Evagrius Ponticus (ca. 345–399), practitioner and theologian of monastic prayer, brought his deep knowledge of both Hellenistic philosophy and Christian thought (especially the work of Origen) to bear on his tracing of the human journey back to perfect union with God. His several writings on prayer, and particularly his teaching about “imageless prayer,” must be situated within that philosophical and theological framework. The emphasis on imageless prayer creates a tension with the Christian and monastic focus on biblical texts. Examining Evagrius’ theories of mental operation and biblical exegesis helps in understanding both the imperative of imageless prayer for Evagrius and its problematic aspects.

Introduction

Like other fourth-century monks of Kellia, the hermit community in Lower Egypt where he passed the last fifteen years of his life, Evagrius Ponticus spent most of his waking hours in some form of prayer. Unlike the other monks, he also wrote about it. Evagrius was a genius at psychodynamic analysis in service of ascetic and contemplative development, and he used his skill to probe his own experience of prayer and to teach others. Through Evagrius, modern scholars have their best access to this aspect of early monasticism often neglected in recent study of the ascetic life. The purpose of this essay is to explore how Evagrius deals with a tension fundamental to his own life of prayer, that between a theology of “imageless” prayer and the incarnational dimensions of a religion based on sacred texts. Although Evagrius posits imageless prayer to be the monastic spiritual goal, he writes of experiences of light during imageless prayer and describes such prayer using biblical metaphors. To understand how Evagrius resolved—or at least handled—this tension, we must consider his writings on prayer, his own practice of prayer, his understanding of mental operation,
and his theory of biblical exegesis. First, however, we must note his theological presuppositions.

In Search of a Unified Theory of Everything

Evagrius was schooled in the philosophical and theological traditions of Christian Hellenism, particularly those of Origen. The greatest theologians of the day were his teachers: Basil the Great ordained him lector, and Gregory Nazianzen both ordained him deacon and took him to Constantinople in 379. Evagrius doubtless acquired his taste for Origen from them. His own Christology and Trinitarian theology, however, evidence much more than Basil’s or Gregory’s the influence of Origen’s cosmic epic sketched in the treatise *On First Principles*. Evagrius’ protological and eschatological speculations may have been encouraged by his later friendship with those ardent readers of Origen, Melania and Rufinus, whom he met in Jerusalem in the early 380s after his precipitous departure from Constantinople in the fallout of an impossible romance. After Melania packed him off to Egypt, Evagrius continued to correspond with both Melania and Rufinus, and his most famous triology of writings is addressed to a monk who probably lived with them on the Mount of Olives. One of his last letters, traditionally known as the *Letter to Melania* (though perhaps actually written to Rufinus), contains the clearest exposition of his overall theological vision and is a valuable key to his more cryptic *Kephalaia Gnostika*. As Evagrius tells the story, the “mind’s long journey to the Holy Trinity” is actually a return voyage. The theological framework he

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2 Anatolios, a Spaniard who had been to Egypt with Melania in the 370s. For this identification, see Bunge, *Briefe aus der Wüste*, 33–36, and Clark, *Origenist Controversy*, 189–91.

3 The attribution to Rufinus is suggested by Bunge (*Briefe aus der Wüste*, 193–200); see Clark’s analysis of the significance of either attribution (*Origenist Controversy*, 191–93).

4 Jeremy Driscoll’s title for his translation of the *Sentences for Monks* (Collegeville, 1993).

5 For overviews of Evagrius’ theological framework, see Antoine Guillaumont, *Les ‘Képhalaia gnostica’ d’Évagre le Pontique et l’histoire de l’Origénisme chez les grecs et chez les syriens,*