆς πρωΐας ἐλπίσάτω Ἰσραὴλ ἐπὶ τὸν Κύριον» (Ps. 129:6 (Masor. 130:6) *et alibi simm.*). «Μακάριοι οἱ δούλοι ἐκεῖνοι οὓς ἐλθὼν ὁ Κύριος εὐρήσει γρηγοροῦντας [...] καὶ ἂν ἔλθῃ ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ φυλακῇ καὶ ἐν τῇ τρίτῃ φυλακῇ ἔλθῃ καὶ εὖρη οὕτως, μακάριοί εἰσιν οἱ δούλοι ἐκεῖνοι» (Luke 12:37-38; cf. Mark 13:33-37, 14:32-41 («τὸ μὲν πνεῦμα πρόθυμον, ἡ δὲ σὰρξ ἀσθενής» etc.)).

⁷⁷ «Ἐλεημοσύνη καὶ ἀλήθεια φυλακὴ βασιλεῖ καὶ περικυκλώσουσιν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ τὸν θρόνον αὐτοῦ» (Prov. 20:28). «Ὅτι Κύριος ἀγαπᾷ κρίσιν καὶ οὐκ ἐγκαταλείπει τοὺς ὀσίους αὐτοῦ – εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα φυλαχθήσονται· ἄνομοι δὲ ἐκδιωχθήσονται καὶ σπέρμα ἀσεβῶν ἐξολεθρευθήσεται» (Ps. 36:38 (Masor. 37:28)).

⁷⁸ Rev. 2:-10, «Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐκκλησίας Σμυρναίων γράψον, “Τάδε λέγει ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ὃς ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἐζήσεν, Ὅϊδά σου τὰ ἔργα καὶ τὴν θλιψίν...μηδὲν φοβοῦ ἃ μέλλεις πάσχειν. Ἴδού, μέλλει βάλειν

Setting the Scene: Death, Mourning and Repentance

In order to uncover some of the spiritual principles that underpin Klimakos's theology in general, and in particular its application in the Prison passage, it is important to understand how he conceives of monastic repentance in terms of mourning and death. Throughout the *Ladder*, Klimakos emphasizes that the monastic state is one characterized by constant mourning: "Asleep or awake, the monk is a soul pained by the constant remembrance of death."⁷⁹ The monk thus must always strive to be in mourning and it is through prolonged and continuous grieving that he is able to find the beginnings of his salvation: "The man turning away from the world in order to shake off the burden of his sins should imitate those who sit by the tombs outside the city."⁸⁰ Hannah Hunt describes the mechanisms of this process as follows:

The connection between remembrance of death and mourning is not simply one of cause and effect. Rather, the mourner will naturally be drawn by the former into the condition of grief and mourning which in turn will heighten the mourner's awareness of the inescapability of their final end, and promote repentance.⁸¹

The connection between death, mourning and repentance in the monastic life is expressed both symbolically and physically. Klimakos exhorts monks to "let the monastery be for you a tomb before the tomb."⁸² There are several accounts of anchorites observing this injunction very

ἐξ ὑμῶν ὁ διάβολος εἰς φυλακὴν, ἵνα πειρασθῆτε καὶ ἔξετε θλίψιν ἡμερῶν δέκα. Γίνου πιστὸς ἄχρι θανάτου καὶ δώσω σοι τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς. ... Ὁ νικῶν οὐ μὴ ἀδικηθῆ ἕκ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ δευτέρου.»

⁷⁹ PG 88.633C (Luibheid 74). «Μοναχός ἐστιν κατώδυνος ψυχῆ ἐν διηνεκεῖ μνήμη θανάτου ἀδολεσχοῦσα, καὶ ὑπνώτουσα, καὶ γρηγοροῦσα.»

⁸⁰ PG 88.633D (Luibheid 74). «Μιμείσθω ὁ τὸ ἑαυτοῦ φορτίον τῶν ἀμαρτημάτων σκορπίσαι τοῦ κόσμου ἐξεληλυθώς, τοὺς πρὸ τῶν τάφων καθημένους ἔξω τῆς πόλεως.» Richard Valantasis (1995:801) puts this dynamic in a theoretical framework: "the ascetic consequently appears always to be in transit, in process, in motion towards a new subjectivity. The early Christian monks, for example, experienced themselves as neither fully human nor fully divine, as embodied angels, as disembodied humans, as living corpses, who lived in a society yet did not, who withdrew from society in order to create another so that at once they existed in a non-existence."

⁸¹ Hunt 2004:48.

⁸² PG 88.716B (Luibheid 74-5). «Μνήμά σοι πρὸ μνήματος ὁ τόπος ἔστω.»

literally by making the tomb their monastery in order to give expression to compunction and sorrow in a suitably symbolic setting.⁸³ The imagery of death has long played an important role in monastic writing. Drawing on Paul's teachings in Romans 6, monastic authors used the concept of physical death — separation of body and soul at life's end — to express the permanent break with the ways and habits of a previously sinful life that the assumption of the monastic habit (and more generally the living of a new, truly Christian life) represented. Having renounced the world and its wickedness, monks strive to make themselves "dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord."⁸⁴ But Klimakos carries the analogy even further in his chapter on obedience, describing the monk as a "blessed living corpse."⁸⁵ The reasoning behind this extraordinary statement is not simply that a monk is someone who mortifies both his flesh and his passions but also, Klimakos asserts, that the monk ought to become corpse-like in his obedience and humility. He explains: "Obedience is the burial place of the will and the resurrection of lowliness. A corpse does not contradict or debate the good or whatever seems bad, and the spiritual father who has devoutly put the disciple's soul to death will answer for everything."⁸⁶ It is worth keeping the extremity of this shocking but very effective imagery in mind as we try to understand the Prison episode and the message it is trying to convey to the reader.

⁸³ See Hunt 2004:48.

⁸⁴ Rom. 6:11 («νεκρούς μὲν εἶναι τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, ζῶντας δὲ τῷ θεῷ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τῷ Κυρίῳ ἡμῶν»).

⁸⁵ PG 88.680B (Luibheid 92). «Ὁ ζῶν νεκρός, οὗτος ὁ μακαρίτης.»

⁸⁶ PG 88.680A (Luibheid 92). «Ὑπακοή ἐστὶ μνήμα θελήσεως, καὶ ἔγερσις ταπεινώσεως· οὐκ ἀντερεῖ, ἢ διακρίνει νεκρός ἐν ἀγαθοῖς, ἢ τὸ δοκεῖν πονηροῖς. Ὁ γὰρ θανατώσας αὐτοῦ εὐσεβῶς τὴν ψυχὴν, ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀπολογήσεται.»

The Narrator as “Spiritual Communicator”

The fifth chapter of the *Ladder* is in many ways a departure from Klimakos’s usual modes of spiritual instruction. Duffy notes that generally Klimakos’s style resists rigid categorization; he deftly weaves together elements from different literary registers.⁸⁷ His spiritual teaching is sometimes presented with aphoristic brevity and clarity, while at other times shrouded in Evagrian elusiveness and complexity. This variety makes the work unpredictable and keeps the reader’s interest piqued. Nevertheless, leaving the complicated and much-debated question of Klimakos’s stylistic antecedents and the degree of their influence aside for the moment, it is possible to identify, as Duffy has done, some general patterns of composition in many of the “steps” of the *Ladder*. He identifies the following four recurring elements: “(1) a brief introductory statement; (2) concise definitions of a virtue or a vice; (3) a general discussion of the theme of the step combining exegesis, admonition, illustrative stories, and personal observation; and (4) a short formulaic closing statement.”⁸⁸ If we apply this framework to the fifth chapter of the *Ladder*, we find (depending on which version of the text we use) initial adherence to the structure set out above: the chapter begins with a brief statement introducing the subsequent material while connecting to the preceding chapter.⁸⁹ Subsequently, there is a succession of short sentences each beginning with the word *μετάνοια* and followed by a brief, figurative interpretation of what this virtue should mean for a monk. The repetitive “chain of definitions” immediately sets the tone of the discussion and establishes a rhythmical cadence

⁸⁷ Duffy 1999:8.

⁸⁸ Duffy 1998:8.

⁸⁹ “Once John outran Peter, and now obedience is placed before repentance. For the one who arrived first represents obedience, the other repentance” (Luibheid 121).

that seize the audience's attention.⁹⁰ Duffy has convincingly traced the influence of liturgical texts – particularly the kontakion – on Klimakos's style.⁹¹ In this chapter on repentance, the rhythmical repetitions may also call to mind the important monastic office of the psalmody.

After the chain of definitions, Klimakos proceeds to the narrative portion of the chapter, which occupies a much larger portion and more central place than comparable sections in any of the other steps. He explicitly mentions the prominence that he accords to his tale: "Let us give first place to the story of dishonored workers – who still earned respect."⁹² Another indication of the importance and centrality of the narrative within the chapter and within the work as a whole is the fact that he gives his readers a brief preview of the story in the previous chapter on obedience. In the fourth chapter there is a brief account of a monk who recovered the appropriate spirit of obedience and penitence following an imprudent lapse into gossip and slander.⁹³ His superior, seeing that the brother's remorse is genuine, sends him to another monastery. Taking this as an opportunity to reveal more about this mysterious monastery "for those who are in mourning for their failures," Klimakos discloses the following:

A mile away from the great monastery was a place called the Prison, where neither smoke, nor wine, nor oil for food, nor anything else was ever seen, only bread and chopped vegetables. Here

⁹⁰ Duffy 1998:12.

⁹¹ See Duffy 1999:8-13. For another "take" on chain of definitions model, see pseudo-Cyril of Alexandria's *De Exitu Animi* (PG 77.1072A-B). At the beginning of this homily, the homilist compiles a long list of things he fears, beginning each phrase with *φοβοῦμαι* followed by a direct object and a brief explanation of the object. The *ὅτι* clause doesn't define the preceding object but indicates why the homilist (and the reader in turn) ought to be afraid of it.

⁹² PG 88.764C (Luibheid 121). «Προτάξωμεν καὶ προτιμήσωμεν τετιμημένων ἀτίμων ἐργατῶν διήγησιν.»

⁹³ An appropriate verse would be Psalm 140:3 (Masor. 141:3), "Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips." «Θοῦ, Κύριε, φελάκην τῷ στόματί μου καὶ θύραν περιοχῆς περὶ τὰ χεῖλη μου» (emphasis mine).

were shut up without permission to go out those who after entering the monastic life had fallen into sin.⁹⁴

We will return momentarily to Klimakos's remark that the brethren were "shut up without permission to go," but the austerity of the asceticism practiced at the Prison becomes clear even before we learn of the inmates' individual mortificatory regimens. Not only do the monks' dietary restrictions include the more common monastic abstinences, as from wine and oil, but the absence of smoke indicates that perhaps, like Evagrius (reportedly), the monks practice a degree of homophagy and xerophagy.⁹⁵ Klimakos also informs us about their living situation: they form a loosely-knit community but remain essentially isolated and unceasing prayer is required of them at all times. It is not entirely clear how far this community was coenobitic in their daily rhythms, but the nature of their fellowship as portrayed in the fifth chapter suggests that it may have resembled a lavra, in which brethren are alone during the week but come together to celebrate the offices on the weekends.⁹⁶ Their leader is a man called Isaac and they occupy their time with plaiting leaves. He finishes the brief description with a dramatic flourish: "[S]uch was their existence and their rule, such their lifestyle, these men who truly sought to face the God of Jacob."⁹⁷ The biblical allusion in this brief passage is to the patriarch whose own (literal) father was also Isaac, and it aligns the penitents' exertions with the spiritual

⁹⁴ PG 88.704A (Luibheid 105). «Τόπος μὲν ἦν ἀπὸ σημείου ἑνὸς τῆς μεγάλης μονῆς, φυλακὴ λεγομένη, ἀπαράκλητος· οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖσε πώποτε κάπνον ὀφθῆναι, οὐκ οἶνον, οὐκ ἔλαιον εἰς βρώσιν, οὐχ ἕτερόν τι ἄλλο ἢ ἄρτον, καὶ λεπτὰ λάχανα. Ἐν τούτῳ τοὺς μετὰ τὴν κλήσιν συμποδιζομένους ἀπροΐτους κατέκλειεν.»

⁹⁵ Stewart 2003:249.

⁹⁶ Johnsén 2007:238.

⁹⁷ PG 88.704C (Luibheid 105). «Οὗτος ὁ βίος, αὕτη ἡ κατάστασις· αὕτη ἡ διαγωγή τῶν ὄντως ζητούντων τὸ πρόσωπον τοῦ Θεοῦ Ἰακώβ.»

wrestlings of the man who became Israel himself (father of all the tribes that wandered through the Sinai).

Jacob is a felicitous choice for a biblical model, given that the organizing framework for Klimakos's work is that of the ladder up to heaven that the patriarch saw in his dream.⁹⁸ And more particularly to the theme of the fifth chapter, Jacob's story offers a number of fitting parallels, most obviously his wrestling with the angel of the Lord.⁹⁹ This stark image will have held much symbolism for the monks in their own struggles: the dark and arduous night of Jacob's trial leads to a new dawn bringing divine blessing and acceptance, an apt metaphor for repentance; Jacob emerges from his struggle with God forever a changed man, bearing (like a monk) a new name; and, while he is exhausted and retains a permanent physical marker from his ordeal (his limp), he gains immeasurable spiritual strength and draws closer to God – quite a wonderful symbol for the exhaustion and self-mortification that the penitents give as their own offering to the Lord. It is important to note that, while all the episodes of a biblical character's story were (presumably) well known to the monks, when the characters are presented as models in monastic texts, they are often frozen in a particular scene – a snapshot extracted to represent a particular virtue, often independent of other episodes of that character's story. *Scène* becomes *tableau*.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ See Gen. 20:10-19. In choosing the ladder as a symbol for spiritual progress, Klimakos was drawing on an established interpretative tradition. The idea's reception in patristic thought is perhaps most elegantly expressed by John Chrysostom in his Homily 83 (on John 18:1): "And so mounting as it were by steps, let us get to heaven by a Jacob's ladder. For the ladder seems to me to signify in a riddle by that vision the gradual ascent by means of virtue, by which it is possible for us to ascend from earth to heaven, not using material steps, but improvement and correction of manners." See also Duffy 1998:3 for a careful survey of biblical resonances and their importance to the work as a whole.

⁹⁹ See Gen. 32:24-28.

¹⁰⁰ See Krueger 2010:202.

One consequence of the repeated association of early monastic people and places with figures and locations from the Bible was that the monks and their way of life “acquired a biblical veneer, such that the practice of asceticism and the cultivation of virtue engaged in a reprise of biblical narrative: the monk formed himself in the image of biblical heroes.”¹⁰¹ Clothing monks and their experiences in the language and imagery of the Bible offered monastic writers an expressive mode, with its conventions and expectations, familiar and accessible to anyone at all conversant with the Scriptures.¹⁰² The biblical exemplars give the monk a vocabulary of ideas through which he can conceptualize, and convey, his identity. In connecting the penitents of the Prison with the story of Jacob, Klimakos drew on a well-established literary tradition in which writers of monastic texts from Late Antiquity situate their subjects’ present way of life within the context and continuity of sacred legend.

As Georgia Frank has shown in her work on the anonymous *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (late 4th century), monastic authors often “wrapped” the desert ascetics of Egypt and their culture in “a biblical haze.”¹⁰³ Klimakos, as a monk himself and as the author of a monastic text in which he has a marked presence as narrator, not only frames his subjects in terms of the language and imagery of the Scriptures but also makes use of them in creating his own narrative persona. And the obvious biblical correspondent for the abbot of St. Catherine’s – leader of a spiritual flock and custodian of one of the most important centers of Christian

¹⁰¹ Krueger 2010:206.

¹⁰² Heim (1985:196) has described a similar process in the narratives of Western pilgrims to the Holy Land, that their desire to see the biblical sights (an often formulaicly expressed longing) sets in motion a phantasmagorical transformation which turns Jerusalem into a heavenly city: «Tout se passe comme si maisons et monuments se transfiguraient par une fantasmagorie declenchee par des souvenirs bibliques pour devenir patrie celeste à laquelle il aspire.»

¹⁰³ Frank 2000:61.

pilgrimage – is that other great shepherd of an unruly people,¹⁰⁴ the prophet who on that mountain gave wandering Israel its law.¹⁰⁵

The Story's Applicability & Believability

So far, we have examined how engaging with holy men of the Old Testament could act as “a lens through which [monks] might understand themselves and their ascetic goals” and what application this had within the framing discussion for the fifth chapter.¹⁰⁶ Presently, we will consider how imbuing a scene with biblical resonances might in fact also be used to create a “safe” and respectful distance between the narrative subject, steeped in repentance and proved by continuous ascetic struggle, and an audience keen to emulate their zeal yet unequipped to handle the severity of their practice. In her research on Christian travel narratives from late antiquity, Frank has analyzed the techniques that the authors of those texts use to “differentiate between the reader’s world and the world in the text.”¹⁰⁷ She writes that “even when those worlds overlap, the writer must establish a ‘clear structural distance.’”¹⁰⁸ But in a text that is *about* monks and written principally *for* monks, the overlap will inevitably be great. Klimakos shows himself aware of this overlap and even addresses it in step 4 of the *Ladder* before

¹⁰⁴ “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.” «Πάντες ὡς πρόβατα ἐπλανήθημεν· ἄνθρωπος τῆ ὁδῷ αὐτοῦ ἐπλανήθη καὶ κύριος παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ἡμῶν» (Isaiah 53:6).

¹⁰⁵ As Flusin (2006:190) puts it, «De même, que Moïse, descendant de la montagne, apporte au peuple d’Israël la loi divine, de même Jean, higoumène de la même montagne de Sinai, apporte au Nouvel Israël qu’est le peuple des moines une loi spirituelle.»

¹⁰⁶ Krueger 2010:202.

¹⁰⁷ Frank 1998:493-4.

¹⁰⁸ Frank 1998:493-4.

describing the shocking acts of self-mortification at “the Prison.” His words function as a disclaimer and a warning:

It is a good thing to admire the labors of holy men; to imitate them procures salvation. But it is unreasonable and impossible to wish to imitate, on a sudden whim, every aspect of the way they live.¹⁰⁹

His caution operates on two levels: first and mostly plainly, admonishing the overeager reader to use prudence in imitating this advanced asceticism, as though to say “don’t try this at home” – or at least not yet to such an extreme degree.¹¹⁰ Secondly, it signals to the audience that the Prison is a place that defies expectation and even belief.¹¹¹ The world inhabited by these “men who face the God of Jacob” (a bright and fiery god, the full glory of whose Jovelike countenance is more than man can bear¹¹²) seems to exist in a separate reality, where the rules of conventional living do not apply. Their sometimes wraith-like existence, as we will see, is marked by dramatic extremes and they continually live at the very edges of human experience: they deprive themselves of adequate rest and nourishment and are continuously exposed to the

¹⁰⁹ PG 88.704C (Luibheid 105). «Τὸ μὲν θαυμάζειν τοὺς ἀγίων πόνους καλόν· τὸ δὲ ζηλοῦν σωτηρίας πρόξενον· τὸ δὲ ὑφ’ ἐν τὴν ἐκείνων μιμεῖσθαι θέλειν πολιτείαν, ἄλογον καὶ ἀμήχανον.»

¹¹⁰ Cf. Matt. 13:5-6, “Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: and when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.” «Ἄλλα δὲ ἔπεσεν ἐπὶ τὰ πετρῶδη, ὅπου οὐκ εἶχεν γῆν πολλήν, καὶ εὐθέως ἐξανέτειλεν διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν βάθος γῆς· ἡλίου δὲ ἀνατείλαντος ἐκαυματίσθη καὶ διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν ῥίζαν ἐξηράνθη»

¹¹¹ Johnsén (2007:208) asks the important question of reader use: “[H]ow is the reader supposed to read the text? Is he requested to make progress himself before he continues to another step? Is this text more like a general and systematic *description* of monastic ideals, or of how a monk should reach perfection, from which a reader might benefit at different stages in his spiritual life?” Here there is actually a moment of very specific user instructions.

¹¹² “...his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead....” (Revelation 1:14-17) «...οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ αὐτοῦ ὡς φλόξ πυρός, καὶ οἱ πόδες αὐτοῦ ὅμοιοι χαλκολιβάνῳ ὡς ἐν καμίνῳ πεπυρωμένοι καὶ ἡ φωνὴ αὐτοῦ ὡς φωνὴ ὑδάτων πολλῶν, καὶ ἔχων ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ χειρὶ ἀστέρας ἑπτὰ καὶ ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ ῥομφαία δίστομος ὡς ἔξοχα ἐκπορευομένη καὶ ἡ ὄψις αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος φαίνει ἐν τῇ δυνάμει αὐτοῦ. Καὶ ὅτε εἶδον αὐτόν ἔπεσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ὡς νεκρός...» Cf. 2Cor. 3:7, where even God’s prophet in his glory could not be beheld.

elements. Sometimes they even sink down into a state of spiritual aphasia, a *tabula* wiped of human speech and thought:

Overcome by their reflections and the weight of conscience, they could not speak, could not pray to God, could not even make the beginning of prayer; and filled, as it seemed, with darkness and empty despair, they offered God only a blank soul and a wordless mind.¹¹³

They are so violently struck by their own reasoning (*λογισμοί*) that in fact their souls are robbed of that very reasoning (*ψυχῆ ἄλογος*) and they become almost as dumb beasts (*ἄλογα*), which do not think but do acutely feel.¹¹⁴ The reports of this place are, in short, so harrowing that they might defy the credulity even of an audience accustomed to the tales of outlandish self-mortification and asceticism in which Byzantine hagiography abounds. But the audience has no choice but to take Klimakos at his word: he is their ears and eyes and the credibility of his description of the Prison is entirely dependent upon his reliability as narrator. Again on the *Monks in Egypt*, which is famously full of incredible stories, Frank says that “[t]he author not only sees for the audience, but even controls what is seen...this rhetorical presence *preserves the distance* between the reader’s world and the exotic world visited.”¹¹⁵ The point is well taken as far as the impressive exoticism of travelers’ tales – and in fact a “tour guide” like Klimakos not only controls *what* the audience sees but also determines *how* they see it. But his goal is not merely to dazzle spectators (“nothing behind the curtain!”) with the figures of cynocephali or

¹¹³PG 88.765B (Luibheid 122-3). «ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν λογισμῶν καὶ τοῦ συνειδότος ἀτιμίας εὐποροῦντας, μηδὲ πῶς ἢ πόθεν τὴν ἰκεσίαν ποιήσασθαι εὐρίσκοντας, μόνην ψυχὴν ἄλογον, καὶ νοῦν ἄφωνον τῷ Θεῷ παριστῶντας, σκοτίας πεπληρωμένους, καὶ ψιλῆς ἀπογνώσεως[.]» It was this abandonment of hope that Dante famously held as most emblematic of the Inferno: *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate!*

¹¹⁴ See preceding note. (The neuter *ἄλογον* was already acquiring its modern sense “horse” (cf. LS-J s.v. *ἄλογος*.)

¹¹⁵ Frank 2000:60 (emphasis mine). Like the *History of the Monks of Egypt*, the fifth chapter of the *Ladder* is also largely a narrative about a journey.

“the anthropophagi and men whose heads / do grow beneath their shoulders.”¹¹⁶ It is to change behavior and save souls, and this – the applicability, the need for caution and so forth – depends of course on the audience’s believing his tale. And, unlike with the traveler whose selective retelling “preserves the distance”, Klimakos’s rhetorical presence *minimizes* it, as follows.

The intended readership, whether laymen or monks, presumably read this sort of literature to confirm and strengthen their belief system rather than challenge it, and so constituted a self-selected, receptive audience for a narrative that requires rather a large suspension of disbelief to accept. Klimakos nevertheless feels compelled to address this underlying anxiety with an open declaration: “Believe me, brothers, I am not making all this up.”¹¹⁷ He faces a similar dilemma to that of the ancient historiographers and storytellers who were equally keen to put charges of narrative falsehood to bed. John Marincola describes their procedures for asserting veracity in a way that can also be applied to Klimakos: “Often in ancient story-telling the author steps out of the mimetic narrative to guarantee...that what will seem unbelievable to the reader actually took place.”¹¹⁸ Klimakos’s counter to the skepticism that he anticipates is that he relates not what he heard but what he himself saw: he is not an (honest but gullible) second-hand relayer of the fantastical, but an (honest and grave) first-hand witness of the marvelous but real. And it is because his credibility hangs so much on his claim to autopsy that it is so important in this chapter, more than in most, that he make his narrative and rhetorical presence so emphatically felt: by standing close to the reader or hearer and also

¹¹⁶ *Othello* 1.3.

¹¹⁷ PG 88.772B (Luibheid 125). «Καὶ μὴ μύθους τὰ εἰρημένα λογίσθητε, ἐρωτῶ, ἀδελφοί.»

¹¹⁸ Marincola 1997:82.

to the events he describes – frightful ones from which the human soul naturally shrinks – he confronts his audience with the scene in such a way as to lessen the scope for doubt and thus widen the scope for action.¹¹⁹

Connections to the Beneficial Tales

In order to examine the ways that Klimakos links his narrative to the extant tradition of otherworldly journeys, let us briefly revisit (from the previous chapter) one of the earliest and most famous of Christian hagiography's accounts of a temporary journey into the afterlife, namely chs. 65 and 66 of Athanasios of Alexandria's Greek *Life of Antony* (4th cent.). As we have seen previously, visions of the afterlife usually fall into two categories: either the narrator undergoes the terrible ordeal of the temporary judgment himself (for example, Antony's flight through the tollgates in VA 65) or he is able to witness the event from afar (as with Antony's vision of the menacing giant that hampers the ascent of souls rising to heaven in VA 66). If we take Antony's second vision (the one of the menacing giant) as a paradigm for descriptions of further saintly visions of the afterlife, three important characteristics emerge.¹²⁰ First, the holy man is granted, on account of his ascetic progress, heightened spiritual perception and sensitivity to numinous events concealed from the casual observer. Second, the purpose of the vision is the edification of a group (and the audience, by extension) through the experiences of a spiritually advanced teacher, with the oral transmission often serving as a framing device.

¹¹⁹ For a theoretical reading of this kind of situation, see also Valantasis 1995:797. He discusses the world-building (to use a rather fashionable word) necessary (and inherent) to create and sustain an ascetic program. He argues that in order to make their reality viable and sustainable, ascetics must "consciously project an alternative symbolic universe."

¹²⁰ Antony's second vision (VA 67) is explicitly described as «τῶν τε πόνων...παράμυθιον.»

Lastly, the primary function of the otherworldly journey (and equally importantly, its retelling) is that it elicits in its hearers an urgent desire to repent.

Now we can analyze how the patterns set out above appear in Klimakos's narrative. John begins his story by drawing the audience into a discussion: "Come, gather round. Listen here and I will speak to all of you who have angered the Lord. Crowd around me and see what he has revealed to my soul for your edification."¹²¹ His conversational style of address, with its imperatives and vocatives, creates an oral overlay for the written text. It sets John up as both a kind of desert father, imparting the precious word to the brethren who have come to listen and learn and reinforces his position as abbot, admonishing and encouraging those of his flock made despondent by sin. Viewing the pedagogical strategy of the *Ladder* as a whole, Johnsén writes "it is evident that the starting point for the teaching very much implies a coenobitic context."¹²² Johnsén's remarks apply particularly to the beginning of this chapter, where Klimakos draws attention to the mechanisms of monastic instruction: the monks (or other readers) receive the teachings of their spiritual elder in a group and, as it were, face to face.

The Vision of Judgment

In addition to emphasizing the persona of monastic teacher, John also presents himself as a visionary and a traveler to an extraordinary and inaccessible place. The language of revelation dots his speech with subtle but unmistakable effect. In the opening lines of the narrative (quoted above) he asserts that the Lord has revealed (*ὑπέδειξε*) to him the events that he is

¹²¹ PG 88.764C (Luibheid 121). «Συνδράμετε, καὶ προσέλθετε, δεῦτε καὶ ἀκούσετε, καὶ διηγήσομαι ὑμῖν· πάντες οἱ τὸν Θεὸν παροργίσαντες, ἀθροίσθητε καὶ ἴδετε, ὅσα πρὸς οἰκοδομὴν ὑπέδειξε τῇ ψυχῇ μου.»

¹²² Johnsén 2007:230. This is not always the case; see Johnsén p. 235.

about to narrate for the edification (*οἰκοδομή*) of many brethren. He accentuates the otherness and isolation of his destination: this “land of penitents” and “that place of true grief”, of which he has initially only *heard* reports, is “separate” (*ιδιάζουσα* – a marked word in monastic literature) and he describes its inhabitants’ way of life as both “great and strange.”¹²³ He draws on his visionary abilities to understand the true meaning and importance of the place: “I actually saw what the eye of an inattentive man never saw, what the ear of a lackadaisical man never heard, what never entered the heart of a sluggard.”¹²⁴ But, unlike Anthony, Klimakos is not privy to a supernatural experience of ascent; what he sees is monks voluntarily marooned in a hell of their own making, a mental state of extreme penitence which they have translated into a physical reality. The monks create a narrative of repentance for themselves by drawing on *topoi* commonly found in the “tour of hell” tale: they imagine themselves being weighed at the gates of heaven by a stern and inexorable judge. “[S]triking their breasts, as though standing before the gates of heaven, some would say to God: ‘Open up to us, O Judge! Open up! We have shut ourselves out with our sins. Open up to us.’”¹²⁵ They are tossed between miserable dejection and wild hope: “How will it go for us? What will be the verdict? Will there be forgiveness for those in darkness, for the lowly, for the convicted?”¹²⁶ They are thrown about by the waves: “Is our prayer vigorous enough to come before the face of the Lord, or has it been

¹²³ PG 88.764D (Luibheid 122). «Ακούσας ἐγὼ ὁ ἀσθενὴς μεγάλην τινὰ καὶ ξένην εἶναι τὴν κατάστασιν καὶ τὴν ταπεινώσιν τῶν ἐν τῇ μονῇ τῇ ιδιᾶζούσῃ τῇ λεγομένῃ φυλακῇ.»

¹²⁴ PG 88.765A (Luibheid 122). «Ἄ ὡς ἔτυχεν ὀφθαλμὸς ἀνθρώπου ἀμελοῦς οὐκ εἶδε, καὶ οὐς ῥαθύμου οὐ δέχεται, καὶ ἐπὶ καρδίαν ὀκνηροῦ οὐκ ἀνέβη.» Cf. 1Cor. 2:9, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” («ὀφθαλμὸς οὐκ εἶδεν καὶ οὐς οὐκ ἤκουσεν καὶ ἐπὶ καρδίαν ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἀνέβη ἃ ἠτοίμασεν ὁ θεὸς τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν»).

¹²⁵ PG 88.769A (Luibheid 124). «Ἄνοιξον ἡμῖν, δικαστὰ, ἄνοιξον ἡμῖν, ἐπειδὴ ἀμαρτίας ἐκλείσαμεν ἑαυτοῖς, ἄνοιξον ἡμῖν.»

¹²⁶ PG 88.769B (Luibheid 124). «Ἄρα τί τὸ ἀποβησόμενον· ἄρα τίς ἡ ἀπόφασις; ἄρα τί τὸ τέλος ἡμῶν; ἄρα ἔστιν ἀνάκλησις; ἄρα ἔστι συγχώρησις τοῖς σκοτεινοῖς, τοῖς ταπεινοῖς, τοῖς καταδίκαις.»

rejected – and rightly so – for being worthless and shameful?”¹²⁷ They express anxiety lest their guardian angels, the indispensable companions of errant souls in the edifying tales tradition, be unable to act as their advocates on account of the magnitude of their sins:

Are the guardian angels standing by us, or are they still at a great distance? For until they come close our efforts are vain and futile. Our prayer has neither the power of access nor the wings of purity to reach the Lord, unless our angels draw near us and take it and bring it to the Lord.¹²⁸

The penitents use the literary *topoi* associated with immediate judgment after death in the tales tradition (standing before a terrible judge, guardian angels, knocking on gates of heaven only to be denied access on account of one’s previous misdeeds) as a working model for their own present inability to approach God. They imagine themselves as already having departed from this life, standing before the Lord in judgment, a situation in which, for most, there are no second chances. Yet they also identify with the redeemed sinners of the tales and maintain a glimmer of hope that their future may hold something other than eternal despair:

Will the Lord accept us once more?...Let us do what we can. If he opens the door, well and good; if not, then blessed be the Lord God who in His justice has shut the door on us. At least we should continue to knock at the door as long as we live. Maybe he will open to us on account of our [brazenness].¹²⁹

We soon discover what continuing to “knock at the door” means for the inmates of the Prison.

¹²⁷ PG 88.769C (Luibheid 124). «Ἄρα ἴσχυσεν ἡμῶν ἡ δέησις εἰσελθεῖν ἐνώπιον Κυρίου; ἢ ἀπεστράφη δικαίως τεταπεινωμένη καὶ κατησχυμένη»

¹²⁸ PG 88.769C (Luibheid 124-5). «Ἄρα ἐπλησίασαν ἡμῖν οἱ ἡμῶν φύλακες, ἢ ἔτι πόρῳ ἀφ’ ἡμῶν ὑπάρχουσιν; Ἐκείνων γὰρ μὴ ἐγγιζόντων πρὸς ἡμᾶς, πᾶς ὁ κόπος ἡμῶν ἀνωφελὴς καὶ ἀνόνητος· οὐ γὰρ ἔχει δύναμιν παρόρησίας ἢ προσευχῆ ἡμῶν, οὐδὲ πτερόν καθαρότητος εἰσελθεῖν πρὸς Κύριον, εἰ μὴ τί γε οἱ ἄγγελοι ἡμῶν προσεγγίσαντες ἡμῖν, ταύτην λαβόντες Κυρίῳ προσενέγκωσιν.»

¹²⁹ PG 88.769D (Luibheid 125, who for the “shamelessness” of *ἀναιδεία* has the rather weaker “persistence”). «Μήπως μεταμεληθήσεται Κύριος; Καὶ κἂν τῆς πολλῆς κολάσεως λυτρώσῃται ἡμᾶς, ὅμως ἡμᾶς τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν ποιήσωμεν. Καὶ ἐὰν ἀνοίξῃ, εὖ καὶ καλῶς· ἐπεὶ εὐλόγητος Κύριος ὁ Θεός, ὁ ἀποκλείσας ἡμῖν δικαίως. Πλήν ἐπιμείνωμεν κρούοντες, ἕως τέλους τῆς ζωῆς ἡμῶν· ἴσως τῇ πολλῇ ἡμῶν ἀναιδείᾳ ἀνοίξῃ ἡμῖν.» Cf. the story of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-6).

In the chain of definitions that precedes the narrative of his sojourn in Alexandria, Klimakos emphasizes the importance of personal agency and self-motivation in the process of repentance. “Repentance,” he writes, “is critical awareness (*αὐτοματόκριτος*) and a sure watch over oneself (*ἀμέριμνος αὐτομέριμνος*).”¹³⁰ In the seventh step, he also recommends that those seeking true repentance should “never stop imagining and examining the abyss of dark fire, its cruel minions, the merciless inexorable judge, the limitless chaos of subterranean flame, the narrow descent to underground chambers and yawning gulfs and such other images. Then lust in our souls may be checked by immense terror, by surrender to incorruptible chastity, and receive that non-material light which shines beyond all fire.”¹³¹ In a desperate, final attempt to keep a foot in the door to heaven, the brethren at the Prison have preempted the great and terrible judge and *condemned themselves* to an earthly facsimile of the torments of hell. By existing in this wretched state temporarily, they hope to be delivered from it eternally.

Catching Hell

Klimakos’s description of the inmates’ “descent” into their own hell also effectively communicates to the audience that, although their mental agony and physical suffering are very real, their identification of it as an infernal place is a construct of their own making. They are indeed transported to an underworld, but rather than being taken there by a pair of

¹³⁰ PG 88.764B (Luibheid 121). Lampe’s “condemning by itself” for the word *αὐτοματόκριτος* – a *hapax* in Klimakos – may be just as likely as “self-aware” and the two are certainly not mutually exclusive. In fact, when one’s “eyes [are] opened” (Gen. 3.7), the one may well follow the other.

¹³¹ PG 88.804C-D (Luibheid 135). «Διερευνῶν πυρὸς σκοτεινοῦ ἄβυσσον· καὶ ἀνελεεῖς ὑπηρέτας, ἀσυμπαθῆ κριτὴν καὶ ἀσυγχώρητον, χάος τε ἀπέρατον καταχθόνιου φλογός, καὶ ὑπογείων, καὶ φοβερῶν τόπων, καὶ χασμάτων τεθλιμμένας καταβάσεις, καὶ τῶν τοιούτων πάντων εἰκόνας· ὅπως τῷ πολλῷ τρόμῳ στυφθεῖσα ἡ ἐνυπάρχουσα ἡμῶν τῇ ψυχῇ λαγνεία συναφθῆ τῇ ἀφθάρτῳ ἀγνείᾳ καὶ φωτὸς ἀύλου πυρὸς παντὸς πλέον ἀποστίλβοντος ἐν αὐτῇ δέξεται [πένθους δεξαμένη].»

disheartened angels who find their charge stymied at tollgates or a posse of infernal minions rejoicing in the dismissal of their soul from the gates of heaven, it is their own remorse that transports them there. Klimakos describes them as follows: the brethren he sees “seemed out of their minds, made dumb by the complete darkness of their despair («γεγονότας ὅλους ἐσκωτισμένους»), insensible to the life around them, their minds sunk in the depths of humility («τῶ νοῖ λοιπὸν ἐν τῇ ἀβύσσῳ τῆς ταπεινώσεως καταδύσαντας»), their eyes dried up in the fire of despondency («καὶ τῶ πυρὶ τῆς ἀθυμίας»).”¹³² The darkness, the abyss and the fire of hell exist only in their minds as a result of their base and hopeless loss of will; they have essentially thought themselves into this infernal state. Nevertheless, the descriptions of their self-imposed torments are real and genuinely harrowing to read as the penitents deprive themselves of sleep, sustenance and every other human comfort, in order to show the depth of their grief. Klimakos’s catalogue of their suffering also draws strikingly on the imagery used to describe the state of the soul as it plummets down into the depths of hell. In Anastasios’s tale of the *taxeōtēs*, the underworld is described as follows:

The earth was rent and we descended through narrow, gloomy places like foul-smelling conduits, until [we reached] the subterranean parts in the prisons of Hades. There were the souls of sinners who have slept since the beginning of the age [ἀπ’ αἰῶνος]. [It is], as Job says, “a dark and murky land, a land of darkness everlasting, where is neither light nor can one see the life of mortal mortal men.” But eternal pain is there, limitless grief, ceaseless wailing, never-silent gnashing and sleepless lamentation – all which things do endlessly cry out, *oh, woe is me!*¹³³

¹³² PG 88.765C (Luibheid 122-3).

¹³³ Nau 1902a:85. «Καὶ διχασθείσης τῆς γῆς, κατήλθομεν διὰ τινῶν στενῶν καὶ ζοφερῶν τόπων ὡς καναλίσκων δυσώδων, ἕως τῶν καταχθονίων ἐν τοῖς δεσμωτηρίοις καὶ φυλακαῖς τοῦ ἄδου, ἔνθα ὑπάρχουσιν ἀποκεκλεισμένοι αἱ ψυχαὶ τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν τῶν ἀπ’ αἰῶνος κεκοιμημένων καθὼς φησὶν ὁ Ἰώβ, “Εἰς γῆν σκοτεινὴν καὶ γνωφερὰν, εἰς γῆν σκότους αἰωνίου οὐ οὐκ ἔστι φέγγος οὐδὲ ὄρᾶν ζῶν βροτῶν.” Ἀλλ’ ὀδύνη αἰώνιος καὶ λύπη ἀτελεύτητος καὶ κλαυθμὸς ἄπαυστος καὶ βρυγμὸς ἀσίγητος καὶ στεναγμοὶ ἀκοίμητοι ἐκεῖ οὐαὶ διαπαντὸς κράζουσιν.» The Job section (10:20-22) begins, “Are not my days few? Cease then and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little, before I go whence I shall not return[.]” «Ἡ οὐκ ὀλίγος ἐστὶν ὁ χρόνος τοῦ βίου μου; Ἐασόν με ἀναπαύσασθαι μικρὸν προτοῦ με πορευθῆναι ὅθεν οὐκ ἀναστρέψω...» (We have not followed the Authorized Version above, which here differs too much from the Septuagint.)

The darkness of these underground caverns creates an emphasis on the auditory environment for the soul of the *taxeōtēs* and, as such, it is the weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth that terrify him the most. Similarly, in the Prison the penitents experience a kind of dusky, subterranean gloom, but rather than the absence of physical light, what oppresses them is a palpable spiritual darkness.¹³⁴ Sound also plays an important role in evoking the terrifying atmosphere of the Prison. Klimakos describes certain monks, like the ones mentioned in the passage above, who are rendered speechless by grief, but others lament their own souls as though they were already deceased (PG 88.765B) and, most disconcertingly, still others are so far gone in their emotions that their behavior is characterized by a sort of insensate, animalistic terror that leaves them roaring and moaning “like lions” or with their tongues hanging out of their mouths “in the manner of dogs.”¹³⁵ This relentless catalogue of vocal (but not necessarily verbal) expressions of despair contributes to the feeling that one is witnessing a spiritual Bedlam where men are driven to madness, mentally overwhelmed by the burden of their sin. The description that Klimakos provides of their appearance adds to the general sense that the inmates have lost the ability to think rationally and they seem to almost robbed of their identity as humans:

...with knees like wood, as a result of all the prostrations, with eyes dimmed and sunken, with hair gone and cheeks wasted and scalded by many hot tears, with faces pale and worn, *they were no different from corpses*. Their breasts were livid from all the beatings, which had even made them

¹³⁴ PG 88.765B (Luibheid 122-3). «Υπὸ τῆς τῶν λογισμῶν καὶ τοῦ συνειδότος ἀτιμίας εὐποροῦντας, μηδὲ πῶς ἢ πόθεν τὴν ἱκεσίαν ποιήσασθαι εὐρίσκοντας, μόνην ψυχὴν ἄλογον, καὶ νοῦν ἄφωνον τῷ Θεῷ παριστῶντας, σκοτίας πεπληρωμένους, καὶ ψιλῆς ἀπογνώσεως[.]» On imageless prayer, a not uncontroversial subject in monastic circles, see Stewart 2003:250.

¹³⁵ PG 88.765C and 88.768D (Luibheid 123).

spit blood. There was no rest for them in beds, no clean and laundered clothing. They were bedraggled, dirty and verminous.¹³⁶

In addition, Klimakos's narrative in the fifth step noticeably lacks any indication of the structure of this community and what the rhythms of their daily lives were, even though in an earlier chapter he does disclose a few details about the penitents' "existence and rule."¹³⁷ This absence of a sense of time or direction makes the Prison seem neither in this world nor of it. Rather, it is "removed into a surreal time and space, separated from the real world by a boundary, rather fluid but well-known to everyone."¹³⁸ The way that each harrowing sight is reported also contributes to the reader's sense of disorientation in following Klimakos's gaze. His sentences often begin with "I saw some..." followed by four or five sentences beginning with "others..." without indication of direction or scope. The reader gets the sense that, whichever way he "looks" in the text, his eye is met with an unending *tableau mort* of suffering.¹³⁹ Klimakos himself admits that the content of his narrative is extremely taxing for the reader and for himself as narrator as well:

¹³⁶ PG 88.772A (Luibheid 125), emphasis mine. «Ἐν ἐκείνοις ἐωρᾶτο γόνατα ἐπεσκληκότα τῷ πλήθει τῶν μετανοιῶν· οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ ἐκτακέντες καὶ ἔσω που εἰς βάθος δεδυκότες· τριχῶν ἀπεστερημένοι, παρειὰς κεκτημένοι πεπληγμένας, καὶ περιπεφλεγμένας τῇ ζέσει τῶν πολλῶν δακρῶν· πρόσωπα καταμεμαρασμένα καὶ ὠχρὰ, μηδὲν ἐν συγκρίσει νεκρῶν διαφέροντα· στήθη ταῖς πληγαῖς ἀλγοῦντα καὶ αἱμάτων πτύελοι ἐκ τῶν ἐν τῷ στήθει πυγμῶν ἐκπεμπόμενοι. Ποῦ ἦν ἐκεῖ στρωμνῆς κατάστασις; ποῦ ἐνδύματος καθαρότης ἢ στερεότης; Ἀλλὰ διεσρηγμένα καὶ ῥυπῶντα, καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ φθιροῦς ἐπικεκαλυμμένα.»

¹³⁷ We learn they had their own cells or shared theirs with one other person and they were given palm leaves "to ward off despondency" – a not entirely effective measure, it appears. See PG 88.703C (Luibheid 105).

¹³⁸ Gurevich 1988:95.

¹³⁹ Or, as Patricia Cox Miller put it in her seminal article "The Body from Nowhere" (1994:144), "the stories of individual desert ascetics are not presented as biographies that follow a linear line of narration from beginning to end, nor are the subjects of these stories situated in densely detailed or richly thickened socio-cultural contexts. Rather, these collections situate their subjects in an extended 'middle' that subverts conventional biographical narrativity. Taking the form of snapshots endlessly repeated, these collections not only deprive their ascetic characters of history—that is, of the perceptual construct from the horizon that emphasizes the figure-and-ground character of the visual field—they also deprive the reader of the horizontal perspective."

I came close to despair when I had seen and heard all this among them and when I had compared my own indifference with what they went through. What a dreadful place they lived in! It was dark, stinking, filthy, and squalid. To call it a prison or house of convicts was an accurate description. Just the sight of it would teach you penitence and mourning.¹⁴⁰

The self-reflexive concluding sentence of this paragraph functions in accordance with what Rapp views as a general dynamic between narrator and audience in hagiographical texts: “the hagiographer presents himself as the prototype of the saint’s clientele, and hence as a model for the ideal audience of his own text.”¹⁴¹ In other words, just as hearing and seeing made Klimakos painfully aware of his own indifference (*ἀδιαφορία*) and his subsequent need to repent and mourn, he is sure that the sight (*θεά*) that the readers “see” through his text will become for them a “teacher” (*διδάσκαλος*) of repentance.

The dramatic effect of Klimakos’s warning message to his audience is also reinforced by a rhetorical trope borrowed from earlier monastic texts dealing with the punishments of hell. In the alphabetical collection the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Abba Theophilos denounces the transience of this world and the things in it with a plaintive string of rhetorical anaphora: «Τότε ποῦ ἢ καύχησις τοῦ κόσμου; Ποῦ ἢ κενοδοξία; Ποῦ ἢ τρυφή; Ποῦ ἢ ἀπόλαυσις; Ποῦ ἢ φαντασία...;»¹⁴² In Klimakos’s text a similar set of question occurs twice (PG 88.768D and

¹⁴⁰ PG 88.773B (Luibheid 127). «Ἐγὼ δὲ ταῦτα ἑωρακώς τε παρ’ ἐκείνοις καὶ ἀκηκώς, μικροῦ δεῖν ἑαυτοῦ ἀπογινώσκειν ἔμελλον, ὁρῶν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ [ἑμαυτοῦ] ἀδιαφορίαν, καὶ συγκρίνων ταύτην πρὸς τὴν ἐκείνων κακοπάθειαν. Οἷα γὰρ ἦν καὶ αὐτὴ ἢ τοῦ τόπου κατάστασις καὶ κατοίκησις; Ὅλη σκοτεινὴ, ὅλη δυσώδης, ὅλη ῥυπῶσα καὶ ἀύχμηρά. Φυλακὴ γὰρ καὶ καταδίκη εὐλόγως προσωνόμασται· ὡς καὶ αὐτὴν τὴν τοῦ χώρου θέαν μετανοίας πάσης καὶ πένθους ὑπάρχειν διδάσκαλον.»

¹⁴¹ Rapp 1998:432. She further adds, “He casts himself in the dual role of beneficiary and proclaimer of this miracle, and involves his audience as witness, thus proving the efficacy of the saint while lending authority and authenticity to his own writing.”

¹⁴² PG 65.200D. It is interesting to note that this quotation is borrowed verbatim in pseudo-Cyril of Alexandria’s later homily, the *De Exitu Animi* — a text which (as we saw in the previous chapter) already itself draws heavily on pre-existing narratives of otherworldly journeys and which is likewise characterized by this heavy, formulaic use of anaphora. This frequent repetition, this alliteration, this rhyme and this assonance make the trope a suitably baroque addition to such an intricate and sonically captivating piece of rhetoric. See PG 77.1077A.

88.776A) and is used to especially poignant effect in the latter set, where penitents express their remorse for their former way of life and achievements, “weeping for them as they were children”:

Where is the purity of my prayer? The confidence that was in it? Where are the sweet tears instead of these bitter ones? Where is that hope of perfect chastity and purification? Where is that expectation of blessed dispassion? Where is my faith in the shepherd? Where is the result of his prayer for us? It is all lost and gone, as though it had never appeared. It has vanished as though it had never been there..¹⁴³

The lines quoted above are direct speech, as is much of the rest of the chapter. The frequent use of direct speech is probably meant to bolster Klimakos’s standing as a reliable witness of this extraordinary place and of the men who dwell there. As we have seen, he is keen to remind the audience that he is a faithful “eyes and ears.” Yet what becomes apparent upon carefully examining the woeful utterances of the Prison’s inmates is that their speech is filled with quotations from the Old and New Testaments. The verses are drawn from a number of different books, including chiefly the Gospels from the New Testament, and from the Old Testament Job, Isaiah and Jonah, books especially associated with repentance and vision. But by far the greatest number of references is to the Psalms. Klimakos often embeds verses from the Psalms in his narrative and speech. In a particularly distressing passage that describes the physical affliction of the penitents, Klimakos exclaims: “the words of David could surely be seen to be fulfilled there, for there were men in hardship and bowed down to the end of their lives, going about all day with downcast faces, with stinking, rotting soars upon their bodies to which they gave no

¹⁴³ Luibheid 127. PG 88.776A: «Ποῦ ἡ τῆς προσευχῆς καθαρότης; Ποῦ ἡ ταύτης παρρησία; Ποῦ τὸ γλυκὸ ἀντὶ πικροῦ δάκρυον; Ποῦ ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς παντελοῦς ἀγνείας καὶ καθάρσεως; Ποῦ ἡ προσδοκία τῆς μακαρίας ἀπαθείας; Ποῦ ἡ πρὸς τὸν ποιμένα πίστις; Ποῦ ἡ τῆς αὐτοῦ προσευχῆς ἐν ἡμῖν εὐεργεσία [ἐνέργεια]; Απόλωλε ταῦτα πάντα· καὶ ὥσπερ μὴ φανέντα, ἐκλέλοιπεν.»

mind.”¹⁴⁴ Even the physical marks of their mortification are expressed through David’s song: “They forgot to eat their bread; their drink is mixed with tears. They ate dust and ashes instead of bread; their bones stuck to their flesh and they were dried up like grass.”¹⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that both of the psalms alluded to in the quotations above (nos. 37 and 101) form part of the canon of penitential psalms popularized by Cassiodorus (ca. 485-580), who in turn inherited this tradition from Augustine.¹⁴⁶ The Psalms also have a notable presence in the direct speech of the inmates themselves,¹⁴⁷ so much so that the penitents’ words appear to be a recitation of the psalmody rather than natural reported speech. Having the monks express themselves through the Psalms is a particularly appropriate choice since, as Hannah Hunt has noted, “whether a hermit or a coenobite, the monk’s bedrock of daily prayer and contemplation was the psalter.”¹⁴⁸ Derek Krueger develops this insight even further, drawing an important connection between the recitation of particular texts and self-representation:

Since all the monks were reciting the same Psalms (eventually in the same order and at the same time of the day), the result was not individuality, where each monk might come to think of himself as different, but rather identity: the monk identified himself with and as the speaker of the Psalms. In the monastic office, the monks assumed biblical identities through liturgical performance. The monk became Scripture’s mouthpiece, and the Psalms scripted the monk’s interior self-reflection and outward self-presentation.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ PG 88.768D (Luibheid 123). «Ἦν ἐκεῖ τὰ τοῦ Δαυῖδ ἐναργῶς θεάσασθαι ῥήματα, ταλαιπωροῦντας ιδέσθαι, κατακαμπτομένους ἕως τέλους τῆς ἑαυτῶν ζωῆς· ὅλην τὴν ἡμέραν σκυθρωπάζοντας, πορευομένους· προσόζοντας καὶ σεσημμένους σώματος μώλωπας, καὶ ἀνεπιμελήτους ὑπάρχοντας...» (cf. Ps. 37:6-7).

¹⁴⁵ PG 88.768D (Luibheid 123). «Κατακαμπτομένους ἕως τέλους τῆς ἑαυτῶν ζωῆς· ὅλην τὴν ἡμέραν σκυθρωπάζοντας ἐπιλανθανομένους τοῦ φαγεῖν τὸν ἄρτον αὐτῶν· τὸ δὲ πόμα τοῦ ὕδατος μετὰ κλαυθμοῦ κιωνῶντας· καὶ σποδὸν καὶ τέφραν ἀντὶ ἄρτου ἐσθίοντας· καὶ κεκολλημένα ἔχοντας τὰ ὀστᾶ τῆ σαρκί· καὶ αὐτοὺς ὡσεὶ χόρτος ἐξηραμμένους» (cf. Ps. 101:4-12).

¹⁴⁶ Gillingham 2012:57. The other psalms classified in this category are nos. 6, 31, 50, 129 and 142.

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, PG 88.769A-B (Luibheid 124) for a particularly dense concentration of psalmic quotations.

¹⁴⁸ Hunt 2004:21

¹⁴⁹ Krueger 2010:218.

Krueger's interpretation is especially meet, considering what Klimakos tells us concerning the abbot Isaac's instructions to his flock: "[H]e demanded of them that they pray scarcely without an interruption."¹⁵⁰ If the monks are to occupy themselves almost exclusively with prayer and the psalmody forms the most important text for their recitations, it is little wonder that the penitents "speak in psalms."¹⁵¹

Like the penitents, Klimakos himself also draws on Scripture to frame and conceptualize his visionary experience. His first source text is perhaps the second-most famous vision from the New Testament, when Paul relates his tale of being caught up to the third heaven:

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth), such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth), how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.¹⁵²

For our purposes, three details of this vision are particularly relevant: first, the Apostle cannot say whether he was taken up to the third heaven in his body or without it. Secondly, he uses the verb *ἀρπάζω* twice to describe the condition of his ascent. Lastly, he claims that he has heard

¹⁵⁰ PG 88.704B (Luibheid 105). «Ὁς ἀπήτει τὴν προσευχὴν ἀδιάλειπτον σχεδὸν τοὺς αὐτῷ παραδιδόμενους.»

¹⁵¹ Zecher (2011:203) reads their use of Scripture in a different but compelling way: "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." This dynamic was also observed by P.C. Miller in the *Historia Monachorum*: "although the text as a whole is presented as the record of an intensely personal journey undertaken by the author, who emphasizes repeatedly his seeing and looking at the monks, there is no physical description of these men. Instead, the reader's gaze is directed away from characteristics that would mark these monks as 'personalities' and so detract from their function as signifiers of a subjectivity that they all share and that represents the highest religious potential in human nature" (1983:232).

¹⁵² 2Cor. 12:1-4. «Οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ πρὸ ἐτῶν δεκατεσσάρων – εἴτε ἐν σώματι οὐκ οἶδα, εἴτε ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν – ἀρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ. Καὶ οἶδα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνθρωπον – εἴτε ἐν σώματι εἴτε χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν – ὅτι ἤρπάγη εἰς τὸν παράδεισον καὶ ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλῆσαι.»

unspeakable words, “which it is not lawful for man to utter.”¹⁵³ Klimakos, in framing his narrative, draws on the language of Paul’s vision, albeit with alterations to the Apostle’s narrative to suit the condition of the Prison. When Klimakos describes the rapture he experiences at the sight of the penitents, he exclaims «καὶ ὅλος τῷ νοῦ σννηρηπάγην, κατέχειν ἑμαυτὸν μὴ δυνάμενος» (emphasis mine). Unlike Paul, there is no doubt in Klimakos’s mind whether he was taken up in spirit or in the body. His physical presence as a witness to the events at the Prison is only partially responsible for his visionary experience. Like Paul, however, Klimakos is able to see the things that remain hidden to others: to the outsider it may look like excessive self-mortification but Klimakos, with his privileged vision, is able to see that their self-sacrifice is repentance on a cosmic scale, an attempt to remedy the wrongs that cannot be righted in the next world. Equally important is the fact that Klimakos shares the vision with his audience: the precious teaching contained in the inmates’ experiences would be lost, had Klimakos, guide and revelator, not been able to explain to his audience their meaning and salvific importance.

Klimakos’s Experiences as a Visionary

When Saint Antony returns “to himself” after his first vision, his distress is acute: “Then forgetful of eating, he remained the rest of the day and through the whole of the night groaning

¹⁵³ Before Klimakos, Athanasios of Alexandria also used Paul’s account to compare and contrast his saint’s vision of the heavenly tollgates: «Ἄλλ’ ὁ μὲν Παῦλος ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ ἠρπάγη καὶ ἀκούσας ἄρρητα ῥήματα κατήλθεν, ὁ δὲ Ἀντώνιος ἕως τοῦ ἀέρος ἑαυτὸν εἶδε φθάσαντα καὶ ἀγωνισάμενον ἕως ἐλεύθερος φανῆ.» See also Krueger’s views on Paul’s use of the third person and how this relates to instruction and humility. Analyzing this same dynamic in the Lausiac History, he comments: “Writing in the third person Palladius is able to rehearse his credentials for authority and authorship, for his journey to the paradise of the desert coupled with his ascetic rigor have yielded license to speak” (1999:231.)

and praying.”¹⁵⁴ And again following his second vision (VA 66.6-8), the saint is reluctant to share his experiences with his disciples until he is sure he is capable of doing so and that it will be for their profit. Klimakos approaches his vision quite differently from Antony. As we saw above, he employs a Pauline vocabulary of rapture to express his emotions when observing the penitents, which may seem unexpected, given the nature of the harrowing things he sees. Klimakos admits that he “was so pleased by their grief that [he] was carried away.”¹⁵⁵ One marked difference between Antony’s two visions in the *Vita Antonii* and Klimakos’s visionary narrative in the fifth step is that, while Antony is granted revelation without having petitioned the Lord directly for this information, Klimakos reports that “during my visit, I asked the good man [Isaac, the abbot of the Prison] to let me see it. This great man, who wished never to cause grief to any soul, gave his permission. I went therefore to the abode of penitents...”¹⁵⁶ Klimakos’s unexpected joy might therefore be the result of his gaining greater light and knowledge upon deliberate request. However, an even more compelling reason for Klimakos’s rejoicing – if we keep in mind his self-identification with Paul in conjunction with his role as abbot – is that what he is able to see through his vision is sinners being “made sorry after a godly manner.”¹⁵⁷ Paul expresses a similar sort of sentiment, saying “now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry but that ye *sorrowed to repentance*.”¹⁵⁸ When Klimakos returns to the main

¹⁵⁴ VA 65.6 (Wace & Schaff, 213). «Τότε τοῦ μὲν φαγεῖν αὐτὸς ἐπιλαθόμενος, ἔμεινε τὸ λοιπὸν τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ δι’ ὅλης τῆς νυκτὸς στενάζων καὶ εὐχόμενος.»

¹⁵⁵ PG 88.776A (Luibheid 128). «Εγὼ δὲ, ὦ φίλοι, λέληθα ἑμαυτὸν ἐν τῷ ἐκείνῳ ἐμφιλοχωρῶν πένθει.»

¹⁵⁶ PG 88.764D (Luibheid 122). «Ἐκεῖσέ μου ἔτι ὄντος, ἰκέτευσά τὸν δίκαιον παραγενέσθαι με ἐκεῖσε· καὶ δὴ εἶξεν ὁ μέγας, μηδ’ ὅλως ποτὲ ψυχὴν λυπήσαι θέλων. Παραγενόμενος οὖν ἐγὼ ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν μετανοούντων μονῇ... »

¹⁵⁷ 2Cor. 7:9. «...ἐλυπήθητε γὰρ κατὰ θεόν...»

¹⁵⁸ 2Cor. 7:9. «Νῦν χαίρω, οὐχ ὅτι ἐλυπήθητε, ἀλλ’ ὅτι ἐλυπήθητε εἰς μετάνοιαν» (emphasis mine).

monastery in Alexandria after a thirty-day stay at the Prison, the abbot of the monastery sees a marked difference in him:

[H]e noticed that I was very much changed and that I had yet to recover my former self. He understood what the change meant, for he was a very wise man. "So, Father John," he said, " you saw how these men were struggling?" "I saw them, Father, and I was amazed," I replied, "It seems to me that those who have fallen and are penitent are more blessed than those who have never fallen and who do not mourn over themselves, because through having fallen, they have pulled themselves up by a sure resurrection."¹⁵⁹

Like the *taxeōtēs*, whose return from his otherworldly voyage was also marked by a sea change in character, the task that remains for Klimakos is to educate his own flock about the salvific power of repentance in the body.

Willingly Repenting in the Flesh

For monks, a critical component of repentance is the decision to submit themselves to that painful process. This agency differentiates their experience substantially from those described in the beneficial tales: for the (temporarily) deceased, we are told in the tales, the transition from this world to the next requires the terrifying evaluation of their soul in accordance with their good or ill deeds. If they would be with God, they must be weighed and not found wanting. Otherwise – as we have seen – a precipitous fall into the bowels of the earth, to darkness and suffering, is the inescapable consequence. For the inmates of the Prison, whose body and soul remain united and who are thus still in possession of their their agency, suffering in a place which in many ways seems like a hell on earth is a decision they have willingly made for

¹⁵⁹ PG 88.776B (Luibheid 128). «Ο δὲ θεασάμενός με, ὥσπερ ἡλλοιωμένον ὄλον καὶ ἐξεστηκότα, ἔγνω ὁ πάνσοφος ἀλλοιώσεως τὸν τρόπον· καὶ φησι, Τί ἐστι, Πάτερ Ἰωάννη; Ἐώρακας τοὺς τῶν καμνόντων ἄθλους; Ἐγὼ δὲ ἔφην· Καὶ ἐώρακα, Πάτερ, καὶ τεθαύμακα, καὶ μεμακάρικα ἔγωγε τοὺς πεπτωκότας, καὶ πενθοῦντας, ὑπὲρ τοὺς μὴ πεπτωκότας, καὶ ἑαυτοὺς μὴ πενθοῦντας· ὅτι διὰ πτώσεως ἀνέστησαν ἀνάστασιν ἀκίνδυνον.»

themselves. At the opening of the chapter, Klimakos stresses that repentance is a self-imposed condition:

[Repentance] is the purification of conscience and the voluntary endurance of affliction. The penitent deals out his own punishment, for repentance is the fierce persecution of the stomach and the flogging of the soul into intense awareness.¹⁶⁰

The “*voluntary* endurance of affliction” lies at the heart of this chapter and of monastic repentance in general. One might well ask, however, why these willing sufferers choose to frame their own experiences in terms of the literary motif of the *involuntary* trial and condemnation of the sinful soul immediately after death. First, as we saw earlier in our discussion of the use of Old Testament imagery in the fifth chapter, the monastic imagination was formed and informed not only by Scripture and the works of the Patristic authors but also by the literature which recorded the lives of the holy fathers.¹⁶¹ Just as holy men themselves could act as exemplars for those wishing to imitate them, thus righteous and virtuous actions could serve as a model for spiritual endeavors (this is especially true of the tales where the protagonist is often a little-known or singly occurring character). Thus, situating one’s own attempts at repentance within an extant and well-known tradition of successful repentance (living in adherence to a tried-and-tested model) legitimizes that experience and increases its likelihood of success. The seeker after righteousness thus consciously makes himself a link in the long *catena* of tradition, fastening himself onto the link that preceded and assuming a shape that can be latched onto by the next link to come. By anticipating and realizing the worst-case scenario described in the writings of the fathers they hope to do and say things, as John

¹⁶⁰ PG 88.764C (Luibheid 121). «Μετάνοιά ἐστὶ συνειδότης καθαρισμός. Μετάνοια ἐκούσιος πάντων τῶν θλιβερῶν ὑπομονή. Μετανοῶν θλίψις γαστροῦ ἰσχυρὰ, καὶ ψυχῆς πληξίς ἐν αἰσθήσει κραταιᾷ.»

¹⁶¹ Krueger 2010:203.

describes it, that “draw down the mercy of God, deeds and attitudes of body that quickly win His love for men.”¹⁶² Also extremely important to the success of repentance is the “weight” added by the body. As we saw in the previous chapter, in Anastasios of Sinai’s tale about the *taxeōtēs* who returns from the grave, “it is impossible...to repent unless it be in the body wherewith you sinned.”¹⁶³ This statement underlines both the salvific and corrupting potential of the body, a topic that also comes under discussion in the *Ladder*. Though an in-depth examination of Klimakos’s views concerning the body in the *Ladder* lies outside the scope of our present discussion, we can say nevertheless that his attitude, like that of many monastic authors of his time, is often deeply ambivalent. In the 26th chapter (*On Discernment*) he warns, “a monster is this gross and savage body.”¹⁶⁴ Yet he also teaches that, while flesh is the instrument of sin, it is the only vehicle through which one can draw closer and return to the Lord and that this paradox is at the heart of what it means to be a monk:

The monk finds himself in an earthly and defiled body, but pushes himself into the rank and status of the incorporeal angels...the monk is ever embattled with what he is, and he is the unfailing purifier of the senses. The monk is a body made holy, a tongue purified, a mind enlightened. Asleep or awake, the monk is a soul pained by the constant remembrance of death.¹⁶⁵

The brethren at the Prison exist almost singularly as souls “pained by the constant remembrance of death.” But the terrible conditions of their existence act as a “refiner’s fire or a

¹⁶² PG 88.765 (Luibheid 122). The verbs are especially forceful here: «Πράγματα καὶ ῥήματα τὸν Θεὸν δυνάμενα βιάσασθαι, ἐπιτηδεύματά τε καὶ σχήματα τὴν αὐτοῦ φιλανθρωπίαν συντόμως κατακάμπτοντα.» It is as though these brethren, by the strength of their compunction, are able to force the Lord’s hand.

¹⁶³ Nau 1902a:86. «Ἀδύνατόν σοι μετανοῆσαι, εἰ μὴ διὰ τοῦ σώματος ἐν ᾧ ἤμαρτες.»

¹⁶⁴ PG 88.1016D (Luibheid 232). «Θηρία δὲ, τὸ βαρὺ τοῦτο καὶ ἄγριον σῶμα.»

¹⁶⁵ PG 88.633B-C (Luibheid 74). «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 φυλακῆ αἰσθήσεων ἀνελλιπῆς. Μοναχός ἐστιν ἡγνισμένον σῶμα, καὶ κεκαθαρμένον στόμα, καὶ πεφωτισμένος νοῦς. Μοναχός ἐστιν κατ᾽ ὄντος ψυχῆ ἐν διηνεκῇ μνήμῃ θανάτου ἀδολεχοῦσα, καὶ ὑπνώττουσα, καὶ γρηγοροῦσα.»

fuller's soap[,]”¹⁶⁶ and not only for their spiritual stains but for their physical ones as well, for it is with and in the body that they will be sanctified in the resurrection.¹⁶⁷ For this reason, as Kallistos Ware has noted, the soul cannot be cleansed of sin without the body: “Even though then, as a result of the fall, body and soul are separated at death, this severance is no more than temporary, and we look beyond it. The body’s vocation, therefore, is to be sanctified and transfigured along with the soul.”¹⁶⁸ In the chapter on fasting, Klimakos comments on this “symbiotic” relationship between body and soul: “It is truly astounding how the incorporeal mind can be defiled and darkened by the body. Equally astonishing is the fact that the immaterial spirit can be purified and refined by the clay.”¹⁶⁹ But, while their spirits are still clothed in flesh, the inmates can have no sure knowledge of future condemnation or forgiveness. Klimakos captures their doubts in a very poignant and fitting manner when he reports the final moments of one their number: “[the others] would speak to the dying man:

Brother and fellow penitent, how is it with you? What will you say? What are your hopes and expectations? Have you achieved what you worked so hard for, or have you not? Has the door been opened, or are you still under sentence?...Please tell us, so that we may know how it will be for us. Your time is over and you will never have another chance.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Malachi 3:2 («ὡς πῦρ χωνευτηρίου καὶ ὡς πῶα πλυνόντων»).

¹⁶⁷ As Susan Ashbrook-Harvey observes, “For the early Christians, the model Christ had offered was the use of the body as an instrument through which to seek eternal life” (2005:141). For the saving “wholly” of the “whole spirit and soul and body” at the Second Coming, cf. the Pauline benediction of 1Tim. 5:23, «Αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ Θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης ἀγιάσαι ὑμᾶς ὁλοτελεῖς, καὶ ὁλόκληρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἀμέμπτως ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τηρηθείη.»

¹⁶⁸ Luibheid 1982:29.

¹⁶⁹ PG 88.868C (Luibheid 169). «Θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι νοῦν ἀσώματον ὑπὸ σώματος μολυνόμενον καὶ σκοπτούμενον· καὶ διὰ πηλοῦ τὸ αὔλον ἀνακαθαιρόμενον καὶ λεπυνόμενον.»

¹⁷⁰ PG 88, 772D-773A (Luibheid 126). «Τί ἐστίν, ἀδελφὲ καὶ συγκατάδικε, πῶς; Τί λέγεις; Τί ἐλπίζεις; Τί ὑπολαμβάνεις; Ἦνυσας ἐκ τοῦ κόπου τὸ ζητούμενον, ἢ οὐκ ἰσχυσας; Ἦνοιξας, ἢ ὑπεύθυνος ἔτι ὑπάρχεις; Ἐφθασας, ἢ οὐκ ἐπέτυχες; [...] Τί λέγεις ἀπλῶς, ἀδελφέ; Εἰπέ ἡμῖν, δυσωποῦμεν, ἵνα καὶ ἡμεῖς γνῶμεν ἐν ποίοις μέλλομεν ἔσεσθαι· σοῦ γὰρ λοιπὸν ὁ καιρὸς ἐκλείσθη, καὶ ἄλλον οὐχ εὐρήσεις ἔτι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.»

By assuming and acting out the worst, they hope to secure the best. And if an actor must suffer for his art, these actors (preferring “to grunt and sweat under a weary life”) elect *for themselves* a role of suffering, in conscious imitation of both the trapped and imprisoned prophets and the wandering people of Israel, that their pain and terror might transform the too-too-solid flesh of their performance into a sacred drama of fall, redemption, and eternal catharsis. And as men willingly “cast” into the desert as self-aware and self-condemning (*αὐτοματόκριτοι*) sinners, voluntarily foregoing the fleshpots of Egypt for the bread of affliction,¹⁷¹ errant¹⁷² in the figurative wastes of Sinai, they hold out their tender hands in hope of tender mercies, seeking through their sufferings¹⁷³ and their offering of a broken and a contrite heart¹⁷⁴ to approach the Lord as good and faithful servants and thus lay claim upon that promise of spontaneous and

¹⁷¹ «Οὐ φάγη ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ ζύμην· ἑπτὰ ἡμέρας φάγη ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ ἄζυμα – ἄρτον κακώσεως – ὅτι ἐν σπουδῇ ἐξήλθετε ἐξ Αἰγύπτου, ἵνα μνησθῆτε τὴν ἡμέραν τῆς ἐξοδίας ὑμῶν ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς ὑμῶν» (Deut. 16:3). This is another point of connection between the expanse of the wilderness and the confines of prison; cf. 1Kings (3Kings) 22:27, «...θέσθαι τοῦτον ἐν φυλακῇ καὶ ἐσθίειν αὐτὸν ἄρτον θλίψεως καὶ ὕδωρ θλίψεως...»

¹⁷² Cf. Ezek. 44:12-16: «Ἄνθ’ ὧν ἐλειτούργουν αὐτοῖς πρὸ προσώπου τῶν εἰδώλων αὐτῶν καὶ ἐγένετο τῷ οἴκῳ Ἰσραὴλ εἰς κόλασιν ἀδικίας, ἔνεκα τούτου ἤρα τὴν χειρὰ μου ἐπ’ αὐτούς, λέγει Κύριος ὁ θεός, καὶ οὐκ ἐγγιούσι πρὸς με τοῦ ἱερατεῦν μοι, οὐδὲ τοῦ προσάγειν πρὸς τὰ ἅγια υἰῶν τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ, οὐδὲ πρὸς τὰ ἅγια τῶν ἁγίων μου, καὶ λήμψονται ἀτιμίαν αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ πλανήσει ἣ ἐπλανήθησαν, καὶ κατατάξουσιν αὐτοὺς *φ υ λ ἄ σ σ ε ι ν φ υ λ α κ ἄ ς* τοῦ οἴκου εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς πάντα ὅσα ἂν ποιήσωσιν οἱ ἱερεῖς, οἱ Λευῖται, οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ Σαδδούκ, οἵτινες *ἐ φ υ λ ἄ ξ α ν τ ο τ ἄ ς φ υ λ α κ ἄ ς* τῶν ἁγίων μου ἐν τῷ πλανᾶσθαι οἶκον Ἰσραὴλ ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ. Οὗτοι προσάξουσιν πρὸς με τοῦ λειτουργεῖν μοι καὶ στήσονται πρὸ προσώπου μου τοῦ προσφέρειν μοι θυσίαν, στέαρ καὶ αἷμα, λέγει Κύριος ὁ θεός. Οὗτοι εἰσελεύσονται εἰς τὰ ἅγια μου καὶ οὗτοι προσελεύσονται πρὸς τὴν τράπεζάν μου τοῦ λειτουργεῖν μοι καὶ *φ υ λ ἄ ξ ο υ σ ι ν τ ἄ ς φ υ λ α κ ἄ ς* μου» (emphasis mine).

¹⁷³ Cf. *i.al.* 1Peter 2:19 («Τοῦτο γὰρ χάρις, εἰ διὰ συνειδήσιν Θεοῦ ὑποφέρει τις λύπας, πάσχων ἀδίκως») and Neh. 9:9 («Καὶ εἶδες τὴν ταπεινώσιν τῶν πατέρων ἡμῶν ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ τὴν κραυγὴν αὐτῶν ἠκουσας ἐπὶ θάλασσαν Ἐρυθρὰν»).

¹⁷⁴ «Θυσία τῷ Θεῷ πνεῦμα συντετριμμένον· καρδίαν συντετριμμένην καὶ τεταπεινωμένην ὁ Θεὸς οὐκ ἐξουθενώσει» (Ps. 50:18 (Masor. 51:17); cf. 33:19 (Masor. 34:18)). As a sacrifice made in prison, cf. Isaiah 61:1 «Πνεῦμα Κυρίου ἐπ’ ἐμέ οὗ εἵνεκεν ἔχρισέν με εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς· ἀπέσταλκέν με ἰάσασθαι τοὺς συντετριμμένους τῇ καρδίᾳ, κηρύξαι αἰχμαλώτοις ἄφεις καὶ τυφλοῖς ἀνάβλεψιν.»

evergreen paradise “over Jordan” that their god had in that very wilderness given their fathers in the law of Moses.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Deut. 11:9-12, 12:9-12. «Καὶ φυλάξεσθε πάσας τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ, ὅσας ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομαί σοι σήμερον, ἵνα ζητεῖτε καὶ πολυπλασιασθῆτε καὶ εἰσελθόντες κληρονομήσητε τὴν γῆν εἰς ἣν ὑμεῖς διαβαίνετε τὸν Ἰορδάνην ἐκεῖ κληρονομήσαι αὐτήν, ἵνα μακροημερεύσητε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἧς ὤμοσεν κύριος τοῖς πατράσιν ὑμῶν δοῦναι αὐτοῖς καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτῶν μετ’ αὐτούς γῆν ῥέουσαν γάλα καὶ μέλι. Ἔστιν γὰρ ἡ γῆ εἰς ἣν εἰσπορεύη ἐκεῖ κληρονομήσαι αὐτήν – οὐχ ὥσπερ ἡ γῆ Αἰγύπτου ἐστίν, ὅθεν ἐκπεπόρευσθε ἐκεῖθεν, ὅταν σπεύρωσιν τὸν σπόρον καὶ ποτίζωσιν τοῖς ποσίν ὡσεὶ κήπον λαχανείας. Ἡ δὲ γῆ εἰς ἣν εἰσπορεύη ἐκεῖ κληρονομήσαι αὐτήν, γῆ ὄρεινὴ καὶ πεδινή, ἐκ τοῦ ὑετοῦ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ πίεται ὕδωρ – γῆ ἦν Κύριος ὁ θεὸς σου ἐπισκοπεῖται αὐτήν. Διὰ παντὸς οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ Κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου ἐπ’ αὐτῆς ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ καὶ ἕως συντελείας τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ. [...] Οὐ γὰρ ἤκατε ἕως τοῦ νῦν εἰς τὴν κατάπαυσιν καὶ εἰς τὴν κληρονομίαν ἣν Κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν δίδωσιν ὑμῖν. Καὶ διαβήσεσθε τὸν Ἰορδάνην καὶ κατοικήσετε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἧς Κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν κατακληρονομεῖ ὑμῖν, καὶ καταπαύσει ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν ἐχθρῶν ὑμῶν τῶν κύκλῳ, καὶ κατοικήσετε μετὰ ἀσφαλείας, καὶ ἔσται ὁ τόπος ὃν ἂν ἐκλέξῃται Κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν ἐπικληθῆναι τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐκεῖ – ἐκεῖ οἴσετε πάντα ὅσα ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομαι ὑμῖν σήμερον: τὰ ὀλοκαυτώματα ὑμῶν καὶ τὰ θυσιάσματα ὑμῶν καὶ τὰ ἐπιδέκατα ὑμῶν καὶ τὰς ἀπαρχὰς τῶν χειρῶν ὑμῶν καὶ τὰ δόματα ὑμῶν καὶ πᾶν ἐκλεκτὸν τῶν δώρων ὑμῶν ὅσα ἐὰν εὔξησθε τῷ θεῷ ὑμῶν, καὶ εὐφρανθήσεσθε ἐναντίον Κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ ὑμῶν» (emphasis mine).

Chapter 3

Moschos: “In prison hast thou spent a pilgrimage And like a hermit overpass’d thy days.”

More are men’s ends mark’d than their lives before:

The setting sun, and music at the close,

As the last taste of sweets, is sweetest last,

Writ in remembrance more than things long past:

Though Richard my life’s counsel would not hear,

My death’s sad tale may yet undeaf his ear.

—John of Gaunt, *Richard II* 2.1

While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name:

those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost...

Ὅτε ἤμην μετ’ αὐτῶν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, ἐγὼ ἐτήρουν αὐτοὺς ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί σου:

οὐς δέδωκάς μοι ἐφύλαξα, καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐξ αὐτῶν ἀπώλετο...

—Intercessory Prayer (John 17:12)

Introduction

In the *Pratum Spirituale* John Moschos records a story about the unusual death and burial of a grazer – that is, an ascetic who subsists chiefly on a diet of grasses and other wild plants.¹⁷⁶ The narrators of the tale, a group of fathers belonging to a monastery situated near the mountains where the ascetic had roamed, recount how the grazer’s death initially went unnoticed because of the solitary life he’d led, despite the fact that he was “a great man in the eyes of God.”¹⁷⁷ They begin their story by explaining that the grazer died “in a certain small cave” and, they add, “we did not know [he had died], for we imagined that he had gone away to another wilderness.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ See Wortley 2001:38 for a discussion of grazers in the *Pratum*.

¹⁷⁷ PG 87(3).2941A (Wortley 67) «πάνυ μέγας κατὰ Θεὸν.» All English excerpts from the *Pratum* are taken from Wortley’s translation.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.* «Ἐτελεύτησεν δὲ εἰς ἓν μικρὸν σπήλαιον, καὶ οὐκ ἔγνωμεν· ἐνομιζομεν δὲ ἡμεῖς, ὅτι εἰς ἄλλην ἔρημον ἀπῆλθεν.»

The fathers thus assume what represents the likeliest end for someone who had made it his vocation to withdraw from society, sever all ties with his fellow men, and eke out an incredibly difficult but spiritually rewarding existence in a small corner of the wild. The anchorite's way of life offered him a profound connection with God and sometimes even great charismatic power, but inevitably it also meant that in the last hours of life he was alone and that after death there was no one immediately available to tend to his remains.¹⁷⁹

In this chapter I would like to examine some of the death narratives of anchorites in the *Pratum* and to see these solitaries not as permanent exiles from human society but as vessels of holiness who have chosen to defer their membership in the community of believers until after the moment of their death – not as a rejection of their fellow men but, on the contrary, for the latter's good. In this type of tale, the (temporary) reintroduction of the holy man's body into the world of the living comes about through a variety of posthumous miracles which ensure that the corpse is perfectly preserved until it is found or, perhaps more importantly, until an oral (and later written) record of the saint's life and works is established, which would otherwise have been lost. Through physical reconnection with the community of the faithful by means of burial in the place where these faithful live and, even more crucially, through the transmission of his narrative, the sanctity of his solitary life of devotion to God is not lost to his fellow Christians, who have him with them often in a physical, and always in a literary, sense.

I also wish to show how the narrative intention of each tale – that is, the act of collecting

¹⁷⁹ We will limit ourselves in this part of the discussion to tales where the deceased anchorite is casting about to be found. This kind of holy man who wishes to be restored to the community after death is one type in a wide and varied spectrum of ascetic "post-mortem" behaviors and there are many other tales of holy men whose bodies disappear after their passing. See for example tale 90 [PG 87(3).2943A-B (Wortley 72-73)] for an instance in the *Pratum* where a brother can no longer find the place where he buried two anchorites.

and recording the lives and deaths of these previously undiscovered anchorites – reflects Moschos’s own narrative agenda for the *Pratum* as a whole. Moschos’s years as a monk, pilgrim and collector of tales coincided with a period of cultural change and political upheaval, the late-sixth and early-seventh centuries, when the great flowering of desert monasticism was already well past its peak and disturbances from the East threatened to bring an end to the storied way of life for which the monks of that region were celebrated throughout the Christian world.¹⁸⁰ As he indicates in the proem, Moschos, along with his companion Sophronios, traveled through the Middle East culling the most radiant blooms of desert spirituality to set in his garland of virtue.¹⁸¹ They were engaged, essentially, in a sacred work of memory, as theirs was one of the last great collections of monastic religious tales to emerge from the end of antiquity.¹⁸² Moschos’s objective, as he explains, was to create an archive of his time and the people in it from which future generations might draw spiritual profit through the act of reading, a necessary supplement, in his opinion, for those wishing to live virtuously:

I have called the work the *meadow* on account of the delight, the fragrance and the benefit which it will afford those who come across it. For virtuous life and habitual piety do not merely consist

¹⁸⁰ For an in-depth study of Moschos in his contemporary context, see Booth 2013:90-139.

¹⁸¹ «Ἄλλοτε ἄλλου ἐν ἄλλαις ἀρεταῖς ὠραῖζομένου κάλλει τε καὶ εὐπρεπεῖα, ἐξ ὧν τὰ καλὰ δρεψάμενος ἄνη πλεκτὸν στέφανον ἀκηράτου λειμῶνος λαβῶν, προσφέρω σοι, τέκνον πιστότατον, καὶ διὰ σοῦ τοῖς πᾶσι» PG 87(3).2852B (Wortley 3).

¹⁸² For an overview of the principal collections of beneficial tales, see Wortley 2001:37 n.1. In chronological terms, the *Pratum* is the penultimate collection in Wortley’s list. Phil Booth (2013:91) also notes that memory and remembrance occupy a central role in the *Pratum* and other collections of *γεροντικά* which are “anthologies that memorialize the deeds and words of the eastern Mediterranean’s ascetic stars.” In the *Pratum* in particular, Booth finds evidence of this impulse to preserve memory with the intention of recognizing and incorporating a larger spectrum of saintly behavior beyond the familiar and respectable narratives of renunciation of the world and retreat into the wilderness. He shows how Moschos foregrounds the sanctity of “urban ascetics, pious clerics, and virtuous *kosmikoi*” and so shows “the existence of holiness outside the limited confines of the hagiographic desert, and articulates a vision of Christian collective that sees the potential of God’s will not in monasticism alone, but in various Christian vocations” (2013:117). As a corollary to these observations I would like to show in this chapter that Moschos not only gives his “wordly” saints a novel and validating literary treatment but that, in his hands, even some of his most “unworldly” saints – his hermits, solitaries and grazers – become through his recounting posthumously “socialized.”

of studying divinity; not only of thinking on an elevated plain about things as they are here and now. It must also include the description in writing of the way of life of others.¹⁸³

The *Pratum* is thus not simply a panorama of “the virtues of holy men who have distinguished themselves in our own times”¹⁸⁴ but a carefully curated *version* of Moschos’s experiences with the Eastern monastic world of his day inserted into a narrative framework with an overtly edifying purpose. As Booth has pointed out, the picture of the monastic world at the turn of the seventh century that emerges from Moschos’s text differs significantly from the one we find in other sources dating from the same era, even hagiographical ones: “Moschos presents [this world] as a paradise, a self-sufficient environment in which pious monks can depend on God for all their needs...The action, therefore, seems distant and detached – far removed from the urgent, vivid histories of Moschos’s Palestinian contemporaries.”¹⁸⁵ What fueled Moschos’s archiving instinct, besides a pastoral concern for the souls of his fellow and future Christians? Booth sees for the *Pratum* a dual function: “Moschos’s purpose, therefore, is both to memorialize the characters and communities of the Eastern deserts in the age before disaster, and to defend that same generation from accusations of moral decadence.”¹⁸⁶ Indeed, that age of disaster was upon them during Moschos’s lifetime and within a few decades of its completion, Sophronios, in his position as exiled patriarch of Jerusalem, would look upon the conquered lands of the Savior’s incarnation, which had also been the backdrop for so many of his own

¹⁸³ PG 87(3).2852B (Wortley 3).

¹⁸⁴ PG 87(3).2852B (Wortley 3).

¹⁸⁵ Booth 2013:91. But, as Booth goes to show in the rest of his chapter, despite the fact that Moschos offers what is in some regards a picture of the world rendered timeless by being stripped of its worrying political backdrop, reality intrudes unremittingly and the *Pratum* ends up being “both the final memorial of Greek monasticism’s golden age, and at the same time, an index of its crisis” (*idem*:127).

¹⁸⁶ Booth 2013:116.

experiences, with longing and regret.¹⁸⁷ The *Pratum* is thus both a textual artifact of its time and an archive of lives lived in piety which, but for John and Sophronios's efforts, would have been lost and so not yield to us their profit and delight.

In his study of earlier collections of religious tales, Derek Krueger argues that "for those separated from a saint's holy flesh by space and time, a saint's life offered for instruction a text in the place of a saint's body."¹⁸⁸ If a text could stand in for a sacred body, yet much more easily dispersed and more easily shared, the author of this text would presumably become the literary analogue of the guardian of a saint's relics. He could shape and control the saint's substitute body, that is to say the narrative: how it was displayed, presented and disseminated.¹⁸⁹ As custodians, John and Sophronios were not simply in possession of a single "textual body" but of a "corpus" of lives and experiences, a repository of descriptions of what Moschos in his proem calls "the way of life of others."¹⁹⁰ And it is fitting that the most important image of this "anthology" or "florilegium" is the blossoms of the field, a perfect symbol for bedecking the graves of the beloved dead in order to honor them and, by so doing, keep them in our own memory.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ See Usener 1886:501-516, especially pp. 508sq.

¹⁸⁸ Krueger 1999:218.

¹⁸⁹ Although an in-depth discussion of this matter is beyond the scope of this chapter, it should be noted that Moschos's "ownership" of the literary memories of the holy men and women allowed him to adjust the theological prism through which holy (and unholy) deeds are viewed. Within the world of the text, those who are righteous and blessed in the eyes of the Lord promote and adhere to the teachings of Chalcedonian orthodoxy whereas those who defy and reject them are often stymied in the spiritual progress and easily led into sin and error. For more on this, see Booth 2013:127-136.

¹⁹⁰ PG 87(3).2852B (Wortley 3). « Τὰς ἄλλων...πολιτείας.» John Haldon (1997:326) has expressed this idea in a different but equally useful way: "[N]arratives are ways of organizing experience in time, they reconstruct experience, whether first or second-hand, and they therefore act as patterns for future action."

¹⁹¹ The imperative verb of the familiar floral-themed Sermon on the Mount verses is striking: «...καταμάθετε τὰ κρίνα τοῦ ἀγροῦ...οὐδὲ Σολομῶν ἐν πάσῃ τῇ δόξῃ αὐτοῦ περιεβάλετο ὡς ἐν τούτων» (Matt. 6:28sq.; Luke 12:27 has *κατανοήσατε*).

In the past short while, a number of studies have appeared that deal either partially or exclusively with the *Pratum*.¹⁹² The variety of analytical approaches taken by these scholars shows that the *Pratum* is a multifaceted text able to bear a diversity of interpretations. Especially relevant to our present discussion is Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen's study, in which she devotes a chapter to death and dying.¹⁹³ Ihssen studies the tales about the burial of hermits in order to discover "to what degree Moschos's beneficial tales provide evidence of tension between the monastic community and the solitary figure."¹⁹⁴ Drawing on the analytical framework and terminology created by Richard Valantasis in his groundbreaking study,¹⁹⁵ she describes the following two types of asceticism. The first is the "combative model," which sees the ascetic, as Ihssen puts it, "in the process of moving from one identity to another, [becoming] a powerful individual largely due to the fact that their transformation includes spiritual or demonic warfare."¹⁹⁶ While this type of asceticism is principally focused on the ascetic's inner spiritual struggle, it can present a source of instability and conflict, should his behavior "threaten to redefine for larger bodies to what expectations the group might be held (either collectively or individually)."¹⁹⁷

The second type she discusses is the so-called "integrative mode": the ascetic who undergoes this sort of transformation does not create friction or opposition but, to use

¹⁹² See Ihssen 2014 (*John Moschos' Spiritual Meadow: Authority and Autonomy at the End of the Antique World*), Marinides 2014 ("Lay Piety in Byzantium, ca. 600-730.") and Booth 2013 (*Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity*).

¹⁹³ See Ihssen 2014:105-136.

¹⁹⁴ Ihssen 2014:118.

¹⁹⁵ Valantasis 1995:775-821.

¹⁹⁶ Ihssen 2014:118.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Valantasis' words, "enhances and enriches the subject's life within the dominant culture."¹⁹⁸ Ihssen argues that "the potential for conflict is introduced when a figure of authority or community attempts to impose an integrative model on an individual who wishes to be transformed and shaped by the combative model."¹⁹⁹ In the *Pratum* she sees a particularly acute possibility for this type of conflict to arise in the relationship between the abbot, a representative of a stable and hierarchical monastic structure, and a deceased solitary, who has lived and died outside of that structure and is, as such, not bound by its rules (or *rule*) and regulations.²⁰⁰ Ihssen's theory is subtle, but the tales which she uses as case studies to prove her argument's validity do not seem to us to afford sufficient analytical traction to support it. In order to analyze conflict, it is necessary to identify points of friction, where authority is explicitly contested, but – to our mind – the tales she has chosen for her discussion do not offer unequivocal evidence of resistance from solitaries towards monastic leaders who attempt to integrate their corpses back into the community.²⁰¹

Her discussion begins with a *précis* of tale 84, one with a plot similar to the one mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. In this tale, a grazer dies alone in a little cave and some time later appears in a dream to a certain Abba Julian, leader of a nearby monastery, to which the narrating fathers belong. He instructs this man to come collect his remains, saying "take some men and come hither: take me up from the place where I am lying, up on the

¹⁹⁸ Valantasis 1995:803.

¹⁹⁹ Ihssen 2014:118.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Tales 84, 87, 92 and 90.

mountain called The Deer.”²⁰² Abba Julian duly rounds up some brothers and they set off for the place indicated. They are, however, unable to find the location of the anchorite’s body because, the fathers say, “with the passage of time, the entrance to the cave [in which he lay] had been covered over by shrubs and snow.”²⁰³ The abbot is just about to give up when, with perfect dramatic timing, a deer appears at a small distance and begins scratching the ground with its hooves. This spot turns out to be the ascetic’s temporary resting place and the brothers are able to recover his still incorrupt body and bury him in the monastery. In a reassuring foreshadowing of the great resurrection, death has lost something of its sting and the grave something of its victory, and the righteous man’s “corruptible [has] put on incorruption” and “[we] know that [his] labour is not in vain in the Lord.”²⁰⁴ The grazer’s request is explicit textual evidence of his consent: he is the one that comes to Julian in order to be found. Outside of dreams, the physical pointer to him – the clue that leads the searching monks to the discovery of his body – is a deer, a peaceful and docile animal. It is both symbolic and significant that this harmless creature is moved about by divinity without resistance. The deer is connected to the saint, who, through his primitive mode of life and diet had grown to resemble it both in nature and in character. All of this points to his wanting to be found; there is no evidence to the contrary in the text. Ihssen reads it rather differently: “did the grazer...desire integration into

²⁰² PG 87(3).2941A (Wortley 67). «Λαβέ τινας, καὶ δεῦρο ἔπαρόν με ἐκ τοῦ τόπου ὅπου κείμαι, εἰς τὸ ὄρος τὸ λεγόμενον ἢ Ἐλαφος.»

²⁰³ PG 87(3).2941A (Wortley 68). «Ἦν γὰρ διὰ τὸν χρόνον ἢ εἴσοδος τοῦ σπηλαίου σκεπασθεῖσα τῶν ξύλων καὶ τῶν χιόνων.»

²⁰⁴ «Δεῖ γὰρ τὸ φθαρτὸν τοῦτο ἐνδύσασθαι ἀφθαρσίαν καὶ τὸ θνητὸν τοῦτο ἐνδύσασθαι ἀθανασίαν. Ὅταν δὲ τὸ φθαρτὸν τοῦτο ἐνδύσῃται ἀφθαρσίαν καὶ τὸ θνητὸν τοῦτο ἐνδύσῃται ἀθανασίαν, τότε γενήσεται ὁ λόγος ὁ γεγραμμένος, “Κατεπόθη ὁ θάνατος εἰς νίκος! Ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ νίκος; Ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ κέντρον;” Τὸ δὲ κέντρον τοῦ θανάτου ἢ ἁμαρτία, ἢ δὲ δύναμις τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ νόμος· τῷ δὲ Θεῷ χάρις τῷ δίδόντι ἡμῖν τὸ νίκος διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. Ὡστε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί, ἐδραῖοι γίνεσθε – ἀμετακίνητοι περισσεύοντες ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ τοῦ Κυρίου, πάντοτε εἰδότες ὅτι ὁ κόπος ὑμῶν οὐκ ἔστιν κενὸς ἐν Κυρίῳ» (1Cor. 15:53-58).

the community such that he made himself known through a vision and a miracle, or does this tale successfully create that opportunity for relation and integration on behalf of Abba Julian?"²⁰⁵ Her line of inquiry raises the question of the *use* of these stories, *i.e.* did Abba Julian have a particular agenda he was pursuing in telling this tale just so to John and Sophronios? Did he really "[force] [the corpse] into a relationship with him?"²⁰⁶ Did he then attempt to gloss over this act of "forced integration"²⁰⁷ by making John and Sophronios see events from a point of view which served the interests of his community? These are certainly interesting questions but, in the absence of extra-literary evidence to corroborate that Abba Julian did indeed have an aggressive acquisition policy for his monastery when it came to the remains of anchorites, such lines of inquiry can only be speculative. As things stand, we must take the text at its word and the story leads us to believe that the corpse was willing. Any attempt to "dig" one's way through the layers of narrative in order to uncover an underlying reality of resistance pushes uncomfortably against the natural contours of the story. Even within the thought-world of the text, the idea of a passively resistant anchorite corpse is less than compelling because, as Ihssen herself later concedes, "if bodies were transported to monasteries, it was only because anchorites allowed themselves to be transported."²⁰⁸ But, while Ihssen's reading of power structures/struggles does not easily arise from the text in the stories about dead anchorites, it appears to much greater advantage in her later discussion of tales where corpses' creation of resistance and conflict *are* evident and explicit (there are several of these in the *Pratum*

²⁰⁵ Ihssen 2014:120.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ Ihssen 2014:124.

concerning both monks and laymen).²⁰⁹ As for our grazer, if he were able to appear to Abba Julian in a dream in order to give consent for the removal of his body from its old habitat, he certainly would have been able to appear in order to deny it.²¹⁰

PART ONE: The Recovery of Anchorites' Bodies

The Grazer on Mount Elafos (Tale 84)

To return to our grazer, his initial *post-mortem* activities follow a familiar pattern that has long-established hagiographical antecedents stretching back to accounts of the deaths of Antony and Pachomios.²¹¹ At first, this tale's almost folkloric consistency of theme is perhaps its most striking feature: the remains of an ascetic whose outstanding characteristic is his adherence to an extremely restrictive vegetarian diet are revealed by the very creature he chooses to imitate. This symmetry is once again reinforced by the name of his dwelling place: Deer Mountain. The natural sympathy that often exists between an ascetic and the inhospitable environment he has chosen to make his abode, a hagiographical *topos* explored by Nancy Ševčenko in her article "The Hermit as Stranger in the Desert", here also functions – and this is essential – as a testimony or witness to the grazer's sanctity and his control over the landscape.²¹²

The wilderness not only yields to the intruding outsider but grows accomodating to his presence in life and especially in death. As Claudia Rapp has noted, "the wonderfully

²⁰⁹ See the section entitled "Combative Corpses" (Ihssen 2014:131-133).

²¹⁰ Cf. tale 31 of Anastasios of Sinai, in which he says that «Ἔθος γὰρ τοῦτο τοῖς ἀγίοις ἀναχωρηταῖς καὶ ἐν ζωῇ καὶ μετὰ τὸν θάνατον, ὅτε θέλουσιν φαίνεσθαι, καὶ ὅτε θέλουσιν κρύπτεσθαι τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ θεοῦ.»

²¹¹ Wortley 1996:290.

²¹² Ševčenko 2000:75-86.

transformed landscape is inhabited by men and women who themselves have been wonderfully transformed.”²¹³ Brushwood and snow form a protective barrier, creating a natural tomb for the holy man’s remains and guarding them from both the elements and from scavengers. Here the symbolism of the sheltering hand of nature constructing a bower to preserve a sacred body also implicitly speaks to those old anxieties, well known long before Christianity, concerning the fate of an unattended corpse.²¹⁴ The deer, a sentient part of nature, also miraculously shows its willingness to assist the grazer in the recovery of his body by revealing the corpse’s location.

The question that remains unanswered in the narrative, however, is why an ascetic who chose the snowy mountains as his habitat in life – an environment which surely denied him any rest, safety or comfort – would wish to be readmitted into the bosom of society in death. I suggest that the process of reintegration of the saint’s remains, his literal reincorporation into society, is the vehicle for the manifestation of his holiness: the fathers say, after all, that the grazer was “great with God” during his life, but it is his death that ultimately unleashes his thaumaturgical strength, whose purpose is to nourish the souls of those who receive the witness, be it at first or at second hand. (The ability posthumously to appear to others in dream

²¹³ Rapp 2006:102.

²¹⁴ The anxieties surrounding the proper burial of those who die under exceptional circumstances away from the society of men and in a hostile, destructive environment, which are addressed in the tales tradition implicitly through narrative, are treated directly in Anastasios of Sinai’s seventh-century *Questions and Answers*. Question 22, one of several that deal with this theme, asks «Πῶς τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὸ μυρίων θηρίων καὶ πετεινῶν καταβρωθὲν, ἢ θαλάττη καταποντισθὲν, καὶ ὑπὸ ἀμετρήτων ἰχθύων ἀναλωθὲν, καὶ ἐν τῷ βυθῷ ἀφοδευθὲν, καὶ διαλυθὲν, πῶς συνάγεται καὶ εἰς ἀνάστασιν ἔρχεται;» (Munitiz 2006:42). This question makes explicit the theological issues at stake surrounding the integrity of body at the time of the Resurrection, to which Anastasios duly responds that: «Εἰ γὰρ πιστεύομεν αὐτὸν παντοδύναμον εἶναι, πάντως ὁ ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἀγαγών, εὐκοπωτέως τὸ πλάσμα τὸ ὑπ’ αὐτοῦπλασθὲν καὶ διὰ θανάτου λυθὲν ἀναπλάσαι καὶ ἀνακαινίσαι δυνησεται» (*idem*:43). Nothing was beyond the power of God, though Anastasios confesses that many of the faithful secretly had, as he puts it, «...σκάνδαλον καὶ δισταγμὸν περὶ τῆς τῶν σωμάτων ἀναστάσεως» (*ibid.*). For the terror and fascination that could until fairly recently accompany unstable and potentially dangerous corpses, see section 37 («Βρुकόλακες») in Politis 1904:573-609 (tales 933-977).

and to bend wild animals to one's will is, in the context of the beneficial tales, an accepted indicator of extraordinary sanctity.)

Thus, the search party headed by Abba Julian not only carries the ascetic's body to his desired final resting place but is also able to witness *in situ* the miraculous conditions of his death and view the setting of the difficult life that earned him those spiritual gifts. Moreover, when they return to the monastery and have buried the man, they have his wilderness-acquired righteousness right there with them, in corporeal and narrative form, which they can share with subsequent visitors like John and Sophronios to the benefit, ultimately, of many souls. Indeed, the symbolism of what happens is stark: he lived as an ἔλαφος upon Mt. Elafos and (as a saint will do) was transfigured upon his mountain. He had eaten and incorporated into himself the products of the mountain, until he went *into* the mountain (in a cave) and was swallowed up by and incorporated into it,²¹⁵ as witnessed by the mountain itself in its symbolic form, the ἔλαφος. His initial "integration" was his becoming integral and one with the mountain. That is a place where monks can go off to seek holiness; but when the grazer in his transfigured state is brought into the monastery, then (so to speak), "the mountain comes to" them.

Fires in the Night (Tale 87)

The concern with recording and transmitting a witness of a holy life lived in seclusion is also the focus of another tale in the *Pratum*, number 87, which we alluded to in the beginning of this chapter. In this story, the death of an ascetic who had made his hermitage near the top of a mountain is revealed to two lay brothers in the valley below by means of extraordinary natural

²¹⁵ "I'm in the [mountain] and the [mountain]'s in me."

phenomena. The framing narrative immediately foreshadows the tale's happy conclusion as the two lay brothers relate the holy man's story to John and Sophronios while standing by the tomb in the church where he has been laid to rest. Seven years ago, the two men begin, they saw lights resembling fires, burning on the mountain's peak at night. Attributing the strange spectacle somehow to wild animals, they went up to investigate but could discover no evidence of the fire they had clearly seen. But the lights – which burned but did not consume, like the fire that blazed for Moses on a mountain in the wilderness – continued to appear nightly for three months. Finally they resolved to return by night to where they had seen the lights. They find the spot and wait until dawn, when they chance upon a small cave from which the light emerges. Inside the cave, they see a deceased anchorite dressed in a tunic and a mantle, clutching a silver cross. Most remarkable among all these extraordinary incidents, however, is the fact that the anchorite has left them a note, which reads "I, the unworthy John, died in the fifteenth indiction."²¹⁶ After some quick calculation, the two men realize the anchorite has been dead for a good seven years, even though he looked, they say, "as though he had died that very day."²¹⁷

This tale represents in a number of ways an interesting departure from the hagiographical commonplaces usually associated with the deaths of holy men and women. Often when a holy person dies and his remains are accessible, his sanctity in life is underscored by the miraculous preservation of the corpse in death. The body remains suspended in a perfect state, unaffected by the ravages of time, something we will soon return to in greater detail. Whereas in accounts of saints known for their relics there is emphasis on the indefinite

²¹⁶ PG 87(3).2915A (Wortley 70). «Ἐτελεύτησα ἐγὼ Ἰωάννης ὁ ταπεινὸς ἐν ἰνδικτιῶνι πεντεκαιδεκάτῃ.»

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* «Οὕτως δὲ ἦν, ὡς σήμερον τελειωθείς.»

preservation of the saintly body, John's remains are kept intact for the purpose of recovery, as his note and the miraculous burning of the fire reveal his intention to make his presence known and to be found. Unlike Saint Antony, that saintly prototype *par excellence*, who desired that the location of his grave remain unknown, the humble John and the other anchorites under consideration in this section choose to withdraw from the society of men during their lifetime but wish to be reabsorbed into it after death.²¹⁸ This reintegration of his remains renders the holiness he has gained unto his fellow men both physically through the grave that is visitable in church and, more lastingly, through the narrative that the two elders pass on to John and Sophronios. John's desire to be readmitted into the fellowship of believers also affords an opportunity for the tale's central miraculous event, which bears witness to his extraordinary life and death: the appearance of the miraculous nighttime fires that alert the two fathers to the location of the holy man's body, a phenomenon indicating a continued synergy between the anchorite and his natural surroundings, surroundings which develop his character but do not overwhelm him.

Abba George and Peter the Grazer (Tale 92)

The question of the dead anchorite's consent is made even more explicit in one of the stories embedded in tale 92. The story forms the third element of a narrative triptych told by a certain Abba George, archimandrite of the monastery of St. Theodosios near Jerusalem.²¹⁹ George

²¹⁸ Significantly, the anchorite in question seems to have found his little corner of wilderness within viewing distance of the inhabited world. Saint Antony asks his disciples to hide his body in order to avoid the Egyptian custom of displaying the corpse in the home to honor the dead. Another compelling reason to hide his remains would surely have been to avoid making his tomb a place of pilgrimage. See *Vita Antonii* §90-91 (Bartelink 364-371).

²¹⁹ See PG 87(3).2949B (Wortley 74).

himself is the narrator of all three episodes, but the first two stories are short vignettes of the humble and patient nature of a Cappadocian brother – a member of the archimandrite’s flock also named George – who busies himself with menial tasks in and around the monastery. The final miracle, which features our archimandrite as protagonist, involves the discovery of a hermit’s body during the construction of a new church. While the last tale is of special interest to our study, I should first like briefly to consider the first two tales as a type of indirect character witness for the abbot in his role as steward of the community and as evidence of his quiet admiration for humble acts of sanctity that remain hidden from the sight of most.

The narration and presentation of the three tales also seems to steer the audience subtly towards a sense of sympathy and respect for the archimandrite; each of the three stories begins with the phrase «Διηγῆσατο ἡμῖν...λέγων...», in itself not an uncommon formula in the *Pratum* but one whose formulaic repetition in this particular set of narrations calls to mind Claudia Rapp’s observations regarding the use of the verb in the Scriptures where, according to her findings, “after someone has an encounter with God, after someone witnesses a miracle, or whenever someone has a meaningful dream, he announces this experience by means of *diegesis*.”²²⁰

The first little story that the archimandrite tells Sophronios and John sees the brethren making bread in the monastery’s bakery while George the Cappadocian, a brother evidently responsible for some of the monastery’s grimmer tasks, is tending to the fire.²²¹ Hoping to cause trouble for him, some of the brothers mischievously remove the cleaning implements needed to

²²⁰ Rapp 1998:444.

²²¹ Krueger (2004:101) notes a parallel to this story in the Life of St. George of Choziba (ch. 23), who is also charged with cleaning duties. Krueger sees this as a practical expression of humility: “Like Christ, this noble monk lowered himself in the service of others.”

clear the ash from oven. George, however, is unperturbed by their prank: “so he went into the oven and wiped it out with his garment. And he came out again not in the least harmed by the fire.”²²² The young Cappadocian is preserved through his innocence, industry and obedience and, in an important piece of foreshadowing for the final miracle in the triptych, emerges from the oven’s searing heat with body unscathed and intact. The abbot doesn’t marvel at the quiet display of sanctity but does reprimand its instigators for having put the unlikely miracle-worker to the test.

The second anecdote concerning George the Cappadocian is even shorter but again shows him employing a measure of humble thaumaturgy in the discharge of his menial tasks: one day George is herding swine when two lions approach, intending to make a meal of the animals. He brandishes his staff and chases the lions down to the banks of the river Jordan. Success at lion-taming was certainly not a given for the monks who populated Moschos’s world and instances of the havoc these wild animals could wreak on humans and livestock are also recorded in the *Pratum*.²²³

The narrator, the archimandrite, is brief in his description of the event, but clearly considered these two anecdotes (even if a bit lacking in plot by themselves) important enough to merit transmission and recording. The purpose of making the archimandrite witness and narrator of these two small miracles, we would argue, is that it shows him to be a careful and

²²² PG 87(3).2949B (Wortley 74). «Εἰσηλθεν οὖν, καὶ ἐσφόγγισεν τὸν φουῶνον εἰς τὸ ἱμάτιον αὐτοῦ· καὶ μηδὲν τὸ σύνολον βλαβεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πυρὸς ἐξήλθεν.»

²²³ Lions figure frequently in the *Pratum*, usually as source of expected evil or of unexpected good. As we shall see below in the pseudo-Moschan tale from *Parisinus graecus* 1596, when lions are articed to human masters this is usually done with a specific psychopelitic purpose in mind: to show the mastery-through-sanctity of a certain *abba* over the king of the beasts (e.g. tales 2, 125 and 181) or with a moralizing purpose underlying it (e.g. tales 18, 163, 167 and 229). Not all lions were candidates for reform though: in addition to the ones valiantly chased off by Abba George in the present story, tale 57 features a lion who kills many people and is then banished by a local stylite for his misdeeds.

involved overseer of his community, sensitive to the needs – and potential for holiness – of even the humblest of the brethren: he can see that the one who scours the ovens may nevertheless reflect the miracle of the Three Hebrew Youths,²²⁴ and a even a simple watcher of pigs (“the good swineherd”) might do as the giant-slaying Psalmist did while still a youngest brother watching over the sheep.²²⁵ Through his narration, the archimandrite reveals that he is “in tune” with subtle manifestations of holiness; this tune will have its crescendo when, by re-introducing Peter the Grazer into the structure of the church and giving the old hermit his final requiem, he is the instrument of the ecclesiastical preservation of wilderness sanctity that we already saw above in tales 84 and 87.

The final tale recounts an occasion when the abbot George, as mentioned, is involved in the construction of a church. As the men are digging the foundation, George has a nighttime vision in which

a monk, very much an ascetic, appeared to me in my sleep. He wore a tunic of sack-cloth and on his shoulders he had an over-garment made of rushes. In a gentle voice he said to me: “Tell me,

²²⁴ For two other well-known stories from the Moschan corpus on the same theme (where children remain miraculously unharmed by the flames of the burning oven in which they are enclosed), see BHG 1322n or Nissen 8 (see Nissen 1938:361-365 for the Greek text and Wortley 205-210 for the English translation) and BHG 1076k or Mioni 12 (see Mioni 1951:93-94 for the Greek and Wortley 227-229 for the English). Incidentally, while neither of the tales features the oven of a bakery, as in the case of Abba George, the motor of the plot in both these tales hinges on the consumption of bread. In these very folkloric tales, little Jewish boys are condemned to die in the flames by their wicked fathers for having partaken of the Eucharist. Through divine intervention, they are preserved and the story ends happily with the punishment of the cruel parent and the conversion of the child to Christianity. The biblical precedent for all three tales is of course the fiery furnace in Daniel 3.1-30, those three youths’ virtue being in abstention, these’ in partaking. For an in-depth discussion of this motif and its *Nachleben* in East and West, see John Duffy 2012:313–322.

²²⁵ “And David said unto Saul, ‘Thy servant kept his father’s sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock. And I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth. And when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he hath defied the armies of the living God.’ David said moreover, ‘The LORD that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine.’ And Saul said unto David, ‘Go, and the LORD be with thee.’...And David put [Saul’s armor] off him. And he took his staff in his hand, and chose him five smooth stones out of the brook, and put them in a shepherd’s bag [ἐν τῷ καθίῳ τῷ ποιμενικῷ] which he had, even in a scrip; and his sling was in his hand: and he drew near to the Philistine” (1Sam. 17:34-40).

Abba George, did it really seem to you, sir, that after so many labours and so much endurance, I should be left outside the church you are building?" Out of respect for the elder, I said to him, "Who in fact are you, sir?" He said: "I am Peter the Grazer of the holy Jordan."²²⁶

George immediately realizes what kind of man his nighttime visitor is: the figure's coarse attire (including a garment of rushes – not an unusual accoutrement for a hermit but a fitting touch for someone who claims the banks of a river as his abode) and the gentle voice which he uses to issue his reprimand make the grazer instantly recognizable to George as someone who is *πάνυ ἀσκητήης* even before identifying himself.²²⁷ In his work on visionary literature in the mediaeval West, Aron Gurevich suggests that those who experienced visions were able to understand and "evaluate [their] own individual experience, practical or spiritual," when they could "correlate it with tradition."²²⁸ In other words, the visionary is able to make sense of what he sees because it connects with his understanding of the world around him, which is shaped and informed by the cultural tradition of which he is a part. George recognizes and accepts the apparition for *what* he is because his appearance and demeanor correspond to a well-established model of holiness in his cultural tradition;²²⁹ the only point on which his curiosity remains to be satisfied is the question of *who* this elder is. Accordingly, when the grazer applies for inclusion in the church structure on account of his ascetic struggles, George, "out of respect for the worth of the

²²⁶ PG 87(3).2949D (Wortley 74-75). «Φαίνεται μοι κατὰ τοὺς ὕπνους μοναχὸς τις πάνυ ἀσκητήης, φορῶν ἀπὸ σειῶα κολόβιον, καὶ μικρὸν εἰς τοὺς ὤμους αὐτοῦ ἐπιρριπτάριον ἀπὸ ψιαθίου· καὶ λέγει μοι πραεῖα τῆ φωνῆ· Εἰπέ, κύρι ἀββᾶ Γεώργι, ἀπλῶς ἔδοξέν σοι μετὰ τοσοῦτους κόπους καὶ τοσαύτην ἀσκησιν ἔξω με ἔασαι οὐ κτίσεις ναοῦ; Ἐγὼ δὲ τὸ ἱεροπρεπὲς τοῦ γέροντος αἰδεσθεῖς, λέγω αὐτῷ· Ὅντως γὰρ σὺ, κύριε, αὐτὸς τις ὑπάρχεις; Ὁ δὲ ἔφη Ἐγὼ εἰμι Πέτρος ὁ βοσκὸς τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰορδάνου. »

²²⁷ For more on monastic attire and the weaving of rushes, see Talbot 1987:231 and Maguire 1993:39-70.

²²⁸ Gurevich 1992:125.

²²⁹ As Gurevich explains it, "an event possessed authenticity only insofar as it could be placed under a corresponding model" (1992:125).

elder,”²³⁰ only asks him his name. The following day, when George alters the building plans of the church in order to oblige Peter’s request, he finds the grazer’s body “just as I had seen him in my sleep” and creates for him a fitting tomb in the church, where he is buried.²³¹ Peter’s agency in the recovery of his body is significant: his appearance in Abba George’s dream suggests that even *post mortem* his spirit retains a careful solicitude for the fate of the flesh it has cast off. Moreover, he explicitly tells Abba George that he understands the process of honoring his corpse with a burial place inside the church as a reward for his ascetic struggles. In none of the other tales is that connection made with such unequivocal clarity.²³²

Of all the tales under examination in this chapter, this one is perhaps also the most programmatic expression of what I understand to be one of the principal objectives of John and Sophronios’s literary undertaking: the incorporation of the holy man’s body into the foundation of the the monastery’s new church – an appropriate resting place for one called Πέτρος – results in the construction of a *μνημεῖον*. The building plans are altered and a place of memory and remembrance established where visitors may come to inquire after the identity of the interred person and what his story was (as we saw happen in tale 87, where the hermit’s story, like his

²³⁰ PG87.2952A (Wortley 75) «Τὸ ἱεροπρεπὲς τοῦ γέροντος αἰδεσθεῖς.»

²³¹ PG87.2952A (Wortley 75). «Ὡς καὶ ἐν τοῖς ὕπνοις αὐτὸν ἔθεασάμην.» Gilbert Dagron (1991:31) discusses an interesting parallel to this but based around the recognition of persons in a vision from iconography in a church from the *Miracles of St. Artemios*: “In the miracles of St. Artemios, a girl of twelve is snatched from ‘the angels of death’ by the saint and returns to earth. Those close to her ask her what the angels she had seen were like. They resemble, she answers, those painted upright in the church of the Prodomos...[H]er personal world was totally impregnated with the imaginary world around her, that of an entire Christian civilization, which was conceived precisely in order to avoid strong divergences.”

²³² Ihssen again sees in this tale the possibility that it is designed to suppress any hint of Peter’s resistance to being incorporated into George’s building program for the greater prestige of the archimandrite’s institution but – as I have argued above – such an interpretation, to my mind, is not easily supported in the text itself. See Ihssen 2014:122.

body, is framed within his tomb in the local church).²³³ Like Abba George, John and Sophronios mean to recollect, preserve and honor the memory of holy men and women whose stories might otherwise have been lost or remained hidden. They also construct a kind of *μνημεῖον* for Peter, but their monument is not a tomb for storing physical remains but rather a repository where memory and narrative stand in for the absent body to which a reader does not have access.²³⁴ Their creative role as builders of textual monuments can be restated in the following way: John and Sophronios through their inclusion of Abba George's account "did not simply preserve the story" of Peter the Grazer's life and death, "but, in fact, [they] created it."²³⁵

Salvaging the Dead (Tale 120)

In the previously-discussed tale, the grazer Peter plays a pivotal role in securing the discovery of his body and its subsequent interment in the new local monastery church. He does so by personally appearing to its archimandrite and making an urgent appeal to the man's sense of reverence for his ascetic achievement. The grazer on Deer Mountain (tale 84) also appears in a dream to the abbot of the monastery where he will eventually be buried; and John the Humble (tale 87), though choosing a different medium (writing), is also able to communicate the details of his demise to his future discoverers. The final tale we will examine in this section is

²³³ In classical and late antiquity, much more than today, Greek and Roman gravestones asked that passers-by stop for a moment and think upon the buried. Simonides' epitaph for the 300 («ὦ ξεῖν', ἀγγέλλειν Λακεδαιμονίοις ὅτι τῆδε / κείμεθα, τοῖς κείνων ῥήμασι πειθόμενοι») is only the most famous of these.

²³⁴ See Krueger 1999:218. Turning from sight to hearing, we might modify Wren's epitaph and make it «Lector, si monumentum requiris, [ausculta]!»

²³⁵ I borrow here from Elizabeth Castelli, who in her book on memory and martyrdom (2004:25) observes that the authors of accounts of martyrdoms "did not simply *preserve* the story of persecution and martyrdom, but, in fact, *created* it."

remarkable for its *lack* of information about the anchorites who are meant to be recovered, taken back to civilization and buried there. We know virtually nothing about the three elders whose bodies are the subject: their names are never mentioned and there are no notes or visions to explain how they found themselves in those inhospitable surroundings, what made them stay and how long they had been there. Had they gotten lost, or was it through an unfortunate mishap that they became stranded in the place where they died? The text simply does not tell us.²³⁶ More than any of our previous deceased solitaries, these anchorites are “defined only by a few simple lines about their death.”²³⁷ The text reveals only where their bodies were found, what they looked like in death and, perhaps most significant of all (for otherwise there would be no story) the fact that divinity intervened to allow for the recovery of their remains.

The story goes as follows: while John and Sophronios are staying at the monastery of Raïthou, a coastal settlement located at the south-western edge of the Sinai peninsula on the Gulf of Suez, they hear a curious tale from some fishermen from Pharan.²³⁸ Resonances from

²³⁶ The following tale (no. 121) forms a companion piece to this one as its narrators are the elders who interred the remains of the three anchorites at Raïthou. The narrative provides much fuller information about another set of deceased anchorites and the manner of their life and death. In this tale, an abba and his disciple (both named Gregory) die from dehydration on the desert island which they inhabited. The boat which they used to make trips to and from the mainland had been loosened from its moorings and drifted away, thus cutting them off from their access to water and provisions. Like the hermit in tale 87, they leave a written record of their death, although this one is rather more heart-wrenching: «Invenerunt autem in dorso testudinis, ita scriptum: Abbas Gregorius Pharonites, [duodetriginta] diebus aquam non libens defunctus est, ego autem, dies triginta septem transegi, ex quo non bibi» (PG87.2983-84). Interestingly, unlike with the discovery of the bodies of the three anchorites, there is no mention of a miraculous event that occasions the discovery of the remains of the two Gregories. The narrator does mention that both their bodies were found “intact.” PG87.2983-84 (Wortley 99).

²³⁷ The phrase is Brenda Ihssen’s; see Ihssen 2014:116.

²³⁸ Tales 115-121 [PG 87(3).2980B-2984C *sqq.* (Wortley 95-99)] are all set in or around the monastery of Raïthou. According to Caner, Raïthou was one of the “three major Christian centers on the southern peninsula,” the others being the Holy Mountain and the oasis town of Pharan (modern Feiran), mentioned above (Caner 2010:2). Pharan was located inland to the north formed the most important urban center on the peninsula. Tale 127 of the *Pratum* indicates that the monastery on the mountain fell under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the bishop of Pharan (Caner 2010:15). Pharonite fishermen and others, such as merchants and traders, who depended on the sea for their livelihood, kept a “permanent base” near Raïthou “for fishing, trade and importing supplies” as their own city was land-locked (Caner 2010:36). To get an idea of the distances between the two places, Caner mentions that “the walk

two well-known events in the Gospels twine lightly through this brief narrative and strengthen its salvific message. The first of these is the conversion of Peter and his brother by the Lord at the Sea of Galilee, for these fishermen, like Peter and his brother, became by divine intervention fishers of men, though their catch consists not of the quick but of the dead. While the fishers are making their way home from a successful fishing trip “on the other side of the Red Sea[,]” adverse weather conditions force them to drop anchor at a place called Pteleos and await a calm sea.²³⁹ For ninety days they are marooned in this spot until they decide to disembark: “venturing into that great wilderness, we found three anchorites dead under one stone. They wore habits of palm fibre and their cloaks were lying beside them.”²⁴⁰ Instead of finding an empty tomb behind the stone (as did the Lord’s disciples three days after his death), these fishermen discover a temporary resting place where the miraculous resides in the *presence* of the three bodies rather than in their absence. The miraculous properties of the corpses themselves are confirmed when the stranded men begin their own divinely-inspired salvage work: as soon as they bring the elders’ remains on board, the weather turns and they are able to weigh anchor and continue home: “We brought the three corpses to the ship and at once the stormy sea subsided. The

from Raïthou to Pharan took three days” (2010:22). Two additional tales involving Raïthou are tale 16 (Wortley 12) and tale 153 (Wortley 127-128). For more information on the monastic settlements of the Sinai Peninsula see Flusin 2006:193-194 and especially Caner 2010:17-39, including the useful maps on pp. 288*sq.* of that volume.

²³⁹ As Wortley notes (Wortley 1992:250), there is a *lacuna* in the text from beginning in the fourth quarter of tale 120, (PG 87(3).2984C (Wortley 98)) till the end of tale 122 (PG 87(3).2985-6 (Wortley 100)). Migne supplements the missing Greek with a Latin translation of the *Pratum* by the Florentine scholar Ambrogio Traversari (1346-1439). Since no parallel translation is required from Greek into Latin, Migne does not adhere to his usual two-column format but rather, prints the Latin text across the entire page. Booth (2013:91n5) notes that Traversari’s translations are drawn from an apparently more complete Florentine manuscript, known as the F manuscript. For more on the *Pratum*’s complicated and problematic textual tradition, see Wortley:1992:xi-xiii and Booth 2013:91 (especially notes 4 and 5), which also point to the copious relevant literature on the subject. On the same subject, see also Binggeli 2014:146n18.

²⁴⁰ PG 87(3).2984C *sqq.* (Wortley 98-99): «καὶ διερχόμενοι τὴν μεγίστην ἔρημον ἐκεῖνην, ἠύρομεν ὑπὸ μιᾶς πέτρας τρεῖς ἀναχωρήτας τεθνηκότας...indutos colobiis de sibino, melotesque illorum juxta eos erant positae.»

winds shifted into a favorable direction. We sailed with a following wind and came to Raïthou.”²⁴¹ The purpose of this restoration – for so concludes the narrative – is that the three anchorites can find their final resting place at Raïthou: “the fathers buried them, together with elders of former times.”²⁴² The absence of specific details in this tale, both about what brought the anchorites to this remote place and how the process of recovery was to be achieved, invites a greater variety of interpretations than the previous tales. The fishermen, after all, find the bodies under a stone and thus the resolution of their problem is achieved, more or less, by a process trial and error. It is only after a waiting ninety days for the weather to change that they venture on land and light upon the means of their departure. I would like to offer an interpretation that I believe fits well with Moschos’s narrative program as I have outlined it in the introduction: the three brethren, like the two Gregories described in the subsequent tale, were during their lifetime likely connected to the community at Raïthou. According to Bernard Flusin, during the period in which Moschos was writing it was uncommon for ascetics in the Sinai peninsula to linger in permanent solitude; periods of complete seclusion were part and parcel of the monastic life but these would usually be followed by or alternated with a return to one of the semi-anchoretic or coenobitic establishments which dotted the landscape.²⁴³ Instead of withdrawing inland to find solitude in the sandy barrens of the desert, these brethren chose the marine environment of the coastal islands along the peninsula for their *anachoresis*. Despite

²⁴¹ *Idem*: «Accepimus itaque illos, et duximus ad navem, continuoque æstuans mare tranquillum factum est, et venti contrari opportunos conversi sunt. Et transfretavimus secundis ventis, et venimus in Raythu.»

²⁴² *Ibid.*: «Patres autem sepelierunt eos cum antiquis senibus.»

²⁴³ Flusin 2006:198. In his study of monasticism in the Sinai desert at the time of John Klimakos (late 6th – early 7th cent.), Flusin writes that «les forms extrêmes de l’anachorèse –la parfaite solitude au désert, dans un ermitage ou une grotte–, si elles sont attestées, semblent souvent avoir été pratiquées de façon temporaire.» For an example of such hybrid monastic practices, see Anastasios of Sinai’s tale I.31 in which Anastasios and his companion Kosmas live at a hermitage at Gouda but set out every morning seeking solitude and *hesychia* in the desert.

the difficulties and dangers facing those wishing to navigate it, Flusin notes that the Red Sea did not represent «*un obstacle infranchissable*» for those traveling between Sinai and the mainland.²⁴⁴ The two Gregories are a good example of monks willing to brave the sea, as their remote abode is not supplied with a source of fresh water and thus they must undertake trips to the mainland to fetch provisions. It is probable, then, that the *anachoresis* of the three brothers in this “great wilderness” was of a temporary nature and that their deaths create an undesired permanent separation from the community at Raïthou. The restoration of the link is accomplished through the fisherman from Pharan, whose stated intention from the very first was to sail to Raïthou. They become the unwitting instruments of salvage in the hands of the Lord, who intends to restore the plenitude of the monastic body – to reattach, even after death, the severed members of a spiritual community. Thus, even in death the anchorites’ connection to a community of believers (in this case a monastic community) is persistent enough to be (re)established. The way that their interment is described is also revealing: through the burying of their bodies the anchorites are joined to “the elders of former times” and become members of a community, a body of men whose traditions and memory stretches back into the distant past. But perhaps even more importantly, along with the bodies themselves, the fisherman bring back to the community of living brethren the *story* of the miraculous discovery of their remains. And this, with every telling and retelling to visitors such as John and Sophronios, constitutes the greater and more far-reaching act of “re-membering.”

²⁴⁴ Flusin 2006:193-4.

A Sea-Change Into Something Rare and Strange (Tale 76)

In all of the tales we have encountered so far, the body of a deceased anchorite, sanctified by ascetic struggle or made holy by an ascetic death, retains a measure of the sanctity its owner bestowed on it in life even when spirit and flesh have been separated.²⁴⁵ We may note that it is not expressly mentioned in the text that any of the recovered bodies take on the properties of *λείψανα* (in the Christian cultic sense of the word, by which I mean especially thaumaturgic relics). But, as Ihssen has pointed out, the possession of relics was indubitably a boon to a monastic community, given that the saint's remains were a posthumous repository of his or her holiness.²⁴⁶ As a point of contrast, I would like briefly to examine another curious story from the *Pratum* (tale 76), which represents an interesting and very dramatic reversal of this theme: in this narrative, a ship is prevented from continuing its journey while the body of a (living) sinner remains on board.²⁴⁷ The story is reported by an Abba Palladios, a Thessalonian monk attached to the *Lithazomenon* monastery, located to the west of Alexandria, who in turn heard it from a shipmaster.²⁴⁸ A sea journey is interrupted when the ship, sailing to an unknown destination,

²⁴⁵ Elizabeth Castelli, in her study of the *Life* of St. Syncletica, observes that "asceticism is...described as a rehearsal for death, the occasion when the body is emptied of life. Comparing the ascetic body to a well-bucket, Syncletica speaks of ascetic practice as the process of emptying the body, rendering it thereby the more effective bearer of 'every solicitude' towards the soul" (1992:141). Our texts suggest that if the ascetic is able to make his or her body sufficiently "empty" in life in order to direct every solicitude towards the soul, the soul (or the Lord), after the moment of death, will reciprocate that concern for the fate of the flesh it has cast off.

²⁴⁶ Ihssen 2014:121.

²⁴⁷ PG 87(3).2928D-2929D (Wortley 57-59).

²⁴⁸ Palladios is the narrator of tales 69-76 and 176 and is also mentioned in tale 171. It is unclear whether Palladios is the abbot of this monastery or whether he is simply a member of their community. In tale 67, PG 87(3).2920A (Wortley 51), we learn that he «ἔχοντα τὸ μοναστήριον αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν λιθαζόμενον...» but this doesn't necessarily mean he is the abbot. In tale 171, PG 87(3).3037C (Wortley 140), Moschos tells the story of a certain reader and calligrapher called Zoilos who, having died, «ἐτάφη εἰς τὸν λιθαζόμενον, ἐν τῷ μοναστηρίῳ τοῦ ἀββᾶ Παλαδίου» but the mention of Palladios might just be intended to refresh the reader's memory about the monastery's connection with this (relatively) prominent earlier narrator. For more information on the *Lithazomenon* monastery, see Gascou 2003:657-8.

languishes in a windless pocket on the high seas for a fortnight, even though ships sailing around them are attended by favorable winds and making good progress. The shipmaster sees that any efforts on the part of his crew to alter the situation are bootless and so he turns to prayer. While in prayer, he hears a voice (but sees no face) speaking to him: “throw out Maria and you will make good way.”²⁴⁹ It transpires that there is a woman named Mary on board who is guilty of an unspeakable crime: she was in love with a soldier who refused to marry her, since she was a mother. In a bid to secure his love, she killed her children and declared herself at liberty to enter into an alliance with the man. Her potential suitor, having learned this information, would have nothing more to do with her. (The name of this infanticide, while a common one, may be deliberately chosen to make her an “anti-Mary” in matters maternal.²⁵⁰) Understanding the divine command, the shipmaster tricks the wretched woman into boarding a dinghy, which promptly sinks, thus freeing the ship of its burdensome cargo and ensuring a speedy onwards journey.²⁵¹ The story of the drowning of Mary acts as a counterpoint to the tales of holy corpses examined previously: of itself a body does not have inherent value to a community. Rather, it is the deeds that are wrought while its occupant is in the flesh that will determine its worth, either for good or for ill. Just as the corpses of the deceased hermits are

²⁴⁹ PG 87(3).2929A (Wortley 58). «Βάλε κάτω Μαρίαν, καὶ εὐπλοεῖς.»

²⁵⁰ Cf. Matt. 1:18-20, 24sq., «...Μνηστευθείσης γὰρ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ Μαρίας τῷ Ἰωσήφ, πρὶν ἢ συνελθεῖν αὐτούς, εὐρέθη ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου. Ἰωσήφ δὲ ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς, δίκαιος ὢν καὶ μὴ θέλων αὐτὴν παραδειγματίσαι, ἐβουλήθη λάθρᾳ ἀπολύσαι αὐτήν. Ταῦτα δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐνθυμηθέντος, ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος Κυρίου κατ’ ὄναρ ἐφάνη αὐτῷ, λέγων, Ἰωσήφ, υἱὸς Δαβὶδ, μὴ φοβηθῆς παραλαβεῖν Μαριάμ τὴν γυναῖκά σου· τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ Πνεύματός ἐστιν Ἁγίου...Διεγερθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰωσήφ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕπνου, ἐποίησεν ὡς προσέταξεν αὐτῷ ὁ ἄγγελος Κυρίου καὶ παρέλαβεν τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, καὶ οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν αὐτὴν ἕως οὗ ἔτεκεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τὸν πρῶτότοκον...»

²⁵¹ Tale 173 offers a variation on the “marooned at sea” theme. In this tale, an anchorite «οὗτος ἠναγκάσθη διὰ χρεῖαν τινὰ κατελθεῖν ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει· καὶ δὴ εἰσηλθὲν ἐν πλοίῳ» (PG 87.3.3042C (Wortley 142)). The ship is similarly afflicted by adverse weather conditions and when the supply of fresh water is running dangerously low, the anchorite prays to God and works a miracle that turns the briny seawater into potable water in front of the rejoicing crew and passengers.

recovered by their communities and are viewed as a sacred and desirable objects because they are a material witness to a life lived in holiness, so the body of Mary is the repository of her past sins. Because she did not repent of her sins, contact with and proximity to her body causes those around her to suffer for her misdeeds as well. God is willing, however, to suspend the action of his vengeance until she has been singled out, but he does create a circumstance in which this process of singling out becomes a necessity. But, just as in the case of the hermits, the thing that does remain, even when the body is no longer accessible, is the story. The body is lost but the story is preserved, not so much (in this case) as a blessing but as a warning. Her miasma is swallowed up in that all-cleansing place, the sea.²⁵²

²⁵² Cf. Iliad 1.313sq. (quoted also at Eudocia's *Homero-centones* «Περὶ Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ», line 339; Ludwich 1897:104). The obvious scriptural analogue to this story is that of Jonah. But it is almost a mirror-image of the story of Paul, a supposed murderer, whose *presence* saves the travelers and crew when the ship *does* go down: "And when neither sun nor stars in many days appeared, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away. But after long abstinence Paul stood forth in the midst of them, and said, 'Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me, and not have loosed from Crete, and to have gained this harm and loss. And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, Saying, 'Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar. And, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee.' Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me. Howbeit we must be cast upon a certain island'" (Acts 27:20-26). In the following chapter the apostle's innocence is proven by a corporeal miracle: "And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the [people of Malta] saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, 'No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live.' And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god" (28:3-6). For this canonical tale's apocryphal *Nachleben*, see tale 196 («Ὁ ἀπόστολος Παῦλος στὴν Κρήτη») in Politis 1904:110, where the Apostle becomes a sort of Greek Saint Patrick.

PART TWO: Variations on the Script

A Unique Method of Self-Preservation

In the tales we have examined until now, nature (in the form of natural phenomena or animal helpers) or the hermit himself (through appearances in dreams) has played a crucial role in facilitating the discovery of the anchorite's remains. In the following tale the hermit is so organically situated within his environment that his transition from life to death is initially quite difficult to grasp for the monk who finds him. The narrator of the story, a monk from Antioch (Θεοῦ πόλις) tells John and Sophronios of an incident which occurred when he was traveling in the vicinity of Mt. Amanon.²⁵³ Ascending the mountain, he came upon a cave where he found what he thought was an anchorite kneeling in prayer. The little story is worth quoting in full:

I went in and found an anchorite, kneeling down and with his hands stretched out to heaven. The hair of his head reached down to the floor. Thinking that he was alive, I made an act of obeisance before him saying: "Pray for me, father." As he made no reply, I got up and went close to him, intending to embrace him. When I touched him I found that he was dead, so I left him and went out.²⁵⁴

The rich symbolism of this in-some-ways-rather-unsettling tale needs to be unpacked in order to explain the element of shock that clings to mistaking a corpse for a living man and discovering one's error only upon bestowing a zealous embrace. The emphasis in the discovery is not on the fact that the anchorite is dead but that in death, as in life, he remains exactly the same, having somehow resisted or escaped the irrepressible march of time and the ravages of

²⁵³ Mount Amanon has been identified by some scholars as the Mount Hor mentioned in Numbers 34:7-8, located at the northern border of the Land of Israel. See Graham 1979:23-30.

²⁵⁴ PG 87(3).2915E-D (Wortley 71-72). «Εἰσελθὼν εὐρίσκω ἀναχωρητὴν κλίναντα μὲν τὰ γόνατα αὐτοῦ, τὰς δὲ χεῖρας ἐκτεταμένας ἔχοντα εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν, ἔχοντα δὲ τὰς τρίχας τῆς κεφαλῆς ἕως ἐδάφους. Ἐγὼ δὲ νομίσας αὐτὸν ζῆν, ἔβαλον αὐτῷ μετάνοιαν, λέγων· Εὐξαί ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ, Πάτερ. Ὡς οὖν οὐδὲν ἀπεκρίθη μοι, ἐγεῖρθεις ἀπὸ ληθον πλησίον αὐτοῦ ἀσπάζεσθαι αὐτόν. Καὶ κρατήσας αὐτὸν εὗρον αὐτὸν νεκρόν.»

man's common lot. The sense of wonderment surrounding the miraculously preserved holy corpse is heightened even further when the monk soon thereafter comes upon another cave-dwelling anchorite (a living one, this time), who is able to give him further information about the deceased. First he asks the monk, "did you get anything from there?"²⁵⁵ When the monk answer in the negative, he continues, "Naturally, brother, for the elder had been dead for fifteen years."²⁵⁶ This causes no small amount of wonder because, the narrator adds, "yet he was as though he had died only an hour before."²⁵⁷ The ascetic is permanently frozen in an attitude of earnest prayer that renders the way he spent his life visible to any onlooker; his lifetime of devotion to God is, so to speak, inscribed upon his body. Through the holiness acquired in his lifetime, he has transformed his tomb into a shrine and fashioned himself into a visually arresting relic that people, like the narrator of the tale, could come and embrace in veneration; as such, the saint had no need to be taken away and buried in a church. Yet the brother who visited the dead hermit's "shrine" was able to carry off an intangible relic from his encounter: the story of this man's exceptional holiness, which can be transmitted, reproduced and disseminated without losing any of its potency.

Arrangements for Burial (Tale 170)

The element of surprise is also very much at work in the next tale we will examine. The surprise (or perhaps rather "the reveal") is twofold and very skilfully narrated, so that the reader is left with a sense of wonder at the miracles which occur hidden from the sight of men. Moschos and

²⁵⁵ PG 87(3).2915D (Wortley 72). «Μή τι ἐκεῖθεν ἔλαβες;»

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.* «Φύσει, ἀδελφὲ, ἔχει ὁ γέρον τειλειωθεὶς ἔτη δεκαπέντε.»

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* «Οὕτως δὲ ἦν ὡς πρὸ μιᾶς ὥρας κοιμηθεὶς.»

Sophronios meet two fathers who have been on a pilgrimage to Sinai. Having visited the Holy Mountain, they set off to their own monastery near Jerusalem. Their journey home is delayed, however, when they lose their way in the desert: “for many days we were borne along in the wilderness as though we were on the high sea.”²⁵⁸ The unexpected comparison of wandering about in the desert to finding oneself afloat on the open sea reflects the perilous conditions facing the pilgrim wishing to travel from Sinai to Palestine. The passage, whether done by land or by sea, was a risky undertaking, as several tales from the *Pratum*, especially that of the two Gregories above, will attest. The narrative frame of the fathers’ encounter with the hermit in this tale calls to mind the situation the marooned fishermen from Pharan (tale 120): both the fathers and the fishermen are sent drifting aimlessly in the wilderness through the exigency of circumstances, but in each case it transpires that their wanderings are in fact directed by a divine purpose which leads to the discovery of a hermit’s corpse. While the fathers are traveling, they catch sight of a cave in the distance located next to a small desert oasis. Despite the relative brevity of the tale, Moschos’s talent as a storyteller shines here as the unveiling of the hermit’s identity proceeds very gradually and with a good deal of narrative suspense: as the fathers approach the cave, they see human footsteps. When they enter the cave, they hear the sound of someone breathing but see no occupant. Continuing their search, they find a person lying in a manger of sorts, but when they address him they receive no answer. Then, finally, they take hold of the body and find, like the startled brother in the previous tale, that the body is a corpse, although it is still warm. Until this point the plot follows a pattern that we find

²⁵⁸ PG 87(3).3037A (Wortley 139). «Καὶ ἐπιφερόμεθα ὡς ἐπὶ πελάγους ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ἐπὶ πολλὰς ἡμέρας.»

elsewhere in the *Pratum*, where pious bystanders arrive just in time to bury an expiring hermit.²⁵⁹ This is exactly what happens now too, but with a rather unexpected twist:

[W]e took [the hermit's] body from where it lay and dug a grave for him there in the cave. One of us took the pallium he was wearing and wrapped the elder's body in it; and we buried him in it. But we discovered that it was a woman – and we glorified God. We performed the office over her and buried her.²⁶⁰

The chief point of interest of this story, the fact the hermitess was a woman, is thus only revealed at the very end of the tale. Apart from the wretched Mary – who is not an anchorite and also principally serves as an exemplar for vice rather than virtue – our survey of tales has been lacking so far in women. The vast majority of tales in the *Pratum* feature men practicing this physically demanding and unforgiving mode of life. Tale 170 is one of two in which a woman lives such a life of seclusion in the wilderness. The other, tale 19, reports a cave-dwelling female anchorite paying a visit to an abba in search of water and memorably telling him, “Abba, I too follow this way of life, sir.”²⁶¹ Regrettably (but predictably), the woman is introduced mostly as a source of carnal temptation for the hermit she visits and we don't learn more about her way of life other than that she lives nearby and is in the habit of traveling across the desert. Given the feeling of prurient anxiety that clings to that earlier encounter between male narrator and anchoritess, perhaps we should not be surprised that the hermitess in this story chastely (and rather conveniently) avoids any interaction with her male visitors by

²⁵⁹ See Tale 90 for an example of this motif. (Wortley 73-73)

²⁶⁰ PG87(3).3037B (Wortley 139). «Λαβόντες οὖν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ ἐκ τοῦ τόπου ὅπου ἔκειτο, ὠρύξαμεν ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ σπηλαίῳ, καὶ εἷς ἐξ ἡμῶν, ὁ περιβέβλητο παλλίον ἀφελόμενος, εἰς αὐτὸ ἐνετυλίξαμεν τὸ σῶμα τοῦ γέροντος, καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ τοῦτο ἐκηδεύομεν. Ἡύρομεν [δὲ] ὅτι γυνὴ ὑπῆρχεν. Καὶ ἐδοξάσαμεν τὸν Θεόν. Καὶ ποιήσαντες τὸν κανόνα ἐπάνω αὐτῆς, ἐθάψαμεν αὐτήν.»

²⁶¹ PG 87(3).2865B (Wortley 13), «Κύρι ἀββᾶ, κἀγὼ τὴν πολιτείαν ταύτην μετέρχομαι.»

breathing out her last before they have a chance to converse with her.²⁶² Once again, what the visitors carry away with them is not the hermitess's body but rather the tale of her blessed sexless existence in the deepest wilderness.

The Story of Abba John, his Teacher and the Two Brothers

In addition to the *post-mortem* power of the holy man in the world of natural phenomena, there is also the *topos* of peaceful and blessed co-existence of man and beast, especially lions, which continues after death. This *topos* has a long history and an impressive hagiographical pedigree. The best-known example of such a symbiosis occurs in the aforementioned *Life* of Mary of Egypt, where Abba Zosimas, being frail of body and lacking in suitable implements, is faced with hard and arid desert soil and almost despairs of being able to dig a suitable grave for the holy woman, until a great lion arrives, shows himself affectionate and obedient to the old man's will, and promptly begins scratching the ground with his paws.²⁶³ A similar event takes place in the *Life* of Paul of Thebes attributed (interestingly) to Jerome,²⁶⁴ where two lions miraculously appear to assist Antony with the burial of Paul's remains, join in the mourning by means of loud roars, and refuse to be separated from the holy man until, like Jacob with the angel, they have received a blessing from his hands.²⁶⁵ We also find several instances of friendly or unusually docile lions in the beneficial tales; of these, the delightful story of Abba Gerasimos and his devoted (but occasionally disobedient) lion Jordanes from the *Pratum* (tale 107) has

²⁶² For more examples of female cave dwellers see Talbot 2014:2.

²⁶³ See Talbot 1996:91-92.

²⁶⁴ See Wortley 1996:201.

²⁶⁵ White 1998:83.

received the most scholarly attention,²⁶⁶ but there is another, lesser-known tale in a *codex unicus*, *Parisinus græcus* 1596.²⁶⁷ Strictly speaking, this tale does not belong in the corpus of the *Pratum*; but, given that it is found in a famous collection of *Paterika* which also contains many tales in common with the *Pratum* and that the tale of Jordanes is already widely known, whereas this one is not, I ask indulgence to include it. In this tale a “great monk” had a servant (*οἰκέτης*) named John, who he initiated into the monastic way of life and taught to read both Greek letters and the Holy Writ.²⁶⁸ After leaving John with some final words of wisdom, he retreated into the desert. The narrative then skips ahead twenty-five years and we are told that the great monk has been subsisting on sea-onions (*σκίλλαι*) and that he lives with two lions, who even share his diet.²⁶⁹ Interestingly, unlike the story of Gerasimos (who, like St. Jerome and reflecting a folktale motif going back at least to Æsop, removed a thorn from the lion Jordanes’ paw and thus won him over as trusty companion), there is no explanation of how this monk’s unusual living arrangement came about: his peaceable co-habitation with the lions is simply presented to us as fact and the miraculous turn in the plot begins after the holy man’s passing. Upon his death, the lions mourn the monk for three days and then dig a grave a full fathom deep in order to bury him. In the meantime, the narrator tells us, as Abba John is sedulously upholding the

²⁶⁶ See *ex. gr.* Ševčenko 2000:82 and Rapp 2006:101-102. At the end of the tale, Moschos’s explanation for the animal’s extraordinary sorrow at his master’s passing (cited by Rapp at 2006:102) is that it mirrors Adam’s prelapsarian dominion over all creatures of the earth: «τούτο δὲ γέγονεν, οὐχ ὡς ψυχὴν λογικὴν ἔχοντος τοῦ λέοντος· ἀλλ’ ὡς, τοῦ Θεοῦ θέλοντος δοξάσαι τοὺς δοξάζοντας αὐτόν, οὐ μόνον ἐν τῇ ζωῇ αὐτῶν ἀλλὰ καὶ μετὰ θάνατον, καὶ δεῖξαι ποίαν εἶχον τὰ θηρία ὑποταγὴν πρὸς τὸν Ἀδὰμ πρὸ τοῦ αὐτὸν παρακοῦσαι τῆς ἐντολῆς, καὶ τῆς ἐν Παραδείσῳ τρυφῆς ἐκπεσεῖν» (PG 87(3).2970B).

²⁶⁷ See Wortley 1996:288-99 for the Greek text of this tale (which is only published here and not listed in the *BHG*) and Wortley’s English translation and commentary.

²⁶⁸ There is a useful discussion of the word *οἰκέτης* and the nature of the relationship between master and disciple in this tale in Wortley 1996:297-98.

²⁶⁹ See Wortley 1996:289n18 for a discussion of this bitter vegetable and for a more general overview of the dietary habits of ascetics, refer to Talbot 2014:4.

rule which was passed on to him by his teacher, the blessed man appears to him in a dream and tells him, “Behold, your two small brothers are expecting you; the Lord Jesus Christ will be your guide.”²⁷⁰

John, ever the last word in faithful obedience, sets out and follows the angel of the Lord, who guides him to the place where his former master dwelt. When he arrives, the lions run out to greet him and receive his blessing. John then more or less takes up the thread where his master left off, and at the end of his life he too is buried by the lions. In his analysis of the tale, Wortley comments on the lions’ unusually anthropomorphic behavior: they are vegetarian, seek for blessings, and observe the burial customs of human society. This is unusual but not unheard of in the beneficial tales, and indeed has some (less developed) precedent in the biblical story of Daniel. What is more interesting and unprecedented is that he calls the lions John’s siblings (*ἀδελφία*). It shows how complete the animals’ assimilation into human rhythms and behaviors, as far as possible for them, has been. In fact, the monk has followed a reverse pattern to the one we find often in this sort of story, especially in the stories of grazers, where the ascetic, as Nancy Ševčenko puts it, becomes so integrated into the landscape that he “begin[s] to resemble physically the animal he [has] displaced.”²⁷¹

For the monk of this story, however, it is the other way around: he turns his little corner of wilderness into a *κοινόβιον* with his two leonine disciples and teaches them a rule, just as he will do with John, which rule they follow even after his death. He then appears in a dream and asks John to take his up his mantle as “abbot” and to take charge of John’s animal brethren. (As

²⁷⁰ Wortley 1996:289-90. «ἰδοὺ γὰρ τὰ δύο ἀδελφία σου ἐκδέχονται σε· ὁ δὲ Κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ὀδηγήσει σε.»

²⁷¹ Ševčenko 2000:78.

with an ordinary monastery of men, John is called out from his brethren to become their spiritual father.) Again, this is a variation on the traditional script, and here the holy man, a newcomer and an intruder into the wilderness, is able to bend nature to his will by means of his asceticism and personal virtue, so that the landscape he inhabits becomes accommodating and suitable for his purposes and its inhabitants either leave him in peace or become his active helpers and guardians. In this case, the monk recreates in the wilderness the living conditions he had with John, taking for disciples the noblest of the sentient beings there available.

There is a mutual attraction between righteous man and righteous nature. We saw above how the grazer on Mt. Elafos desired to become meek and obedient; his virtue lay in cultivating (if such a gardening term be not inappropriate) the laudable Christian traits that allowed him to tame himself and to become one with what we might call the noble savagery of nature's peaceful side, as symbolized by the deer. This was a success. But it was an even more stunning success when John's spiritual father, already tamed, encountered the ferocious aspect of nature, as symbolized by the lion. Nature and man once again came together, in a kind of gravitational pull, but this time the greater weight of glory²⁷² was in the man – the monastically trained man – and it was nature that conformed.

But the outstanding message of this tale is not only that everything in creation is subject to man and that through personal righteousness even the most inhospitable surroundings can be made into a haven for spiritual growth, but that in such an arrangement as the monk creates, the divine economy is made clearly manifest. It is, once again, this witness of God's power that gives the tale its soul-benefiting character. In the cases of martyrs like Ignatius, the saint

²⁷² Cf. 2 Cor. 4.17, «Τὸ γὰρ παραυτίκα ἐλαφρὸν τῆς θλίψεως ἡμῶν καθ' ὑπερβολὴν εἰς ὑπερβολὴν αἰώνιον βάρους δόξης κατεργάζεται ἡμῖν.»

witnesses to his faith in God's greatness by his willingness – like his forerunner, the prophet Daniel – to testify of his belief by giving himself over to wild beasts; in cases like that just related, it is the saint's preservation – also like Daniel's – that constitutes a sign of divine power and providence. In both cases the saint's holy life culminates and is consummated in an impressive interaction with the highest and most ferocious of God's non-human natural creation, an interaction which opens up a testimony of God's might to onlookers, listeners and readers.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

What then can we say in conclusion to this small and by-no-means-exhaustive survey? Of the many possible approaches to these stories, the one I'd like to end with here is the importance of their (at least according to believers) power to instruct and to bless. They might for example exhort a listener far removed from the stories' locale to choose edification of the soul over pleasures of the flesh, while at the same time reminding a Christian, who subscribes to a religion with resurrection, of the importance of the body.

Whether a saint's remains were physically present among the greater society (following the example of the tombs of Abraham and the other patriarchs) or were understood to have been miraculously whisked away (somewhat after the examples of Enoch's translation, the Lord's assumption, or the Virgin's dormition), it was essential that the virtue and power which he had accumulated through his efforts while body and soul were united not remain to him alone nor be withheld from the more common lot of men, who had a greater need of such things. An East Roman Bishop Berkeley might have asked, "if a saint is transfigured in the

wilderness and nobody's there to see it, does it really happen?" Today we would probably demand photographs. Important is that such an end that benefited the saint alone would, for the larger audience of Christians, have been a waste, a loss.

Tales of the kind we've been looking at prevent this loss and share to some degree that soul-benefiting virtue with a greater population, be it a community of monks or the church as a whole. They take the corporeal and tangible, which is necessarily limited to a single place, and put it onto pages that can be copied, and into ears that are linked to mouths (which speak to other ears, and so forth). They convert, in other words, a rare and finite commodity into a form where it can be shared again and again and suffer little diminution. (Indeed, such tales are often liable instead to increase!) And, though the religious significance of recording a culture hero's final transfiguration and reporting it to others is widespread – one thinks of *Œdipus at Colonus*, *Empedocles on Mt. Ætna*, *Romulus and Cæsar* in *Ovid*, and of course the Buddha – the importance of keeping such tales from oblivion is particularly appropriate to a religion like Christianity, at whose center is redemption from perdition.

Chapter 4

Anastasios and the Spirit of the Place

*While I draw this fleeting breath,
When mine eyes shall close in death,
When I soar to worlds unknown,
See Thee on Thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.*

— Augustus Montague Toplady, 1763

The seventh century ushered in a period of great unrest for Christians on the Sinai peninsula, leaving in its wake famine, pestilence and the ever-looming danger of attack by aggressive invaders. The anxiety that such disruptive and destructive events caused within the community of believers is documented in a contemporary source, the *Questions and Answers* (*Ερωταποκρίσεις*) of Anastasios of Sinai. During the difficult conditions of the time, with large parts of the desert flooded by a hostile and perhaps theodidic deluge spilling out of Arabia, Anastasios instructs his readers and hearers on how to weather the world-storm overwhelming their society and, by keeping an eye fixed on the never-changing lodestar of their faith, to navigate through the political and spiritual undulations of a radically changing earthly landscape. Anastasios's identity, biography and *œuvre* have stoked flames of scholarly debate spanning several centuries but, in contrast to John Klimakos and John Moschos, whose literary bequests are limited to a single (if tremendously influential) work each, there is a relatively large corpus of texts connected with the name Anastasios.²⁷³

²⁷³ Baggarly and Kuehn 2007:xiv.

Many of these works are “pastoral in nature, reflecting [Anastasios’] concern to shore up Christian communities in this time of crisis.”²⁷⁴ The *Questions and Answers*, a pastoral work *par excellence*, has always attracted a good deal of scholarly attention, owing to the importance and uniqueness of the text as a reflection not only of the preoccupations and concerns of the common man but also as a source of informal theology and lay piety in the seventh century, that “time of uncertainty,” as John Haldon has called it.²⁷⁵ The varied subject of these concerns is evident from the wide range of theological, practical and scientific questions which Anastasios fields from members of his congregation and others he met during his ministry. But, as Munitiz has shown,²⁷⁶ certain patterns and thematic repetitions emerge that allow us to “extrapolate...the sort of questions that were troubling his audience” in particular.²⁷⁷ For example, several of the answers provide elementary guidelines for what a person might do and say if required to defend his faith against religious opponents.²⁷⁸ Such occasions, we may imagine, would not have been uncommon when Anastasios’s audience found themselves

²⁷⁴ Caner 2010:172. For a summary of Anastasios’s principal works, see Marinides 2014:336-346; for both primary and select secondary bibliography, see Munitiz 1998:243-246.

²⁷⁵ Haldon 1997:360. As Haldon writes in another important article on the text (1992:116), “[Anastasios] represented also, however, the ordinary people, as is clear from many of the answers ascribed to him in the collection of *Question and Answers*: he demonstrates a sympathy and understanding for the humdrum, day-to-day existence of ordinary folk which was no doubt common to many holy men and churchmen, but which is – as one might expect – not so readily found in the theological works of a Maximus or the polemical writings of a Sophronius. And it is in this context that the collection of *Questions and Answers* is so important.”

²⁷⁶ Munitiz 2006:1-li.

²⁷⁷ Munitiz 1998:235sq..

²⁷⁸ Although this apologetic and polemical bent is more pronounced in other works such as the *Hodegos*, which has been described as “a *vademecum* to assist the ordinary Christian to withstand the criticism of unorthodox fellow believers, with particular reference to the situation in Egypt,” it also occupies an important place in the *Questions and Answers* (Munitiz 1998:234). For an example of such a question, see Appendix 20, Question 1 in Munitiz 2006:208-210.

living, to their spiritual counselor's great dismay, in an increasingly heterodox society.²⁷⁹

Another matter which seems to have been a pressing source of concern for Anastasios's audience was questions about "the ever present threat of death."²⁸⁰ Munitiz remarks that "Anastasios and his correspondents are particularly fascinated by the problems of death, life after death and predestination."²⁸¹ Here we also find a great variety of questions: some of the queries address very general and rather abstract matters concerning the end of the world.²⁸² Others deal with perennial concerns such as the fate of unattended bodily remains, a question we discussed in a monastic context in the previous chapter.²⁸³ Still other questions bring into focus the contemporary context of Christians living areas under occupation where dying a martyr's death was, even for a layman, not simply a possibility but, at times, a reality.²⁸⁴

The *Questions and Answers*, then, seems to address itself principally to Christians living in the world and forms an important index of "the sort of questions that were troubling

²⁷⁹ Anastasios not infrequently answers questions of the type «ἄρα πάντα τὰ κακὰ ὅσα ἐποίησαν ταῖς χώραις καὶ τοῖς λαοῖς τῶν Χριστιανῶν οἱ Ἄραβες, κατὰ κέλευσιν πάντως καὶ ἐπιτροπῆν Θεοῦ ἡμῖν ταῦτα πεποίηκαν;» (Question 101; Munitiz 161).

²⁸⁰ Munitiz 1998:242.

²⁸¹ Munitiz 1998:239.

²⁸² Question 94 (Munitiz 149) asks «Ἐχει ὄρον χρονικὸν ἢ συντέλεια τοῦ κόσμου;» Questions of the end of the world do seem to align themselves with the surge in apocalyptic literature that Haldon (1997:368) finds evidence for in the seventh century.

²⁸³ Thus, question 22 for example asks «Πῶς τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὸ μυρίων θηρίων καὶ πετεινῶν καταβρωθὲν, ἢ θαλάττη καταποντισθὲν, καὶ ὑπὸ ἀμετρήτων ἰχθύων ἀναλωθὲν, καὶ ἐν τῷ βυθῷ ἀφοδευθὲν, καὶ διαλυθὲν, πῶς συνάγεται καὶ εἰς ἀνάστασιν ἔρχεται;» This question makes explicit the theological issues at stake surrounding the integrity of body at the time of the Resurrection, to which Anastasios responds that: «Εἰ γὰρ πιστεύομεν αὐτὸν παντοδύναμον εἶναι, πάντως ὁ ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἀγαγὼν, εὐκοπωτέρως τὸ πλάσμα τὸ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ πλασθὲν καὶ διὰ θανάτου λυθὲν ἀναπλάσαι καὶ ἀνακαινίσει δύνησεται.» Nothing was beyond the power of God, though Anastasios confesses that many of the faithful secretly had, as he puts it, «σκάνδαλον καὶ δισταγμὸν περὶ τῆς τῶν σωμάτων ἀναστάσεως.» *Quæstiones et Responsiones* 22 (Munitiz 98, trans. 42).

²⁸⁴ *Ex. gr.* question 89, «Πόθεν ὀρῶμέν τινες πολλακίς νῦν προθύμως ἑαυτοὺς προδιδόντας εἰς θάνατον ὑπὲρ τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως καὶ ἐρχομένους εἰς αὐτὸ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν, εἴτε ἀπὸ παρακλήσεως ἀνθρώπων, εἴτε καὶ αὐτοὶ οἱ τύρρανοι μεταβαλλόμενοι ἀπολύουσιν αὐτούς; Πόθεν χρη̄ λογίζεσθαι εἶναι τὴν τοιαύτην ἀπόλυσιν, ἐκ Θεοῦ, ἢ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων;» (Munitiz 143).

[Anastasios'] audience."²⁸⁵ The practical answers that he offers in response to sometimes quite complicated theological questions bear the imprint of his long experience as preacher and an instructor in the faith. Dagron has commented on the "supplementary" nature of this work (and, by extent, this genre), noting that it allows Anastasios to explore the gray areas of Christian anthropology «dont la théologie officielle se soucie peu où les hagiographes ont l'habitude de broder leurs contes.»²⁸⁶ His *œuvre* also includes a sizable and important collection of edifying tales which speak to the other integral part of his formation as a religious thinker: his lifelong association with the monastic community of Mount Sinai and his enduring love and reverence for the Fathers who taught and supported him in his formative years as a monk there. The tales represent a different kind of index, in which some of the themes discussed *directly* in the *Questions and Answers* receive an *indirect* narrative treatment.

The collection known as *The Tales of the Sinai Fathers*, the first of the two collections that make up the corpus of Anastasian tales, seems to be framed especially (but not exclusively) with a monastic audience in mind.²⁸⁷ *The Tales of the Sinai Fathers* is unique among the edifying tales collections of late antiquity, because of its narrow geographical focus. Where Moschos and Sophronios traveled far afield in Egypt and the Levant to gather their blooms of virtue, Anastasios concentrates his narrative attention on the holy mountain he knew so well and on

²⁸⁵ Munitiz 1998:235-6.

²⁸⁶ Dagron 1992:61.

²⁸⁷ Caner (2011:65) surmises that both Anastasios and Moschos's tales were probably written "to edify coenobitic monks safe within their fortified compounds." We will discuss the local aspect of these tales later in the chapter. These sorts of details are useful and recognizable only by the *cognoscenti*. Because of the lack of a preface, these ideas can only emerge from the text itself. Anastasios's habit of accentuating the *couleur locale* in his tales (by which I mean that he is rather particular about supplying the names and backgrounds of the characters which populate his tales and the places where their narratives unfold) could suggest that the work was intended principally for readers who had at least a passing acquaintance with the monastery and its environs – was, in other words, by and for the monks of Sinai – but this hypothesis would be difficult to prove (since the inclusion of such details might just as well be to increase credibility or verisimilitude for an audience *not* familiar with the area).

the lives of the saintly men who lived around it. The purpose of the collection remains somewhat difficult to discern, given that, unlike the *Pratum*, the *Tales* have no preface or explicit statement of intent. In the introduction to his English translation of the tales, Donald Caner remarks that “there is no over-arching narrative or obvious thematic connection between [Anastasios’s] stories, besides the holiness of the Sinai and its Christian inhabitants.”²⁸⁸ The tales’ most recent editor, André Binggeli, refines Caner’s observation by suggesting that, while the tales “are very much in the spirit of earlier monastic collections and the influence of the *Historia Monachorum* or the *The Spiritual Meadow* is evident...this collection starts with a novel section devoted to miracles that took place on Mt Sinai, suggesting that the holy place itself contributed to the holiness of the fathers who lived in the surrounding desert.”²⁸⁹ The mountain thus forms a spiritual anchor for monks of Sinai, an enduring “witness to theophany”²⁹⁰ animating the spiritual lives of those who dwell in its shadow and encouraging them to take a dim view of this world and its vicissitudes and to keep their eyes trained on the place where Moses and Israel gazed upon the Lord in his majesty,²⁹¹ an ever-present physical reminder of the possibility of communion with the Divine.

Caner has shown how the fifth century had marked a turning-point for monasticism on the Sinai peninsula with regards to its fame and reputation throughout the wider empire. After the destruction of Sketis at the beginning of that century, the Sinai desert gained custody of the most emblematic figure of Egyptian monasticism, the wild and woolly hermit “who haunted

²⁸⁸ Caner 2010:173.

²⁸⁹ Binggeli 2014:149-150 (emphasis mine).

²⁹⁰ Heim 1985:197.

²⁹¹ Ex. 33:12, Num. 14:14, Deut. 5:4 and 34:10.

remote Egyptian oases, beyond all worldly interference or concern.”²⁹² It is likely that, particularly in the minds of its visitors and pilgrims, the presence of such ascetics only increased the air of sanctity and sublimity that clung to these already-hallowed grounds. Contributing to this process of mythologizing the peninsula was also the development of various Sinai martyr traditions and their cults, with their close ties to the coenobitic monasteries at the foot of the mountain itself and at the nearby settlement of Raïthou. The fifth-century *Narrations* of pseudoNeilos, a work whose novelistic storytelling and wealth of *couleur locale* have made it an enticing object for students of early-Christian narrative, but whose questionable historicity has continued to frustrate historians, as well as the fifth- or sixth-century *Ammonios Report*, an equally intriguing but problematic text, reflect the growth and increasing popularity of the martyr cults at both Sinai and Raïthou.²⁹³ The establishment of a martyr tradition at Sinai, Caner adds, was what helped secure its position as one of the major centers of the faith, thereby “completing a process of Christianization.”²⁹⁴

Stories about monks suffering and dying for the faith at the hands of ruthless “barbarians,” which form the thematic core of pseudoNeilos’s *Narrations* and the *Ammonios Report*, also have a substantial presence in Moschos’s *Pratum*. Though his focus extends far beyond the Sinai desert, Moschos includes several rather gruesome tales about hapless monks made vulnerable by their isolation, their mistreatment and sometimes their murder by bloodthirsty and predatory enemies.²⁹⁵ Moschos’s tales seem to “emphasize atrocities.”²⁹⁶

²⁹² Caner 2010:65.

²⁹³ For a thorough discussion of these two texts that also touches on questions such as dating, historicity and reception, see Caner 2010:54-57.

²⁹⁴ Caner 2010:64.

²⁹⁵ See the *Pratum*, tales 21, 99, 133, 155.

Though such stories were likely gathered with the intention of promoting a nascent martyr cult, and as such form notoriously unreliable witnesses – as Caner prudently notes, “the safest course may be to use early Sinai history to understand the *Narrations* and the *Report*, rather than the other way around”²⁹⁷ – nevertheless, when all the heroic suffering, over-the-top depictions of senseless cruelty and narrative liberties are “skimmed off the top,” what remains is a picture of monastic life in which managing a *modus vivendi* with the other inhabitants of the peninsula seems to have been a greatly challenging proposition more often than not.²⁹⁸

As the third and last major Sinai-focused monastic narrative source to emerge from the late Antique period, *The Tales of the Sinai Fathers* is born out of a rich and complex literary tradition. In the rest of this chapter, we will investigate how the *Tales* partake in and perpetuate the thematic interests and spiritual objectives of that tradition, but also how, by being the discrete literary product of a particular time and place and the work of a monk with a strong pastoral vocation, it is set apart as something distinct and situated in its contemporary context.

One of the most evident breaks with tradition in this text is the de-emphasizing of martyrdom. As we will see later in the chapter, there certainly is evidence in the stories of aggression from peoples hostile to the monks and their way of life, but the *Tales* are not a

²⁹⁶ Caner 2010:67.

²⁹⁷ Caner 2010:56.

²⁹⁸ For more on relations between the monks and their various neighbors, see Caner 2010:50*sq.* What’s of course entirely erased (or perhaps we ought to say omitted) from such stories emerging from the dominant culture on the peninsula, is any kind of narrative that represents the monks as anything but peaceful benefactors to those around them. Despite indications of a profitable mutual dependency, their good is rewarded with destruction, depredation and aggression (*cf.* Psalm 109:5). Caner (2010:50) includes an instructive example where he reads a piece of contemporary hagiography “against the grain,” in order to reveal a possible instance of monastic “colonization” of Bedouin land: “The *Life of Theognis*, written by a seventh-century monk at Elusa, describes how one Saracen threatened a monk, not to obtain money or food, but merely to intimidate and drive him out of the cave he was occupying. Since it is common for Bedouin to use caves to pen their sheep, perhaps this story reflects a shepherd’s effort to reclaim such a pen from a monastic squatter.”

narrative of active or even passive resistance. What takes its place is a landscape that seems almost inured to the harmful and disruptive intrusions of reality.²⁹⁹ Anastasios, Caner suggests, infuses many of his stories with a “dreamlike or nostalgic feel, perhaps because many seem to reach back into earlier, more tranquil periods of Sinai history.”³⁰⁰ We will study the process of literary world-building in the tales and focus particularly on the sacralizing effect of the mountain as a *locus* of immense spiritual power which imparts an otherworldly gloss to its surroundings and the devout Christians who inhabit it. We examine, in connection with this, a number of tales where this psalmodic harmony is jarred by the faulty notes of a cacophonous, contemporary reality; we argue that such tales reflect and acknowledge the “era of profound stress and transition”³⁰¹ in which they were written, offering examples and exemplars for imitation that guide and shore up an anxious readers and listeners of the age.

Lastly, we will consider the legacy of John Klimakos, whose presence looms large over the *Tales*. Marinides has described Klimakos’s appearances in the *Tales*, some of which record the famed abbot and influential monastic thinker’s speech and actions, as a way of presenting the teachings contained in the “forbiddingly monastic *Ladder*” and making them “accessible to laypeople.”³⁰² Elsewhere and in a similar vein, Binggeli suggests that the tales were not just a vehicle for presenting Klimakan thought but that the collection itself was formed in order to “celebrate [Klimakos’s] memory.”³⁰³ Building on these two ideas – that central objectives of the

²⁹⁹ For refuge to the mountain as a classic response to danger, cf. Luke 21:20-21, «Ὅταν δὲ ἴδητε κυκλουμένην ὑπὸ στρατοπέδων τὴν Ἱερουσαλήμ, τότε γνῶτε ὅτι ἤγγικεν ἡ ἐρήμωσις αὐτῆς. Τότε οἱ ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ φευγέτωσαν εἰς τὰ ὄρη, καὶ οἱ ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῆς ἐκχωρεῖτωσαν...»

³⁰⁰ Caner 2010:173.

³⁰¹ Caner 2010:173.

³⁰² Marinides 2014:343.

³⁰³ Caner 2010:173n4.

Tales are to commemorate the sainted abbot's life and service to the Sinai community and to explain his teachings to a wider audience – we intend to make a particular study of stories about the death of monks and to see whether Klimakan teaching informs (or perhaps we should say, is embedded in) the way these events are presented. We base that line of inquiry on the premise that if the tales represent kind of a *mise en scène* of the monastic teachings set forth by Klimakos in the *Ladder*, it should not come as a surprise that repentance, the remembrance of death, and mourning occupy a central position in the thought-world of the tales as well.³⁰⁴

Anastasios as a Sinai Monk

Most of what is known about Anastasios and his time at Sinai comes from his writing; the tales in particular are surprisingly self-referential and it is possible to glean, from seemingly casual remarks which he tacks on to various tales, a great deal of information about his life, the people he knew and the places he lived and visited.³⁰⁵ Thus, from the first tales collection we learn (tale I.29) that, having had a great ascetic for a spiritual father, he himself advanced in his ascetic practice; in the second collection, the *Edifying Tales*, he mentions a disciple of his own named John (II.5). He also seems to have practiced various forms of monasticism, spending three years as a hermit at the satellite colony of Arselaiou (I.14), whose precipitous, inhospitable terrain figures prominently in several of the tales we will discuss, and at Goudda where he lived with a

³⁰⁴ For more on the sources of biography for John Klimakos, see Duffy 1999:2 and Zecher 2013:184-185. The precise nature of the relationship between Klimakos and Anastasios remains the subject of much scholarly discussion, owing to our limited knowledge of their biographical information. The discussion that surrounds the details of Klimakos's life, though relevant and important (especially his dates), must be passed over here as it does not materially affect the argument of this chapter.

³⁰⁵ Marinides 2014:337.

companion but made a habit of withdrawing to the desert for solitary contemplation during the day (I.31). In addition to his monastic vocation, he also seems to have had some medical experience; he mentions in tale I.3 that he was warden of the monastery's infirmary.

The abundance of personal information that the attentive reader can discover throughout the tales caused Bernard Flusin to propose an intriguing theory. Any monastic writer with an autobiographical impulse is faced with a number of problems when seeking to transmit the events of his life to posterity through the written word. Bound on the one hand by the monastic imperative to humility above all and, on the other, by the overwhelming sanctity of the subject(s) he is supposed to be describing, there remains little room for personal narrative and so a measure of invention had to be found for the author to achieve his end. Flusin calls this strategy *biographie déguisée* and suggests that Anastasios sometimes speaks of his own deeds and accomplishments using an unnamed stand-in for himself, who he refers to in the third person.³⁰⁶

The Identity of Anastasios

The exceptional richness and variety of the Anastasian corpus has in the past given rise to theories that there were several people named Anastasios writing in the seventh century. A case in point for how divisive the question of authorship could be is found in the work known as the *Hexaemeron*. According to its modern editors, this lengthy, learned commentary on the beginning chapters of Genesis has historically been attributed to three different Anastasii,³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ See Flusin 1991:397-400 and tale C.10 («οἶδα ἐγὼ τινα»).

³⁰⁷ Baggarly and Kuehn 2007:xiv, "The first is Anastasius I, patriarch of Antioch from 559-570 and again from 593-598. The second is Anastasius II, Patriarch of Antioch from 599-609. The third is Anastasius of Sinai, priest and monk of

though the current consensus, supported by this most recent edition, is that the work belongs genuinely to Anastasios of Sinai.³⁰⁸ For the tales, matters were equally unresolved for a long time, owing in part to difficulties surrounding the identity of the author but also because of the considerable challenges inherent in producing a critical edition of a popular Byzantine religious tales collection with such a sizeable corpus of manuscript witnesses. François Nau published a version of the tales based on two Parisian manuscripts in 1902-03 and until recently this careful edition was the standard version of the text. In recent years, two events have paved the way for a new critical engagement with the tales: first, in an article published in 1991, Flusin showed that both of the tales collections traditionally associated with the name Anastasios were likely from the pen of a Cypriot-born but (at least for some part of his life) Sinai-based monk and priest by that name, who was still writing around the turn of the eighth century.³⁰⁹ Additionally, building on the work of Paul Canart, Flusin was able to prove through careful analysis of the most important *testimonia* that the order of the tales was not as “*fluctuant*” as had been previously surmised.³¹⁰ His student, the Swiss scholar André Binggeli, then carried these important beginnings to their necessary conclusion by preparing a critical edition, translation and commentary for his doctoral work in 2001.³¹¹ Although Binggeli has yet to publish his work (it is currently being prepared for the series *Le Monde Byzantin*), the Greek text in his thesis

the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai – but never Patriarch of Antioch – who apparently was still active shortly after 700.”

³⁰⁸ Baggarly and Kuehn 2007:xxiii. Clement Kuehn maintains a useful list of all of Anastasios’s works online and has organized them into groups of genuine and doubtful works. See anastasiosofsinai.org/list-of-works.html (accessed February, 6th, 2014).

³⁰⁹ Flusin 1991:395.

³¹⁰ Flusin 1991:384. By identifying and resolving an unintentional break in the text introduced by scribal error in one of the principal witnesses, the *Vaticanus*, he was also able to propose a order for the tales that reflected the sequence found in other manuscripts.

³¹¹ *Anastase le Sinaïte, Récits sur le Sinaï et Récits utiles à l’âme. Édition, traduction, commentaire* (University of Paris).

already supersedes Nau's 1902/03 edition, both because it was collated from a much larger number of manuscript witnesses and includes a valuable apparatus drawn from his collation work, and also because it includes several tales not present in Nau's edition.³¹²

Binggeli also preserves the custom, emerging from the manuscript tradition, of dividing Anastasios's tales into discrete sets: the above-mentioned *Tales of the Sinai Fathers* (*Διηγήσεις τῶν Πατέρων*) and also the *Edifying Tales* (*Διηγήματα Στηρικτικά*). This second collection differs a great deal from the first in its thematic focus and its geographical locations: these tales look far beyond the confines of the Lord's Mountain to narrate stories occurring in Alexandria, Jerusalem and even Cyprus, among other places. Their focus, as Flusin puts it, is the problems caused by «le grand mal qui menace la chrétienté au temps d'Anastase[;]» that is to say, religious opponents (particularly Muslims and Monophysites) and demons.³¹³ The two sets of tales, when joined together as a textual unit, have faced a problem similar to that of the overall corpus of Anastasian works, though on a smaller scale, in that scholars (and Nau is notable among them) have found it difficult to reconcile the differences in these collections and have, consequently, wondered whether they could have been authored by the same person. Binggeli, following Flusin and what appears to be the emerging consensus, accepts both collections as being by a single author.

³¹²See Flusin 1991:382sq.

³¹³ Flusin 1991:397.

The Place Whereon Thou Standest is Holy Ground

An instructive place to begin examining Anastasios's portrayal of Sinai as a place where the veil between this world and the next is especially thin, and contact with the divine is a frequent occurrence, is miracles involving pilgrims. From other sources, most notably the travelogue of Egeria (late 4th cent.) and the accounts of the Piacenza pilgrim (6th cent.), we are relatively well informed about what it was like to be a pilgrim on and around the Holy Mountain in Late Antiquity. Anastasios's stories provide an interesting supplement to these earlier pilgrims' accounts by offering narratives from the perspective of host, rather than guest or visitor. His tales show that the monks of the monastery at the foot of the mountain practiced an expansive – and, one imagines, fairly lucrative – form of hospitality in looking after the many visitors who traveled to the Holy Mountain each year. Two tales give us an idea of the numbers of pilgrims present visiting the site in Anastasios's time. Tale I.12 preserves a delightful vignette of John Klimakos during his time as hegumen. While presiding over a mealtime gathering of his flock and 600 pilgrims, the sainted abbot notices an unknown person coordinating the suppers of the brethren and the assembled guests:

While they were sitting down and eating, saintly John our father noticed a man with short-cropped hair and wearing fine linen cloth in Judæan fashion, who was running around giving orders in an authoritative manner to the cooks, stewards, cellarers, and the rest of the servers. After the lay folk had left and the servants were sitting down to eat, they searched for the man who had been running around everywhere giving orders, but he was nowhere to be found. Then Christ's slave, the hegumen, said, "Let him be. Lord Moses had done nothing strange by serving in his own place."³¹⁴

³¹⁴ I.12 (Binggeli 184-185; Caner 182), «Ἀμέλει γοῦν ἐν μιᾷ εἰσελθόντων ἐνταῦθα περίπου ἑξακοσίων ξένων, ἐν τῷ καθέζεσθαι αὐτοὺς καὶ ἐσθίειν θεωρεῖ ὁ ὁσιος Ἰωάννης ὁ πατήρ ἡμῶν τινὰ κονδροκούρευτον ἀναβεβλημένον Ἰουδαϊκῶς σινδόνα περιτρέχοντα καὶ κατ' ἐξουσίαν ἐπιτρέποντα τοῖς τε μαγείροις καὶ οἰκονόμοις καὶ κελλαρίταις καὶ λοιποῖς ὑπουργοῖς. Μετὰ οὖν τὸ ὑπάγειν τὸν λαὸν καθεσθέντων φαγεῖν τῶν ὑπηρετῶν, ἐζητεῖτο ἐκείνοις ὁ παντὶ περιτρέχων καὶ ἐπιτάττων καὶ οὐχ ἠύρισκετο. Τότε ὁ τοῦ Χριστοῦ δούλος ὁ ἡγούμενος λέγει. Ἐάσατε αὐτόν. Οὐδὲν ξένον ἐποίησεν ὁ κύρις Μωϋσῆς εἰς τὸν ἴδιον τόπον διακονήσας.»

John's casual attitude to the prophetic apparition emphasizes that Sinai was a place where the divine presence was easily and frequently entwined with the lives and experiences of those on the mountain. Moreover, as Klimakos notes by saying that it is natural to find Moses "in his own place," the spiritual proximity to God and his prophet that they enjoyed was, in a large part, due to their physical presence in that most holy place. Moses's unobtrusive presence among the brethren and pilgrims suggests that to the minds of those present, the Mountain was a place where biblical history was potent and actualized: *illud tempus* was also *hoc tempus*.

The tremendous spiritual power of Sinai as a site of pilgrimage is attested in another tale, where no fewer than 800 pilgrims have an intense, collective encounter with divine fire on the summit of the mountain. It was the custom, Anastasios tell us, of 800 Armenians to undertake a yearly pilgrimage to Sinai to offer prayers upon the mountain.³¹⁵ Having gathered at the summit, the pious travelers suddenly appear to be engulfed in a great fire.³¹⁶ After an hour of devotions and fearful pleas for mercy, the flames cease and it transpires that not a single pilgrim has suffered harm from the conflagration. Anastasios concludes the tale with a report that the Armenian pilgrims were left with an imprint of the manifestation of the divine presence in a beautifully symbolic way: though they themselves were hale and hearty, the tips of their staves were lightly charred. "By this form of theirs," Anastasios adds, "they testify even in their

³¹⁵ I.4 (Binggeli 174; Caner 176).

³¹⁶ *Ibid.* Holy fire strikes fear and awe into faithful and infidel alike: in the *Ammonios Report*, holy fire is similarly used as a deterrent when a group of Sinai monks is under attack and a awesome manifestation of divine fire on the summit of the mountains scares away the "Saracens" (which seems to be ethnic denomination rather than a religious one here) who are threatening them. See Caner 2010:151sq.

country, as if speaking aloud, that ‘Today on the Holy Mountain of Sina the Lord was seen again in fire.’” They have become (like Aaron³¹⁷) prophets to their own people in Armenia.

Though such large-scale public displays of God’s power are uncommon³¹⁸ – the example with the Priests of Baal is a rare one – Sinai holds a special position. It is the archetypal mountain.³¹⁹ The mountain itself stands between heaven and earth; its wilderness stands between the nations; things here can happen in the plural: “And [the Egyptians] will tell it to the inhabitants of [Canaan]: for they have heard that thou [art the Lord] among this people; that thou, Lord, art seen face to face; and that thy cloud standeth over them; and that thou goest before them, by day time in a pillar of a cloud, and in a pillar of fire by night.”³²⁰ Here, even a large group of eight hundred Armenians can play the role of the Camp of Israel.

Anastasios cleverly uses imagery from the books of Exodus and Daniel to situate the pilgrims’ experiences in a scriptural framework and to show that the Lord’s manifestation to his prophet animated the space where it occurred with such an enduring abundance of divine power that it was possible even centuries later for a large group of humble pilgrims to experience a Mosaic theophany of biblical proportions. His pilgrims are like the three Hebrew youths in the fiery furnace “upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their

³¹⁷ Ex. 4:16, 7:1.

³¹⁸ “[T]he gift of the vision of God, however, was not something associated primarily with laypeople, but with the mystical initiate, the solitary Moses-like figure of the desert anchorite” (Marinides 2014:319).

³¹⁹ Its position as such is seen in the second hemistich of Deborah’s exclamation: «Ὁρη ἐσαλεύθησαν ἀπὸ προσώπου Κυρίου Ἐλωῖ - τοῦτο Σινᾶ [even Sinai itself] ἀπὸ προσώπου Κυρίου θεοῦ Ἰσραήλ!» (Judges 5:5).

³²⁰ Num. 14:14 «...ἀκηκόασιν ὅτι σὺ εἶ Κύριος ἐν τῷ λαῷ τούτῳ, ὅστις ὀφθαλμοῖς κατ’ ὀφθαλμοὺς ὀπτάζει, Κύριε, καὶ ἡ νεφέλη σου ἐφέστηκεν ἐπ’ αὐτῶν καὶ ἐν στύλῳ νεφέλης σὺ πορεύῃ πρότερος αὐτῶν τὴν ἡμέραν καὶ ἐν στύλῳ πυρὸς τὴν νύκτα.» For the pillar, cf. Ex. 13:21-22, 14:19-20, 33:9-10. Note the plural also in Deut. 5:4, «Πρόσωπον κατὰ πρόσωπον ἐλάλησεν Κύριος πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν τῷ ὄρει ἐκ μέσου τοῦ πυρὸς.»

head singed.”³²¹ But Anastasios parts ways with the biblical story briefly, in order to underscore an important point: while the youths emerged from the furnace completely unaffected (“neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them”), the pilgrims retain a witness of their Moses-like encounter with the Lord, not on their bodies but on that most Mosaic/Aaronic of symbols: they return to their homeland with char-tipped staves in hand, a *souvenir* (in the original sense of the term) of their experience. Any listener familiar with the Books of Moses will surely have recognized the importance of using a staff as a sign – after the fire itself, it is the first sign the Lord uses when introducing himself to Moses, and one whereby Moses and Aaron testify of the Lord to others.³²²

Besides the staff and the fire, the other two signs the Burning Bush gives Moses are his (Moses’s) hand,³²³ which holds the staff,³²⁴ and water, which the staff brings forth.³²⁵ While the staff-bearing pilgrims in our story walk away unharmed, in other tales the marks of the divine presence can be actual destruction of the hand. For instance, in tale I.5 (Binggeli 176; Caner 177) a monk, hiding in the shrine at the summit, where he wasn’t supposed to be at night, attempts to trim the wick in one of the lamps. Sparks fly out and by divine command half of his body is “withered” («ἐξηράνθη»). In Moses’s encounter with divine fire, the prophet’s hand was transfigured (“leprous” in Hebrew, «ὡς χιῶν» in the Septuagint) and then quickly restored;³²⁶ but the damage to this monk’s withered hand is a mark he must wear in perpetuity. In tale I.26

³²¹ Dan. 3:27.

³²² Ex. 4:1-5, 4:17, 7:9-12, 7:17, 14:16. For fire, note that the entire mountain can be in flame: «Καὶ ἐπιστρέψας κατέβην ἐκ τοῦ ὄρους καὶ τὸ ὄρος ἐκαίετο πυρὶ, καὶ αἱ δύο πλάκες ἐπὶ ταῖς δυοῖ χερσίν μου» (Deut. 9:15).

³²³ Ex. 4:6-8.

³²⁴ Ex. 4:2: «Τί τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ ἐν τῇ χειρὶ σου;»

³²⁵ Ex. 4:9 (see also 7:17-21, 14:16, 14:21-29).

³²⁶ Ex. 4:6-7.

a certain Abba Orentios makes his burned hand – also punishment for earlier disobedience – a signature of his humility; from this, “God’s favor did not abandon the old man.”³²⁷ These various signs show that the people involved have been, if not transfigured, then most certainly transformed by their contact with the divine, and with their Mosaic tokens they advertise not only that God lives and manifests himself to his faithful but, most importantly, that he does so on Mount Sinai.

For the monks who acted as guides and companions to these visitors to the biblical past, the scriptural overlay that the surrounding topography acquired left an even more pronounced imprint on their way of life. Anastasios traces the effect on monks of living in such a spiritually charged environment in a story that resembles the experiences of the Armenian pilgrims. This tale is also the first in the collection, so it is not unreasonable to assume that Anastasios (or whoever arranged the tales after him) looked to this story to set the tone for the rest of the narratives. The tale in question also describes a journey to the mountain’s summit but, instead of a large group of pilgrims, the party consists of only two fathers: an older, more experienced monk and his younger companion. Anastasios adds in passing that the senior partner of this duo “is still alive” at the time he records this story.³²⁸ It should be noted that, while Anastasios does much to celebrate the mystique (if we may call it that) of the Mountain, describing Sinai as a place teeming with numinous potential, he is careful not to sever its ties with the reality of his audience, making sure it remains a “visitable” place both physically and spiritually. This small mention of a story-character’s still being among us – and admissions of such a kind are present

³²⁷ Binggeli 201; Caner 188, «Οὐ μὴν ἢ τοῦ Θεοῦ χάρις τοῦ γέροντος ὑπεχώρησε.»

³²⁸ Binggeli 170; Caner 174, «ὁ καὶ περιών».

in nearly all of the tales collections under consideration in this thesis – serves as just such a device for bridging the reader’s horizons of experience with the exceptional miracles and encounters with the divine which he reads about in the tales. This man may, like Moses, have seen the Lord face to face, but in this present day he is still alive to tell the tale. In it, and not unimportantly, Anastasios also reminds readers of his own familiarity with the fathers and their world. The pair’s ascent coincides with their entry into the realm of supernatural experiences; this entry is signaled gradually, first by the introduction of an otherworldly fragrance which they notice as they approach the church on the summit. The disciple, being unaccustomed to such immediate contact with the divine, rationalizes that it must be the church’s custodian burning incense; but the older monk, grasping the true nature of the divine scent, tells him “this is no earthly fragrance.”³²⁹ Their encounter then develops from an olfactory into a visual experience (which in the hierarchy of encounters with divinity ranks higher than a scent alone) and they see the church at the summit “blazing inside like a fiery furnace, with fire flickering out of all its windows.”³³⁰ When the disciple’s initial terror subsides, “as into a furnace, they fearlessly entered the shrine and prayed.”³³¹ As in the story of the Armenian pilgrims, the imagery and quotations from the book of Daniel connects the experiences of the fathers with those of the three Hebrew youths, but even more significant here are the allusions to Exodus 34, when Moses appears to the Israelites having stood face to face with the Lord. When day breaks, the two fathers are observed by the custodian of the shrine:

³²⁹ *Ibid.* 174.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*

When the custodian saw them, he observed that their faces were gloriously shining, as the face of Moses once [shone]. He said to them, "What was it that you saw on your ascent?" Since they wanted to keep it secret, they said, "nothing, Father." Then the custodian, who was himself a slave of the Lord, spoke to them once more: "Believe me, you saw a vision, for behold! Your faces are beaming with the glory of the Holy Spirit." They made obeisance before him and begged him not to tell anyone. After saying their prayers, they departed in peace."³³²

As with Moses, the mystical encounter has left the two fathers with a visage made supernaturally bright, which they cannot conceal from a "slave of the Lord" (a term Anastasios also applies to John Klimakos above). Whether or not they, like Moses, are unaware of the radiance they wear upon their countenances, they are met (as Moses was by the prophet Aaron) by a figure that can discern them. And, though they try to hide the experience from that spiritually gifted custodian, he – like a cartographer of the soul – can read upon their "maps" the unmistakable image of the great and sacred mountain, where God and man come face to face.³³³

Spiritualized Men

The mountain thus gives a deeply spiritual cast to the lives and the asceticism of the fathers who live around it, as though they participate in a lasting communion with the divine because of the tremendous sacred power with which the ground they tread is imbued. By association,

³³² Caner 174-175. For Christ's metamorphosis on the Mount of Transfiguration, see Matt. 17:2, Mark 9:2-3 and Luke 9:28-36.

³³³ Cf. Ex. 33:12 («ἐνώπιος ἐνωπίω»), Deut. 5.4 and 34:10 («πρόσωπον κατὰ πρόσωπον»), Num. 14:14 («ὀφθαλμοῖς κατ' ὀφθαλμοῦς»). For the face-to-face experience as terrifying, in an episode where a fiery staff is again involved, see Judges 6:21-24. In the *Ammonios Report* §17, there is also a curious story about the face of a holy man called Joseph shining brightly after his death. In fact, this embedded tale assembles several of the tropes associated with "holy death" at Sinai that are discussed in this chapter; Joseph disappears for many years, to the dismay of his disciple Gelasios, only to reappear mysteriously. He claims he was in his cell the entire time during his absence and had no knowledge of the passing of time. He has foreknowledge of the time of his death and attends to his own funeral arrangements. The luminous visage at death is clearly also meant to suggest some kind of transfiguration. See Caner 2010:159.

many of the fathers in Anastasios's tales take on a numinous, ephemeral quality of their own; appearing and disappearing at will by shimmering in and out of their spectators' field of vision. Caner remarks that "such figures embodied the mysteries of 'God's Mountain,' and are almost always described as disappearing."³³⁴ The evanescent quality of their life is also reflected particularly in the way Anastasios portrays their deaths: they live not so much "with one foot in the grave" as already beginning to step on the threshold into paradise. Tale I.31 demonstrates how, owing to their advanced asceticism, certain fathers inhabiting the Sinai wilderness appear as supernatural creatures, able to circumvent the ordinary laws of nature. The tale is narrated by Anastasios himself and reveals interesting details about the patterns of worship and ascetic practice that he and his companion, a monk named Kosmas the Armenian, followed. While the pair lived in cells at Goudda, which Anastasios calls "a place with a garden," it was their custom to venture out into the desert in order to "meditate in contemplation of God."³³⁵

When he had gone about two miles away from his cell, he came upon the mouth of a cave. Inside it he saw three men lying down, wearing tunics made of palm fibres. He did not know if they were alive or dead. He decided to go back to his cell and get a censer and then return to the holy fathers. With great precision he marked the place by setting up cairns. Then he came to his cell, and got the censer and Abba Kosmas, and went back. They searched for the place and the markers with great effort but were unable to find them. ³³⁶

³³⁴ Caner 2010:65. This vanishing act also serves as means of self-preservation in a very perilous environment but we shall return to that later in this chapter.

³³⁵ For an earlier description of this (fairly common) kind of semi-anachoresis practiced at the monastic community of Raïthou, see the *Ammonios Report* §11-12 (Caner 2010:151-2), where monks live in seclusion during the week but come together for church services on the weekend.

³³⁶ I.31 (Binggeli 206; Caner 191), «Καὶ ἀπομακρύνας τοῦ κελλίου ὡσεὶ μίλια δύο περιπίπτει εἰς στόμιον σπηλαίου τινὸς καὶ ὄρα ἔνδον τρεῖς τινας ἀνακειμένους φορούντας σίβινα κολόβια· οὐκ οἶδεν εἴτε ζῶντας εἴτε τεθνεώτας. Ἐλογίσατο οὖν ὑποστρέψαι ἐν τῷ κελλίῳ καὶ ἐνέγκαι θυμιατήριον καὶ οὕτως εἰσελθεῖν πρὸς τοὺς ἁγίους πατέρας. Καὶ σημειωσάμενος κατὰ πᾶσαν ἀκρίβειαν τὸν τόπον καὶ σκοπέλους βαλὼν ἦλθεν εἰς τὸ κελλίον, καὶ λαβὼν τὸν ἀββᾶν Κοσμᾶν ἀπηλθε· καὶ πολλὰ ζητήσαντες τὸν τόπον καὶ τὰ σημεῖα οὐκ ἠδυνήθησαν εὐρεῖν. Ἔθος γὰρ τοῦτο τοῖς ἁγίοις ἀναχωρηταῖς καὶ ἐν ζωῇ καὶ μετὰ τὸν θάνατον, ὅτε θέλουσιν φαίνεσθαι, καὶ ὅτε θέλουσιν κρύπτεσθαι τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ θεοῦ.» Binggeli (2005:515) rightly notes that the switch to the third-person narration that occurs in the first line of the quotation is awkward, and concludes that «il ne peut s'agir d'abba Cosmas qui réapparaît dans la suite du récit – ; cette mise à distance permettait sans doute à notre auteur de parler plus librement de l'apparition miraculeuse don't il fut personnellement témoin.» This is

The stated purpose for this daily retreat into the desert is to “meditate in contemplation of God,” which is perhaps why he cannot tell whether the elders in the cave are dead or alive – nor are we the audience told which is the case. The desert for Anastasios is a place where the most profound contemplation is possible and these monks appear to him so far advanced in their *theoria* of the Lord that they exist in a continuous state of imperturbable peace, and the ambiguity as to their state (alive or dead) is already enough to make them a liminal creatures poised between this world and the next.

Anastasios’s actions upon his discovery of the cave, with its mysterious occupants, suggest that he believes the fathers to have left this life. This is again not explicitly stated but his actions reveal his line of thinking, as we will see. Upon seeing the brethren still and reclining, he decides to return to his own cell to fetch a censer (*θυμιατήριον*). Caner suggests that such an instrument could serve to mask the odor of death in the cave and to provide light in a dark space.³³⁷ But beyond such practical applications, other tales show that censers also performed an important ritual function at the moment of death, as for example in tale I.20, the last in a series of narratives tales which witness the extraordinary thaumaturgy of Abba George of Arselaïou. This last tale fittingly gives an account of the “great father’s death, or rather, his migration through death to eternal life.”³³⁸ George falls gravely ill and asks a local Christian to travel to the town of Aila (around 200 miles away) in order to fetch a loved one for a final reunion before death. The man is gone for twelve days, but on the last day the moribund elder asks his disciple

undoubtedly the case and an accepted technique in hagiography with precedents in the *Vita Antonii* and its origin in Paul. Putting a vision into the third person is a simple way to increase its credibility.

³³⁷ Caner 2010:191n2.

³³⁸ I.20 (Binggeli 194; Caner 185), «ὁ θάνατος τοῦ μεγάλου τούτου πατρὸς γέγονε, μᾶλλον δὲ ἡ μετᾶστασις διὰ θανάτου πρὸς ζωὴν αἰώνιον».

to light the censer, because he senses that the expected travelers are about to return. Anastasios tells us,

after the brother lit the censer, behold! The [Christian] Saracen and the old man's dear one from Aila entered the cave. The old man said a prayer, embraced them both and partook of the Holy Mysteries, laid himself back down and departed to the Lord.³³⁹

The burning of incense ritually marks what Anastasios calls the “migration through death to eternal life.” The image is a fitting symbol – precious smoke wafting and rising out of the heavy body of a censer – and one that appears also in the liturgy for the dead. At the same time, and with the sense of place (Sinai) being ever in the reader's mind, one surely thinks of the repeated injunctions to Aaron, especially in Exodus 30, to burn incense as an offering. Smoke, furthermore, can represent not only the ascending prayers of the saints³⁴⁰ but, in the other direction, the condescending presence of the Lord upon his mountain or within his temple.³⁴¹

³³⁹ I.20 (Binggeli 194; Caner 185), «Καὶ ποιήσαντος τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ τὸ θυμιατήριον, ἰδοὺ εἰσηλθεν καὶ ὁ Σαρακηνὸς καὶ ὁ ἀγαπητὸς τοῦ γέροντος ἐκ τοῦ Αἰλᾶ εἰς τὸ σπήλαιον. Καὶ ποιήσας εὐχὴν ὁ γέρον καὶ ἀσπασάμενος ἀμφοτέροισι καὶ μεταλαβὼν τῶν ἁγίων μυστηρίων, ἀνακλίνας ἑαυτὸν ἀπῆλθε πρὸς Κύριον.» In tale 57 of the *Pratum*, Abba Julian the Stylite suddenly tells his disciples to burn incense outside of the scheduled intervals. When asked why they are to do this, the elder answers that Symeon of Aegaion, another stylite, is dead and that he saw the great man's soul rising to heaven. The point of the story is, of course, to reveal Julian's extraordinary discernment but, as Wortley remarks (1992:245), the story is something of a *topos*, and each time incense is used as a ritual marker for the passage of the soul from this life to the next. For another similar instance of this motif, where a monk belonging to the Lavra of St. Sabas is aware of his own imminent death and asks his disciple to light a censer, see tale 30 in Garitte 1966:423. While in Anastasios's tale Abba George asks his disciple to light the censer for the arrival of his guest, the monk in the story in Garitte's collection is not expecting any attendants for his passing, but the event attracts the notice of many when the sweet smell permeates the air for a three-mile radius. It is worth quoting this story here (translated by Garitte from Georgian): «Et die parasceve (paraskevi), hora tertia, [monachus] dixit discipulo suo: “...Accipe ignem et pone incensum.” Et ille fecit ita et statim illuminata est domus splendidius quam sole; impleta est aromate, ita ut perveniret ad tria milia (milion) aroma eius; et multi mirati sunt odorem incensi. Et dixit discipulo suo: “Pax tibi, fili mi,” et obdormivit somno dulci; et sepeliverunt eum cum patribus; et nos dedimus gloriam Deo qui glorificat dignos (servos) suos.»

³⁴⁰ E.g. Ps. 141:2 («Κατευθυνθήτω ἡ προσευχή μου ὡς θυμίαμα ἐνώπιόν σου ἔπαρσις τῶν χειρῶν μου θυσία ἐσπερινή») and Rev. 8:4 («Καὶ ἀνέβη ὁ καπνὸς τῶν θυμιαμάτων ταῖς προσευχαῖς τῶν ἁγίων ἐκ χειρὸς τοῦ ἀγγέλου ἐνώπιον τοῦ Θεοῦ»), with which compare Homeric *κνίσση* and the biblical “sweet savour” of Levitical burnt sacrifices (the *ὀσμὴ εὐωδίας* which enters into God's own wrath- and smoke-breathing nostrils).

³⁴¹ E.g. Ex. 19:18 («Τὸ δὲ ὄρος τὸ Σινᾶ ἐκαπνίζετο ὅλον διὰ τὸ καταβεβηκέναι ἐπ' αὐτὸ τὸν Θεὸν ἐν πυρὶ, καὶ ἀνέβαινεν ὁ καπνὸς ὡς καπνὸς καμίνου καὶ ἐξέστη πᾶς ὁ λαὸς σφόδρα»), Isaiah 4:6 («Καὶ ἦξει καὶ ἔσται πᾶς τόπος τοῦ ὄρους Σιών καὶ πάντα τὰ περικύκλω αὐτῆς σκιάσει νεφέλη ἡμέρας καὶ ὡς καπνοῦ καὶ ὡς φωτὸς

Anastasios concludes his account of the disappearing fathers with a generality about the anchorites of Sinai, “for it is custom among the holy anchorites, both in life and after death, to reveal themselves and to conceal themselves whenever they want, by the power of God.”³⁴² This statement again touches on the unresolved ambiguity from earlier on in the tale, whether the elders were dead or alive; in the end, the question is left open. For this reason also, however, the tale is paradigmatic for Anastasios’s depiction of deceased monks in his tales. They are shown to be adhering to a mode of life and death that has existed there since Biblical times. The tale shows that they have, in fact, advanced beyond the simple binaries of life and death, presence or absence, and that this is a function of their great holiness. This class of spiritually advanced monks exists on a different plane from the rest, whom death has taken away at last but whose connection to the frailties of mortality were, even during their life, tenuous at best.

Miracles of Self-Preservation

While the Mountain acts as a conduit for spiritual power, it also forms the focal point of a harsh and barren landscape which serves as a proving ground for those seeking proximity to the Lord. As in the writing of John Klimakos, the mountain looms large in the tales and represents, as Marinides writes, “a constant invitation and challenge to the monk who has left the pleasures and cares of the world to struggle in hunger, thirst, and obedience in the desert.”³⁴³ The rugged and inhospitable terrain of the Sinai and its surroundings forms a difficult setting for ascetic

πυρὸς καιομένου νυκτὸς πάση τῇ δόξῃ σκεπασθήσεται»), Ps. 144:5 («Κύριε, κλῖνον οὐρανοὺς σου καὶ κατὰβηθι ἄψαι τῶν ὀρέων καὶ καπνισθήσονται») and Rev. 15:8 («Καὶ ἐγεμίσθη ὁ ναὸς καπνοῦ ἐκ τῆς δόξης τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ ἐκ τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ...»).

³⁴² I.31 (Binggeli 190; Caner 206).

³⁴³ Marinides 2014:319.

success. In the tales, the rhythms of daily life for the monks are shaped, to a large degree, by the requirements for survival in an environment where water and food are not naturally abundant and where there is a constant threat of predation both from wild animals and hostile men. Anastasios's monks are seen tending little gardens and guarding their crops from the local fauna and their dwellings from vermin.³⁴⁴ They find shelter at the bottom of ravines and navigate precipitous terrain to maintain and strengthen the bonds of brotherhood.³⁴⁵ Accordingly, much of their thaumaturgy addresses and resolves problems that arise from living under such dangerous conditions: monks save their disciples from deadly snakebites; bountiful gardens and fruit-laden trees miraculously appear in the depth of winter, and they are able through prayer to create a miraculous multiplication of scarce supplies.³⁴⁶ As paradigms of charitable love, the brethren's efforts for the preservation of life frequently extend beyond their own needs to providing for the needs of the local population and even those of wild animals.³⁴⁷ The miracles thus show the monks acting not only as implements of divine mercy but as

³⁴⁴ Monks tending gardens: I.21, I.25, I.34. In tale I.21, a monk hits upon a mutually advantageous arrangement with a leopard: he sets the leopard as a watch over his crops with the instruction to make a meal of any *χοιρόγρυλλα* found in the garden. Although scholars disagree, it appears a *χοιρόγρυλλον* is some kind of rabbit or hare (a "coney" according to the LSJ *s.v.*); see Caner 2010:186n77. Wortley also calls them "rock rabbits" (home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~wortley/general.html). For a cave filled with vermin see I.27.

³⁴⁵ Monks living in ravines: I.14, I.21, I.30, I.32, I.35. Navigating precipitous terrain: I.15, I.20, I.21.

³⁴⁶ Rescue from poisonous snakes: I.19. Scarcity: in tale I.17 the monastery is coping with a shortage of olive oil at a time when "the road from Palestine was beset by barbarians." The brethren's prayer over the oil vats creates a wondrous supply of oil that fills the monastery's needs, a miracle with both folkloric and scriptural precedent (1Kings 17:8-16).

³⁴⁷ In tale I.18, a monk called George, who eats only bitter capers himself, points a group of starving Saracens to a place where they might find and hunt a herd of wild goats. Tale I.24 sees George bringing rain down from the heavens for a herd of mountain goats suffering from under a recent drought. Anastasios's tales of the monks' interactions with animals have enough gentle delight to rival Moschos's best: in one touching little story (I.22), John the Sabaïte heals the blind eyes of a young coney and is offered a cabbage by the nursling's grateful mother, only to refuse the animal's gift with a gentle reprimand for having stolen the vegetable from one of the fathers' gardens.

extensions of or supplements to the barren landscape, ensuring by their miraculous intervention that this holy desert remains liveable for themselves and for others who dwell in it.

One of the most curious stories in the *Tales of the Sinai Fathers* belonging to this category occurs towards the end of the collection. It features a miracle of self-preservation in which, as in the story of the three hermits in a cave, an ascetic becomes integrated into his surroundings while seeking communion with the divine; it is worth quoting in full:

In the dreadful ravine called Sidid a holy man used to dwell along with his disciple. One day the old man sent his disciple to Raïthou. Three days later he was in the desert by the Crossing Point. While focused on divine contemplation, he saw his disciple coming from afar. Thinking him to be a Saracen, he changed his shape into a palm tree to escape notice. When the disciple came to the place, he saw a palm tree. Bewildered, he struck it with a cup of his hand, saying, “When did this palm tree come here?” Transported by a divine hand, the old man got back to the cave before the disciple did. He welcomed him and cheerfully said to him the next day, “what was it that I did to you that made you box my ears yesterday?” The disciple threw himself on the ground, denying and disowning the deed. Then the old man told him the reason for the palm tree – that it had been he, and that he had instantly changed into the form of a palm tree because he had been occupied by divine contemplation and did not want to be interrupted by any human encounter.³⁴⁸

In this amusing incident, Anastasios seems to embrace the fantastical elements of the desert tradition, familiar from works like the fourth-century *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, with greater alacrity than he is wont to do. The hermit of Sidid is truly a worthy heir of his thaumaturgically gifted predecessors at Wadi Natrun. Sidid is also mentioned in tale I.30 as the setting for a “miracle of paradise,” as Caner calls it, when during Lent one of the fathers and his

³⁴⁸ I.32 (Binggeli 206; Caner 191), «Καὶ γοῦν ἐν τῷ χειμάρρῳ τῷ φοβερῷ τοῦ Σιδιδ ᾧκει ἀνὴρ ἅγιος ἔχων μεθ' ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὸν οἰκειὸν μαθητὴν. Καὶ ἐν μιᾷ ἀποστείλαντος αὐτοῦ αὐτὸν εἰς Ῥαῖθου, μετὰ τρεῖς ἡμέρας ὧν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τῇ κατὰ τὴν διάβασιν ὁ γέρων καὶ τῇ θείᾳ ἐνατενίζων θεωρία ὄρα τὸν ἴδιον μαθητὴν ἀπὸ μήκοθεν ἐρχόμενον, καὶ νομίσας αὐτὸν Σαρακηγὸν εἶναι μετεμορφώθη εἰς φοῖνικα διαλαθεῖν βουλόμενος. Ἐλθὼν οὖν κατὰ τὸν τόπον ὁ μαθητῆς ὄρα τὸν φοῖνικα καὶ κρούει αὐτὸν τῇ παλάμῃ ἑαυτοῦ, ἐξιστάμενος καὶ λέγων· Πότε γέγονεν ὁ φοῖνιξ οὗτος ὧδε; Θεία οὖν χειρὶ μετενεχθεὶς ὁ γέρων προέλαβε τὸν μαθητὴν ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ, καὶ δεξάμενος αὐτὸν λέγει πρὸς αὐτὸν τῇ ἐπαύριον χαριέντως· Τί ἔπταισά σοι, ἀδελφὲ, ὅτι δέδωκάς μοι χθὲς κόσσον; Ἐρριψεν οὖν ἑαυτὸν εἰς τὴν γῆν ὁ μαθητῆς, ἀρνούμενος καὶ ἀγνοῶν τὸ πρᾶγμα. Τότε εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ γέρων τὴν αἰτίαν τοῦ φοῖνικος ὅτι αὐτὸς ἦν, καὶ ὅτι ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτὸν εἰς θεῖαν ἀδολεσχίαν καὶ μὴ βουλόμενον ὑπὸ συντυχίας ἀνθρωπίνης διασκεδασθῆναι, ἐξαυτῆς εἰς τὴν τοῦ φοῖνικος μετεμορφώθη ἰδέαν.»

disciples are able to glimpse a deep ravine with a hermit's cell and a garden with "trees bearing all kinds of fruits out of season." When they draw close, in order to obtain a blessing from its cultivator, the tree disappears in the twinkling of an eye.³⁴⁹ The hermit in tale I.32 possesses an even greater mastery over the landscape than the miraculous cultivator from tale I.30, as he is *literally* able to become a part of it. Beyond its comic value, the story shows how "deeply rooted" and enmeshed the hermit has become in these "dreadful" surroundings. His choice to transform into a date palm seems a logical one, given the relative prevalence of that tree in the desert.³⁵⁰ From other tales and from earlier sources we learn that date palms were an indispensable resource for monks living in the desert, and in the previously discussed tale about the dead hermits in the cave (I.31), Anastasios mentions that they are wearing garments from palm fibers. In the *Ammonios Report*, the narrator describes a monk named Moses who not only wore clothing made from palm fibers but also subsisted on a diet consisting solely of dates.³⁵¹ The most notable parallel to the story of this desert "dendrite" also occurs in the *Ammonios Report*, when the narrator, having witnessed the terrible carnage of his fellow Christians at the hands of merciless Blemmyes (those "men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders") conceals himself behind palm fronds to escape his enemies' notice:

As these things happened, almost all of my blood left me. I lay still as a corpse, sure that they would also inspect the palm branches and find me hiding. I kept peering through the palm fronds to see when they would come to me. As the saying goes, I saw death before my eyes, and continually supplicated God Who loves mankind to save me if it pleased him. They came right up to me, but when they saw that there were only palms, they withdrew in contempt.

³⁴⁹ Caner 2010:190.

³⁵⁰ Cf. Egeria's *Travelogue* §14, where Egeria describes the Pharan desert as containing "no fields or vineyards. Nothing else but water and palm trees" (see Caner 2010:216). Also the *Piacenza Pilgrim* §40 (see Caner 2010:259-60).

³⁵¹ See Caner 155-156.

They went away without discovering the place I was in, since God had darkened their eyes and hearts.³⁵²

What the narrator in the *Ammonios Report* attempts (and achieves) through concealment and camouflage, using the fronds of the palm tree, the hermit can achieve by completely transforming himself into the very tree itself.³⁵³ The father at Sidid has thus developed his thaumaturgy in such a way that it is in complete harmony with his surroundings and his transformation is undiscoverable even to his own disciple, who merely wonders at the new greenery in his living environment.

It is something of a hagiographical *topos* that the spiritual power resulting from extremely advanced asceticism (or martyrdom for that matter) remains largely unattainable for the average Christian, whether layman or monk. The narrator usually assures the reader that attempts at exact imitation are not expected or might even be deemed presumptuous. But, if stories of such power are largely meant to be aspirational or exemplary, it stands to reason that the teller still wishes the reader or listener to take note of whatever skill or a virtue is being

³⁵² *Ammonios Report* §31 (Caner 166 (adapted); Combefis 122-23), «Εγὼ τούτων γινομένων οὐδεμίαν ῥάνίδα αἵματος εἶχον· ἀλλ’ ὅλος ἐκεῖμην ὡσεὶ νεκρός· ἐν βεβαίῳ εἶχον, ὅτι πάντως καὶ τοὺς θάλλους τῶν φοινίκων ἔχουσιν ἐρευνῆσαι, καὶ μὲ εὐρήσουσιν κεκρυμμένον. Καὶ συνεχῶς διὰ τῶν βαίων παρέκλυτον ἰδὼν πότε καὶ πρὸς με ἤξουσιν, ὡς προειρήται [sic?], ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς μου βλέπων τὸν θάνατον, καὶ ἐδεόμην τοῦ Θεοῦ σῶσαι με εἰ ἀρεστὸν αὐτῷ ἔστιν. Ἔρχονται οὖν καὶ πρὸς με, καὶ θεωρήσαντες ὅτι βαία εἰσίν, ὡς δῆθεν καταφρονήσαντες αὐτῶν, ἀνεχώρησαν, τοῦ Θεοῦ σκεπάσαντος τὰς καρδίας καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν, ἵνα μὴ ἐρευνήσωσιν τὸν τόπον ἐν ᾧ ἤμην.» A modern and much improved edition of the text, edited by Katsanes and Tsames in 1990, exists but I have been unable to consult it and so must rely on Combefis’ 1660 edition to provide the Greek text, which diverges at certain points from the version Caner is translating.

³⁵³ People turning into trees for protection is, of course, a motif with a long tradition in various cultures, its most famous iteration being the story of Apollo and Daphne. An interesting contemporary parallel for trees concealing people from their religious opponents comes from the Hadith: “The last hour would not come unless the Muslims will fight against the Jews and the Muslims would kill them and until the Jews would hide themselves behind a stone or a tree, and a stone or a tree would say: ‘Muslim, or the servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me; come and kill him.’ Only a very thorny tree known as the *gharqad*, which is painful to touch, will be loyal to the Jews and not reveal their identity, ‘for it is the tree of the Jew’ (6985 [*Ṣaḥīḥ*]). Another sign of the approaching Hour will be that ‘the sun would rise from the West’ (7039)” (Swarup 2002:177, §15.36 “Some signs of the last hour”). For the modern reception of this hadith see Juergensmeyer, Kitts and Jerryson (edd.) 2013:484.

modeled by the advanced Christian, and to adapt and implement it in his own life, even if on a more modest scale. The representation of monks in these tales – if the tales are indeed, as Caner has suggested, meant for an audience of monks safely cloistered within fortified monastery walls – would seem to be intended as a model of sanctity meant not to replace but to supplement, with practicable goals, the ideals of an already strongly established martyr tradition at Sinai. The monks of Anastasios's stories are heroes *at coping*. They deal with the difficulties inherent in desert life, such as famine, drought, and shortages of supplies, and do so with Christ-like humility, perseverance and supreme competence. Several of their miracles, as we have seen, neutralize the exigencies of their arduous existence, thereby keeping this difficult, hard-won life of devotion viable for those around them, and for themselves, to preserve and continue a monastic tradition that stretched hundreds of years back in time. They encourage the audience of Anastasios's tales, in turn, to cope as well as they can in spite of the trying times they live in, so that they too may continue their encounter with the divine without interruption.

The Translation of Abba Conon and Another Great Father

The father at Sidid concealed himself initially because he did not wish to come into contact with a "Saracen." Whereas in the *Ammonios Report* it is clear that the narrator hides from his assailants because they intend to do him harm, such is not made explicit in tale I.32. The hermit transformed himself because he did not want to be interrupted by anyone, not even his disciple. Still, the mention of Saracens draws attention to the fact that there were other desert dwellers, who, as Moschos's *Pratum* so emphatically witnesses, could present a real danger to Sinai's Christians. While Anastasios mostly seems to avoid stories of gore, there are certain moments in

the tales where echoes of reality seem to penetrate the wondrous and timeless mist which clings to his carefully crafted narrative landscape. The danger of attack or depredation always loomed in the desert and, for those motivated by desperation or ill will, an unarmed Christian monk made a relatively easy target. Particularly vulnerable to such attacks were anchorites, who did not have the immediate protection of monastery walls or the strength in numbers that the cœnobitic communities enjoyed.³⁵⁴ One of the tales relates just such an unhappy circumstance, in which no fewer than six monks were murdered during an “attack by savage barbarians.”³⁵⁵ Among the dead was Abba Conon the Cilician, known to us from at least two tales in the *Pratum*.³⁵⁶ According to the narrator, Conon possessed the gifts of discernment and prophecy; in other words, he was a man who had attained an exceptional degree of sanctity. The appropriately named Abba Martyrios, who was at that time dwelling in the region of the Red Sea – a place where a few centuries earlier Antony the Great had performed such great spiritual deeds – witnessed the attack and took it upon himself to provide a proper burial for the dead monks. Having found a suitable cave, he laid the men inside, placed a slab (πλάξ) in front of the opening, and inscribed their names upon it. (There is probably a Mosaic echo here as well, the lawgiver’s tables being referred to as the *πλάκες λίθιναι*³⁵⁷ and, also appropriate here, as the *πλάκες τῆς διαθήκης*.³⁵⁸) Later, Martyrios returned to see whether the grave was still intact, fearing hyenas and other scavengers. He did find it still intact, but when he removed the slab he

³⁵⁴ One would imagine that their relative poverty also made them less attractive targets for those seeking to gain riches, but perhaps that is not the point. An anchorite in the hand might be better than several cœnobites in, so to speak, the bush.

³⁵⁵ Tale I.10 (Binggeli 182; Caner 180), «ἐπιδρομή τινων βαρβάρων ἀγρίων».

³⁵⁶ Tales 3 and 22 in the *Pratum*.

³⁵⁷ Ex. 31:18, 32:15, 34:1, Deut. 4:13, 5:22, 9:9-11, 10:1, 10:3, 1Kings 8:9. (Cf. also 2Cor. 3:3 for an interesting spin.)

³⁵⁸ Ex. 34:28, Deut. 9:9, 9:11 («τὰς πλάκας τὰς λιθίνας, πλάκας διαθήκης»), 1Kings 8:9 («πλάκες λίθιναι, πλάκες τῆς διαθήκης ἃς ἔθηκεν ἐκεῖ Μωϋσῆς»), Heb. 9:4.

saw “that two of the bodies had been translated by the Lord from where he stood.” These were, the tale concludes, “the body of Abba Conon and of another great elder.” The Greek participle used for “translated” is *μετατεθείς*, the same one we find in Genesis when the narrator (reputedly Moses) mentions Enoch. For an audience steeped in the stories and the language of the Old Testament, the textual echo would have signaled that, like Enoch, Abba Conon and the other great elder had been men who “walked with God.” Though they did not escape the experience of tasting death, their righteousness and God’s power were nevertheless made manifest in that they “[were] not; for God took [them].”³⁵⁹ And, in fact, for the story to have its power, it was necessary – as with that other famous tale of an empty tomb – that their bodies first be seen deceased.

Both the mountain and its biblical past profoundly shaped the life and asceticism of the monks who lived around it. If, as Caner puts it, “the solitary was the absolute hero of this distant desert landscape” and his surroundings “offered almost unparalleled opportunities for obtaining the solitude essential to *hesychia*,” it would stand to reason that dying were also principally a private and unattended activity in this dispersed community.³⁶⁰ And yet, in the tales, just as we have seen manifestations of God as public events, so it is often at and around the moment of death that the ties of monastic brotherhood find their most poignant expression and that the company of other humans becomes not only desirable but even essential. The story of Abba George of Arselaiou shows that the assembly of the right group of people was important enough for the moribund to delay the moment of his death. While in the case of

³⁵⁹ Gen. 5.24 «Καὶ εὐηρέστησεν Ἐνὼχ τῷ Θεῷ, καὶ οὐχ ἠύρισκετο, ὅτι μετέθηκεν αὐτὸν ὁ Θεός.»

³⁶⁰ Caner 2010:64 and 2010:24.

George, the principal objective for the reunion between the abba and his ἀγαπητός was to arrange a final farewell,³⁶¹ in other stories we learn that having an attendant (or several) at or after one's death could also serve more practical purposes. Several of the hermits in Anastasios's tales face a dilemma which, as we saw in the previous chapter, also kept hermits in the *Pratum* occupied until well into the afterlife: if one dies in solitude, what is to become of one's earthly remains?³⁶² In contrast to the grazers of the Judæan desert, whose desire to live untrammelled by worldly constraints could, if we may believe Moschos's telling of it, be readily gratified in that lonely place, Anastasios shows many of the hermits living near the Mountain tempering their intense desire for solitude with the maintenance of a basic network of support and communication with a few of their fellow brethren. Such networks likely owed their existence, at least in part, to the idiosyncracies of Sinaitic monasticism, and it must have been more difficult for those monks to find perfect seclusion in a wilderness that saw as much traffic from travelers as did the Sinai desert in that period.³⁶³ As Flusin puts it, Sinai in the seventh century was «certainement un lieu où l'on pratique la solitude. Mais en même temps, du fait en particulier des pèlerinages, c'est un point de convergence en un centre de rayonnement, où les contacts et les échanges sont intenses.»³⁶⁴ But, beyond the fact that Sinai was, by certain standards, a rather well-trodden wilderness, the tales remind us that it was a wilderness still, in

³⁶¹ I.20 (Binggeli 194; Caner 185).

³⁶² Cf. note 11 above.

³⁶³ For the main pilgrimage routes and the distances between the important points on those routes, see Caner 2010:24. Caner also points out, however, and it is important to bear that in mind when reading these stories, that not all monastic settlements were clustered around the Mountain and that certain monks had traveled rather far afield to stake out their little bit of wilderness. For the geographical spread of the monastic settlements, see Flusin 2006:197 and especially Caner 2010:33.

³⁶⁴ Flusin 2006:195.

which the presence and assistance of friends and brothers was sometimes necessary not only for living but, as we will see, also for dying.

Blest be the Tie that Binds

The most important attendant and assistant in the final stages of an elderly or invalid monk's life was usually, and naturally, his disciple. Among the most intimate portraits of death that Anastasios presents, where no more than two or three people witness the passing of a moribund elder, the disciple provides palliative care leading up to the moment of death and, perhaps most importantly, attends to the appropriate ritual functions which mark the monk's passing. George of Arselaiou's disciple plays a rather minor role in the story, because Anastasios foregrounds the miraculous foresight which enables George to delay his death until his dear friend has arrived. Nevertheless, we are able to gather that the disciple stayed with his bed-ridden (or rather, mat-ridden) master while the local man was on his errand to fetch the friend. When death drew near for George, the disciple lit the censer and prepared the final sacrament so his elder's "migration" might begin with the appropriate ceremony.

The tale of abba Epiphanius the Recluse (ἔγκλειστος) also offers insight into how monks balanced their continual search for ascetic *hesychia* with their obligations towards the community. Despite his nickname, it seems that Epiphanius maintained significant connections with a number of his fellow brethren, even throughout his time of confinement. The most interesting of these relationships is mentioned quite subtly: while introducing this great recluse, he calls the man "my abba Epiphanius,"³⁶⁵ at which Binggeli notes that this likely indicates that

³⁶⁵ Binggeli 204; Caner 189, «ὁ ἐμὸς ἀββᾶς Ἐπιφάνιος».

he was at one time our narrator's spiritual advisor (*ἐπιστάτης*).³⁶⁶ Another important person in Epiphanius's circle of friends was abba Stephen of Byzantium, himself the subject of a noteworthy monastic death story, which we will return to in the next chapter. Anastasios describes Epiphanius as Stephen's "companion in the world and in his way of life,"³⁶⁷ and Epiphanius's life (as we observe it indirectly through his associations with friends and disciples) exemplifies some of the fluidity in monastic practice that Flusin has noted in the Sinai community of the time.³⁶⁸ Narration of tale I.29 begins at "the beginning of his seclusion"; so it is likely that, prior to this event, Epiphanius had lived a semi-anachoretic or even cœnobitic life.³⁶⁹ His disciple/servant (*ὑπηρέτης*) is then perhaps also a holdover from before the time of his seclusion. We learn about Epiphanius's daily routine, however, because the narrative episode marks the occasion when he breaks the established pattern (*exceptio probat regulam*). Under normal circumstances, this abba made it his practice "not to meet anyone – not even his own servant – before the fourth hour."³⁷⁰ Significantly, Anastasios adds that this custom had been "handed down to him long ago," meaning that even if such partial seclusion was not widely practiced by Sinai monks, it at least had some historical precedent.³⁷¹ Foreknowledge of his own death – the province of the spiritually advanced – causes Epiphanius to issue special instructions to his disciple on the eve of his own death, in order to accommodate the exigencies of his impending passage:

³⁶⁶ Binggeli 2005:513n138.

³⁶⁷ Tale I.29 (Binggeli 204; Caner 189), «ἐταῖρος καὶ ἐν κόσμῳ καὶ ἐν τρόπῳ».

³⁶⁸ Flusin 2006:194.

³⁶⁹ Binggeli 204; Caner 190, «ἐν ἀρχαῖς τοῦ ἐγκλεισθῆναι.» Another possibility is that his seclusion is linked with his illness, which is discussed in the beginning and is the eventual cause of his death.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, «μὴ συντυγχάνειν ἐκτὸς ἀνάγκης πρὸ ὥρας τετάρτης τινί, μήτε αὐτῷ τῷ οἰκείῳ ὑπερέτη.»

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, «ἔθος...αὐτῷ πάλαι παραδεδομένον.»

He said in the evening to his disciple, “Tomorrow before dawn, open the gate and come to me inside, because there is a certain necessity that I want to show you.” The slave of Christ was not lying. For in the morning when the disciple opened and came in, he found that the saint had positioned himself towards the east and had departed to the Lord.³⁷²

It is curious that, unlike the death scenes we will discuss in the next chapter, Epiphanius chooses to keep his death a private occasion and, while telling his disciple that there is an «ἀναγκαῖον τίποτε» which his master wishes him to see, the disciple is not invited to be present at the moment when he breathes his last. The way Epiphanius arranges the discovery of death and the purpose of this ploy merit further investigation; highly important for understanding the message of this tale, it seems, is that Epiphanius was our narrator’s own ascetic teacher. In Anastasios’s telling, his master left this world in the same way he had spent his years in it – that is, with a view to edifying others. This didactic (and deictic) function of Epiphanius’s passing is further underscored by the elder’s rather marked use of the word ἀναγκαῖον to describe the event to his disciple. In its neuter form, the word occurs infrequently in the collections of beneficial tales we are considering for this study. The most common lexical meaning is rendered by Caner as “necessity” or, more literally “a necessary thing.” *Prima facie*, that is certainly what’s intended here, meaning there is an imperative task for the disciple to complete in burying the elder’s bodily remains.³⁷³ But, interestingly, another perhaps more specialized meaning of the word ἀναγκαῖον, found also in Moschos and Klimakos, seems to

³⁷² *Ibid.*, «λέγει τῇ ἑσπέρα τῷ ἰδίῳ μαθητῇ ὁ δοῦλος τοῦ Χριστοῦ· Αὔριον ἀπὸ νυχέων ἐλθὲ καὶ στρέψον τὴν θυρίδα καὶ εἰσελθε πρὸς με ὅτι θέλω ἀναγκαῖον τίποτε δεῖξαι σοι. Καὶ οὐκ ἐψεύσατο ὁ δοῦλος τοῦ Χριστοῦ· ἀνοίξας γὰρ καὶ εἰσελθὼν τὸ πρῶν ἠύρε τὸν ὄσιον σχηματίζοντα ἑαυτὸν κατὰ ἀνατολὰς καὶ ἀπελθόντα πρὸς Κύριον.»

³⁷³ Variants of ἀναγκαῖος with the meaning “necessary” are also predominantly used this way in the the *Pratum*: PG 87(3).2889A («διά τινος ἀναγκαίας χρείας») and PG 87(3).3104A («τὰ ἀναγκαῖα») and in the *Ladder*: PG 88.860B («ἐν προσευχῇ σταθέντας ἀναγκαίων πραγμάτων ὑπομιμνήσκει, καὶ πᾶσαν μηχανὴν ποιεῖ ἐκεῖθεν ἡμᾶς φορβιᾶ εὐλόγῳ ἀποσύραι ἢ ἄλογος»).

connect it with teachings about the remembrance of death. Thus in the *Pratum*, Abba Palladios gives the following instruction:

[M]y children, since we know what kind of times these are and what kind of labor is required of us, let us strive for the self-knowledge that is attained by means of the solitary life. For at this stage, it is required (*ἀναγκαῖον*) of us that we sincerely repent, so that we may indeed be temples of God. For it will not be honor such as the world gives that we will receive in the world to come.³⁷⁴

Similarly, in Step 6 of the *Ladder, On the Remembrance of Death*, Klimakos adjures his audience that,

just as bread is the most essential (*ἀναγκαιότερον*) of all foods, so the thought of death is the most essential of all works. The remembrance of death brings labors and meditations, or rather, the sweetness of dishonor to those living in the community, whereas for those living away from turbulence it produces freedom from daily worries and breeds constant prayer and guarding of the mind, virtues that are the cause and the effect of the thought of death.³⁷⁵

Epiphanius's explanation of what is *ἀναγκαῖον* occurs through an image rather than explanation. For his disciple, the sight of his ascetic master's corpse, arranged facing East in readiness to meet first death and then the Lord, acts as an arresting visual reminder of what is most needful for a monk to have – that is, as Klimakos puts it, to have the remembrance of death as a “constant spouse,” a thought always occupying the mind.³⁷⁶ The visual character of this final piece of ascetic instruction is already signaled by Epiphanius when he promises to “show” (*δειξαι*) his disciple something the next morning, but it plays into what Munitiz has observed as a stylistic tendency in Anastasios's sermons: he notes that Anastasios appeals “to

³⁷⁴ PG 87(3).2920C-D (Wortley 52), «...εἰδότες, τέκνα, τοίνυν τὸν καιρὸν, ποίας ἐργασίας δεῖται, ἐπιγνώμεν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τῆς ἡσυχίας. Ἐν τούτῳ γὰρ τῷ καιρῷ ἀναγκαῖον χρῆσθαι ἡμᾶς τῇ καλῇ μετανοίᾳ, ὅπως ναοὶ Θεοῦ χρηματίσωμεν. Οὐ γὰρ ἡ τυχούσα ἡμῖν γίνεται τιμὴ ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι αἰῶνι.»

³⁷⁵ PG 88.793A (Luibheid 132), «Ὡς πασῶν τροφῶν ὁ ἄρτος ἀναγκαιότερος, οὕτως πασῶν ἐργασιῶν ἡ τοῦ θανάτου ἔννοια· μνήμη θανάτου γεννᾷ ἐν μὲν τοῖς ἐν μέσῳ πόνους καὶ ἀδολεσχίας· μᾶλλον δὲ ἀτιμίας ἡδύτητα· παρὰ δὲ τοῖς ἐκτὸς θορύβου φροντίδων ἀπόθεσιν καὶ εὐχὴν διηνεκῆ, καὶ νοὸς φυλακὴν.»

³⁷⁶ PG 88.667D (Luibheid 87, modified), «σύμβιον ἀναπόσπαστον.»

an audience that sees more easily than it hears.”³⁷⁷ So the stark image evoked by this short tale – the unexpected discovery of a corpse – is a blunt and concrete reminder of the transitoriness of life and the need to prepare accordingly.

While Epiphanius in his death narrative turns himself into a “paradigm” for his disciple to contemplate and imitate, the emphasis in the third such tale (those featuring the relationship between spiritual advisor and disciple at the moment of death) is the importance of a disciple’s obedience and service. This comes out more than in the previous two tales. Tale I.15 offers a short but touching vignette of the affectionate and supportive relationship between an elder and his disciple right until the very end. It also provides a fuller picture of monastic burial than the previous two tales: whereas these cut off at, respectively, the moment of death and the discovery of the body, the story of death of Michael the Iberian follows him and his disciple Eustathios all the way to the former’s grave. Binggeli observes that in this and in other tales there is a fair amount of casual prosopographical detail; he calls these pieces of information “anecdotal.”³⁷⁸ The disciple Eustathios, for example, is described as being “now in Babylon seeking treatment for his hand.”³⁷⁹ Some of the monks are known historical persons and Binggeli has a fairly good guess for Michael the Iberian’s historical identity.³⁸⁰ But “Eustathios with the injured hand” is the kind of identification that is so specific that it consigns him to anonymity for anyone except «le lecteur contemporain d’Anastase, habitant de Babylone de

³⁷⁷ Munitiz 1995:234.

³⁷⁸ Binggeli 2001:497n71.

³⁷⁹ Binggeli 188; Caner 183, «τὸν καὶ ἐν Βαβυλῶνι παραγενόμενον περιοδευθῆναι τὴν ἑαυτοῦ χεῖρα βουλούμενον.» Cf. tale I.29 in which Epiphanius’s disciple is mentioned, one «πολίτης Ζαχαρίας χρυσοχόος ἐν Βαβυλῶνι γενόμενος» (Binggeli, 204).

³⁸⁰ See Binggeli 2001:497n71. Binggeli also notes that Anastasios worked in the hospital at Sinai and so would have been familiar with the patients. For more on Anastasios’s medical training and on his background more generally, see Dagon 1992:64 and Marinides 2014:370-372.

surcroît.»³⁸¹

In the case of this particular disciple, Binggeli's view that such small asides are meant to be anecdotal seems especially applicable and it is worth asking why he includes them. One possibility is that the mentions of this kind of highly specific detail works to "clear" some miraculous haze that permeates this wondrous desert, making it seem less like a land of endless and undifferentiated pious marvels. The mention of a brother seeking treatment for a hand injury anchors the narrative once again into the lived (and livable) experience of the audience who (mostly likely) do not inhabit a world of "diaphanous moments when heavenly apparitions appear on Mount Sinai, dreams transport monks to distant landscapes, or monks themselves vanish or change shape."³⁸² For Anastasios, as for the authors and compilers of other Byzantine collections of edifying tales and miracles, the *souci de crédibilité* was an important concern, and one way to address doubts surrounding credibility was for the author, «à fournir les plus de renseignements et de détails concrets possibles.»³⁸³ These details shore up the credibility of the story and, in turn, that of Anastasios as a narrator. Another possibility is that the mention of otherwise little-known brethren serves as a nod to those in the know among the local audience, the brethren who had been at Sinai long enough to remember the time of Klimakos and other such luminaries or to have heard stories about them from their contemporaries. If the tales do indeed represent a sort of monastic *Festschrift* to honor this illustrious abbot's memory, then it would not be surprising to find precise information (such as

³⁸¹ Binggeli 2001:497n71.

³⁸² Caner 2010:172. See tale I.32 (Binggeli 207; Caner 191).

³⁸³ Déroche 1993:99. In his study on the *Miracles of St. Artemios*, Déroche notes (*ibid.*) that the author of the collection is keen to record details such as the name, age, social status, precise dates and topographical information about Constantinople.

the identity of Abba Michael's disciple) about Klimakos's important associates and contemporaries. The death of Abba Michael, the main event in tale I.15, takes place at Arselaiou, one of the hermit colonies that was home to the aforementioned Abba George and, at least for a while, to our narrator himself. Speaking from personal experience then, Anastasios says in tale I.14 that "Arselaiou is a place located in a ravine that is hard to reach."³⁸⁴ Tale I.15 shows just how difficult it was to navigate this terrain, especially for the elderly and infirm:

When Abba Michael fell sick, Eustathios stood by his side and wept.³⁸⁵ You see, the tomb of the Fathers that is in that place has a very difficult and dangerous access down smooth rock. So Abba Michael said to Abba Eustathios, "Child, bring me [the things I need] to wash and take communion." Once that was done, he said once more: "You know, child, the descent to the tomb is dangerously slippery. If I die [here], you run the risk of having to carry me down. You might fall off the cliff and die. So come, let's do it together, step by step." Once they had descended, the old man said a prayer and embraced Eustathios, saying, "Peace be with you, child. Pray for me." He lay down in the burial place and departed to the Lord with joy and exultation.³⁸⁶

Michael's passing represents the intersection of the future and the past as his spiritual "progeny" accompanies him to take his place in the "Tomb of the Fathers." The tale represents both the transience and permanence of the monastic life on the Holy Mountain, where the great work to draw closer to the Lord is made timeless by generation upon generation of monks, each of them an individual in search of spiritual progress around a soul which is everlasting.

³⁸⁴ I.14 (Binggeli 187; Caner 183), «Τὰ Ἀρσελάου τόπος ἐστὶ χεῖμαρρος δυσχερῆς διακειμένος, ἐν ᾧ καὶ γὰρ ἐπὶ τριετίαν ᾤκησα.»

³⁸⁵ The disciple's name is delightfully fitting for his role in this tale.

³⁸⁶ Tale I.15 (Binggeli 188; Caner 183). «Ἀσθηνήσαντος οὖν τοῦ ἀββᾶ Μιχαήλ, παρίστατο αὐτῷ κλαίων ὁ Εὐστάθιος. Τὸ γοῦν μνημεῖον τῶν πατέρων τὸ ὄν αὐτόθι πάνυ δυσχερῆ καὶ ἐπικίνδυνον λειοπετρίαν τὴν κατὰ βᾶσιν κέκτηται. Λέγει οὖν πρὸς τὸν ἀββᾶν Εὐστάθιον ὁ ἀββᾶς Μιχαήλ· Τέκνον, φέρε ἵνα νύψωμαι καὶ κοινωήσω. Καὶ τούτου γενομένου, πάλιν λέγει αὐτῷ· Οἶδας, τέκνον, ὅτι ἐπικίνδυνός ἐστι καὶ ἐξόλισθος ἡ κατὰ βᾶσις τοῦ μνημεῖου, καὶ ἐὰν ἀποθάνω κινδινεύεις τοῦ βαστάξαι με καὶ κατελθεῖν, μήπως πέσης καὶ ἀποθάνης εἰς τὸ κρημνόν. Ἀλλᾶ δεῦρο, ἄγωμεν ἀμφότεροι μικρὰ μικρὰ. Καὶ κατελθόντων αὐτῶν, ἐποίησεν εὐχὴν, καὶ ἀσπασάμενος τὸν Εὐστάθιον ὁ γέρον εἶπεν· Εἰρήνη σοι, τέκνον, καὶ εὐχου ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ. Καὶ ἀνακλίνας ἑαυτὸν ἐν τῷ τάφῳ μετὰ χαρᾶς καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσεως ἀπῆλθε πρὸς Κύριον.»

Chapter 4: Conclusion

A final tale records one of the most humorous events in the Tales collection in the wake of a deadly outbreak of the plague, surrounding the death of two monks at the monastery of St. Catherine. The first monk, having died in old age after a life of pious devotion, is laid to rest at the cemetery, close to the fortified monastery. When the plague claims another victim – this time a younger and less sedulous man – the brothers bury his remains, according to custom, on top of those belonging to the elder. A third death takes the brothers back to the cemetery once more, but this time their gloomy task is unexpectedly interrupted by what they later learn to be a rather brazen act of *post-mortem* disobedience:

When they went to deposit [the third body], they found that the saintly man had himself tossed the sinful brother's tabernacle to the ground. At the time, they thought that this had happened by accident and not through any miracle, so they picked up the brother and put him back above the father. But the next day when they came they found that the virtuous father had thrown the brother off.³⁸⁷

Word of these events reaches the hegumen, “a saintly father” in his own right and none other than John Klimakos himself.³⁸⁸ “[He] came and entered the tomb. Addressing the deceased elder, who was called John, he remarks, ‘Abba John, during your lifetime you were gentle and forbearing.’”³⁸⁹ Then, replacing the negligent monks’ remains on top of the elder’s body with his own hands, he adds sternly, “Put up with the brother, Abba John, even if he was a sinner, just

³⁸⁷ I.8 (Binggeli 179; Caner 179), «Ἦλθον τοῦ καταθέσθαι τὸ λείψανον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἠῦρον ὅτι ἀπέρριψε χαμαὶ ἐξ αὐτοῦ ὁ ὀσιος ἀνὴρ τὸ σκήνωμα τοῦ ἀμαρτωλοῦ ἀδελφοῦ. Εἶτα νομίσαντες ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ συμβάντος γέγονε καὶ οὐ κατὰ τινὰ θαυματουργίαν, πάλιν λαβόντες τέθηκαν ἐπάνω τοῦ πατρὸς τὸν ἀδελφόν. Καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν αὔριον παραγενάμενοι ἠῦρον ὅτι ἀπέρριψε τὸν ἀδελφόν ὁ ἐνάρετος πατήρ.»

³⁸⁸ See Binggeli 2001:490n40.

³⁸⁹ (Binggeli 179; Caner 179), «εἰσελθὼν ἐν τῷ μνήματι λέγει τῷ μνήματι λέγει τῷ τεθνεῶτι γέροντι, Ἰωάννη καλουμένῳ· Ἀββᾶ Ἰωάννη, ἐν τῇ ζωῇ σου πρῶτος καὶ μακρόθυμος ὑπῆρχες.»

as God puts up with the sins of the world.”³⁹⁰ Anastasios concludes the tale by mentioning that “from that day onwards, the old man never tossed off the brother’s tabernacle.”³⁹¹ Klimakos’s urgent appeal to Abba John emphasizes the very same values which Anastasios shows throughout the tales as the strength and foundation of Sinai’s monastic community and its safeguard against the vicissitudes of a changing world: the importance of patience, humility, self-sacrifice, brotherly love, obedience and most importantly, an unwavering faith in the Lord’s commitment to His people. By documenting the rich heritage of Sinai’s monastic culture and cherishing its memory, Anastasios seeks to shape and sustain its future by strengthening a new generation of monks and pilgrims and to remind them that seeking communion with the Divine on God’s Mountain is itself a tradition as old as the hills.

³⁹⁰ *Idem.*, «Καὶ λαβὼν τὸ λείψανον τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἰδίαις χερσὶ τίθησιν αὐτὸ ἐπάνω τοῦ γέροντος καὶ λέγει πάλιν πρὸς αὐτόν· Βάσταξον τὸν ἀδελφόν, κὰν ἁμαρτωλὸς ᾦν, ἀββᾶ Ἰωάννη, καθὼς βαστάζει ὁ Θεὸς τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ κόσμου.»

³⁹¹ *Idem.*, «Καὶ ἀπ’ ἐκείνης τῆς ἡμέρας οὐκέτι ἀπέρριψε τὸ σκῆνωμα τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ὁ γέρον.»

Chapter 5

The Final Conversation

For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled.

Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.

For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told.

—Psalm 90:7-9 (“A prayer of Moses”)

Ὅτι ἐξελίπομεν ἐν τῇ ὀργῇ σου καὶ ἐν τῷ θυμῷ σου ἐταράχθημεν.

Ἔθου τὰς ἀνομίας ἡμῶν ἐνώπιόν σου. Ὁ αἰὼν ἡμῶν εἰς φωτισμὸν τοῦ προσώπου σου.

Ὅτι πᾶσαι αἱ ἡμέραι ἡμῶν ἐξελίπον καὶ ἐν τῇ ὀργῇ σου ἐξελίπομεν,

τὰ ἔτη ἡμῶν ὡς ἀράχνην³⁹² ἐμελέτων.

—Ψαλμός 89:7-9 («Προσευχὴ τοῦ Μωϋσῆ»)

And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid;

but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me.

Οἱ δὲ σὺν ἐμοὶ ὄντες τὸ μὲν φῶς ἐθεάσαντο καὶ ἔμφοβοι ἐγένοντο,

τὴν δὲ φωνὴν οὐκ ἤκουσαν τοῦ λαλοῦντός μοι.

—Acts 22:9

Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?

Κύριε, τίς ἐπίστευσεν τῇ ἀκοῇ ἡμῶν, καὶ ὁ βραχίων Κυρίου τίνι ἀπεκαλύφθη;

—Isaiah 53:1

While the ordeal of passing from this life into the next itself is characterized by a terrifying solitude, there are very few death narratives in the *Tales of the Sinai Fathers* which feature a monk dying completely alone.³⁹³ As at the death of Abba George of Arselaiou (I.20), two or more disciples, friends and other bystanders are often present at the solemn event. Besides assisting and comforting the moribund, these attendees also serve as spectators, informants and witnesses to the oft-miraculous events that occur around the moment of death. The deathbed

³⁹² ἀράχνη: insubstantial gossamer, “the baseless fabric of this vision.”

³⁹³ The tale of Abba Epiphanius the Recluse (I.15) is a notable exception.

scene became a popular *topos* in seventh-century monastic literature, and within this especially the interrogation of a swooning monk was found to be such an effective narrative platform for an urgent *memento mori* about the importance of repentance and the daily remembrance of death, that we find it not only in the edifying tales tradition but also in several sermons and hymns dating from or around this period. In this type of scene, a monk in the throes of death is called to give an account of his actions in life before an unseen demonic host. The dramatic spectacle unfolds before a stricken and fearful audience of fellow monks, who are able to catch only half of the exchange (the answers but not the questions) and at the moment of death are left painfully uncertain about the outcome of the moribund's ordeal. This "final conversation" represents, in some ways, an alternative to the tollgates we explored in the first chapter. Both have as their principle objective to urge their audience to contemplate their own mortality and to consider how they might best prepare for the relentless interrogation that they too will face at that dreadful, inevitable moment. But, whereas the story of the journey through the tollgates of the air is necessarily told in retrospect, after its subject has returned from the dead, the deathbed scene offers its audience what Peter Brown has called "visible signs of the presence of the other world" through the dying man's reactions to the imposing assembly of invisible powers crowding around his bed.³⁹⁴ Bringing this dramatic trial down from the distant ether into the intimate surroundings of the deathbed made the experience more immediate and urgent for the spectators, turning it into an inescapable and agonizing confrontation with the horror of death. In this chapter, we will examine the occurrence and development of what we will call the "final conversation" in edifying tales from the late sixth and early seventh centuries, and then

³⁹⁴ Brown 1999:299.

compare these to other instances where the motif occurs in homilies and hymn. This will allow us to consider broader questions of genre and audience: how the motif is transformed when it passes from the simple and concise language of the tales into the explicit, yet carefully oratorical, expression of the homily.

The Lord is My Portion

Two instances of a final conversation occur in the tales of Anastasios. The first of these, the death of Abba Orentios, Anastasios hears from a certain Abba Abraham. The story offers an example of the importance of an audience for shedding light on the process of death:

When Abba Orentios was dying, I was sitting beside him, as was Abba Sergios – the bishop of Aila – and some other fathers. When he beheld the angelic presence, the old man said to the bishop, “Say a prayer, Father.” After the prayer we sat down again. Then again the old man said to the bishop, “Say a prayer.” After the prayer he addressed him once more: “did you behold how many ravens came in here, my great Lord? By Christ’s grace I’ll take no heed of them, and none of them shall come near me.” After saying these things he departed to the Lord in peace and joy.

The account of Orentios’s death is extremely sober and almost oblique in its description of the process of the death struggle. What it describes, mostly through reported speech, is clearly the dying abba’s *psychomachia*. The narrator alludes to Orentios’s perception of “the angelic presence” but it is really only when he asks those in attendance (at least four people) if they have noticed the flock of ravens present at his deathbed that it becomes clear that Orentios is seeing a great deal more than is visible to the eyes of those seated around him.³⁹⁵ The understated and (in the literal sense) one-sided report of Orentios’s visions and his brief and

³⁹⁵ There are examples of demons appearing as birds elsewhere too: most notably in the *Pratum*, tale 105, where they appear as crows. (A similar image is alive in modern poetry as well; cf. Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and Seamus Heaney’s “The Blackbird of Glanmore.”)

repeated requests for prayers emphasize that, despite the presence of a small crowd offering prayers at his death bed (among them even a bishop!), the ordeal of facing the angels and the demonic ravens is one that Orentios had to experience alone. In the following story, which recounts the death of Abba Stephen of Byzantium, Anastasios once again avoids all pretense of narrative omniscience and refuses to fill in the blanks for his readers as to what the dying elder sees. The story is more detailed in its descriptions than the previous one, however, perhaps because Anastasios himself was an eyewitness to the Stephen's death and knew the man in life.³⁹⁶ A dramatic portrait of Stephen's last moments emerges in which the perceptible half of Stephen's conversation is reported: while Anastasios and another abba, named Theodosios, are keeping vigil over the dying man and reciting for him a psalm specifically for the dying (the lengthy, so-called "blameless psalm"³⁹⁷), Stephen suddenly grows animated:

[T]he dying man suddenly cast a sharp glance and spoke harshly to someone visible to him, saying, "Why have you come here? Get to outer darkness! You have no business with me. The Lord is my portion." Then when we came in our recitation to the verse that says "The Lord is my portion," Abba Stephen gave up his spirit to the Lord.³⁹⁸

The sharp glance and harsh words which he directs at what appears, to others present, as empty space are both mysterious and alarming; Peter Brown is right to point out that the dying man's reactions to the beings that he alone can see are "quite as chilling as any incident of possession."³⁹⁹ The narrative is suggestive, without revealing the entire picture. Anastasios's

³⁹⁶ This Stephen, in addition to being the companion of his own spiritual father Epiphanius the Recluse, had, in Anastasios telling, been a well-connected grandee before entering the monastic life: Abba Stephen of Byzantium was the former secretary of General Maurianos.

³⁹⁷ Ps. 118 (Masor. 119).

³⁹⁸ I.28 (Caner 189; Binggeli 203), «Εξαίφνης βλοσυροῖ τὸ ὄμμα αὐτοῦ, ὁ τελευτῶν, καὶ ἐμβριθῶς λέγει πρὸς τινα ὀφθέντα αὐτῷ· Τί ἦλθες ὧδε; Ὑπαγε εἰς τὸ σκοτός τὸ ἐξώτερον· οὐκ ἔχεις τίποτε σὺ πρὸς ἡμᾶς. Μερὶς μου ὁ Κύριος. Ὡς οὖν ἐφθάσαμεν στιχολογοῦντες εἰς αὐτὸν τὸ στίχον τοῦ εἰπεῖν· Μερὶς μου ὁ Κύριος, παρέδωκεν τῷ Κυρίῳ τὸ πνεῦμα ὁ ἀββᾶς Στέφανος.» Cf. v. 57, «Μερὶς μου εἶ, Κύριε, εἶπα τοῦ φυλάξασθαι τὸν νόμον σου.»

³⁹⁹ Brown 1999:299.

reticence to “lift the veil” on the mystery and describe “the Powers” with whom the dying monk is conversing underscores that in the reckoning, the individual alone will be held accountable before the angel of death, and the presence and assistance of his friends and brothers will be of no avail.⁴⁰⁰ Stephen’s argument with the unseen demonic forces also twines cleverly with the “soundtrack” of his death; for, in dying at the brothers’ utterance of the *phrase juste*, he confirms to those left behind that it is the Lord that has indeed been his portion in death – and not the demons who have come for his soul. The epilogue to Stephen’s demonic tussle reveals the means whereby Stephen gained his portion in the Lord; as Anastasios and Theodosios search for something to wrap the body in for burial, “we found none, even though he had once known such wealth and glory.”⁴⁰¹ Stephen’s exemplary poverty, earned through humility and renunciation following his previous worldly life of the abundance and riches, ensure that he too was counted among those “whose way is blameless.”

A Good Death

Owing to the virtue they acquired in life, Orentios and Stephen both experience a peaceful death, despite the worrying presence of unseen opponents prior to their passing. Orentios even departs with “peace and joy.” This peace at the moment when soul is rent from body reflects established patterns of holy death in Byzantine hagiography, which “uniformly stresses the serenity with which the dying saint faced death, because of his belief that death meant freedom

⁴⁰⁰ This reticence stands in contrast to the thorough descriptions of the demonic presence that we find in the accounts of the tollgates.

⁴⁰¹ Caner 189; Binggeli 203.

from the bonds of the body and union with the divine.”⁴⁰² But, as Zecher has pointed out, for monks a peaceful death does not necessarily signify a “good” death; “burial is of no importance; sickness, violence, and mourning are often signs of nothing.”⁴⁰³ He explains that “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—” will be indicative of the type of experience he will have.⁴⁰⁴ Zecher’s analysis focuses primarily on desert literature from an earlier period, but his observations hold equally true for the seventh century. To illustrate Zecher’s observation, the story of the death of Abba Stephen the Cypriot shows that for an ascetic, a painful death may function as a complement to a life lived in endurance, suffering and abstinence for the Lord’s sake and can improve a righteous person’s *post-mortem* standing with the Lord. By way of introduction, Anastasios mentions that Abba Stephen was a personal acquaintance of his and, most importantly, that he was a paragon of righteousness: “he was a most peaceable man and a partaker in the Holy Spirit, adorned with every virtue.”⁴⁰⁵ His death, however, was a painful trial:

When he was about to die, he burst out in such welts as I think no man ever saw before. He languished for many days, then died. One of those who knew his diligence and way of life became troubled, thinking to himself, “How has such a person succumbed to such a force?” Then the blessed Stephen appeared to him in a dream and said, “Lord Brother, even if for a little while I was made loathsome, nevertheless I’ve found greater freedom of speech with Christ.”⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² Podskalsky 2005.

⁴⁰³ Zecher 2011:197.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁵ I.38 (Binggeli 213; Caner 194), «...ἄνδρὸς εἰρηνικωτάτου καὶ πνεύματος ἁγίου μετόχου καὶ πάσῃ ἀρετῇ κεκοσμημένου.»

⁴⁰⁶ I.38 (Binggeli 213; Caner 194), «καὶ γὰρ μέλλοντος τελευτᾶν...ἐξέβρασεν ἐκβρασμὸν οἷον τάχα οὐδεὶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐθεάσατο· καὶ ἐπὶ πολλὰς ἡμέρας διατρίψας ἐτελεύτησεν. Τίς οὖν τῶν γινωσκόντων τὴν ἐργασίαν καὶ τὸν βίον αὐτοῦ ἐδυσχέραιεν, εἰς ἑαυτὸν λογιζόμενος ὅτι ἄρα τίνος χάριν ὁ τοιοῦτος ἄνθρωπος τοιαύτη ἀνάγκη περιέπεσεν; Φαίνεται οὖν αὐτῷ κατ’ ὄναρ ὁ μακάριος Στέφανος καὶ λέγει· Κύρι ἀδελφέ, εἰ καὶ ἐσιάνθημεν μικρόν, ἀλλ’ ὅμως ἠῦρομεν περισσοτέραν παρηρησίαν πρὸς τὸν Χριστόν.»

For Stephen, death acted as a refiner's fire for the soul, burning off the remaining dross so that he might gain even greater *παρρησία* in the hereafter. Both Caner and Binggeli note that the phrase "adorned with every virtue" is drawn from 3rd Maccabees 6:1, where it is used to describe Eleazar, high priest of the Jews, whose prayer frees his people from the oppression of king Ptolemy; in other words, someone whose *παρρησία* with power is great.⁴⁰⁷ To an audience steeped in martyr stories, as the local audience would have been, the name would probably also call to mind the other Eleazar, the teacher and fellow martyr of the seven brothers from the second and fourth books of the Maccabees. His painful demise became a prototype for a noble death in the Jewish and Christian tradition; the association then strengthens the suggestion that Stephen's death itself is a form of martyrdom.⁴⁰⁸ Perhaps most striking in this tale, however, is the fact that Stephen himself comes back from beyond the grave, in order to visit the monk who had deemed this death unworthy of one so virtuous, and to reassure him that the overall outcome of all his suffering was positive.

The Uncertain Judgment

John Klimakos's *Ladder of Divine Ascent* also contains an account of a final conversation, providing an earlier *comparandum* for Anastasios's treatment of the *topos*. Even more significant than its temporal antecedence, however, is the fact that the *Ladder* was likely a formative text for Anastasios as a religious thinker. As we saw in the previous chapter, the tales bear witness that the memory of this saintly abbot was cherished and celebrated on the Mountain, and one

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, *not. ad hunc loc.*

⁴⁰⁸ For more on Eleazar's noble death, see Van Henten *et. al.* 2002:72-76.

imagines that the *Ladder*, his strict blueprint for spiritual perfection, had a profound influence on later generations of monks and their attitude towards death. The tale about an elder also called Stephen is embedded in the seventh step of the Ladder, *On Joy-Bearing Grief*, and highlights a set of concerns that remain largely unmentioned in Anastasios's telling – namely, the bystanders' response to the perceptible half of the otherworldly scene unfolding before them. Another noteworthy difference is the special attention paid to the uncertainty and anxiety about the final conversation's outcome. While in the cases of Anastasios's Abba Stephen and Abba Orentios it is fairly clear to the bystanders that, after an initially arduous struggle with those unseen powers who would reckon with them, their deaths lead them into the joy of the Lord and not elsewhere, Klimakos purposefully places the tale's emotional accent in a different way and signals this by stating that the purpose of the tale is "an inducement to most valuable mourning and sorrow."⁴⁰⁹ Klimakos's objective, then, is to have the story pack an emotional punch by making it as personal as possible. So, as is often the case in edifying tales when there is an audience present when a miracle takes place or is recounted, their reactions are meant to model the appropriate response for the reading or listening audience. Klimakos's account goes into considerably greater depth, both in the dying elder's backstory and in the report of his final conversation. The detail is given, as Caner notes, with a specific purpose in mind: to establish Stephen as an irreproachable model of ascetic excellence.⁴¹⁰ Stephen had, Klimakos tells us, "spent many years in monastic training. His soul was especially adorned with tears and fasting,

⁴⁰⁹ PG 88.812A (Luibheid 142), «Πρὸς δὲ ὄντως πένθους ἐναργεστάτου, καὶ ὀδύνης ὀνησιφόρου.»

⁴¹⁰ Caner 2010:67.

and he was bedecked with other good achievements.”⁴¹¹ At some point, he deemed his regimen insufficiently austere and moved with his two disciples to an even more remote and inhospitable wilderness at Siddim. Having persevered in his ascetic labors, at last he succumbed to a fatal illness. On his sickbed “he went into ecstasy of mind and with open eyes he looked to the right and left of his bed, as if he were being called to account by someone.”⁴¹² Like Stephen of Byzantium, Abba Stephen is able in his ecstasy to see things that remain invisible to other people. This is also a sign of his spiritual advancement because, as Klimakos mentions earlier in the chapter, “blessed is the monk who with the eyes of his soul can fix his gaze upon the powers of the spiritual world.”⁴¹³ Stephen’s final conversation is framed like a prosecution being conducted in public. It calls to mind the proceedings at the tollgates we discussed in an earlier chapter, but with the important distinction that the dying elder serves as his own defense counsel. As with Orentios and the other Stephen, the audience hears only Stephen’s responses to his relentless interlocutors:

He seemed to be rendering an account to someone, and in the hearing of the bystanders he said: “of course it is true. That was why I fasted for so many years.” Or again: “yes, that is correct, but I wept and served my brothers.” Or again: “no. You are accusing me falsely.” Or sometimes: “quite right. No, I have no excuse. But God is merciful.” This unseen and relentless interrogation was a truly awful and frightening spectacle. Worst of all was the fact that he was charged with offences of which he was innocent; and, what is extraordinary, regarding some of them this hesychast and hermit would say: “I do not know how to

⁴¹¹ PG 88.812B (Luibheid 142), «Χρόνους τε ικανούς ἐν μοναδικῇ διατρίψας παλαιστρα, νηστείας τε μάλιστα καὶ δάκρυσι κατακεκοσμημένος, καὶ ἑτέροις ἀγαθοῖς πλεονεκτήμασι περιηθημένος ὑπάρχων.»

⁴¹² PG 88.812C (Luibheid 142) «Ἐξίσταται τῷ νοῖ καὶ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἀνεωγμένων κατενόει εἰς τὰ δέξια, καὶ εἰς τὰ ἀριστερὰ τῆς κλίνης· καὶ ὡς ὑπὸ τινῶν λογοθετούμενος.»

⁴¹³ PG 88.809A (Luibheid 140, adapted). We might even say something like “who can stare down powers (only) perceptible to reason.” «Μακάριος μὲν ὁ μοναχὸς ὁ τοῖς τῆς ψυχῆς ὄμμασιν ταῖς νοεραῖς δυνάμεσιν ἐνατενίζειν δυνάμενος.» Besides the loaded adjective *νοερός* (originally philosophical, but see Lampe *s.v.* for its wide range of uses in patristic sources), this pronouncement concerning vision echoes that in the Sermon on the Mount, «Μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῆ καρδία, ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν Θεὸν ὄψονται» (Matt. 5:8). The beatific wording in the context of death may at the same time invoke the “blameless psalm” above, which begins «Μακάριοι οἱ ἄμωμοι ἐν ὁδῷ οἱ πορευόμενοι ἐν νόμῳ Κυρίου.» (And, given Stephen’s name, we might even add from James 1:12, «Μακάριος ἀνὴρ ὃς ὑπομένει πειρασμόν, ὅτι δόκιμος γενόμενος λήψεται τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς ...»)

answer.” And yet he had been a monk for almost forty years and he had the gift of tears as well.⁴¹⁴

What makes Stephen’s half of this interchange so emotionally arresting is its jarring exposition of the intense self-scrutiny that all must undergo at the end of life, when every past action is brought to bear on the fate of the soul. This abba, whose lengthy and imposing ascetic résumé Klimakos includes for our perusal, represents for all intents and purposes the best imaginable guinea pig for such a harrowing ordeal. Forty years of tears, fasting and strict repentance, the training of two pious disciples to follow in his footsteps, the gift of tears and a reportedly miraculous control over wild animals have left him as prepared as he could possibly be to face the merciless inquisitors.⁴¹⁵ But, while Stephen conducts himself with exemplary fortitude, showing in his parries of false accusations that his indeed was an examined life, he is powerless to defend himself against sins he was *unaware* of having committed.⁴¹⁶ The warning message that emerges from this *exemplum* is that which Zecher calls the “uncertain judgment.” For, in spite of all his penitence and preparation, there are no guarantees of salvation, even for the spiritually advanced like Stephen.⁴¹⁷ For the spectators as well, things remain uncertain and

⁴¹⁴ PG 88.812C-D (Luibheid 142), «καὶ ὑπὸ τινῶν λογοθετούμενος, ἔλεγε πάντων ἀκουόντων τῶν περισταμένων, ποτὲ μὲν: “Ναί, ὄντως, ἀλήθεια, ἀλλ’ ἐνήστευσα τοσοῦτους χρόνους ὑπὲρ τούτου.” Εἶτα πάλιν, “οὐχί, ὄντως ψεύδεσθε, τοῦτο οὐκ ἐποίησα.” Καὶ πάλιν: “Ναί, ἀληθῶς τοῦτο, ναί· ἀλλ’ ἔκλαυσα, ἀλλὰ διηκόνησα.” Καὶ πάλιν, “Οὐχί, ὅλως κατηγορεῖτέ μου.” Ἔστι δὲ ὅτε εἰς τινα ἔλεγε “Ναί, ἀληθῶς, ναί· καὶ πρὸς τοῦτο τί εἶπεν οὐκ οἶδα· ἐν τῷ Θεῷ ἐστὶν ἔλεος.” Καὶ ἦν ἀληθῶς θέαμα φρικτὸν καὶ φοβερὸν, ἀόρατον καὶ ἀσυγχώρητον λογοθέσιον· καὶ τὸ φοβερώτερον, ὅτι καὶ ἃ οὐκ ἐποίησε, κατηγοροῦν αὐτοῦ. Βαβαί, ὁ ἡσυχαστῆς καὶ ἀναχωρητῆς ἔλεγεν εἰς τινα τῶν ἐαυτοῦ πταισμάτων, ὅτι “Πρὸς ταῦτα εἶπεν οὐκ οἶδα,” ἔχων πού λοιπὸν περὶ τὰ τεσσαράκοντα ἔτη μοναχός, καὶ ἔχων τὸ δάκρυον.»

⁴¹⁵ The connection with Elijah is also made implicitly but still significantly.

⁴¹⁶ Zecher (2011:213) has an intriguing analysis of the Stephen episode that sees the dying abba’s accurately recalling his deeds and misdeeds in the throes of death as an encapsulation of the vision of monasticism which Klimakos is advocating: “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.”

⁴¹⁷ Zecher 2011:213.

incomplete. Having only partial knowledge of what was said in the exchange between the moribund and his accusers, their understanding of Stephen's final conversation remains tantalizingly incomplete, as though they were listening in to half of a phone conversation. And what's more, they are left wholly in the dark concerning the final outcome of the trial. Klimakos finishes the tale of Abba Stephen on that note of uncertainty: "So there he was now, called to account, and he died while it was happening, leaving us unsure of the judgment passed on him, of his final end or sentence, or of the verdict rendered him."⁴¹⁸

Dying among Friends and Brothers

Several scholars have noted the curiously public nature of such dramatic descriptions of death, where dying is done in front of an audience of subdued and mournful friends and brothers. Caner proposes that "seventh-century monastic literature tended to focus on deathbed scenes, highlighting a moment when monks watched to find out whether their practices or leaders were effective or not."⁴¹⁹ Peter Brown in turn notes the spectacle that is inherent in such events: "witnessed by the companions of monks, or nuns or simply by the members of any Christian family, death ushered every Byzantine into an orchestra seat, just as the curtain was about to rise on the most awesome spectacle of all."⁴²⁰ While the narrative focuses extensively on the dying monk's experience of the "final, massed assault that all human beings must face at the

⁴¹⁸PG 88.812D (Luibheid 142) «καὶ οὕτω λογοθετούμενος, τοῦ σώματος ἐχωρίσθη, τί τὸ κρῖμα, ἢ τὸ πέρας, ἢ ἀπόφασις αὐτοῦ, ἢ τὸ τέλος τοῦ λογοθεσίου κατὰδηλον μὴ ποιησάμενος.» The uncertainty that the monks face regarding the ultimate fate of their friend is a departure from the standard version of the script where, as Jane Baun puts it, "the more typical edifying tale is unequivocal, showing the person in question as either saved or damned" (2007:123).

⁴¹⁹ Caner 2010:66-67.

⁴²⁰ Brown 1999:300.

hour of death," the moment when he gives up the ghost also marks the point when his experiences, emotions, fears and ultimate fate are beyond the grasp and ken of his companions.⁴²¹ And at that point it is often not the deceased's experiences but those of the audience that really dominate the narrative's conclusion and deliver the tale's edifying message. It is possible that the literary popularity of this version (or vision) of the temporary judgment grew alongside, and even to some extent outgrew, literary accounts of visions of the afterlife (like that of the tollgates) because the "unseen drama" of the *ante-mortem* deathbed judgment had a much greater and more immediate degree of audience involvement.⁴²² The bystander could see for him- or herself what shape the trials at the hour of death took, rather than having to learn these things from others. Not everyone had the chance to encounter a desperate penitent returned from the Other World, but most people would at some point in their lives witness the death of a friend or a loved one and, as Brown puts it, "what mattered in such a deathbed scene was that this was an experience of the other world that *all could and, indeed, would share.*"⁴²³ The edifying force of such tales, then, surely hinges on cataloguing the reactions of the assembled bystanders who represent the internal audience of the story. As we see in the account of Abba Stephen's death, Klimakos plays up the terror that the dramatic spectacle unfolding before them inspires in its viewers. The sight of the death of one of their own leaves the spectators saddened, shaken and, most important of all, filled with a deep remorse and dread at how unequal they themselves are, being weighed down with the consciousness of sin,

⁴²¹ *Ibidem.*

⁴²² For the audience, a story about *an* audience becomes a story about them. And one finds hardly any story so interesting as a story about oneself.

⁴²³ Brown 1999:299 (my emphasis).

to the task of facing this terrifying and inevitable ordeal. As stand-ins for the tale's external audience, their contrition moves the readers and listeners of the tale, in turn, to contemplate their own mortality and how they might best prepare for the dreadful moment.

Homily and Tale

An account of a final conversation also occurs elsewhere in the Anastasian corpus, in a short homily known as the *Sermo in Defunctos*.⁴²⁴ The *Patrologia* (a reprint of a late-18th-century edition) attributes the sermon to Anastasios Sinaites and this attribution has for the most part, it seems, been accepted or at least not actively questioned by scholars.⁴²⁵ This is perhaps not surprising: the existence of a number of tales and a homily on the same subject is typical of the richness of the Anastasian corpus and mirrors instances where questions put to Anastasios in the *Quaestiones et Responiones* find their answers also in the narratives of the tales. In considering the thematic coherence that exists between many of Anastasios's works, Munitiz writes that "an unusual advantage for the appreciation of Anastasios as a preacher is the existence of his other writings. In many ways these shed a remarkable light on his mind."⁴²⁶ Munitiz, whose experience with Anastasios and his writings (both as a commentator and as an editor) is considerable, is not so sanguine however about the authenticity of this sermon and, because of its generic character, deems the attribution merely plausible at best. He writes that the theme "seems traditional enough and there is little to distinguish this from countless others. It could

⁴²⁴ The text can be found in PG 89.1192-1201.

⁴²⁵ See for example Brown 1999:300n46.

⁴²⁶ Munitiz 1998:221.

be Anastasian, but could also have been written by almost any other Byzantine writer.”⁴²⁷ Munitiz’s objection is certainly justified when we compare the work to other short homilies on similar themes. For a fairly representative sample of their general correlation, we may compare the opening passages of Anastasios’s sermon to the first few lines of a homily attributed to Ephraem Syrus, the *Sermo in eos qui in Christo obdormierunt*.⁴²⁸ Except for minor variants, these two texts are the same. What’s more, another homily attributed to (pseudo-)Ephraem, the *Sermo de Secundo Adventu et Iudicio*, includes phrases that occur both in Anastasios’s *Sermo in Defunctos* and in pseudo-Cyril’s *De Exitu Animi et Secundo Adventu*, a text discussed at length in the first chapter of this study.

What does this mean for the alleged Anastasian authorship of this sermon? First, it should be noted that both Anastasios and Ephraem (much like Cyril of Alexandria and, perhaps most famously, John Chrysostom) were well-known and prolific homilists whose name-recognition often exerted, in the course of textual transmission, a kind of centripetal pull on smaller anonymous or pseudonymous sermons, thus attracting them into their “orbit.” Bearing this pattern in mind, we can outline a number of possible scenarios for the composition and development of this text but, pending further investigation, they must remain tentative. It may be that this work’s original date of composition must indeed be sought closer towards the fourth century, rather than at the close of Late Antiquity. The immediate *ante-* and *post-mortem*

⁴²⁷ Munitiz 1998:232.

⁴²⁸ CPG 4028. Compare Anastasios’s *Sermo in Defunctos*, PG 1192A: «Τί τοῦτο σήμερον, ἀγαπητοί, σπουδαίως ὁμοῦ τε καὶ ἀξίως συνήχθημεν; Συνεκάλεσεν γὰρ ἡμᾶς ἅπαντας οἱ πρὸς Χριστὸν ἀφ’ ἡμῶν κληθέντες ἀδελφοί. Διὸ καὶ προσέλθωμεν προθύμως πρὸς Χριστὸν ὑμνωδίαν» with the beginning of Ephraim Syrus’s text: «Τί τοῦτο σήμερον, ἀγαπητοί, σπουδαίως ὁμοῦ τε καὶ ἀξίως συνήχθημεν; Συνεκάλεσαν γὰρ ἡμᾶς ἅπαντας ὁμοθυμαδὸν οἱ πρὸς Χριστὸν ἀφ’ ἡμῶν κληθέντες ἀδελφοί. Διὸ καὶ συνήχθημεν προθύμως πρὸς Χριστοῦ ὑμνωδίαν.» For the full work, see Phrantzoles 1995:94-118.

states were a noted matter of interest to the Desert Fathers and evidence of this survives both in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and, perhaps significantly, in the *Vita Antonii*. Another possibility is that the sermon is in fact Anastasian (meaning, either by Anastasios himself or someone working closely in the tradition), but that in the process of transmission it somehow also became attached to the Ephremic corpus. Lastly, Anastasios himself may have come across the sermon and adapted it for his own use, thus attaching his *own* name to it. For a working hypothesis, however, we will suppose that in terms of its particular focus on the final conversation – this being the central event which the homily is built around – it would seem to fit in very well with the preferred themes of seventh-century monastic literature, which as we noted earlier, had a peculiar partiality for the deathbed scene.⁴²⁹ In contrast to the evident relationship between the tale of the *taxeōtēs* and the pseudo-Cyrillic homily discussed in the first chapter, where the significant textual overlap forges an undeniable connection, the *Sermo in Defunctos* closely resembles the final conversation tales – not in form, but in their substance and in their concord of sentiment – that is to say that they treat the same event and draw similar lessons from the narrative which they describe. It is also, at this point when no reliable modern edition of the *Sermo in Defunctos* exists, difficult and perhaps even inadvisable to attempt to establish any sort of primacy between the tales and the homily, *i.e.* which influenced the other. Were they somehow developed independently? Both perhaps separately looking towards a common earlier tradition?

The existence of a homiletic version of the final conversation, just as there is homiletic rendering of the *taxeōtēs* story, indicates that there is a connection between the religious tales

⁴²⁹ Brown 1999:299.

tradition and popular preaching which deserves to be explored. As a medium for spiritual edification, the homily and the religious tale share many common elements: both seek to elevate, instruct and exhort, and for this purpose storytelling was “a helpful vehicle for the transmission of [Christian] values and the religious knowledge supportive of them.”⁴³⁰ Stories thus formed the “stock in trade” for many preachers and there is another well-known sermon attributed to Anastasios, the *Homily on the Sixth Psalm*, which has no fewer than three religious tales embedded for illustrating the gift of tears. In Munitiz’s opinion, these three short narratives account also for the continued scholarly interest in what is otherwise an unremarkable text.⁴³¹ The tales tradition (along with those homilies which use tales as their narrative centerpieces) was able to address subjects that, owing to their lack of Scriptural precedent, slipped through the net of “formal” theology.⁴³² They represent an effort to reconcile lived experience with a Christian belief system and offer the result of this process swathed in layers of storytelling and morality. In the case of stories reporting a final conversation, we may imagine that these sought to account for the “movements of the dying person” which, as Peter Brown has noted, “were often terrible to observe.”⁴³³ Such tales thus belong to a category of

⁴³⁰ Berkey 2001:19.

⁴³¹ *Homilia in sextum Psalmum* (CPG 7751), PG 89.1077-116. Munitiz (1998:231) also notes the echoes of other genres in this homily, “the popular nature of such a homily is clear enough. Its distinctive feature is the colour given by the three stories. One thinks at once of the collections of stories attributed to Anastasios the Monk [by which Munitiz means both sets of tales] and even in the *Questions and Answers* one finds examples of similar stories. Thus even if one might prefer not to include this homily in the Anastasian corpus, the argument from internal evidence is weak. It is the type of homily that he might well have written and distributed.”

⁴³² This was not always the case however, and in Basil of Caesarea’s *Homily on Baptism* the great doctor of the Orthodox church calls upon his audience to imagine their own *psychomachia* (which has no Scriptural but plenty of classical precedents) and arrange their lives according to the outcome they wish to see in that moment: «Νῦν ὡσπερ ἐπὶ τρυτάνης ἐστάναι νόμιζέ σου τὴν ψυχὴν, ἐνθεν ὑπ’ ἀγγέλων, κακείθεν ὑπὸ δαιμόνων διελκομένην. Τίσιν ἄρα δώσεις τὴν ῥοπήν τὴν καρδίας;» (PG 31.432B).

⁴³³ Brown 1999:299.

Christian lore containing a liberal admixture of “superstition and legend.”⁴³⁴ The inclusion of extra-scriptural traditions was apparently not seen as problematic by the authors and compilers of the religious tales, and the wide net that they cast for their tales is accounted for by Anastasios in the proem to his second tales collection:

Good tales are those that shine a light on God’s Church, which strengthen one’s knowledge of the divine, rouse souls towards the Lord and lead them away from error. They stir those who are slothful in spirit, they steady those who are shaken, they bring compunction to hard hearts, and they enlighten those who are foolish. Every divinely-inspired and useful piece of writ bears witness to this fact.⁴³⁵

Good tales will thus be known by the fruits which they bear in their readers and not where they came from; or, as Marinides puts it, “the primary criterion of inspired scripture was that it be inspiring, *i.e.* that it produce the effects listed by Anastasios.”⁴³⁶ Christianity is, as Berkey has said of Islam and of “all the great religions[,]...not monolithic or consistent” but filled with contradicting or competing traditions.⁴³⁷ *Re* the Christian tradition(s) treated here, we said earlier that these tales are “often in accordance with” teachings indisputably canonical. Where they might, by the scrupulous reader, be thought to be at variance therewith, their orthodoxy and acceptability are established not only by their edifying force but also by the probity – moral and (in less contested matters) doctrinal – of their source.

⁴³⁴ Gurevich 1992:71.

⁴³⁵(Binggeli 215) «Διηγήματα γὰρ ἀγαθὰ ἐκκλησίαν Θεοῦ φαιδρύνει, πρὸς θεογνωσίαν κρατύνει, τὰς ψυχὰς πρὸς Θεὸν ἐγείρει, ἀπὸ πλάνης ἐπιστρέφει, τοὺς ῥαθύμους ἐξυπνίζει, τοὺς σαλευομένους στηρίζει, τοὺς σκληροκαρδίου κατανύσσει, τοὺς ἀφελεῖς φωτίζει. Καὶ μαρτυρεῖ τοῦτο πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος ὠφέλιμος ὑπάρχουσα.»

⁴³⁶ Marinides 2014:351. Marinides also points out Anastasios’s striking “claim that his own collection is a form of Scripture.” See also pp. 350-352 for a more extensive discussion of this subject. In addition to the good fruits that reading religious tales brought forth, it probably also helped that Moschos and Sophronios, Klimakos, and Anastasios were all in possession of unassailable Orthodox credentials.

⁴³⁷ Berkey 2001:19.

Religious and popular homilies overlap not only in their themes but also in their style. In an influential article on Byzantine levels of style, Ihor Ševčenko argued that the best conditions for the stylistic comparison of two texts occurs when the *comparanda* display “alternative forms, but the same or related content: consecutive reworking of the same text by its author: an original that can be juxtaposed with its paraphrases, done by another author or, finally, works of the same author dealing with similar topics or falling within the same literary genre.”⁴³⁸ While it remains to be determined whether Anastasios’s tales and the *Sermo in Defunctos* are works by the same author, it is certain that these works, though both belonging to a class best termed “popular religious literature,” represent two different literary treatments of the same *topos*. Both are also meant for oral performance and tend to the same lesson, but do so by different routes – the low road and the middle.⁴³⁹ And, however we today may judge the quality of their results, both attempts were justified by scriptural precedent, the one author following the example of the Evangelists, who present their doctrines through a narrative almost approaching drama, the other working in a more expository and self-consciously rhetorical, Pauline vein. The thematic overlap between the tales and the homily allow us to make a case study of how stories are used in popular preaching. How is the *topos* transformed when it passes from the simple and concise language of the tales into the explicit yet carefully oratorical expression of the homily? Which parts of the *topos* are accentuated, expanded or

⁴³⁸ Ševčenko 2001:199.

⁴³⁹ In terms of its stylistic register, if we follow the definitions set out by Ševčenko, the tales would belong to the low level as the religious tale generally “uses largely paratactic structures; its vocabulary contains a fair number of words unattested in standard dictionaries or coming from languages other than Greek, its verbal forms are not Attic; its Scriptural quotations, more frequently than not, come from the New Testament and Psalter” (2001:291). The sermon falls into the middle category, where “periods are rarely attempted and fill-words and clichés more abundant, it requires the use of a patristic lexicon, and its Scriptural quotations are more frequent than its classical ones.”

omitted as they appear in each treatment and to what effect? We will now see how the final conversation fares in the hands of a homilist.

The *Sermo in Defunctos*

The sermon begins with a lengthy preamble reflecting upon the blessed state of the deceased. They, the homilist writes, “have departed from the storm and the rough waters of the world and have moored in the most serene havens,” leaving the survivors bereft in the midst of the tempest.⁴⁴⁰ But this blessed repose, the homilist continues, comes at a tremendous cost. In order to reach this placid haven, the moribund must weather another storm even more violent and inescapable than the trials of this false world – that is, to give account and be judged for one’s deeds in it: “great then is [their] fear and terror and great also the mystery and the moment of crisis, when we depart for [the place] whence no one has returned.”⁴⁴¹ While we cannot firmly conclude that the sermon is exclusively geared towards an audience of monks,⁴⁴² the homilist poses a number of direct questions which ask the audience to picture a scene very similar to the ones Anastasios describes at the deaths of abba Orentios and Theodosios: “Do you not see, tell me, when we sit around those brothers that are dying or fighting for their soul, do we not see terrible things then?”⁴⁴³ Munitiz correctly notes that this sermon “gives a realistic account of the death throes that many have to undergo” for the physical and emotional details of the process

⁴⁴⁰ PG 89.1193A, «Ἐξῆλθον τοῦ χειμῶνος καὶ κλύδωνος τοῦ κόσμου, καὶ εἰς παγγαλήνους προσώρμισαν λιμένας.»

⁴⁴¹ PG 89.1196C, «Μέγας ὁ τότε φόβος, μέγας ὁ τότε τρόμος, μέγα τὸ μυστήριον, μεγάλη ἡ περίστασις, ὅτε ὑπάγομεν, ὅθεν οὐδεὶς ἐπανέλυσεν.»

⁴⁴² The addressees are simply called ἀγαπητοί and «οἱ πρὸς Χριστὸν ἀφ’ ἡμῶν κληθέντες ἀδελφοί» (PG 89.1192A).

⁴⁴³ PG 89.1196C, «Οὐχ ὀρᾶς, εἰπέ μοι, ἡνίκα πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφούς τοὺς τελευτῶντας ἢ ψυχορραγοῦντας παρακαθήμεθα, οὐ φοβερὰ τότε ὀρῶμεν;»

of dying are abundant:⁴⁴⁴

[H]ow they endure, how they are shaken, how they wail, how they sweat cold and bitter sweat, like men at harvest in the field, how they gnash their teeth and grow alarmed and petrified, how they leap up from the bed, attempting to flee but unable to do so, seeing things which they never saw before and hearing [things] from the Powers.⁴⁴⁵

Passages like this one are perhaps what Munitiz had in mind when he commented on the generic nature of this homily. Indeed, most deathbed scenes follow a standard script of the drama of death being “performed” before a hushed and fearful crowd of intimates.

The singularity of this sermon, however, lies in the prominent role assumed by the internal audience and the peculiarly complete information that Anastasios provides about the actual moment of death (to be differentiated from the death struggle); these seem to act both as a supplement to and a commentary on the tales. As we saw in the tales, one of the principal functions of the attendants is to provide palliative care for the dying person. In the sermon as well, those present at the deathbed serve the moribund with watchful solicitude, wiping his brows and eyes and applying water to his parched mouth.⁴⁴⁶ Their charity is attended by a curious mix of fear and greediness for information. Interestingly, the terror that the bodily and emotional torments of the dying man inspire in his audience creates a physical response in *them* that to a certain degree mirrors *his* symptoms: upon seeing his suffering, they too begin to tremble and their faces grow wet, not with perspiration but with tears.⁴⁴⁷ The intense sensations

⁴⁴⁴ Munitiz 1998:232.

⁴⁴⁵ PG 89.1196C, «Πῶς ἀνέχονται, πῶς ταράττονται, πῶς στενάζουσι, πῶς ἰδροῦσι ψυχρὸν καὶ πικρὸν, ὡς οἱ ἐν ἀγρῷ θερισταί; Πῶς οἱ μὲν τοὺς ὀδόντας τρίζουσιν, οἱ δὲ θαμβοῦνται καὶ ταράττονται; Πῶς κλίνης ἀναπηδῶσι, φεύγειν βουλόμενοι, μὴ δυνάμενοι δέ; Ὀρῶντες ἄπερ οὐδέποτε ἐωράκασι, καὶ ἀκούοντες ὑπὸ τῶν ἐξουσιῶν... »

⁴⁴⁶ PG 89.1196D, «Ἀπαλείφομεν τὸν ἰδρῶτα τοῦ προσώπου αὐτῶν, ἐκμάσσομεν τοὺς τούτων ὀφθαλμούς, τὴν γλῶσσαν φλεγομένην δροσίζομεν ὕδατι...» See also 1197D.

⁴⁴⁷ “Oh, I have suffer’d / with those that I saw suffer!” (*Tempest* 1.2).

of *ἔλεος καὶ φόβος* produced by this terrifying spectacle of death allow the bystanders to experience a lighter version of that dreadful passage, where the physical changes are reversible but the psychic effect, they hope, will be a profound and lasting one. Their fear, however, does not seem to diminish their inquisitiveness as they question the dying man and try to extract morsels of information from his halting speech: “inclining the ear so that we might hear his stammered words, we question him saying: how do you see yourself now? Do not be afraid; the Lord will give succor, for he loves mankind.”⁴⁴⁸ Catharsis must come in the end. This “scene” calls to mind the fifth step of the *Ladder*, in which the prisoners seek similar answers from one of their number who is about to die.⁴⁴⁹

The next section of the sermon focuses on a ritual that is also often alluded to in Anastasios’s descriptions of death: the final farewell. Some of the stylistic differences between a sermon and a religious tale begin to emerge clearly here: if we take the death of Abba Michael the Iberian⁴⁵⁰ as a representative of a typical final farewell among the monks Anastasios describes,⁴⁵¹ we see that mostly these encounters are heartfelt but also rather short and to-the-point, or are at least described so. The dying brother in the sermon, however, seems to revive temporarily from his death-throes to assume the role of orator on his deathbed and to deliver along with his final embrace a rather rousing and extended speech on repentance, for the

⁴⁴⁸ PG 89.1196D «Τὸ οὖς προστίθεντες, ἵνα τὸν ψελλισμὸν τῶν αὐτῶν ἀκούσωμεν ῥημάτων. Εἶτα ἐπερωτῶμεν λέγοντες, Πῶς βλέπεις σεαυτὸν ἄρτι; Μὴ φοβοῦ, βοηθεῖ ὁ Θεός· φιλόανθρωπος γὰρ ἐστίν.»

⁴⁴⁹ PG 88.772D-773A «Τί ἐστίν, ἀδελφὲ καὶ συγκατάδικε, πῶς; Τί λέγεις; Τί ἐλπίζεις; Τί ὑπολαμβάνεις; Ἦνυσας ἐκ τοῦ κόπου τὸ ζητούμενον, ἢ οὐκ ἰσχυσας; Ἦνοιξας, ἢ ὑπεύθυνος ἔτι ὑπάρχεις; Ἐφθασας, ἢ οὐκ ἐπέτυχες; [...] Τί λέγεις ἀπλῶς, ἀδελφέ; Εἰπέ ἡμῖν, δυσωποῦμεν, ἵνα καὶ ἡμεῖς γνῶμεν ἐν ποίοις μέλλομεν ἔσεσθαι· σοῦ γὰρ λοιπὸν ὁ καιρὸς ἐκλείσθη, καὶ ἄλλον οὐχ εὐρήσεις ἔτι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.»

⁴⁵⁰ Tale I.15, discussed in the previous chapter.

⁴⁵¹ Tale I.15 (Binggeli 188; Caner 183), «Καὶ κατελθόντων αὐτῶν, ἐποίησεν εὐχὴν καὶ ἀσπασάμενος τὸν Εὐστάθιον ὁ γέρον ἐῖπεν· Εἰρήνη σοι, τέκνον, καὶ εὐχου ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ. Καὶ ἀνακλίνας ἑαυτὸν ἐν τῷ τάφῳ μετὰ χαρᾶς καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσεως ἀπῆλθε πρὸς Κύριον.»

encouragement of his disconsolate companions. In this instance, the homilist is truly able to capitalize on the moments that will carry the greatest emotional weight with his audience and elaborate on those as he sees fit. The tales frequently include direct speech but, more often than not, these are a few sentences rather than entire speeches. The subject of the moribund's discourse is, predictably, regret and the necessity for timely repentance:

Have mercy on me, friends, have mercy and give me aid. Take pity on me and pray on my behalf, so that I may find some remission for my sins, that I may receive some small measure of mercy. I do not seek much, because I have sinned a great deal. Oh, how I deceived myself. How I deluded myself saying, "I am still young, for now I will enjoy life! I will revel in worldly things and indulge my flesh and then later will repent, for God loves mankind and surely will forgive me." Thinking these sorts of thoughts everyday, I wickedly wasted my life.⁴⁵²

While this "catalogue of regrets" is something of a set piece in homilies of this type –indeed there is a very similar passage in the *De Exitu Animi*⁴⁵³ – the homilist has tailored the element to fit into his narrative scheme. The dying man addresses his companions and continually pleads with them for assistance and prayers. As the external audience, we are constantly reminded of the presence of the internal audience, who must witness this fearful scene at first hand.

When, at last, the dying man begins to slip out of consciousness, there is curiously no verbatim report of the final conversation. What happens instead is a detailed description of the physical symptoms of death:

[S]uddenly the tongue is loosed, the mind takes leave, and the eyes are changed. Then at last the despotic Powers draw close...He quivers and is beside himself, seeing those fearsome Powers, seeing their strange and powerful forms, seeing their rank which he has never yet seen before. These things the departing one then sees, no longer regarding us, but towards those beckoning

⁴⁵² PG 89.1197C-D, «Ελεήσατε, ὦ φίλοι, ἐλεήσατε καὶ βοηθήσατε. Συμπαθήσατέ μοι καὶ προσεύξασθε, ἵνα εὖρω ἐκεῖ μικρὰν ἄφεσιν, ἵνα λάβω μικρὸν ἐκεῖ ἔλεος. Οὐ ζητῶ πολὺ, ὅτι ἤμαρτον πολὺ. Οἴμοι πῶς ἑμαυτὸν ἠπάτησα! Πῶς ἑμαυτὸν ἐνέπαιξα λέγων, "Νέος εἰμὶ ἔτι, τέως ἀπολαύσω τῶν τοῦ βίου! Ἐντυφήσω τῷ κόσμῳ. Θεραπεύσω τὴν σάρκα καὶ ἐν ὑστέρω μετανοῶ. Φιλάνθρωπος γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ Θεός, καὶ πάντως συγχωρήσει μοι." Ταῦτα ἐννοῶν καθημέραν τὴν ἑμαυτοῦ ζωὴν κακῶς ἐδαπάνησα.»

⁴⁵³ See PG 77.1073A *sqq.*

Powers he gazes, wonderstruck. Perhaps he tries to whisper some imprecations at them as long as his tongue is able to speak.⁴⁵⁴

When the spark of life leaves the dying man's body and his survivors are left with only a shell, they too, though grieved and dejected, have been forced to accept not only his death but also their own:

[B]ut we, having interred the mortal body, we attend to the dead man with zeal at that moment. And, having left him there, we return homewards, gloomy and downcast, we ourselves awaiting the inexorable moment of death.⁴⁵⁵

The enduring popularity of the deathbed scene both in religious tales and in popular sermons becomes readily apparent with a pressing question that the homilist puts directly to the audience at the end of the work: "if the death of your brother will not chasten you, then no one can be of any use to you. If you do not repent upon seeing a corpse, when will you turn away [from sin]?"⁴⁵⁶ The ideal monastic life, according to the teachings of Klimakos, consists of an unending brush with death; a monk is supposed to have an "unforgettable memory of death" at the forefront of his mind at all times.⁴⁵⁷ Like the inmates of Klimakos's "Prison," the monks who attend the death struggles of their brethren are seeking a literal and metaphorical near-death experience by carefully observing the throes of others. The slightly uncomfortable feeling of

⁴⁵⁴ PG 89.1199A, «Ἐξαίφνης δεσμεῖται ἡ γλῶσσα, ἀναπολεῖ ὁ νοῦς, ἀλλοιοῦνται οἱ ὀφθαλμοί, ἤνικα αἱ δεσποτικαὶ δυνάμεις λοιπὸν παραγένωνται...Ὁλος θαμβεῖται καὶ ἐξίσταται ὄρων δυνάμεις φοβεράς, ὄρων μορφὰς ξένας καὶ κραταιάς, ὄρων τάξιν ἣν οὐδέποτε ἐθεάσατο· ταῦτα ὁ ἀπαγόμενος ὄρα, ἡμᾶς δὲ οὐκέτι καθορᾶ, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὰς καλούσας δυνάμεις θαμβηθεὶς ἐξίσταται. Ἴσως δὲ καὶ τινὰς δεήσεις πρὸς αὐτὰς ποιεῖται ψιθυρίζων, καθὼς ἡ γλῶσσα λαλεῖν δύναται.»

⁴⁵⁵ PG 89.1200D, «Ἡμεῖς δὲ, τὸ θνητὸν σῶμα κηδεύσαντες, πρὸς τὸν καιρὸν κομίζομεν μετὰ σπουδῆς τὸν τεθνεῶτα. Καὶ ἐκεῖσε καταλιπόντες, οἴκαδε ἀναστρέφομεν, στυγνάζοντες καὶ κατηφεῖς, ἐκδεχόμενοι καὶ αὐτοὶ τὴν ἀπαραίτητον τοῦ θανάτου ὥραν.»

⁴⁵⁶ PG 89.1201B, «Εἰ μὴ γὰρ ὁ θάνατος τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου σωφρονίσει σε, οὐδεὶς δύναται σε ὠφελήσειν. Εἰ μὴ νεκρὸν βλέπων μετανοήσεις, πότε λοιπὸν ἐπιστρέψεις;» This does not sit entirely comfortably with what Abraham says when refusing to inform Dives' brethren about the *post-mortem* state of their brother's soul: «Εἰ Μωϋσέως καὶ τῶν προφητῶν οὐκ ἀκούουσιν, οὐδ' ἓάν τις ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστῆ πεισθήσονται» (Luke 16:31).

⁴⁵⁷ PG 77.725A, «μνήμη ἀνεπίληστος ἐξόδου.»

voyeurism that attends the spectacle (and the graphic description) of death is mitigated by the soul-piercing compunction which such a scene induces in the spectator and then in turn in the auditor.

In the tale of Stephen of Byzantium, Klimakos also demonstrates the impossibility of “cheating” death: despite their earnest endeavor to glean as much as they can from their dying brother, the spectators are left in great uncertainty, catching only half of the crucial conversation and finally, not having learned anything new but simply (and crucially) being reminded of what they already knew: how important it is to avoid “being found unready in that fateful moment.”⁴⁵⁸ The use of the final conversation as narrative centerpiece shows the importance of the story to the speech. Bare exhortation or a straightforward enumeration of principles, even good ones, has almost nothing of the traction it can when driven by narrative or drama. The didactic force of narrative that our homilist recognizes in composing his sermon here is something that even modern textbook writers understand when beginning each chapter with a case study. When it is told right, an edifying tale will not simply bring about a “tickling of the ears,” but a profound “change in morals.”⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ PG 89.1200D «Ἡμεῖς μὴ ἀνέτοιμοι εὐρεθῶμεν... ἐν τῇ ἀνάγκῃ ἐκείνῃ.»

⁴⁵⁹ Marinides 2014:46.

General Conclusion

A famous episode from the seventh-century *Life of John the Almsgiver* by the hagiographer Leontios of Neapolis reveals this sainted cleric's great fondness for reading religious tales: "Our Saint, who was adorned with so many good deeds, was not wanting in this respect either, for he dearly loved reading the lives of the holy fathers, especially of those who practised almsgiving." Once, when the patriarch had spent hours reading about the exceptionally charitable St. Serapion, he became inspired:

He was so overcome and filled with admiration for his goodness, that he burst into tears and then summoned all his own officials and read all these portions about St. Serapion to them and said: "On my soul, you lovers of Christ, see how greatly a man is edified by reading the lives of the holy fathers. For, believe me, until today I really thought that I was doing a little something by giving away the monies which came to me, for I did not know that some, when overcome by pity, even sold themselves!"

Apart from a tantalizing glimpse into the reading habits (presumably silent) of one of the luminaries of the seventh-century Alexandrian church, this vignette suggests that for their late-antique readers, religious tales were not merely an "appendix" to the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers of the Church but a *γραφή* in their own right, as Anastasios calls them, capable of filling their readers with an inspiration that brings them closer to God. After reading about Serapion, the Almsgiver's heart is set alight with such pious admiration for the man whose chief virtue is one that he himself seeks above all to emulate. The religious tales, in addition to being a "mirror for monks," thus form a collection of "scriptures" (with a small *s*) that was just as crucial to the shaping of individual piety as the stories of the Savior and his disciples.

It is not surprising then, given the formative power that the tales held over the personal beliefs of their audience, that death – that most universal of human universals – assumes a

central position in the collections we have examined in this study. Where Scripture (with a capital S) offers only parables, hints, outlines and perhaps mutually contradictory views, the stories, as Wortley has noted, “fill in details and supplementary matter of various kinds” and provide practical and poignantly illustrated guidance for the anxious believer unsure how best to approach the dreadful moment of reckoning.⁴⁶⁰

Beyond the pastoral function of the tales, death also emerges, especially for the tale’s monastic audience, as “a symbolic framework within which to cultivate and communicate the contours of Christian ascetic identity.”⁴⁶¹ And not only their identity, but their very understanding of life. This attitude informs the behavior of the spectators at their brother’s deathbed and makes keen their hunger for information: having been given the opportunity to attend a “dress rehearsal” of their own eventual demise, they want to know if their life lived in the service of this ultimate *τέλος* is being lived well. If they still miss the mark (*ἀμαρτάνειν*), a poignant session with the death of someone like them – either in the flesh or through the word – instructs them how to correct their aim. The penitent sinner who has been permitted to return after a terrifying brush with the Powers of the air is sent back for the same reason – to become an example unto many and to teach and emphasize the importance of repentance in the flesh.

But, while the tales teach that death is *an* end – to our heavy corporeal load, to the transitory pleasures of this life (this “worldwynn” as we might say), and to the stark but finite and ultimately surmountable struggles and trials of this existence – they also emphasize that it is not *the* end. The letter killeth, but the inspired tale giveth life. And, just as deeds done in the

⁴⁶⁰ Wortley 2001:69.

⁴⁶¹ Zecher 2011:212.

corruptible flesh leave their imprint on the incorruptible soul,⁴⁶² so the light of a saint, even of a solitary hermit, when glowing bright with virtue, will not stay hidden under the bushel (this fictile vessel) but is revealed, celebrated and “translated” into stories for the instruction of others. And these stories, coming down from the ever-standing mountain, “elevate” their audience and invite them, one by one, to ascend, to bring their talents, and to enter as faithful servants into the joy of the Lord.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶² Cf. 1Cor. 15:53 (*in re* the resurrection).

⁴⁶³ Matt. 25:21-23.

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