

Songs in the Desert: Psalmody, Spiritual Formation and the Desert Fathers

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Abstract

In this article I explore the role of Scripture in the lives of the Desert Fathers. I argue that the book of Psalms in particular was intrinsic to the spirituality of the Desert Fathers. The chanting of the Psalms ordered the daily lives of monks and provided meaning to the monks' ongoing quest for salvation and holiness: exposing the heart of the monks, but also in transforming their emotional landscape; protecting and comforting them during times of struggle and anxiety; and leading them to deeper union with God.

Introduction

In both the Eastern and Western Church, a musical revival exploded around the Psalms in the last half of the fourth century. As historian James McKinnon observes, 'Nothing quite like it has been observed either before or after in the history of Christianity or Judaism'. Scripture infused the lives of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and none more so than the book of Psalms. In its liturgical use, the Psalms not only gave shape to the external life of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, but also governed and guided their internal life. In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Athanasius' *Letter to Marcellinus*, and the later and more systematised theology of Evagrius Ponticus, the Psalms were acknowledged as unique among the scriptures, offering both didactic and therapeutic support to the Abbas and Ammas.

The Psalms were intrinsic to the worship of the Desert Fathers, both in their liturgical assembly and their private devotion.¹ In liturgical practice, psalmody comprised the canonical hours of the daily monastic office. Psalmody involved the chanting of Psalms, interspersed by prayer.² In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Antony is recorded as singing the Psalms before sleep and after sleep.³ That is, at the Vigil office of dawn and at dusk for Vespers, the monks chanted twelve Psalms, with pause for private prayer.⁴ The Psalms were also chanted at *synaxis*, the weekly public gatherings where scripture was recited.⁵ Psalmody therefore gave structure to the waking hours of the monks.

Psalmody as an internal spiritual practice was recommended by virtually all the Desert Fathers.⁶ Epiphanius declared that 'the true monk should have prayer and psalmody continually in his heart'.⁷ During the day, and much into the night, psalmody was 'the background against which all other work was undertaken'.⁸ Prayer interrupted the

¹ Dysinger, Luke. *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 49.

² Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in Evagrius Ponticus*, 48.

³ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 118.

⁴ According to Abba of Rome, Arsenius recited the 12 Psalms morning and evening (Abba of Rome 1, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Alphabetical Collection*. Translated by Benedicta Ward, Oxford: A. R. Mowbray, 1975, 209).

⁵ Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 117.

⁶ Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in Evagrius Ponticus*, 49.

⁷ Epiphanius 3 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 57.

⁸ Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in Evagrius Ponticus*, 49.

manual labour of the monks, or was woven into their physical labour. Palladius reports hearing the monks of Nitra chanting the Psalms while manufacturing linen.⁹ An example of stopping for prayer is given in the life of Antony the Great, who, having found himself in a state of *acedia*, pleaded with God to be saved. He was given a vision of an angel:

*a man like himself sitting at his work, getting up from his work to pray, then sitting down and plaiting a rope and then getting up again to pray.*¹⁰

Anthony obeyed and, 'filled with joy and courage ... was saved'.¹¹ Indeed, Theodore of Enaton argued that, 'if God reproaches us for carelessness in our prayers and infidelities in our psalmody, we cannot be saved'.¹²

Such concentrated focus on the recitation of Psalms - both as the words of their prayers and as a way of generating personal prayer - reflected the monks' perception of the uniqueness of the Psalms amongst all scripture. The words of the Psalms possessed such immediacy and directness that they were capable of being spoken as one's own words, and conversely reflected the state of one's own soul, as in a mirror. Athanasius, in his letter to Marcellinus, states that, while 'all scripture of ours - both ancient and new - is inspired by God and profitable for teaching', the book of Psalms 'possesses a winning exactitude for those who are prayerful'.¹³ The book of Psalms is like garden, Athanasius goes on, as it contains and recapitulates the themes found in the other books of the Bible, but 'also exhibits things of its own that it gives in song along with them'.¹⁴ These things consisted of the emotions of the soul:

*And it seems to me that these words become like a mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul, and thus affected, he might recite them.*¹⁵

Further, the one who recites the Psalms

*utters the rest as his own words, and each sing them as if they were written concerning him, and he accepts them and recites them not as if another were speaking, nor as if speaking about someone else. But he handles them as if he is speaking about himself. And then things spoken are such that he lifts them up to God as himself acting and speaking them from himself.*¹⁶

The interaction between the Psalms and the reciter and listener of them represented a profound inter-dwelling: the text gains entry into the heart, as the monk chants or listens to them, but simultaneously, 'the heart comes to inhabit the text as the interpreter seeks to experience, through imagination and action, the world of the

⁹ Palladius, *Lausiac History* 7.5 Translated and annotated by Robert T. Meyer (New York: Newman Press, 1964), 38-40.

¹⁰ Anthony the Great, 1 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 2.

¹¹ Anthony the Great, 1, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 2.

¹² Theodore of Enaton, 3, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 79.

¹³ Athanasius 2 in *Letter to Marcellinus*, translated by Robert C. Cregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 101.

¹⁴ Athanasius 2, in *Letter to Marcellinus*, 102.

¹⁵ Athanasius 12, in *Letter to Marcellinus*, 111.

¹⁶ Athanasius 11, *Letter to Marcellinus*, translated by Robert C. Cregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 110.

text'.¹⁷ The book of Psalms represents a didactic workbook for the soul, and yet goes beyond to transform the very identity of the user.

For the Desert Fathers, the soul is under constant attack, as demons wage spiritual war on believers. The demons deploy *logismoi*, tempting thoughts that distract the monks from a single-minded focus on God. The Psalms act as a weapon against this demonic onslaught, by driving out *logismoi* and replacing them with better thoughts. Against the *logismoi* of the demons, the monks are counselled to refute or contradict them by throwing verses of the Psalms at them, in a type of spiritual contest. Evagrius co-opts the psalms in his *antirrhesis* technique of deploying Bible verses against sinful thoughts, deliberately contradicting the thoughts of temptation verbally:

*Do not immediately pray when you are tempted; first speak some words with anger to the one pressing you ... you will confuse and banish the ideas that come from your enemies.*¹⁸

Such an *antirrhesis* is essential, for 'when your souls are acted upon by tempting thoughts prayer cannot be pure'.¹⁹ *Antirrhesis* must precede true, pure prayer.

King David is Evagrius' exemplar of this method of *antirrhesis*. For Evagrius, David is the model of the spiritual warrior who was also a contemplative:

*I expounded openly the entire contest of the monastic way of life, [that contest] which the Holy Spirit taught David by means of the Psalms, and which was also handed on to us by the blessed fathers.*²⁰

Evagrius counsels that the monk must be 'intrepid in opposing his foe' as David was in quoting the Psalms:

*Thus if the demons say, "When will he die and his name be forgotten?" (Ps. 40: 5) he then also replies, "I will not die, but live and proclaim the works of the Lord!" (Ps. 117: 17). "And if, on the other hand, the demons say, "Flee and abide like a sparrow on the mountain" (Ps. 10: 1), then one should say, "For he is my God and my saviour, my strong place of refuge; I will not waver" (Ps. 17: 3). Therefore, observe the mutually contradicting voices and love the victory; imitate David and pay close attention to yourself!*²¹

Such battles with demons, notes Douglas Burton-Christie, are reflective of the 'profound psychological challenges' facing the monks in their life in the desert.²² The most dangerous of all challenges for the monks was *accidie* – spiritual apathy or boredom. In fighting against *accidie*, the Desert Fathers and Mothers counselled the active reciting of Psalms. Amma Syncletica identifies *accidie* as 'grief that comes from the enemy, full of mockery', and says that 'this spirit must be cast out, mainly by prayer and psalmody'.²³ In a saying of the Desert Fathers, a brother who has found

¹⁷ Rebecca Harden Weaver, 'Access to Scripture: Experiencing the Text', *Interpretations* 52, no. 4 (1998): 367.

¹⁸ Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 42, quoted in Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in Evagrius Ponticus*, 133.

¹⁹ Evagrius Ponticus 72 in *De Oratione*, quoted in Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in Evagrius Ponticus*, 151.

²⁰ Evagrius, *Antirrhethikos*, Prologue, quoted in Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in Evagrius*, 132.

²¹ Evagrius, *Letter* 11.2, quoted in Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in Evagrius*, 134.

²² Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 124.

²³ Amma Syncletica 27 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 235.

himself 'prey to accidie'²⁴ seeks counsel from Abba Heraclides, whose remedy is to stand up and sing many psalms.²⁵

Psalmody reordered the thoughts of the monks, sharpening their spiritual vision by drawing together disparate thoughts towards a single-minded focus on God. From the *Sayings*, there is a story concerning John the Dwarf, that

*when he returned from the harvest or when he had been with some of the old men, he gave himself to prayer, meditation, and psalmody, until his thoughts were re-established in their previous order.*²⁶

Athanasius notes that the Psalms teach teaches 'not only not to disregard passion, but also how one must heal passion through speaking and acting'.²⁷ For the Desert Fathers, the body, with its energy and passion, was not to be dismissed, but acknowledged and subdued to the greater goal of the soul's pursuit of God.

Psalmody was effective in the healing of past wounds, by remaking and replacing the memory of the monks. In the *Sayings*, the story is told of Macarius observing Satan on the road, whose task was to 'stir up the memories of the brethren'.²⁸ Memories of the struggle to live holy lives, of past times of moral failures, or of their former life, would assail the monks, and tempt them to depression. In meditating on the psalms, mulling over a few select verses in their cells, the monks received healing and encouragement. Meditation for the Desert Fathers was an oral phenomenon that not only occupied the memory of the monk but creates a new storehouse of thoughts.²⁹ Evagrius Ponticus highlights this meditative function of psalmody in *Peri Logismon* 17:

*And if, weary from our toil, a certain acedia overtakes us we should climb up a little onto the rock of knowledge and converse with the psalter (cf. Ps 48:5) plucking with the virtues the strings of knowledge: let us again tend our sheep as they pasture below Mount Sinai, so that the God of our fathers may also call to us out of the bush (cf. Exod. 3:1-6) and grant us the logoi of the signs and the wonders (cf. Exod. 7:9, 11:9-10).*³⁰

Evagrius envisages the book of Psalms as a mediating point of 'an oscillating movement from ascetical toil into contemplative knowledge and back again into ascetical practice'.³¹ The Book of Psalms is represented as a rock of knowledge, that is, Christ himself.³² The Book of Psalms is a place of refuge, a comforting resting place that enables us to hear and converse with Father and Son, before the inevitable

²⁴ Heraclides 1 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 72.

²⁵ Heraclides 1 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 72.

²⁶ John the Dwarf, 35 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 92.

²⁷ Athanasius 10 in *Letter to Marcellinus*, 108.

²⁸ Macarius the Great 3 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 126.

²⁹ Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 125.

³⁰ Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer*, 151.

³¹ Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer*, 151.

³² The efficacy of the Psalms lies in part in their ability and capacity to reveal Jesus. Christ's birth, ministry, passion and ascension, his future coming as judge are all found in the Psalms. In his *Letter to Marcellinus*, Athanasius provides an extensive list of the Psalms that recount the person and work of Christ. For example, Psalm 44 'knew Christ himself as the Coming one', while Psalm 86 speaks of Christ's incarnation. Psalm 21 recounts the death of Jesus, and Psalm 87 recounts of the sufferings of Christ. Christ is the exegetical key to the Psalms; and the goal of psalmody is in part an encounter with Jesus. Athanasius 6 in *Letter to Marcellinus*, 105-106.

return to the pasture of asceticism.³³ These images of the Psalms as verdant land echo Athanasius' metaphor of the Psalms as a lush garden.

The book of Psalms played an essential part in the life and understanding of the Desert Fathers. The chanting of the Psalms ordered the prayers and meditations of the monks, both within a collective liturgical context as well as in private devotion. The Psalms provided meaning to the monks' ongoing quest for salvation and holiness: exposing the heart of the monks, but also transforming their emotional landscape; protecting and comforting them during times of struggle and anxiety; and leading them to deeper union with God. While we live in a world vastly different to that of the Desert Fathers, our own experiences of being assailed by external distractions and internal despondency seem all too similar to those experienced by the Fathers. For us in our busy, noisy, self-sufficient society, the examples of the Desert Fathers challenge us to seek healing from the Scriptures, and to allow the Psalms in particular to mould our internal emotional world and personal narrative. The ancient method of meditation on psalmody may yet provide powerful and profound engagement — individually and communally — with God in the midst of barrenness.

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Image credits

St. Athanasius the Confessor of Constantinople. Unknown author. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Righteous Syncletica of Alexandria. Author anonymous. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

³³ Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer*, 152.