DEMONS AND PRAYERS: SPIRITUAL EXERCISES IN THE MONASTIC COMMUNITY OF GAZA IN THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES

BY

BROURIA BITTON-ASHKELONY

Prayer may do what it likes—just as God can. It gives orders on earth, it holds back in heaven. Prayer is a god amongst human beings.

(Martyrius, The Book of Perfection 40)\(^1\)

What should a monk do to make progress? What spiritual exercises—inner exertions of thought and will—should he practice to attain perfection? These questions are repeatedly asked in the monastic milieu, including that of the monks of Gaza in the fifth and sixth centuries.\(^2\) Despite the fact that without the help of the Fathers the whole ascetic pursuit would have seemed impossible,\(^3\) several spiritual exercises were listed by the teachers in Gaza to mould their disciples and guide them to self-transformation: attention to oneself (\(\pi\rho\sigma\sigma\omega\chi\eta\)) and vigilance at every moment, watching the

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\(^3\) See, for example, Q4 124, 197, SC 427, pp. 462-69, 624-27; Q4 260-261, SC 450, pp. 232-37; Q4 225, SC 450, p. 140. For this aspect in the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John, see L. Perrone, “The Necessity of Advice: Spiritual Direction as a School of Christianity in the Correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza,” in B. Bitton-Ashkelony and A. Kofsky (eds.), Christianity in Gaza in Late Antiquity, forthcoming.
heart (νησίς), examining conscience (συνείδησις), meditation (μελέτη), self-mastery (ἐγκράτεια), a complete elimination of passions (ἀπώθεια), and humility (ταπεινός). I wish to discuss here an additional component, neglected by scholars—that is, the emergence of individual prayer in ascetic culture as a factor of spiritual progress. In the rich corpus of writings that has come down to us from Gaza—including the Asceticom of Abba Isaiah (d. 491), the Instructions of Dorotheus, the famous sixth-century abbot of the coenobium near Gaza, and above all the vivid correspondence of the spiritual guides Barsanuphius and John (known as the Old Men) with monks and laymen, containing more than 800 questions and answers—the theme of private prayer is elaborated with great clarity and appears to have been a major method of training for modifying the individual. In this framework, I will confine myself to discussing very briefly three private and spontaneous types of prayer: unceasing prayer (ἀδιάλειπτος προσευχή/εὐχή), pure prayer (προσευχή καθαρά), and remembrance of God (μνήμη θεοῦ). I shall argue that although such types of prayer were not new for Christians in the fifth and sixth centuries, in Gaza they gained new meaning, formulation, and function. They became the most radical method for cultivating the self, transforming its level, and ensuring an encounter with the divine.

As the title of this article suggests, its starting point is Pierre Hadot’s groundbreaking study Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique. Hadot focused on the notion in antiquity that true philosophy is a spiritual exercise—that is, first and foremost a way of life, an art of living leading to an altered level of the self. Drawing on the portrayal of monasticism as a philosophia depicted by Christian writers from the fourth century on, Hadot identified

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5 I have adopted here the term “spontaneous prayer,” a term currently used in the phenomenological study of F. Heiler (Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion, German original 1920, Eng. trans. S. McComb, Oxford: 1937) to distinguish all sorts of private prayer from the fixed liturgy.
