CHAPTER FIVE

COUNSELING THROUGH ENIGMAS

In the previous chapter we drew a portrait of Barsanuphius as a holy man and witnessed the emergence of his multifaceted charismatic leadership. The discussion that follows further rounds out this image by analyzing his quasi-divine self-awareness and status as reflected in a unique set of five questions and answers, described by the ancient redactor as a way of consulting the spiritual guide “through enigmas.”1 From the Correspondence it is not possible to determine the extent to which cryptic language was employed in the Gaza monastic milieu as a whole. Barsanuphius, as we shall see, was not very enthusiastic about such language, a fact that might explain the scarcity of letters of this sort in the Correspondence. Although the redactor classified this entire group of letters as counseling “through enigmas,” two sorts of writing are distinguishable here: cryptic language and meditation on the alphabet. The latter, exemplified in Letter 137b, deals specifically with meditation on the letter Η and discussion of it constitutes the second part of this chapter.

We learn about the first category—counseling through enigmas—from the case of a monk in the monastery of Seridus who had three thoughts (λογισμοῖ) and wrote his question to Barsanuphius “not in a clear manner but through enigmas” (οὐ σαφῶς, ἀλλὰ δι᾽ αἰνημάτων).2 Keeping in mind the three topics on which he was seeking counsel, the monk inscribed a few letters of the alphabet. For each thought, he imprinted in his mind (ἐν τῇ οὐτοί διανοιῇ ἑνετυμόσατο) the letter that seemed suitable. Here the redactor provided a valuable piece of information—namely, the monk’s alphabetic code. For formulating in his mind a question concerning the subject of hesychia and total withdrawal into silence (περὶ τῆς ἡσυχίας ἁκριβοῦς καὶ παντελῶς σιωπῆς τοῦ μηδενί παντελῶς συντυχείν), the monk used the letter iota;3 he used kappa for concerns about diet, asking through this

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1 Questions and Answers 40, 132, 133, 137, 137b.
2 Ibid., 132.
3 Ibid.
sign whether one should eat dried food and abstain from drinking
wine; and he used lambda for asking about audacity. The immediate incentive for using cryptic language in the monastery was to bypass Abbot Seridus—Barsanuphius and John’s secretary—whose identity is disclosed only in the later letters. Seridus—the person who wielded direct authority in the monastery—was apparently not highly esteemed by this monk, he may have doubted the abbot’s wisdom concerning matters of daily life and been seeking a higher authority and more sophisticated counseling, so he used a known code to circumvent him.

In the next letter the same monk continued to address Barsanuphius, but this time asked his question neither clearly nor through enigma, as previously, but only by pondering in his mind (ἀλλὰ μόνον τῶν ἐνθυμηθέείς). Using an “alphabet of the mind,” the monk posed questions about sleeping problems, weakness of the soul, obtaining salvation, and prayer.4 The next three letters of the Correspondence constitute Barsanuphius’ responses; yet his answers too were given in riddles (such as “the first brings loss, the second is beneficial” and “turn not to the right hand nor to the left, until the two will be in agreement”), which, according to the redactor, induced embarrassment and frustration in the monk.5 In the end, Barsanuphius wrote an explicit answer to dispel these confusions.6 Though it leaves many questions unresolved, this letter provides a glimpse into Barsanuphius’ fundamental attitude to this way of counseling. At first glance, his stance on the use of cryptic language in the monastery seems somewhat positive. He declares that it seems to him good to receive—via God—the monk’s thoughts through enigmas and to answer him in the same way, since it produces in the rational soul, especially among the wise, “a spiritual rumination” (μηρωσιμὸν πνευματικὸν). By delving into the enigmas, he says, we find abundant advantage in them. Nonetheless, drawing on Romans 12:16 (“Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate”), he strictly forbade the monk to express his thoughts thenceforth in enigmas; instead, he should bare his thoughts clearly through the intermediacy of another brother or write them down. Even if the monk acknowledged that he received charisma from God, it was not profitable,

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4 Ibid., 133.
5 Ibid., 133, 134, 135.
6 Ibid., 136.