COUNSELING THROUGH ENIGMAS: MONASTIC LEADERSHIP AND LINGUISTIC TECHNIQUES IN SIXTH-CENTURY GAZA

Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony

Our guide spoke to us through letters
And he gave it to us as symbols
(\textit{Les mystères des lettres Grecques})

\textit{Introduction}

One of the most surprising aspects of the monastic leadership in the sixth-century ascetic community of Gaza is the obvious absence of miracles and exorcism as means of channeling power and establishing and maintaining the role of the holy person in his society. Likewise, the late antique ordinary strategy of bishops, abbots, and holy men to ensure their local prominence and standing by patronizing relics and holy shrines was not embraced by Barsanuphius and John—the leading figures of this community. Nevertheless, they did not neglect the extraordinary dimension of their role: Barsanuphius and John reflect the self-consciousness of a spiritual elite; they belonged to an order of ascetics who had attained perfection and regarded themselves, metaphorically, as combatants in an elite military corps, wearing the “uniform of the unit” and envisaging their ascetic life as following the path of the tormented martyrs of past heroic generations. This consciousness of ascetic perfection indeed charged them with spiritual energy

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{1 The Coptic text with French translation known as The Mysteries of the Greek Letters was published and translated by A. Hebbelynck, \textit{Les mystères des lettres Grecques d\'après un manuscript Copte-Arabe}. Louvain, 1902, 69. The text was first published by A. Hebbelynck in \textit{Le Muséon} 1, 1900: 16–36, 105–36, 269–300; 2, 1901: 5–33, 369–414.}
\footnote{2 See, for example, Flusin 1983, 155–214; Brown 1971, 80–101.}
\footnote{3 On the history of this community, see Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky 2000, 14–62; Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (eds.) 2004; idem 2006, 6–46.}
\footnote{4 Kofsky 2004, 421–437.}
\end{footnotesize}
and charismatic authority as holy men, elevating them to the status of mediators between their followers and God. Much has been said in the last three decades concerning the function and portrayal of the holy man in late antique Christian societies. However, as Philip Rousseau has discerned, the holy man in late antiquity should be perceived as a new kind of teacher with a new kind of *paideia*, thus identifying the central expression of authority within ascetic society as the relationship between master and disciple. Undoubtedly, this was the case with Barsanuphius and John, who approached their role in clear pedagogical terms. In this paper I wish to discuss one extraordinary linguistic technique, termed in the sources “counseling through enigmas,” by which Barsanuphius—known also as the Great Old Man—exercised his authority. I shall argue here that though secluded in his cell-tomb and far from the public drama of the healing miracles that were animating all parts of the Christian empire and proving the power of the holy person, Barsanuphius’ quasi-divine standing and self-awareness became apparent through the linguistic technique of “counseling through enigmas.”

The historical source for this investigation is the exciting corpus of *Erotapokriseis, Questions and Answers*, comprising over eight hundred letters, the correspondence between Barsanuphius and John and their clientele. This precious exchange of letters—a result of the conditions of extreme seclusion of the spiritual fathers—provides a rare opportunity to see from close up intimate moments of interaction between master and disciple. It is worth noting that the *Questions and Answers* did not follow any protocol of classical epistolography. Rather, their style is

---

7 For the peculiar model of spiritual guidance in seclusion—maintaining contact with the outside world only through a disciple—in Gaza and in Egypt, see Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky 2006, p. 83.