

“Beloved, know yourselves”: Theology and Scripture in Antony’s
Life, Letters and Sayings

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“Beloved, know yourselves”: Theology and Scripture in Antony’s
Life, Letters and Sayings
Christopher Snook

A complete text of the seven *Letters* attributed to St. Antony the Great by St. Jerome in 392 was re-discovered in 1955 at St. Catherine’s Monastery, Mt. Sinai. The discovery of the *Letters* fuelled an ongoing debate concerning Antony. Is he in fact the illiterate and pious desert monk of popular imagination, or is he perhaps, as the *Letters* suggest, a much more sophisticated theologian acquainted with the Alexandrian theological tradition?

This thesis argues that St. Antony’s theological thought was both innovative and highly original. It relies upon the figure of Antony represented in the texts most closely associated with his life: the biography by St. Athanasius, the sayings recorded in the *Apophthegmata patrum*, and the *Letters*. Its focus is primarily the theology of the *Letters*, in particular their use of Scripture.

Strikingly, while the *Letters* suggest Antony’s familiarity with Egyptian theology’s Origenian heritage, he nowhere unequivocally cites any patristic sources. His only source is Scripture. Through a consideration of his use of Scripture in Athanasius’ biography and in the sayings, this thesis will uncover Antony’s original use and exegesis of Scripture as it appears in his *Letters*.

I proceed in three parts. First, I consider the texts and contexts informing our knowledge of Antony. Second, I offer a reading of the theology of Antony’s *Letters*. Third, I examine the theology of Scripture that appears in Antony’s biography, sayings and *Letters*.

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I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Anne Snook.

For my entire life she has been an example of the most difficult and yet most liberating Christian truth: love that does not count the cost.

Deo Gratias.

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Introduction:
Self-Knowledge and Contemporary Theology

Claims that it is possible to synthesize the knowledge 'of all things visible and invisible' are largely met with skepticism, if not incredulity and hostility, by many contemporary theologians and philosophers. The roots of this skepticism are twofold. Firstly, the sheer abundance of new historical, scientific and technological knowledge discovered in the last two centuries seemingly defies systematization. Secondly, the twentieth century's wars and atrocities have cast suspicion on all totalizing truth claims. Neither the systems of mediaeval scholasticism nor the idealism of nineteenth-century German philosophy survived the twentieth century unscathed.

The problem of an authentic Christian response to this development partially underlies this thesis on the *Letters* of St. Antony of the Desert. Neither a wholesale rejection of the unity of knowledge seems possible for Christian theology nor its naive affirmation. On one hand, the model by which the theologian explores the question of unity and diversity is the self-revealing Trinity, the one-in-three, which contains in itself the principle of diversity as a principle of unity. On the other hand, we see in a glass darkly, and so our apprehension of the unity of knowledge is limited.

St. Antony's critical concern throughout his *Letters* is self-knowledge and the discernment required for its realization. This concern is not speculative. Rather, as a spiritual father Antony is passionately concerned for the welfare of his disciples. Authentic self-knowledge, the *Letters* argue, is the condition of their salvation. It is acquired through repentance and the disciplined life of discernment in which the conversion proper to both body and soul is discovered.

Time and again Antony reminds his disciples that their spiritual origin consists in a primal unity from which they have fallen and to which they are returned through Christ.

This unity (or community) is the Church and is bound together by mutual self-giving. That is, its members reproduce in their own lives the self-giving of Christ. This is a condition of their knowledge of his love. Humans must become, Antony insists, sacrifices for one another in imitation of Christ's one sacrifice.

According to Antony, self-knowledge consists in knowing oneself according to the pattern of one's creation and redemption. It is here that Antony touches upon the crucial question that underlies this thesis. Antony affirms less the possibility of our articulate knowledge of all things -- he does not offer a system -- than the essential unity of all knowing. This unity is discerned by analogy with the unity of the Godhead, Father, Son and Spirit, and belongs to the human from its origin and is essential to its self-knowledge. That is, humanity is a unity in Christ because it reflects the unity of Christ with the Father and the Spirit. Knowledge is unity, because all that is known has its proper source and unity in the incarnate Logos. Antony argues that the world, knowledge and experience are known in relation to the Divine unity, not vice-versa.

According to Antony, Scripture is the sufficient means to both self-knowledge and the knowledge of Christian doctrine. Accordingly, this thesis is primarily concerned with the status of Scripture in Antony's *Letters*. It approaches this question through an introduction to the texts and contexts of Antony literature, through an analysis of the theology of the *Letters* and through a comparative reading of the uses of Scripture in Antony's sayings, biography and *Letters*. Though the Antony texts do not offer a systematic theology of Scripture, they do affirm unequivocally both Scripture's doctrinal content and its sufficiency as a guide to the virtuous and ascetic life.

Antony's *Letters* are a challenge to contemporary theologies which fail to submit experience to revelation as expressed fundamentally in Scripture. The attempt to

rediscover the principles by which an authentic self-knowledge can be acquired and action in the world effected is supported by the theology of the early and medieval Church. This theology articulates the way to God by reminding us who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. In Antony's words, "...our Lord Jesus Christ is the true mind of the Father, by whom all the fulness of every rational nature is made to the likeness of his image, he himself being the head of all creatures and the body of the Church."¹ If taken seriously, the ramifications of this claim are infinite, as are its hope and promise (and so too its terrors). The suspension of any real engagement with this doctrine in favour of a vaguely 'incarnational' theology has in many cases simply resulted in a polemic of self-affirmation neither sufficiently aware of human culpability for sin nor of the true glory belonging to human beings.

In a different context, and some five hundred years after Antony's death, John Scotus Eriugena suggested an interpretation of Adam's naming of the animals which explains the relationship between human knowledge and the human image of Christ:

The Nourishing Teacher in Eriugena's book asks: 'Does it seem to you that there is a kind of concept in man of all the sensible and intelligible things the human mind can understand?'

The answer comes back from the well taught Disciple:

'This clearly seems to be true: and indeed the essence of man is understood principally to consist in this: that it has been given to him to possess the concept of all things which were either created his equals or which he was instructed to

¹ St. Antony, *Letters*, 6.85. All citations of *Letters* taken from the translation appended to Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Studies in Antiquity and Christianity; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) and hereafter cited as *Letters*.

govern. For how could man be given the dominion of things of which he had not the concept? For his dominion over them would go astray if he did not know the things which he was to rule. Holy Scripture gives us a clear indication of this when it says: 'Therefore, having formed out of the earth every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens, the Lord God brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living soul that is its name.' It says 'to see,' that is, to understand what he would call them. For if the man did not rightly *understand*, how would he be able to *call* them rightly? But what he called anything that is its name, that is, it is the very notion of the living soul.²

Wayne Hankey comments :

For Eriugena, humanity can know and name the animals because the human mind is the image of the true Image. The whole visible creation is *in* the eternal Word. In him is the whole plan, purpose, and counsel of God, the forms and paradigms of the things which God creates by his Son. Because we are images of the Image, what is *in God* is also *in us*. Because we are images of the Image, what is in God the eternal creative Word is also in us. This is why we can be co-creators with God.

Eriugena calls humanity "the workshop of all things." That is our great dignity. However, everything which is wonderful about us is also fearful. Together with our immense dignity, goes the other side: we cannot know ourselves or exist, body

² Eriugena, *Periphyseon* IV.6, PL 768D. Cited in Wayne J. Hankey, *Pantocrator, the Cosmic Christ: A Christian Theology of Nature* (Charlottetown: St. Peter Publications, 2005), 20.

or soul, apart from the universe of life. We are as much in these living beings, as they are in us. When, by the true Image imaged in us, we named the beasts, we went out into them. When we destroy that universe of life, we not only destroy the conditions of our *bodily* life, we also destroy what is essential to our properly *human* life. We destroy the possibility of self-knowledge. We destroy ourselves body and soul. We darken the image of God in us so that we can see neither the world, nor ourselves, nor God. Terrible words, even more terrible reality.³

This is an example, I suggest, of the real possibilities a rediscovery of the image-theology of the early Church offers to contemporary attempts to position human beings responsibly and freely in the world. It offers both self-knowledge and knowledge of the world as dependent in the first instance on humanity's origin in God. It is, I would suggest, the only means by which an appropriately rigorous self-examination, both individually and corporately, is possible which might illuminate the real dangers a culture of excess poses for the world and the soul.

The self-knowledge to which Antony exhorts his disciples is close to this vision. It consists in a knowledge of humanity's true origin as image and is impeded by the real sin which afflicted the communities under his care. As with Erigena, so too for Antony, the way to this knowledge is through Scripture read with the Spirit's guidance.

Though largely expository in character, this thesis is an attempt to lay the groundwork for a much more in-depth consideration of the larger questions pointed to in this introduction: the content of Christian self-knowledge, its meaning for Christian living, and the possibility of a rediscovery of Christian asceticism.

³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

Chapter 1 The Antony Corpus: Texts and Contexts

I.1 *Introduction*

That scholarly accounts of St. Antony the Great's life and spirituality vary considerably is no surprise. While consensus agrees that Antony was a late-third-century monastic pioneer living in the wilderness of the Egyptian desert, it also suggests that the variety of texts which witness to his life and teachings each reflect not identical, but rather slightly different, Antony's. The famous *Life of St. Antony* by St. Athanasius, the sayings recorded in the *Apophthegmata patrum* and the *Letters* of Antony, each reflect, if not different Antony's, than at least strikingly different aspects of the anchorite's life. From the Athanasian spiritual warrior, to the humble desert holy man, to the teacher of Christian *gnosis* found in the *Letters*, the figure of Antony has been the subject of substantial scholarly interest and perplexity in recent decades, which has seen various scholars champion the authenticity of one or other picture of Antony.

The scholarly debates are reasonable. The history of Christianity in ancient Egypt is largely opaque, especially prior to the establishment of a strong and influential

Alexandrian episcopacy towards the end of the second century of the common era.⁴ This, coupled with the most fundamental biographical detail of Antony's life -- that he went into the desert to be alone -- make access to him and to his cultural history difficult. The anonymous prologue to the alphabetical collection of the desert fathers' sayings points to this difficulty explicitly:

You must understand that the holy fathers who were the initiators and masters of the blessed monastic way of life, being entirely on fire with divine and heavenly love and counting as nothing all that men hold to be beautiful and estimable, trained themselves here below to do nothing whatever out of vainglory. They hid themselves away, and by their supreme humility in keeping most of their good works hidden, they made progress on the way that leads to God. Moreover, no one has been able to describe their virtuous lives for us in detail, for those who have taken the greatest pains in this matter have only committed to writing a few fragments of their best words and actions.⁵

The tension between the hidden works of the desert monks (which scholars cannot assess) and the "fragments of their best words and actions" (which they can), attests to the difficulties inherent in the study of early Egyptian Christianity.

⁴ See Wilfrid C. Griggs, *Earliest Christianity in Egypt: from its Origins to 451 C.E.* (Coptic Studies 2; New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), 45. It should be noted that Griggs' history, while wide-ranging, suffers from the attempt to identify earliest Christianity in Egypt unequivocally with heterodoxy, despite itself recognizing the paucity of documentary evidence for such a claim. While it seems clear that prior to the doctrinal definitions of the fourth century Councils Egyptian Christianity drew widely on canonical and non-canonical sources, the suggestions of its gnostic heterodoxy have largely been dismissed. For this view see, for example, A.F.J. Klijn's "Jewish Christianity in Egypt" in Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring, ed., *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 161-175.

⁵ Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (London: A.R. Mowbray Co. Ltd), xviii.

However, the picture of Christianity in Egypt has acquired greater clarity in recent decades. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi library and numerous papyri fragments have highlighted the diversity and complexity of early Egyptian religious life and the dangers of too quickly identifying texts with either a gnostic or orthodox world-view.⁶ Coincident with these discoveries is the profoundly significant development in Antony studies occasioned by the publication in 1955 of the *Seven Letters of St. Antony* ascribed to him by St. Jerome in 392 C.E. and rediscovered in St. Catherine's Monastery, Mt. Sinai.⁷ These letters have led to a re-evaluation of the popular picture of Antony as a pious hermit neither theologically adept nor intellectually subtle. Though this vision of Antony is not at all substantiated by the extant texts relating to his life (for example, in the *Life of St Antony* he has a rigorously sophisticated conversation with non-Christian philosophers and in the *Apophthegmata patrum* he demonstrates his remarkable gift for the discernment of spirits) it has nonetheless co-opted the popular imagination. The *Letters*, however, counter this oversimplification. Through a unique and theologically rigorous anthropology and ascetic theology articulated within a framework and language resonate with the Origenist tradition (and, perhaps, with even older Egyptian traditions), the *Letters* offer a picture of a sophisticated and nuanced theologian.⁸ With the publication of Antony's *Letters*, an image is emerging less of an unlettered hermit than of

⁶ The distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the fourth century requires careful consideration. In this thesis I juxtapose the orthodox and the heterodox primarily with reference to the theologians that come to be viewed as expositors of each position. During the fourth century the articulation of these positions was fraught even in the minds of orthodox theologians. So, for example, Athanasius struggled for years with the term *homousios* in the definition of Christ's relationship to the Father because it is not found in Scripture.

⁷ See Jerome, *De viris illustribus* (Leipzig: E.C. Richardson, 1896), 88.

⁸ For the suggestion that Antony reflects older traditions than the Origenian, see Charles Kannengiesser, "Origen's Doctrine Transmitted by Antony the Hermit and Athanasius of Alexandria," in *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition. Papers of the 8th International Origen Congress* (Leuven: University Press, 2003), 889-899.

a unique theological mind, able to bring to bear a complex theological anthropology on concrete and specific issues of spiritual discernment.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the discussion of Antony's theology in the wake of its re-evaluation subsequent to the *Letter's* discovery. Few treatments of the Antony corpus have been undertaken which compare and contrast the various texts by and about Antony. This investigation is primarily concerned with the *Letters*, but it will discuss the *Life* and the sayings as well. While aspects of Antony's *Letters* resonate with the general themes of third- and fourth-century Egyptian theology, by far their most interesting feature is their use of Scripture. Not only is Scripture the only text cited in the *Letters*, but their most striking arguments (Antony's account of a sacred history, his anthropology and his theology of sanctification) are entirely produced from a unique reading of the Bible. While most scholarly work on the *Letters* has examined their indebtedness to the Alexandrian tradition, this thesis seeks to extend this research to a consideration of Antony's method of Scriptural exegesis. It is with respect to their use of Scripture that the *Life* and the sayings will be examined. It is in the matrix of the approaches to Scripture found in the Antony corpus as a whole that Antony's use of Scripture in the *Letters* can be best approached. In so doing, I hope that new avenues of exploration will appear relevant to the question of Scripture and desert monasticism.

As Charles Kannengiesser has noted, the critical philological work relating to the Antony corpus has largely been secured. There is a need in Antony scholarship to move beyond philological concerns towards a greater understanding of Antony's theological witness. This project hopes to contribute to ongoing scholarship which seeks to cast light on the peculiar genius of the Desert Christians of the fourth century and, through a clearer appreciation of them, to gain a new perspective on contemporary theological

questions. For example, the desert monks may contribute to the repositioning of Christian anthropology (and its concomitant ascetic theology) at the centre of contemporary theological reflection. This has begun to be creatively pursued by Orthodox theologians such as Olivier Clement and Paul Evdokimov.⁹ As well, the Fathers' understanding of Scripture can contribute to contemporary uncertainties about the nature and status of Scripture. Their assertion of its Trinitarian ontology and doctrinal content resonates with work being pursued by, among others, Telford Work.¹⁰

This thesis will proceed in three chapters. The remainder of chapter one will offer an overview of the texts of the Antony corpus and their historical contexts. Chapter two will consider the theological anthropology of the *Letters*. Chapter three will explore Antony's use of Scripture in the sayings, *Life* and *Letters*.

I.2 *The Desert*

Like its contemporary expressions in Syria and Palestine, the history of monasticism in Egypt is marked by its geography. The desert was the common location for the ascetic practice of Christian virtue for thousands of men and women throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East. In Egypt, popular tradition associated the advent of desert *ascesis* with St. Antony, whose progressive journey into the desert is recounted in Athanasius' *Life*. As various sources attest, for Antony and others the desert was a geographical reality imbued with spiritual significance:

...for the the Egyptian monks of the fourth century, the desert *was* a geographical

⁹ See, for example, Olivier Clement's *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology* (New York: New City Press, 2000) and Paul Evdokimov's *Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984).

¹⁰ See Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

reality -- both in place and in memory. In place because of where they lived: outside of the immediate area watered by the Nile lies desert. In memory because the sacred scriptures of the monks told them that the people of Israel had wandered in the desert; Elijah, Elisha, and John the Baptist had prophesied in the desert; their Lord and Saviour after his baptism had been driven by the Spirit into the desert.¹¹

The desert geographies navigated by the early monks, then, were both interior and exterior, the latter functioning as an image not simply of spiritual desolation, but rather as the locus of spiritual trial and transformation by which every monk participated in a long history of desert spirituality. In a letter attributed to Antony's disciple, Ammonas, this theme of trial and transformation is discussed. He understands desert asceticism as an attempt to see clearly the soul's antagonists and to conquer them through spiritual combat:

You also know, my dear brethren, that ever since the transgression came to pass, the soul cannot know God unless it withdraws itself from men and from every distraction. For then the soul will see the adversary who fights against it. And once it has seen the adversary, and has overcome him everytime he engages it in battle, then God dwells in that soul, and all the labour is changed to joy and gladness... This is why the holy fathers also withdrew into the desert alone, men such as Elijah the Tishbite and John the Baptist.¹²

¹¹ Tim Vivien, "Mountain and Desert: The Geographies of Early Coptic Monasticism," *Coptic Church Review* 12 (1991): 15-21 at 15.

¹² *The Letter to Ammonas, Successor of St Antony* (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 1979), Ep. 12.

Ammonas goes on to suggest that the victory of the desert monks is not theirs alone, but is a training in spiritual perfection meant to equip them with the skills of spiritual physicians. In imitation of Jesus they are to minister to their fellow Christians, “For as the Father sent His very Son,” writes Ammonas, “to heal all the infirmities and sicknesses of men... thus all the saints who come among men to heal them follow the example of the Creator of all...”¹³

St. Antony’s life embodies the pattern of withdrawal and return suggested in Ammonas’ account of desert monasticism. The son of a well-to-do Egyptian family, Antony left his home in search of spiritual perfection, settling first on the outskirts of his town and then moving progressively deeper into the desert. He journeyed to Alexandria early in the fourth century, on one occasion to comfort Christians suffering under the Diocletian persecution and in another instance to show his support of Athanasius in the Arian controversy. After each of these urban visits, he returned to his desert home. There, a group of monks gathered around his retreat and became his disciples in the ascetic life. Spiritual seekers of all sorts wrote and visited him often.

The advent of the monasticism of the late third and fourth centuries has been the subject of substantial scholarly investigation. For a time popular prejudice argued that Antony was the founder of the eremitic monastic life, largely under the influence of Athanasius’ biography. Strikingly, however, the biography does not suggest that Antony’s devotion to the ascetic way was novel. It says that he followed the examples of old men in his vicinity who had consecrated themselves to lives of renunciation. Neither is it clear that he was the first Christian to enter the desert, as the biography

¹³ *Ibid.*, Ep. 12.

indeed suggests.¹⁴ Rather, desert incursions of individuals or groups of Christians likely preceded Antony, though the order and stability given to the monastic vocation through his witness and through the labours of his younger contemporaries such as Pachomius and Macarius the Great constitute substantial developments of the monastic life (the establishment of the *lavra* is associated with Macarius and cenobitic monasticism with Pachomius).

The impetus behind desert monasticism has been variously explained. As the letter of Ammonas shows clearly, in the first instance desert asceticism has a Scriptural precedent. Antony himself attests this in the *Life*: “And he used to say to himself that the life led by the great Elias should serve the ascetic as a mirror in which always to study his own life.”¹⁵ It is the continuity of Egyptian monasticism with earlier ascetic traditions that has attracted the attention of recent research. The simple explanation of monastic origins has given way to a complex picture which notes the preponderance of ascetic lifestyles circulating in the ancient world in late antiquity. Manichean and gnostic forms of the ascetic life, the spiritual disciplines of the philosophic schools, and the asceticism articulated in early Christian texts (the *Shepherd of Hermas*, for example) and then forcibly experienced during the eras of persecution, prepared the way for the monastic experiments of the fourth century, including Antony’s.

General accounts of the origin of the Christian monastic life suggest that it arises with the

transformation of the eschatological communion of saints brought on by the delay

¹⁴ Meyer, Robert T, trans., *Athanasius: The Life of Saint Anthony*, ACW 10 (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1950), 3. Hereafter cited as *Life*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

of the second coming of Christ and the increasing success of Christianity. In the second and third centuries, before the conversion of the emperor Constantine, martyrdom was the ultimate expression of Christian commitment. The martyr chose death rather than conformity to the Roman way of life. With the peace that ensued in the fourth century and the concomitant influx of new members, Christians began to conform to the ways of the world. In this new environment, the monastic life developed in part as a statement against this growing conformity. The monk replaced the martyr as Christian hero, as the one who chose to die to a secular life.¹⁶

This reading of monasticism as protest and as eschatological readjustment is helpful, though it does not exhaust its complicated history. For example, eschatological Christian hopes are still powerfully present in early monastic literature as they were in the apocalyptic texts produced throughout the second and third centuries (Antony himself has an apocalyptic vision patterned on the book of Daniel in the *Life*). But this reading does offer the movement's broad outlines.

For an understanding of specifically Egyptian monasticism these outlines must be made still more specific and it is to this endeavour that I will now turn. The monastic literature of the fourth and fifth centuries is the best guide to the development of Christianity in Egypt and its bearing on the Antony corpus. In the following reflections I will examine the period's dominant themes offering brief comments on the historical and cultural issues surrounding the Antony corpus while introducing the textual histories of this corpus: the *Apophthegmata*, the *Letters* and the *Life*. Each text provides a window

¹⁶ James E. Goerhing, "Monasticism" in Everett Ferguson *et al.*, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 613.

on relevant historical and theological themes which will aid the readings offered in chapters two and three.

I will begin with the sayings and the characteristics of Egyptian Christian asceticism; secondly, I will discuss the *Letters* and the Egyptian cultural and intellectual traditions to which they are indebted; and finally, I will conclude with a consideration of the *Life* and the theological controversies of the fourth century.

I.3 *The Apophthegmata patrum and Asceticism*

The *Apophthegmata Patrum*, or “sayings of the fathers”, are arguably the “single most important source for our knowledge of the monasticism of the fourth- and fifth-century” in Egypt.¹⁷ Though they include sayings of Cappadocians such as Basil the Great, the collections of sayings attributed to the pioneers of desert asceticism are largely and strikingly confined to monks of the Egyptian desert and offer an invaluable insight into the character of early Christian *ascesis* and spiritual direction.

The sayings are largely extant in two versions, the alphabetical and systematic collections. In the former the sayings are collected alphabetically (following the Greek alphabet) under the name of the monk to whom they are attributed or to whom they primarily refer. Appended to this collection is a series of anonymous sayings. The systematic collections group the sayings thematically. In the Greek systematic collection, for example, headings include: “Concerning peace to be pursued with all eagerness”, “Concerning compunction” and “Concerning unceasing prayer.”¹⁸ Collections

¹⁷ Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 4.

¹⁸ For a list of chapter titles in the various systematic collections see Appendix 8.1 in William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See chapter six of the same text for a brief introduction to the *Apophthegmata* texts and contexts.

of the sayings appear in numerous languages. In addition to the Greek text, which is itself most likely based on a Coptic tradition, there are Georgian, Ethiopic, Syriac and Armenian collections. These collections show variations and the history of text-transmission is complicated. However, a lineage and history is clearly discernible. For the purposes of this study, I will only consider the history of the alphabetical collection, which begins with thirty-eight sayings of St. Antony.

The most exhaustive recent work in the study of *Apophthegmata* history has been undertaken by Graham Gould and builds upon the work of, among others, André Louf, Derwas Chitty and Philip Rousseau. In his seminal *The Desert a City*, Chitty characterized the sayings as “pedigree stories: ‘Abba Peter said that Abba Abraham said that Abba Agathon said...’ and so on.”¹⁹ This account of the transmission of the sayings roots them firmly in an oral tradition consciously structured and legitimated through an authoritative lineage. This lineage ensures not only the sayings’ reliability, but also preserves the teachings of a particular period of ascetic history. Sayings are authentic and reliable by virtue of their pedigree, which also serves to connect the latter-day auditor or lector spiritually and pastorally with the tradition. In the history of the sayings’ transmission these pedigree “tags” are ubiquitous in the most primitive collections and, in their retelling, the tags were often dropped but without a change in the content of the saying.²⁰

Graham Gould argues persuasively that the alphabetical collection is intentionally “Scetiotic and pre-Chalcedonian [in] character”.²¹ The texts are “Scetiotic” inasmuch as they belong primarily to monastics living in relative proximity to the Scetis foundation.

¹⁹ Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966) 68.

²⁰ See Gould, 17-25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

Moreover, the sayings' primarily Scetiotite-monastic origin and orientation are also suggested by their focus on Abba/disciple relationships rather than monk/lay person, by the absence of references to Pachomian monasticism, and by the self-conscious critique of contemporary monasticism in sayings which reference the purity of earlier generations (thereby suggesting participation in a common monastic endeavour).²² According to Gould, these sayings are "pre-Chalcedonian" because they contain almost no mention of monastics living after the Council's Christological definition which significantly divided the Egyptian Christian community. The collection was most likely compiled in Egypt by monks who fled Scetis in the wake of barbarian incursions early in the fifth century. Sources for the sayings include a collection left among the works of Isaiah of Scetis who died in Palestine in the late fifth century. Of this collection, Gould notes that there "can be no doubt [that it] was among the sources used by the compiler of the alphabetical collection".²³

The usefulness of the sayings in the examination of fourth-century monastic history has been called into question by scholars in part concerned that the compilation of the text after Origen's condemnation in 399 would have purged sayings betraying Origenist overtones. The apparent Origenism of Antony's *Letters*, for example, suggests to Samuel Rubenson that at the least Antony's sayings have been purged of their speculative and Alexandrian theological heritage. However, the literary character of the sayings and their purpose as guides to the ascetic life suggest that speculative theology was simply not within the texts' purview, but rather practical advice on the ascetic life. Significantly, the sayings contain no denunciations of Origenism which might be expected

²² *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 10.

if they were indeed edited in light of the Origenist controversy.²⁴ It should also be added that the sayings are in fact deceptively simple. Though often practical, their gnomic quality resists easy reduction to plain common sense. Arguably, they contain more of the speculative and mystical than often allowed.

The sayings' genre has a lineage. The *apophthegmata* are short instructions intended in the first instance to answer the needs of particular monks. In their transmission they became words for meditation and repetition as an aid to the development of virtue and an increase in zeal. In some sense the *apophthegmata* belong to the genre of Wisdom literature of the ancient Near East, which includes the wisdom books of the Bible such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, but also texts such as the *Sentences of Sextus* and the *Teachings of Silvanus*.²⁵ As Pierre Hadot demonstrates, both these texts and the *apophthegmata* recollect the traditions of ancient philosophy exemplified in the writings of Diogenes Laertius, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, and Porphyry's *Sentences*.²⁶ These texts were aids to meditation by which individuals became attentive to themselves. This attention is not simply a moral awareness, but rather a recollection of oneself and of God accompanied by, in the case of Christianity, remembrance of the commandments and the evangelical counsels (which are themselves "*apophthegmatic*" in character).²⁷ Monks then navigate their experiences with the aid of these wisdom texts:

²⁴ See Graham Gould, "Recent Work on Monastic Origins: A Consideration of Questions Raised by Samuel Rubenson's *The Letters of St. Antony*," *Studia Patristica* 25 (1993): 414.

²⁵ See Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 82. On the indebtedness of monastic literature to "Greek and Late Egyptian wisdom texts", see Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Studies in Antiquity and Christianity; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 113.

²⁶ Pierre Hadot, "Ancient Spiritual Exercises and 'Christian Philosophy'" in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 133.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

In the spiritual life, there is a kind of conspiracy between, on the one hand, normative sayings, which are memorized and meditated upon, and, on the other, the events which provide the occasion for putting them into practice. Dorotheus of Gaza promised his monks that, if they constantly meditated on the ‘works of the holy Elders,’ they would ‘be able to profit from everything that happens to you, and to make progress by the help of God.’ Dorotheus no doubt meant that after such meditation, his monks would be able to recognize the will of God in all events, thanks to the words of the Fathers, which were likewise inspired by the will of God.²⁸

The sayings, then, were critical for monks’ ability to make their experience legible. Prayer, Scripture, the Liturgy and the sayings constituted a matrix within which monks discerned God’s activity in their own lives.

The men and women who ventured into the desert and both authored and followed the *Apophthegmata* sayings were responding to a social crisis in late antique Egypt occasioned in part by the redistribution of power to local towns under Roman rule. The extension of power and responsibility from Alexandria to towns and their councils, itself a positive development, carried with it increased financial burdens for townspeople expected to fund public works.²⁹ The term which comes to be associated in later tradition primarily with eremitic monasticism, *anachoresis*, was first used to describe the illegal withdrawal (or *anachoresis*) of townspeople from their properties in the attempt to avoid public works fees far in excess of their means to pay: “men,” writes Chitty,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁹ See Brown, chapters one and four.

“sometimes whole communities [withdrew] into deserts or swamps to escape from the intolerable burden of taxation and the public liturgies.”³⁰ These instances of illegal withdrawal were part of the culture that witnessed the rise of Christian desert asceticism, which likely began in response to persecutions. With their conclusion under Constantine, the desert became a means of renunciation equal to, if different from, that of the martyrs.³¹ Strikingly, Antony’s *Life* itself recounts precisely this dynamic in his own life when, after going to Alexandria to aid those suffering persecution, he fails to find martyrdom and instead “went back to his solitary cell; and there he was a daily martyr to his conscience, ever fighting the battles of the Faith.”³²

In chapter three Antony’s sayings will be considered in greater detail. I will now offer a brief introduction to the *Letters* of Antony and their theological context, followed by an introduction to the *Life* and the doctrinal conflicts it witnesses.

I.4 *The Letters of St. Antony: Text and Theological Context*

Just as the *Apophthegmata patrum* are both illustrative of a peculiarly Christian ascetic theology and are suggestive of the wider ascetic discourse of late antiquity, so too Antony’s *Seven Letters* provide a unique theology while witnessing to the period’s broad and wide-ranging theological discussions. The polyglot character of religious life in third and fourth-century Egypt has been well-documented. Manicheism, Gnosticism, hybrid hermetic religions and various brands of Christian gnosticism as well as Orthodoxy coexisted. Christian orthodoxy itself was in its formative stages and its development and defence in Egypt was largely coincident with the growing authority of the Alexandrian

³⁰ Chitty, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³² *Life*, 47.

Patriarchate. As mentioned above, though scholarly descriptions of early Egyptian Christianity as determinedly heterodox have been largely rebuffed, there is no question that the formation of Egyptian Christianity was predicated on a “broadly-based literary tradition” which included significantly influential apocryphal and non-canonical texts.³³ While no certain identification can be established between the Nag Hammadi codices and the Pachomian monastery in sight of which they were discovered, their proximity is suggestive of the (literal) proximity of apparently diverse theological traditions. Athanasius’ festal letter which identified canonical texts and censured the reading of apocryphal ones provides evidence of the diverse literature in circulation among, at the least, monastics.

Within this world St. Antony’s *Seven Letters* were produced.³⁴ The significance of their re-discovery and publication is in large part still being ascertained. With the publication of Samuel Rubenson’s *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint*, first in 1990 and then again in 1995, the scholarly work to date was largely synthesized and the *Letters* given their first monograph-length consideration. Rubenson’s conclusions will be examined in detail in the coming chapters. It is enough to say by way

³³ Griggs, 34.

³⁴ The *Letters* are extant in Coptic, Syriac, Georgian, Latin and Arabic versions or fragments. Rubenson has established a stemma relating the variant texts which shows convincingly that the Georgian manuscript is the most reliable text:

...even if the Arabic and Latin versions are translations of texts closer to the original than the Georgian and the Syriac versions, this does not make them more reliable. The Arabic version is a very free translation and the Latin is often confused, probably due to a poor source. Although the Syriac version of Letter I is not only the one preserved in the oldest extant manuscripts, but, no doubt, the oldest preserved translation, it does not present the most reliable text. In a number of passages and in important expressions the accord between the three other versions shows that the Syriac translator was less accurate than has been supposed. Except for the parts preserved in Coptic, the best witness to the original text is no doubt the Georgian version. Only when at least two of the other versions agree against the Georgian should we be obliged to reject its readings. Rubenson, 34.

For a full account of the variant text-types and their stemma see the entirety of Part I, chapter one of Rubenson’s discussion.

of introduction that he reflects the general consensus that the *Letters* betray a sophisticated and broadly Origenist theology in which the “actualized mystery of salvation is entirely embodied in the ascetic experiment of which [Antony] stresses the universal and ecclesial dimensions.”³⁵

Though there are clear thematic continuities between the *Letters* and Origen, Antony’s indebtedness requires critical evaluation. As we have seen, the literary traditions circulating in late antiquity in Egypt were manifold. If Antony betrays resonances of Origenian teaching, he also shows signs of an affinity with Athanasius and potentially to Nag Hammadi texts such as *The Teachings of Silvanus*. In fact, it may be that the Athanasian re-evaluation of the Alexandrian speculative theological tradition was more determinate for Antony (if not perhaps indebted to him) than was Origen.³⁶

Athanasius’

spirituality turned away from the Alexandrian tradition of intellectual contemplation of God without directly repudiating that tradition. It did so by defining the Christian life in ascetic terms: as the restored governance of the body and its passions by the rational soul...³⁷

Echoes of precisely this ascetic theology and soteriology appear throughout the *Life* and

³⁵ Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, vol. 2. (Boston, Mass.: E.J. Brill, 2004), 1460. On the *Letters*’ Origenian heritage see, for example, Rubenson chapter 4. For other developments of this consensus see Pamela Bright, “The Combat with the Demons: The Letters of Anthony and the Origenian Heritage,” *Origeniana Septima* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1998), Charles Kannengiesser, “Antony, Athanasius, Evagrius: The Egyptian Fate of Origenism,” *Coptic Church Review* 16, no.1 (1995): 3-8 and J. Roldanus, “Origene, Antoine et Athanase: leur interconnexion dans la *Vie* et les *Lettres*,” *Studia Patristica* 26 (1993): 389-414.

³⁶ For this argument, see Kannengiesser “Antony, Athanasius, Evagrius” .

³⁷ David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 160.

the *Letters*. However, as Charles Kannengiesser notes, Antony's

real connection with the Origenian and Athanasian legacies is difficult to retrace with precision. In particular, in relation to Origen, much of what has been called "Origenist" in Antony's seven authentic letters offers more of a resemblance with Origenian teaching than a clear proof of dependence. The hermit seems to witness Egyptian traditions broader, if not older, than Origen himself. Antony's attention on what he considered to be the actual process of salvation experienced by him in the solitude brought him more into the vicinity of the thought of Athanasius than Origen. At least provisionally, I would be cautious in regard to the extent of Origenism in Antony's spirituality.³⁸

The tension between Antony's connection with the "Origenian and Athanasian legacies" in part derives from Antony's life itself. Antony's theology straddles two centuries and two periods of Egyptian theology and reflects the theological concerns of two generations. As Pamela Bright notes, Antony stands at the crossroads of the Alexandrian theological tradition. His *Letters* powerfully reflect this and resonate with the tradition in its entirety: "Antony's *Letters* reflect the gnosis soteriology of the Alexandrian tradition, that is, a soteriology that insists on the importance of 'knowing' one's true nature and origin in order to return to recover this true nature."³⁹ Bright continues by noting the *Letters*' explicit points of contact with Origen (the emphasis on

³⁸ Charles Kannengiesser, "Origen's Doctrine Transmitted by Antony the Hermit and Athanasius of Alexandria," in *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition. Papers of the 8th International Origen Congress* (Leuven: University Press, 2003), 889-899 at 889.

³⁹ Pamela Bright, "The Church as 'The House of Truth' in the Letters of Antony of Egypt," in *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition. Papers of the 8th International Origen Congress* (Leuven: University Press, 2003), 977-986 at 980.

the fall from primal unity and the subsequent spiritual struggle), with Clement (the emphasis on gnosis and adoptive sonship), and the new key they strike with respect to their emphasis on Christ's *kenosis*.⁴⁰

The difference between third and early fourth century Egyptian theology is largely the result of a shift in theological fundamentals. The ancient Platonic principle that "like-knows-like" (which assumed for Plato the ontological identity between the highest part of the human soul and the divine), gives way in Christianity to the ontological distinction between Creator and creation. This distinction gains increasing significance in the early Christian centuries. In the Alexandrian tradition, Origen and Clement emphasize less this ontological distinction (even though it is clearly asserted in the first book of Origen's *Peri Archon*) than an affinity or identity between the spiritual mind and its spiritual Creator. What stands opposite both is matter (this is not to say, however, that either Clement or Origen were Gnostic). In the fourth century the increasing importance of the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* and the Arian crisis occasioned a shift, as Andrew Louth notes, of theology's ontological fundamentals. No longer is the operative theological distinction primarily spiritual/material. It becomes Creator/creation. This is explicitly the case in the work of Athanasius and it clearly informs the fourth century's Christological debates. These debates revolve in part around Christ's status as either uncreated and so ontologically of the same substance as the Father (*homousios*), or created and therefore, at best, of like substance (*homoiousios*).

As Athanasius' theology demonstrates, the strong assertion of ontological difference between the human and the divine necessitates a mediator who can reveal the Father in order to bridge the ontological divide. Athanasius writes in *On the Incarnation*:

"...he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible

⁴⁰ For these observations, consult Bright's article in its entirety.

Father.”⁴¹ Because there is no kinship between the soul and God, “man can only know God if God comes to him, comes down into the realm of corruption and death that man inhabits. And this he does in the Incarnation.”⁴²

The emphasis throughout the *Letters* on the *kenosis* of Christ resonates with the same kenotic emphasis in Athanasius’ theology. This emphasis itself results from the centrality of the ontological distinction between God and humans critical to fourth century orthodoxy, which asserts the necessary self-emptying of God in the incarnation as the essential means of redemption.

Significantly, however, regardless of Antony’s debts to other theologians, far and away the most dominant literary references permeating the *Letters* are Scriptural. Moreover, his Scriptural sources never vary from the list of approved Scriptural texts outlined by Athanasius. This is interesting because it differentiates his *Letters* from other fourth century monastic literature which is often replete with apocryphal references.⁴³ This may also suggest Antony’s affinity with Athanasius, even his possible influence on Antony late in the hermits life. Given the primacy of Scripture in Antony’s *Letters*, an investigation of his use of Scripture is the most justifiable and useful strategy in their investigation. His exegesis of Scripture, his breadth of sources and his repetition of passages are the most revealing features of his theology. These issues form the substance of chapter three.

Broadly speaking the *Letters* are a series of reflections on the history of

⁴¹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.

⁴² Andrew Louth, *Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 75.

⁴³ Cf. the “Letters of Antony’s disciple and successor, Ammonas.” Kannengiesser, *Handbook*, 1461.

redemption culminating in Christ's redemption of humanity's "intellectual substance". This victory is appropriated through true self-knowledge, which involves knowledge of humanity's Fall (and subsequent need for redemption) and knowledge of redemption through Christ. This knowledge leads to repentance and the ascetic life. The ascetic life, guided by the Spirit, leads Christians from obedience to the Law by which they are purified to the freedom of adoption, by which they become Christ's friends, siblings and fellow-heirs. The *Letters* accompany these general themes with an emphasis on spiritual discernment, a condemnation of Arius, and a lengthy discussion of the deceptions of demons.

Stylistically, the *Letters* are similar to St. Paul's Epistles. Rubenson notes five points which suggest that they are consciously modelled upon them: half of the biblical quotations are Pauline; the beginning and end of each Letter parallels Pauline custom; like Paul, the *Letters* interweave Christological, soteriological and Pneumatological passages; Antony appropriates Pauline terms; and his exhortations, like Paul's, are predicated upon personal experience.⁴⁴ As suggested above, the *Letters* also bear resemblance to texts such as the *Teachings of Silvanus*, which emphasize self-examination, the conflict with evil powers and the importance of asceticism.⁴⁵

The theological controversies of the fourth century which form the background of Antony's *Letters* receive explicit treatment in the *Life* by St. Athanasius. It is these conflicts and the textual history of the *Life* which constitute the final section of this chapter and the requisite introduction to the texts and contexts of the Antony corpus.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

⁴⁵ See *Ibid.*, 49.

I.5 *The Life of St. Antony: Texts and Context*

William Harmless suggests that the three distinguishing features of third and fourth century Egyptian Christianity are its erudite theology, its fierce local divisions, and the Alexandrian patriarchate.⁴⁶ St. Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony* bears witness to these three features. In the first instance, it is written by, arguably, the most significant Alexandrian theologian of the fourth century who worked within and creatively re-evaluated the tradition of Alexandrian erudition. In the second case, this theologian was also the patriarch of Alexandria for the entire middle decades of the century, from 328 to 373.⁴⁷ Athanasius' intellectual and pastoral gifts, combined both with the length and the vicissitudes of his episcopacy, ensured his enormous influence on the direction of Egyptian orthodoxy. Finally, the fierce local divisions of the Egyptian Church (due to the Melitian schism, gnosticism and, especially, Arianism), were precisely the focus of a great deal of Athanasius' pastoral and intellectual labour. The circumstances of the *Life's* production themselves attest to the extremity of ecclesiastical divisions. It was written while Athanasius was in exile due to the Arian controversy (he was hiding, in fact, with monks in the desert). These three features of Egyptian Christianity all appear in the *Life*. Antony, for example, shows his support for Athanasius and his submission to the clergy (the Patriarchate), he censures schismatics (local divisions), and he offers profoundly erudite counsel to the monks and disputes learnedly with philosophers (theology).

There are many and varied readings of the *Life*. Written by Athanasius in response to a request from monks for an account of Antony's life, Athanasius presents him as a model of the Christian ideal whose sanctification follows a discernible pattern:

⁴⁶ See Harmless, chapters one and two.

⁴⁷ Athanasius' episcopacy was, however, interrupted by two substantial periods of exile between 339-345 and 357-361.

“first there is the inner conflict with his own thoughts, then the stage of demonic onslaught from without, then the victorious growth, in which the wonder-working stage of perfect faith gradually gives place to the calm of perfect knowledge...”⁴⁸ Scholars dispute the extent to which Athanasius re-imagines Antony in the *Life* in order to reflect his own pastoral and theological pre-occupations. As Fumihiko Takeda has demonstrated, the Syriac version of the *Life*, for example, contains its own monastic theology at times at variance with the Athanasian and Hellenised theology of the Greek version.⁴⁹ T.D. Barnes has gone further, arguing that there are two versions of the *Life*, a Syriac translation of a lost Coptic original and its Greek reworking. The latter, he suggests, is not the work of Athanasius. Andrew Louth has provisionally accepted Barnes’ claim that a Coptic *Life* likely preceded the Greek, but shows convincingly (and in keeping with the general consensus) that the Greek *Life* is far too imbued with Athanasius’ theological language and concerns not to have been produced by him.⁵⁰

There are two easily identifiable Athanasian concerns in the *Life* which deserve comment. The first is the strongly anti-Arian soteriology informing the text. While it is not necessary that the *Life* in its entirety be read as an anti-Arian tract, Athanasius’ own understandings of Christology, grace, asceticism and soteriology were formed in the crucible of the Arian conflict. As such, his model of the Christian saint can be expected

⁴⁸ Chitty, 10.

⁴⁹ Fumihiko F. Takeda, “Monastic Theology of the Syriac Version of the *Life of St. Antony*,” *Studia Patristica* 35 (2001): 158-166.

⁵⁰ Andrew Louth, “St. Athanasius and the Greek *Life of Antony*,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 39 (1988): 504-509.

to witness an anti-Arian spirituality.⁵¹ As Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh have argued, the “feats of the desert wrestler of demons, and the interpretive framework in which they are set, reveal consciousness of the soteriological issues which sharply divide orthodox and Arian spokesmen for the Christian faith.”⁵² These soteriological issues revolve around a central problematic: the intimate connection between the “character of the saviour and the character of the salvation available to the believer.”⁵³ Because the Arians argue that humans share the same creaturely nature as Christ, sanctification can be achieved through the labour of imitation. While imitation is central to Athanasius’ conception of the Christian life (imitation of, ultimately, Christ, but also of his saints) precisely because of the ontological distinction between Christ the Word and humans, grace is required for sanctification: “The monk labours to resist temptation, but the triumph is his only because he is a recipient of grace.”⁵⁴ Hence Antony’s repeated insistence that miracles wrought by him are entirely the work of Christ. This theme finds articulation in the *Letters* when Antony insists that what belongs to Christ by nature (perfection, holiness, unity with God) is humanity’s only by adoption.

The soteriology of the *Life* is suggestive of the second notable Athanasian concern that is woven into the text, asceticism. The insistence throughout the *Life* on the necessity of asceticism and the attempt to return the body through the control of the passions to its prelapsarian state resonates with Athanasius’ account of Christian

⁵¹ It is important to note that Arianism, properly speaking, is a more complex phenomenon than sometimes allowed. Post-Nicea (325), at least three theological parties asserted Arian tendencies in their rejection of the Council’s *homousios* definition, the Anomians, the Homoiousians and the Homoians. These distinct groups have often been universally described as Arian which oversimplifies the precise character of their positions. For an account of their views see Harmless, 32-33.

⁵² Gregg, Robert C. and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 134.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

holiness. Athanasius

removed intellectual contemplation of God from the centre of his spirituality, and instead defined the Christian life in ascetic terms as control of the body's passions and cultivation of virtue. The model Christian was no longer the insightful intellectual, but the self-controlled ascetic.⁵⁵

As David Brakke argues, what distinguishes Athanasius' thought from that of his predecessors in the Alexandrian tradition is that he repositions contemplation. No longer the cause of divinization (as with, for example, Origen), contemplation is "one of the activities of the divinized soul." The divinized soul was the one that had mastered the body and achieved a life of virtue: it was an ascetic soul.⁵⁶ This principle is amply exemplified in the *Life*. Indeed, its presence in Athanasius' theology is likely indebted to the influence of the desert monks with whom he spent so much time.

As with the *Letters* and the sayings, the *Life* is suggestive of its contemporary literary forms. Though often considered the first saint's life, the structure of the *Life* shows many parallels with ancient philosophers' lives as well as with the *encomium* and the lives of mystics.⁵⁷ Its uniqueness lies not in its being a first biography, but rather in being a new type of Christian biography. As Robert Meyer has it, "the ancient ideal type, the *hero* in the natural order, or later, the *sage* in the intellectual order, is here superseded by the *saint* in the supernatural order."⁵⁸ What makes Antony worth

⁵⁵ Brakke, 144.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵⁷ Meyer, "Introduction" in the *Life*, 11-13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

emulation is, to borrow from Peter Brown, the fact that he is a “friend of God”, uniquely positioned through his spiritual experience to guide the faithful in their own Godward pilgrimages.

Antony’s use of Scripture is the most striking feature of his *Letters*. It determines his theology of sanctification and his Christology. Scripture is also critical to the other texts in the Antony corpus, but they have only recently begun to be read with respect to their hermeneutics. I am convinced that the uses of Scripture in the *Letters*, *Life*, and sayings support each other. They highlight sometimes different but always complementary approaches to the Bible. In all three, for example, Scripture’s doctrinal content is asserted. Moreover, all three suggest that the Bible is a sufficient guide to the ascetic life. The following chapters aim to elucidate Antony’s appropriation of Scripture as revealed in the *Letters*, *Life*, and sayings. Chapter two will begin by offer a reading of the *Letters’* theology.

Chapter Two The Theology of St. Antony's *Letters*

II.1 *Introduction*

While the theology of Antony's *Letters* resonates with the Alexandrian theological tradition, strikingly, the *Letters* do not cite or unequivocally reference any Alexandrian sources. Rather, as a whole the *Letters* reflect a broadly Alexandrian heritage primarily articulated with respect to the pastoral needs of Antony's disciples. The *Letters* are, first and foremost, pastoral epistles written with sensitivity and charity to those in Antony's spiritual care. Despite different emphases in the *Letters*, a common exhortation dominates the seven as a whole: know thyself. The meaning of this exhortation is bound up with the *Letters'* constitutive themes: self-knowledge is related to the knowledge of God, to an anthropology, to a theology of sanctification, to love of neighbour, to an ecclesiology, and to a science of temptation. In relation to these different themes, Antony demonstrates in the *Letters* that self-knowledge principally requires the gift of discernment. Discernment can distinguish true knowledge from false, right from wrong, evil spirits from good. In effect, self-knowledge is the product of discernment.

That the *Letters'* sources seem less any particular text (other than Scripture) and rather the general culture of third- and fourth-century Egyptian theology supports the contention that, whatever their debts, they are largely the work of a mind able to synthesize its contemporary theological traditions within a unique theological vision. The theology of the *Letters* is most powerfully indebted to early Christianity's rigorous theological engagement with Scripture. Scripture provides both the content and context of Christian reflection and it is the biblical narrative that profoundly determines Antony's theological anthropology. As he notes in the *Life*, Scripture is the wholly sufficient witness to knowledge of God and the self.¹ The self known in Antony's *Letters* is in large part the self revealed by Scripture. The *Letters'* specific uses of Scripture are discussed in chapter three.

II.2 *Discernment and Self-Knowledge*

The *Letters'* central focus is self-knowledge through discernment. From the first *Letter*, which is in its entirety an ascetic catachesis emphasizing purification and the discernment of virtue, to the various exhortations to self-knowledge contained in subsequent letters, discernment remains Antony's dominant theme. Self-knowledge is the product of true discernment, which also yields knowledge of God. Knowledge of other things (of the Church, for example, of love of neighbour, of the operations of the devils) attends true knowledge of the self and God.

The *Letters'* emphasis on discernment clearly implies that self-knowledge is a problem. Throughout the *Letters*, Antony notes the impediments to self-knowledge. In

¹ *Life*, 16.

the first instance, true self-knowledge is impossible for Antony (as for Plotinus and Origen) because the rational mind has been exchanged for the irrational: "Yes, we are called sensible, but have put on an irrational mind..."² This exchange has been occasioned by a primal Fall and the effects of this disobedience are manifold: ignorance of the devil and his "secret contrivances" against the soul; the death of the mind's faculties accompanied by the inaccessibility of self-knowledge; and a general decent from unity into disunity (primarily at the level of human community). This Fall, or exchange of rationality for irrationality, manifests itself concretely in the human will. "I lament over those," writes Antony in *Letter* three, "who speak in the name of Jesus but act according to the will of their own hearts and bodies."³ In *Letter* six he is more explicit:

In truth, my children, I tell you that every man who delights in his own desires, and who is subdued to his own thoughts and sticks to what is sown in his own heart and rejoices in it and thinks in his heart that it is some great chosen mystery, and through it justifies himself in what he does, the soul of such a man is the breath of evil spirits and his counsel towards evil, and his body a store of evil mysteries which it hides in itself: and over such a one the demons have great power, because he has not dishonoured them before all men.⁴

² *Letters*, 6.22.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.46-48.

The fundamental impediment to self-knowledge, then, is self-will.⁵ A lack of discernment occasions an unreflective self-confidence, or pride, imitative, writes Antony, of the pride that occasioned the devil's fall. The devil's agents attack humans precisely in their pride in an effort to lure them away from virtue.

In opposition to pride and lack of discernment Antony counsels humility and self-knowledge: "Therefore, if you do not have great humility throughout your heart and in all your mind, in all your soul and in all your body, you cannot inherit the kingdom of God."⁶ In the first instance, discernment involves attention to oneself and to one's actions. Hastiness, forgetfulness and greed destroy the reflection required to counter temptation. Discernment requires self-possession. But discernment is more than a virtuous disposition. It reveals critical truths, namely, what constitutes humanity's spiritual essence and how humanity is redeemed. Throughout the *Letters*, the exhortation to self-knowledge is accompanied with Antony's injunction that the monks must know their spiritual essence. Their essence, he writes in *Letter* three, is an "eternal substance, which is not dissolved with the body but still cannot be freed through its own righteousness."⁷ The soul, then, is created to exist forever, but is incapable of redeeming itself from slavery to sin. Discernment reveals both the condition of the soul in its disgrace and its true redeemer: "For he who knows his disgrace seeks again his chosen

⁵ Inasmuch as the fallen will affirms what is unnatural and contrary to the soul's true dignity as a created being in the image of God (i.e. vice), Antony even goes so far as to say that the will is dead. See, *ibid.*, 7.58e.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.110.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.12. Consider as well a passage from *Letter* seven: "Now, therefore, he is the life of every rational being created by him in his own image, for he is the true mind of the Father and the immutable image of the Father. But the essence present in the creatures made in his image is mutable, and thus the evil, in which we are all dead, had come upon us, and we are [now] alien to the nature of the spiritual essence. Therefore, as I have said, through all that is alien to nature, we have acquired a dark house full of war." *Ibid.*, 7. 10-15.

glory, and he who knows his death also knows eternal life."⁸ The challenge that Antony sets his monks is to become aware of their sin precisely as a means of recognizing their true nature and true desire for salvation. To be aware of sin is already to have some knowledge of righteousness. But the salvation the monks desire is only knowable through the proper apprehension of Christ as redeemer. This is the theme of *Letter seven* verses 31-45, in which Antony argues that the heaviness of sin makes Christ's advent "illegible" to many, so that they cannot read in it the appearance of the uncreated God in human flesh.⁹ Christ's incarnation itself attempts to rectify human inability to recognize the Good it desires by approaching humans precisely in the form of their weakness and foolishness: "We were fools and through our foolishness we did all evil, but he took for us the form of foolishness, that through his foolishness he might make us wise."¹⁰ Christ transforms the principles of human alienation from God into the means of reconciliation. Discernment, then, offers self-knowledge in this respect: the self is known as fallen, yet in the image of God and made for eternal life. Christ is discerned as its true redeemer.

Any consideration of discernment in the *Letters* would be remiss if it did not emphasize that discernment is a gift of grace. Antony emphasises this when he prays repeatedly that his disciples be given the Spirit of discernment. Letter three is exemplary: "Beloved in the Lord," he writes, "our members and joint heirs with the saints, I beseech you in the name of Jesus Christ to act so that he gives you all the Spirit of discernment..."¹¹ The role of the Spirit in Antony's theology of sanctification is

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.113.

⁹ This is arguably the substance of Antony's critique of Arius in *Letter four* as well. There, Antony critiques the lack of self-knowledge that led Arius to assert untruths about the Divine son.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.3.

immense. The Spirit figures prominently in *Letter one*, for example, where he is critical to the process of repentance and the attainment of virtue.

Having broadly considered the role of discernment and self-knowledge in the *Letters* I will now consider more closely their theology of sanctification. This will include a consideration of the Spirit and of Christ's *kenosis* as critical aspects of Antony's theology. As well, it will return us to the theme of self-knowledge, but with special attention to its discussion in select letters.

II.3 *The Letters' Theology of Sanctification*

The *Letters'* theology is articulated with respect to two interconnected theological foci. The first is Antony's account of salvation history. In it, Antony shows that God visited humanity many times in order to rectify the wound of sin. The Mosaic law, the prophets and finally Christ are the three moments *par excellence* which most concern Antony. The Law is, according to Antony, a guide to virtue. Despite the helpfulness of the Law, however, the prophets recognize that it cannot heal the wound of self-will. Christ is the physician able to heal the soul and to return it to its original integrity. The second focus that governs Antony's theology is Christ's *kenosis*. The *kenosis* of Christ (his descent from heaven) leads to the ascent of the human into heaven. Christ's *kenosis*, argues Antony, finds its proper response in the self-sacrifice of the monastic. The faithful person offers him- or herself in an imitative self-sacrificing *kenosis* whose actual effect is not "descent" but rather, paradoxically, ascent (or rather, it might be said, a spiritual descent culminating in the spiritual and divinizing ascent). The *kenosis* is referenced time and again in the *Letters*.

A close consideration of the *Letters* best proceeds with a close reading of a single representative letter. In this way, the themes raised can be expanded upon with reference to the other letters without, however, losing the focus provided by a single frame of reference. Letter four, then, will provide the window onto the *Letters* as a whole. It is among the shorter letters but is concerned with critically important themes: righteousness and adoption, virtue and the natural state of the soul, the communion of saints, self-knowledge and the Arian controversy.¹²

Letter Four

Antony writes to all his dear brothers in Christ: Greetings!

Members of the Church, I never fail in remembering you. I want you to know the love I have for you, that it is not the love of the flesh, but the love of godliness. For the friendship of the body is not stable or lasting – it is moved about by alien winds. Everyone who fears God, and keeps his commandments is a servant of God. But in this service there is no fulfillment, although it is just and a guide to adoption. Even the prophets and apostles, the holy choir, those elected by God to be entrusted with the apostolic message, were thus made prisoners in Christ through the benevolence of God the Father. For Paul says: *Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle*. And so the written law works with us in a good service until we are able to restrain all passions and to fulfill the good ministry of virtue through this apostolic [life?].

¹² Italicized passages in the *Letters* are Rubensons. They highlight Antony's citations of Scripture. Uncertain words in the manuscripts appear in parentheses and are followed by a question mark.

When they had come close to the grace Jesus said to them: *Henceforth I call you not my servants, but my brothers and my friends, for all that the Father has taught me, I have made known unto you and taught you.* Those who had come close, by being taught by the Holy Spirit, came to know themselves in their spiritual essence. And their self-knowledge they called and said: *We have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but the spirit of adoption whereby we cry: Abba, Father, that we shall know what God has granted us. If we are children we are heirs, the heirs of God and joint heirs with the saints.*

My dear brothers, joint heirs with the saints, no virtues are alien to you; they are all yours, for when you have become revealed to God, you have no obligations towards this bodily life. *The Spirit does not enter a soul that has an unclean heart, nor a body that sins. It is a holy power, far from any deceit.* Truly, my beloved, *I write to you as to wise men,* who are able to know themselves. He who knows himself knows God, he who knows God must worship him as is proper.

My beloved in the Lord, know yourselves! Those who know themselves know their time, and those who know their time are able to stand upright without being moved by shifty tongues.

As for Arius, who stood up in Alexandria, he spoke strange words about the Only-begotten: to him who has no beginning, he gave a beginning, to him who is ineffable among men he gave an end, and to the immovable he gave movement. *If one man sins against another man, one prays for him to God. But if someone sins against God, to whom should one pray for him?* That man has begun a great

task, an unhealable wound. If he had known himself, his tongue would not have spoken about what he did not know. It is, however, manifest, that he did not know himself.

Self-knowledge is again a critical theme of the fourth *Letter*. But in the fourth *Letter* the general picture of self-knowledge acquires nuance. In the fourth letter self-knowledge belongs to a *movement*. It is not primarily a rational account of the soul's structure (though such an account is provided in both letters one and six, where the human is conceived of as body and soul under the governance of the mind). Rather, self-knowledge is produced in the first instance in the movement from servanthood to adoption, described here in the distinction between the "ministry of virtue", which belongs to servanthood, and Christ's "Henceforth I call you not servants, but my brothers and my friends," which characterizes adoption. Antony is attempting to show that obedience to the Law is a stage in the spiritual life, but not its end. Rather, friendship with God is the proper end of human life.

What the fourth *Letter* describes schematically, the first elucidates systematically. Self-knowledge arises through the gradual purification of the soul and body wherein vice is eliminated and the soul and body's natural virtue restored. This process is accomplished through the Spirit's guidance. According to *Letter* one there are three types of soul, or three ways by which souls are brought to God. Some, the letter argues, are obedient to the implanted Law of righteousness (the biblical type of this soul is Abraham); some, in whom the implanted Law has grown cold, are obedient to the written law; and others still are brought to God through affliction. These "are three gates for the

souls who come to repent until they obtain grace, and the calling of the Son of God.”¹³

Critically, all of these souls are called to repentance. It is simply the agent or catalyst of their obedience which differs. There is a rough parallel between these types of soul and Antony’s general division of history, which emphasizes the implanted Law’s “cooling” and the subsequent sending of Moses:

Having seen that the spiritual essence had descended into the abyss, being completely dead, and that the law of promise had grown cold, God in his benevolence visited them through Moses. Moses truly founded the house of truth, and wanted to heal the great wound and bring them back to their original unity, but he could not and left them. Then, too, the council of the prophets built upon the foundation of Moses, but they were unable to heal the great wound of their members, and realized that their power ceased. Thus the communion of saints assembled in unity and offered prayers before their Creator... And all prayed by the benevolence of the Father for his Only-begotten, because unless he himself would come, none of the creatures would be able to heal the great wound.¹⁴

Moses, the lawgiver, is positioned at the Church’s origins and it is the Law, as letter four suggests, which guides the first steps of conversion.¹⁵

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.16-20, 23.

¹⁵ Antony’s argument that the Church begins with Moses is significant. On one hand, it incorporates the Law into the Church’s discipline. On the other hand, it identifies the Church explicitly with Israel and its movement from bondage to freedom. Antony time and again highlights freedom as a gift of Christ’s advent.

For those who are awoken to the knowledge of God primarily through the Law, the Law testifies “of all pain and punishment prepared for the wicked and announce[s] the blessed promises for those who progress. Through testimonies of the written law their thoughts are aroused, and they try to enter into their calling.”¹⁶ The Law, in Pauline terms, awakens a consciousness of sin.

But as with Paul, so too for Antony, the Law is not itself sufficient to heal humanity’s wound. Paul emphasizes that this is largely because humans cannot fulfill the Law. Antony emphasizes less this aspect of the Law. Rather, for Antony, the Law leads to self-knowledge “until we are able to restrain all the passions and to fulfill the good ministry of virtue through this apostolic [life?]” and as such is a good and necessary part of the soul’s movement towards God.¹⁷ It is insufficient not because it is impossible to fulfill, but rather because the dignity of the human vocation is not to servanthood but to sonship. This distinction is critical to the *Letters* and in the fourth letter takes on a strikingly Pauline character. “Everyone who fears God, and keeps his commandments is a servant of God,” writes Antony. “But in this service there is no fulfillment, although it is just, and a guide to adoption.”¹⁸ Labour in the Law brings the soul close to Christ. This proximity endows the soul with knowledge of its sonship which is, properly, its “spiritual essence”.¹⁹ Thus self-knowledge is fully realized only in the moment of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.9-11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.8. This contrast with Paul risks oversimplification. For Paul, the law is not done away with but rather fulfilled once and for all in Christ, and so the Christian has in themselves through Christ the same fulfillment. In this sense, he and Antony are alike – or I should say, Antony obeys Scripture. What’s interesting is Antony’s emphasis: the law is a positive aspect of the movement towards adoptive sonship, a part of a larger schematic understanding of the acquisition of holiness.

¹⁸ *Letters* 4.4,5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.10.

friendship with Christ. The movement from servanthood to adoption largely runs parallel to Paul's distinction between law and grace. This is not surprising, perhaps, given the significance of Paul's epistle to the Romans in letter four.²⁰

The process of adoption, described in *Letter* four as a movement through purification to friendship, is systematically delineated in the first letter. At the beginning and end of this process is the Spirit of God, acting in different capacities as the soul matures. The guiding principle of the return is repentance: everything, soul and body, seeks its own proper repentance, or return, to God. The initial movements of return take place under the guidance of the Spirit of repentance, who in the first instance begins the process of purification through the body's fasts and vigils. As this proceeds, the "Spirit begins to open the eyes of the soul" so that it may seek its own proper purification.²¹ This takes place under the guidance of the mind, the soul's highest faculty, which learns from the Spirit to discriminate between body and soul so that each can be led "back to its original condition."²² The emphasis throughout the *Letters* is akin to the emphasis of Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony*, the sanctified soul is returned to an original harmony proper to it.²³ As Antony says in the fourth letter, virtue belongs by nature to the soul, it is vice that is foreign. Yet, though the *Letters* generally seek the restitution of a lost, but "natural" harmony, they present this restitution not simply as a re-appropriation of

²⁰ The movement from servanthood to sonship is also strikingly paralleled in the sayings attributed to Antony. There, in saying 32 of the alphabetical collection it is figured as a movement from fear of God to the love of God: "Abba Antony said, 'I no longer fear God, but I love Him. For love casts out fear.'"

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.26.

²² *Ibid.*, 1.30.

²³ In the *Life*, chapter 14, we read: "When they saw him, they were astonished to see that his body had kept its former appearance, that it was neither obese from want of exercise, nor emaciated from his fastings and struggles with the demons... No, he had himself completely under control – a man guided by reason and stable in his character."

prelapsarian selfhood, but also as a movement forward towards the resurrected body.

The soul purified by ascetic discipline and made transparent to grace through the Spirit of adoption acquires “something of that other spiritual body which will be taken on at the resurrection of the just.”²⁴ Thus, the process of sanctification casts its glance both backwards and forwards, reuniting the body with lost perfection under the sign of future transformation.

The mind’s purification of body and soul proceeds by purifying the body’s motions, its natural motions replacing motions due to avarice and motions due to evil spirits (natural motions are those movements which belong to soul and body in accordance with virtue).²⁵ Then the mind is befriended by the Spirit and taught to “heal all its afflictions”, first those which are mingled with the body and second those that belong to the soul alone.²⁶ Soul-body wounds include impure sight, ears desirous of slander, deceit of the mouth (including hypocrisy), and an appetite governed by greed. They are healed in a descending order from the eyes to the feet. In the wake of this purification, afflictions belonging to the soul alone are healed, including, for example, pride. It is a striking feature of the first letter that the body does not have sins that belong to it alone. Rather, the letter is clear that, though the body needs its own disciplines, its intemperance belongs to an illness of the soul in its relations with the body, not to the body as such.

²⁴ *Letters*, 1.71.

²⁵ Antony identifies three motions as listed above. The natural motions versus those occasioned by avarice and demons runs parallel to Clement’s distinction between the soul’s natural motions and those occasioned by the passions. For a discussion of this, see chapter four of John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁶ *Letters*, 1.49.

This process of sanctification has a goal. The gift of the Spirit of adoption, by which penitents become children of God, largely reforms the image of Christ in humans. Central to Antony's anthropology is an image theology: Christ is "the very mind and image of the Father, who made every rational creature in the image of his image."²⁷ Elsewhere Antony writes, "I want you to know that our Lord Jesus Christ is the true mind of the Father, by whom all the fullness of every rational nature is made to the likeness of his image, he himself being the head of all creatures and the body of the Church."²⁸ The restitution of the image in humanity is a far reaching grace: by it, not only are individuals healed, but the church (Moses' "house of truth") is perfected. This is largely articulated through the *kenosis* theology of the *Letters*, which itself informs the *Letters'* critically important discussion of the Church as the communion of saints.²⁹

II.4 *Kenosis and Community*

The critical importance of Christ's *kenosis* is reiterated throughout the *Letters*.³⁰ In fact, it is the central feature of Antony's account of salvation history in which wounded humanity, seeking healing, discovers through the witness of Moses and the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.85.

²⁹ Though it is only in letter four that Arius is explicitly mentioned, the theology of the *Letters* with respect to Christ's work is explicitly informed by a Christology that strongly asserts Christ's divine sonship. The *Letters'* soteriology depends upon an orthodox Christology, as evidenced in Antony's critique of Arius and assertion that only the persons of the Trinity are without beginning.

³⁰ For awareness of the critical importance of Christ's *kenosis* to Antony's theology I am indebted to Pamela Bright.

prophets that “none of the creatures would be able to heal the great wound.”³¹ Healing requires the great physician, Christ, who is solicited by the prophets and the saints to come and heal the world.³²

Antony’s fifth letter powerfully dramatizes the tension in humanity’s need for healing as well as the radical character of the *kenosis*. On the one hand, Antony writes: “Truly, my children, we dwell in our death and stay in the house of the robber, bound by the fetters of death.”³³ On the other hand, he cites the prophet Ezekiel: “Son of man, make to thyself vessels of captivity.”³⁴ The tension between these two statements, the one an observation the other a divine imperative, is evident: how can humanity, subject to death, make a vessel, a saving raft, precisely out of this death? It is through an exchange, the fifth letter suggests, that healing is found. Christ exchanges humanity’s death for his life: human sin humbles Christ; his wounds (the marks of his humbling, as it were), heal humans. The downward movement of Christ into the tomb precipitates the upward movement of humanity. Illustrating this, Antony cites Isaiah 53.5: “Our iniquities humbled him and by his stripes we were healed.”³⁵

This action is the frame for the developed ascetic pattern of the first letter. It is within the economy of Christ’s kenotic salvation that Christian *ascesis* makes sense. That this is true for Antony is made explicit in the *Letters* when he outlines the imitative

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.23.

³² The incarnation is, in Antony’s account, less a response to human sin than to the prayer and repentance of the saints. This is not surprising -- Antony emphasizes over and over again the critical, “co-operative” role of humans in salvation history (both personal and corporate).

³³ *Ibid.*, 5.6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.26.

(or rather, participatory) *response* required of Christians to God. The response he emphasizes is one of radical self-sacrifice. The Christian is to imitate Christ's kenotic self-giving and so live in themselves both his death and his new life: "Therefore, let us raise up God in ourselves by spurring one another, and deliver ourselves to death for our [own] souls and for one another, and doing this we shall reveal the essence of our mercy."³⁶

The "kenotic life" is critical because it helps to effect the unity of believers that Christ has established in the Church. Just as Christ was ransomed for many, so too Antony emphasizes the inter-dependence of all humans who ought to sacrifice themselves for one another. Humans are interdependent, in the first instance, because they share a common source with all rational creatures. Because of this common source,

whoever sins against his neighbour sins against himself, and whoever does evil to his neighbour does evil to himself. Likewise whoever does good to his neighbour does good to himself. For truly, who would there be who could do evil to God, or who can hurt him, or who is there who can give him rest, or who can ever serve him, or who exists who could ever bless him, as if he would need his blessing, or who could honour him so that he [really] is honoured, or who could exalt him so that he [really] is exalted?³⁷

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.66, 67.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.63-65.

Antony suggests that it is primarily in relation to one another that humans are given the injunctions to give rest, to honour, to serve, because it belongs primarily to humans' relations as creatures to give and receive these things. God is in need of nothing and so bids humans love those who do have needs.

What this effects is a unity of souls which redresses the destruction of unity occasioned by sin. Among the central victories occasioned by Christ's incarnation (which include the remission of sins and the re-formation of people's souls) is the gathering of people from all lands teaching them that they are members of one another.³⁸ It is a striking feature of Antony's discussion in letter six of the devils' temptations that they result in a fundamental destruction of unity. The devils incite contempt of neighbours so that people are "every hour accusing each other"³⁹; they lead people to think that their "struggle comes from our fellows, judging what is outside while the robbers are all inside our house".⁴⁰ The kenotic life, made possible by Christ, redresses these divisions, and is in essence a life of self-sacrifice intended to combat the temptations of pride by which, as Antony notes, the first sin was occasioned. In its stead humility must be perfected, which goes hand in hand with renunciation and the ascetic life. But humility is not abstract, it is obedience to the teachings and example of Christ:

Why did Jesus gird himself with a towel and wash the feet of his disciples, if not to make this an example and teach those who turn back to their first beginning,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.22,23.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.37.

since pride is the origin of that movement which was in the beginning. Therefore, if you do not have great humility throughout your heart and in all your mind, in all your soul and in all your body, you cannot inherit the kingdom of God.⁴¹

Strikingly, it is after his discussion of love of neighbour that Antony presents his most memorable and substantial discussion of the kenotic life. It is largely a plea for purity by which the unity of the Church may be secured.

My dear children, I pray that this will not be a burden to you, nor that you should tire of loving one another. Lift up your body in which you are clothed and make it an altar and lay upon it all your thoughts and leave all evil counsels before God, and lift up the hands of your heart to him, that is to the Creator of the mind, and pray to God that he gives you the great invisible fire, that it may descend from above and consume the altar and all upon it, as well as the priests of Baal, who are the hostile works of the enemy, that they may fear and flee before you as before the prophet Elijah. Then you will see as it were the track of a man over the sea, who will bring you the spiritual rain, which is the comfort of the Spirit of comfort.⁴²

The Church, argues Antony, is the House of Truth. This house stands over against the other houses mentioned in the *Letters*: the house of robbers, for example, and the house of death. It is as a community founded in God's visitations of humanity, firstly

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6.108-110.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.72-77.

in the Law, but most importantly in the *kenosis* of Christ and its subsequent repetition in the lives of the Church's members. In this way, the House of Truth is built up and edified.

II.5 *Conclusions*

The theological vision of the *Letters* is a practical pastoral theology informed by the speculative schools of Alexandrian theology but more profoundly determined by a biblical theology of Christ's *kenosis*. As I have shown, the *kenosis* is the constitutive event and framework for Antony's elaborations on discernment, repentance, asceticism and ecclesiology. Self-knowledge and Adoption are the result of a process of sanctification governed by the Spirit's presence to Christian souls. The Spirit works by the gift of discernment through which the essence of the soul, the true nature of Christ, and the benefits of his Incarnation are known.

In the following chapter I will look more closely at the uses of Scripture in the *Letters*. As noted, Scripture is the only source unequivocally employed in the *Letters* and its uses both here and in the other texts of the Antony corpus have received little sustained treatment. The theology of the *Letters* is clearly determined by the ways in which Antony employs Scripture. These uses raise questions: does Antony have a unique exegetical method? Are there passages to which he returns that demand investigation? Are there consonant uses of Scripture in the *Life* and the sayings? How is Scripture presented? The aim of the following chapter is to deepen the initial theological considerations presented here in the hopes of continuing to elucidate Antony's thought.

Chapter Three Scripture in Antony's *Letters, Life* and Sayings

III.1 *Introduction: A Desert Hermeneutic*

As suggested in chapter one, the Christian exodus into the desert in the late third and early fourth centuries was a remarkably literal enactment of sacred history. Elijah and Elisha, John the Baptist and Christ himself all journeyed into the wilderness. Though other factors were involved in the advent of Christian monasticism, the mimetic aspect of desert spirituality provides a significant insight into the general practice of Scriptural exegesis common to the Desert Fathers. This practice largely consists of performative exegesis through “processing and enacting the Word [of Scripture] ‘mimetically’ in the continuum of action, experience, and traditional understanding.”¹ This performative exegesis is present in the fundamental query inaugurating many disciple/master relationships in the *Apophthegmata patrum*: “What must I do to be saved?” As Paul Blowers notes, this question is “clearly reminiscent of the rich young man’s query to Jesus in Matthew 19:16” and it shows that the very disposition of spiritual aspirants in the Egyptian desert was framed not simply externally in the biblical geography of the desert,

¹ Paul Blowers, “The Bible and Spiritual Doctrine: Some Controversies within the Early Eastern Christian Ascetic Tradition,” in Paul Blowers, trans. and ed., *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 231.

but was also internally or spiritually in the Scriptural query.² These queries were most often met with practical exhortations drawn explicitly or implicitly from Scripture: the repetition of the commandments or the beatitudes, for example, or exhortation to virtue.³ At its most general, the desert's biblical hermeneutic emphasized that the true appropriation of Scripture required its embodiment in the life of the faithful monk. As Douglas Burton-Christie argues,

This insistence on praxis is not simply a matter of ethical exhortation, but also has a hermeneutical significance, for the desert Christians were convinced that true understanding of the *meaning* of sacred texts could not come apart from the attempt to integrate a text into one's life. They show an acute awareness of the particular kind of self-deception that arises from substituting theoretical knowledge of the texts for practical knowledge... [W]e are told of a woman came to Antony and, declaring that she had endured great fasting, and had learned the entire Bible by heart, asked what more she was to do? Antony asked her 'Is contempt the same as honour to you?' to which she answered 'No'. He then asked her 'Is loss as gain, strangers as your parents, poverty as abundance?' Again she answered, 'No'. Hearing this, Antony responded: 'thus you have neither fasted nor learned the Old and New Testament, but you have deceived yourself.'⁴

² *Ibid*, 230.

³ See, for example, the following sayings in the alphabetical collection: Antony 7, John the Dwarf 20 and 22, and Abba Poeman 112, 115 and 142.

⁴ Douglas Burton-Christie, "'Practice Makes Perfect': Interpretation of Scripture in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*," *Studia Patristica* 20 (1987): 213-218 at 215-16.

This desert hermeneutic, however, though “practical”, is not without its significant subtleties and complexities. With respect to Antony, the uses of Scripture in the sayings, Athanasius’ *Life*, and in the *Letters* are striking in their general conformity with the hermeneutic presented above. But, as might be expected given the differences in genre between these works, each of them also embodies different uses of Scripture. So, for example, in the *Letters* I would argue that Scriptural exegesis is subject to a dominant model of salvation history (itself Scriptural) that frames Antony’s theological counsel. In the *Life*, Antony’s discourses largely interpret Scripture according to an “ascetic exegesis” which allegorizes Scripture specifically in relation to asceticism. The sayings, on the other hand, portray both the difficulty of interpreting Scripture and also the accommodation of Scripture to souls at various stages of spiritual maturity.

Common to all three texts is an emphasis on the practical life of virtue (though in the *Letters* this is articulated within a general emphasis on self-knowledge, leading to the active love of God and neighbour). In addition to this commonality, it also seems to me that the texts agree to, or assume, certain fundamental attributes of Scripture: its Trinitarian ontology, its sufficiency for salvation, and its doctrinal content. Though the first two of these features are most clearly seen in the *Life* and the latter in the *Letters*, they constitute an early Christian assumption about the nature of Scripture important to bear in mind when considering the texts.⁵

⁵ This assumption has largely been lost in contemporary theology and spirituality, though some recent scholarship has sought its reassertion and some liturgical lectionaries still presuppose and teach it. See, for example, Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), and David P. Curry, “Doctrinal Instrument of Salvation: The Use of Scripture in the Prayer Book Lectionary,” *The Prayer Book*, (Charlottetown: St. Peter Publications, 1985), 29-70. The usefulness of Antony in a recovery of this tradition is briefly considered in the conclusion to this work.

In this chapter I will explore the various uses of Scripture found in the Antony corpus. I will direct the chapter towards a primary investigation of the *Letters*, but a consideration of the sayings and the *Life* will help to outline different aspects of Antony's hermeneutic showing how Scripture is interpreted *vis-à-vis* the Christian ascetic life.

III.2. *The Sayings and Scripture: Naming*

The extent to which Scripture informs the “mimetic praxis” of early Egyptian monasticism is nowhere more evident than in the application of Biblical names (in particular Old Testament names) to holy monks. This application suggests less the strict imitative expertise of one ascetic or another than the monk's actual participation in a sacred history comprehended in the lives of the saints and shared in by the desert Christians. So, for example, Antony is compared to both Elijah and Jacob in the Prologue and first chapter of Athanasius' *Life*; and again, in the sayings, Antony is allegorically represented as the pillar of light that led the Israelites by night out of bondage.⁶

These identifications of a monastic with sacred persons or appearances from Scripture are perhaps most dramatically expressed in the *Letters* wherein Antony repeatedly refers to his fellow ascetics as “Israelites”, emphasizing their incorporation into the chosen people of the covenant. More importantly, however, Antony interprets the name “Israel” (given to Jacob after his contest with the angel in Genesis 32) “mind

⁶ This saying, attributed to Abba Hilarion, reads: “From Palestine, Abba Hilarion went to the mountain to Abba Anthony. Abba Anthony said to him, ‘You are welcome, torch which awakens the day.’ Abba Hilarion said, ‘Peace to you, pillar of light, giving light to the world.’”

that sees God.”⁷ This interpretation extends the identification between the monastics and Israelites into an allegorical and soteriological assertion about the end of the monastic life itself: the vision of God. This identification denotes, then, not only the ascetics’ chosenness but their perfection as well.

This latter example of naming captures potently the significance and complexity involved in early monasticism’s Scriptural identifications and the numerous levels on which such identifications operate. Antony’s use of “Israelite” offers a complex allegorical treatment of Scripture that reads salvation history in the context of his contemporary ascetic struggle. What Paul Blowers has noted of the fifth century ascetic Nilus of Ancyra might as appropriately be said of Antony: “drawing on Origen’s axiom that the whole Biblical history could be allegorically ‘transposed’ into the life of the individual soul, [Antony] considered the ascetics of the present day to inhabit, as it were, the same spiritual cosmos as the Bible’s saints (and sinners).”⁸ That is to say, sacred history is contemporaneous with the spiritual lives of contemporary Christians. What is essential to Antony is that this means reading Scripture (as he does in his use of the term “Israelite”) within a soteriology given by the whole of Scripture and interpreted backwards through the victory of the Cross. In this context Scripture interprets Scripture and, more importantly, it is shown to be the interpretive key to life.

It is because their “minds saw God”, as it were, that desert monastics became objects of pilgrimage and acquired disciples. The results of these pilgrimages are, in part, captured in the texts of the *Apophthegmata patrum*. The sayings attributed to Antony

⁷ *Letters*, 3.6.

⁸ Blowers, 232.

reveal a unique relationship to Scripture characterized on one hand by an extremely disciplined approach to biblical interpretation and on the other by biblically inspired counsel. Samuel Rubenson has noted five distinctive features of Antony's sayings *vis-à-vis* collections of sayings attributed to other ascetics. The features he notes in the sayings include the following:

1. The sayings represent Antony as monasticism's ideal and principle authority.
2. The sayings emphasize Antony's profound interpretation of Scripture.
3. The sayings emphasize Antony's spiritual insight (or discernment).
4. The sayings ascetic counsels are less austere than in sayings attributed to others.
5. Compared to other sayings, Antony's emphasize despair over sin less.

It is not within the purview of this investigation to consider the basis for Rubenson's claims concerning Antony's sayings *in toto*. Rather, I will focus on the second of his assertions, the profound ability to interpret Scripture that the sayings associate with Antony. The profundity and particularity of Antony's use of Scripture will become apparent through an examination of three consecutive sayings from the alphabetical collection.

III.2.a *Antony and Scripture in the Sayings*

Sayings seventeen, eighteen and nineteen in the alphabetical collection deal with Scripture. The first reveals the opacity of Scripture, the second the dangers of excessive

conversation concerning Scripture, the third the sufficiency of Scripture and its accommodation to believers.

Saying 17

One day some old men came to Abba Anthony. In the midst of them was Abba Joseph. Wanting to test them, the old man suggested a text from the Scriptures, and, beginning with the youngest, he asked them what it meant. Each gave his opinion as he was able. But to each one the old man said, ‘You have not understood it.’ Last of all he said to Abba Joseph, ‘How would you explain this saying?’ and he replied, ‘I do not know.’ Then Abba Anthony said, ‘Indeed, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said: “I do not know”’.

The context of this saying is itself significant: a group of elder monastics gather with Antony to consider a verse of the Bible. The saying’s immediate suggestions with respect to Scripture are twofold. On one hand, the setting suggests that such considerations of Scripture were common. Saying twenty-six in Antony’s collection, another discussion of a “piece” of Scripture, confirms this assumption (though saying seventeen is interesting in its use of Scripture as a test). On the other hand, the group examination of a passage suggests by its very nature that the meaning of Scripture is not necessarily clear, at least not to all (and in this case not even to aged monastics!). The opacity of Scripture is revealed when none of the ascetics are able to understand the passage presented by Antony. Only Abba Joseph shows discernment when he responds

to Antony's query, "How would you explain this saying?" with a confession of ignorance: "I do not know."

While a cursory reading of this saying might suggest that Abba Joseph's response is wholly negative, Antony is clear that it is in fact a positive articulation of "the way" of biblical interpretation. The reasons for this are twofold. The first reason concerns virtue's relation to biblical interpretation and the other is a speculative possibility. Concerning virtue, Antony is teaching that self-knowledge and humility are principles of authentic biblical interpretation. That the passage under consideration is not given in the saying is telling – the prerequisite virtue for the interpretation of any passage of Scripture is the same. It is in this sense that Abba Joseph's response represents a "way", a positive account, as it were, of an exegetical method predicated on humility. In this sense, Antony's saying corresponds closely with the claims introduced at the beginning this chapter with respect to desert exegesis.

Speculatively, however, it might also be suggested that "I do not know" is in fact an entirely appropriate exegesis of certain specific Scripture passages. Considering the gnomic quality of many of the *apophthegmata*, it is imaginable that the most appropriate response to, for example, the meaning of Christ's "Blessed are the poor in Spirit" is the text's performative expression: "I do not know". In this context, the confession of ignorance embodies the meaning of Scripture (poverty, self-knowledge, humility) rather than elucidating it by argument. As Blowers notes, "in effect [the ascetics'] very lives were the conversation with Scripture."⁹ Paradoxically, if both of these interpretations

⁹ Blowers, 233.

suggest that humility is the prerequisite of biblical interpretation, they also show that it is the Bible itself that teaches how it is acquired.

Saying 18

Some brothers were coming from Scetis to see Abba Anthony. When they were getting into a boat to go there, they found an old man who also wanted to go there. The brothers did not know him. They sat in the boat occupied by turns with the words of the Fathers, Scripture, and their manual work. As for the old man, he remained silent. When they arrived on shore they found that the old man was going to the cell of Abba Anthony too. When they reached the place, Anthony said to them, 'You found this old man a good companion for the journey?' Then he said to the old man, 'You have brought many good brethren with you, father.' The old man said, 'No doubt they are good, but they do not have a door to their house and anyone who wishes can enter the stable and loose the ass.' He meant that the brethren said whatever came into their minds.

If in the previous saying Scripture is shown to be opaque and its exegesis to require humility, this saying suggests that even ostensibly holy conversation about Scripture can be the cause of spiritual harm and so counsels the tongue's discipline. The argument of the saying is thoroughly Scriptural. Bible passages that counsel control of the tongue are numerous.¹⁰ As with saying seventeen, the model of holy behaviour is present among the monks. The old man – the stranger – is the model of silence and the ascetic discipline of conversation. (Strikingly, his silence includes the suspension of

¹⁰ See, for example, Psalm 34.13, Proverbs 21.23, and James 1.26.

rebuke. He only censures the younger monks when asked by Antony.) The saying argues that, like the old man, the virtuous model of a way to God is often present among the faithful, but that inattentiveness and a lack of virtue make one blind to the presence. More importantly, the saying underlines the insight of saying seventeen by dramatically contrasting those who speak about Scripture with those who practice its counsels, thus highlighting the tension between hearing and doing the Word.

Saying 19

The brethren came to Abba Anthony and said to him, 'Speak a word; how are we to be saved?' The old man said to them, 'You have heard the Scriptures. That should teach you how.' But they said, 'We want to hear from you too, Father.' Then the old man said to them, 'The Gospel says, "if anyone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also."' (Matt.5.39) They said, 'We cannot do that.' The old man said, 'If you cannot offer the other cheek, at least allow one cheek to be struck.' 'We cannot do that either,' they said. So he said, 'If you are not able to do that, do not return evil for evil,' and they said, 'We cannot do that either.' Then the old man said to his disciple, 'Prepare a little brew of corn for these invalids. If you cannot do this or that, what can I do for you? What you need is prayers.'

Unlike the previous sayings, in this Antony offers lengthy counsel. His counsel proceeds in two interconnected stages profoundly revealing of his general apprehension of Scripture. When the brothers ask him for a word, Antony responds in the first instance

by asserting the sufficiency of Scripture for their spiritual education. This response resonates with both an earlier saying in the Antony collection (saying three) and with his claim in Athanasius' *Life*: "The scriptures," he says there, at the beginning of his first conference with the monks, "are really sufficient for our instruction."¹¹ Strikingly, when pressed by the monks in saying 19 to add a word to Scripture, Antony's response is to cite the Bible. This strategy is highly suggestive: through the citation of Scripture in response to the further request for a word Antony reasserts his primary claim concerning its sufficiency.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the saying, however, is Antony's pastoral response to the monk's inability to follow the saying, "If anyone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also." Rather than offer an alternative counsel when they proclaim their inability, he attempts to accommodate the teachings of Scripture to the spiritual abilities of his brethren. So, for instance, he limits the Scriptural command to its first clause, offering one cheek. Then, finding resistance, he counsels another Scriptural command, do not return evil for evil. The difference between these two commands is striking and signifies a movement in the saying through a hierarchy of spiritual virtues. The first command is the most demanding because it requires voluntary suffering. The second is less demanding inasmuch as it counsels reserve in the face of involuntary affliction.

The significance of this saying for Antony's use of Scripture is twofold: on one hand, as noted, he asserts the sufficiency of Scripture for spiritual education. On the other hand, he accommodates Scripture's teachings in a "hierarchy of perfection" in order to meet the spiritual needs and abilities of those seeking counsel. The accommodation of

¹¹ *Life*, 16.

Scripture to the faithful affirms the particularity of individual souls and the reality of spiritual progress. However, as Antony demonstrates, it is required in all of this that accommodation always conform to Scripture.

In Antony's sayings, then, a complex relation to Scripture is discerned. In the three sayings examined here the general principles of Antony's appropriation and interpretation of the Bible can be found.

1. Antony insists that virtue is the precondition of biblical interpretation.
2. Antony teaches that unguarded discussion of Scripture is a danger to the soul.
3. Antony insists that Scripture contains all things necessary for ascetic education.
4. Antony's sayings suggest that pastoral exigencies may require the accommodation of Scripture to different souls.

III.3 *Antony's use of Scripture in the Life*

The uses of Scripture in the *Life* are complex and varied.¹² Their thorough investigation requires, among other things, a close consideration of Athanasius' theology of Scripture and of the period in Athanasius' life in which the *Life* was written. Such an investigation is beyond the scope of this work. Rather, I will concentrate on select passages of the *Life* which seem particularly revelatory of Antony's biblical theology.

The types of questions informing this investigation are such as follows: how does

¹² It is important to note that the uses of Scripture in the *Life* reflect not simply Antony's use of Scripture but Athanasius'. I have tried to emphasize aspects of the use of Scripture in the *Life* that resonate with Antony's use of Scripture in the sayings and in the *Letters*.

Athanasius present Antony's exegesis? Are general assumptions about the nature of Scripture operative in the text?

Broadly, I will argue that the *Life* offers a particular model of biblical exegesis resonant with the entire tradition of *apophthegmata*, namely, the allegorization of Scripture in relation to the ascetic life. I will call this "ascetic exegesis". This has already been encountered, if peripherally, in the discussion of Antony's use of "Israelite" to name his fellow monks in the *Letters* and it is explicit in the sayings attributed to him. With respect to his sayings, Samuel Rubenson notes:

There are, moreover, two interesting sayings in which Antony interprets the meaning of the loaves in the parable of the man who in the middle of the night asks his friend for three loaves of bread (Luke 11:15-18). According to him, the three loaves are hospitality, poverty, and abstinence. In the second he interprets the furnace of Babylon and the cloud from which God spoke to Moses as the cell of the monk.¹³

This method of exegesis, which allegorizes Scripture in relation to the specifics of the monastic vocation, is common to the sayings and to Antony's teachings in the *Life*.

But the *Life* does not associate Scripture exclusively with ascetic counsel. As we have seen, Antony does emphasize Scripture's sufficiency for monastic education. But the "sufficiency" of Scripture is deeper than ethical or even ascetic imperatives. As Antony notes, Scripture teaches not only how to practice virtue, but also what to believe:

¹³ Rubenson, 160.

that is, the content of the orthodox faith. This is explicit in Antony's encounter with the philosophers in chapter 75 of the *Life*. Here, Antony argues that Scripture reveals Christ's divine sonship:

At all events, it seems to me that you are but defrauding yourselves and are not really familiar with our Scriptures. But do read them and see that the things which Christ did, prove Him to be God abiding with us for the salvation of mankind.

In addition to this assertion of Scripture's doctrinal content, Antony's final words to his disciples assert the same principle: "...and watch over... above all, the orthodox faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, as you have learned it from the Scriptures and as you have often been put in mind of by me."¹⁴

The "double" sufficiency of Scripture (for ascetic practice and orthodox doctrine) is an important theme to have in mind as specific aspects of Scripture's use in the *Life* are explored. The aspects to be considered can be grouped under two headings: Scripture and asceticism, and Scripture and visions.

III.3.a *Scripture and Asceticism*

Towards the end of the *Life*, Athanasius suggests that Antony's story is simply a confirmation of the promises of Scripture:

¹⁴ *Life*, 89. The argument that doctrine was imposed on Scriptural texts, themselves opaque and multivalent, has become a commonplace assumption in much theology. I would suggest that the actual development of Christian doctrine results from a deepening apprehension of the Biblical revelation and the conviction of its doctrinal content. At the very least, this is certainly the understanding of the early Church.

Such is the story of Antony. We must not show ourselves skeptical when it is through a man that all these great wonders came to pass. For it is the promise of the Saviour who says: *If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain: 'Remove hence!' and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible to you.* And again: *Amen, amen, I say to you, if you ask the Father anything in my name, He will give it you.... Ask and you shall receive.* And it is He who said to His disciples and to all who believe in Him: *Heal the sick; ...cast out demons; freely have you received, freely give.*¹⁵

Athanasius argues that Antony's specific charisms (great acts of faith, effective prayer, the healing of the sick) are in reality the proper attributes of every Christian. The interpretation of Antony's life through the words of Scripture universalizes his example so that its exceptionality is transformed into the "stock and trade" of Christian lives transformed by grace.

Of course, Athanasius' prologue to the *Life* states clearly his intention to provide a model of Christian perfection for the imitation of desert ascetics. His universalizing of Antony's spiritual prowess is, then, not surprising. But he does insist, through his choice of texts, that, though accessible to all Christians, these spiritual gifts are in the first instance the gifts of grace. This emphasis is repeated throughout the text (see, for example, chapter seven) and, as noted in chapter one, it sets Athanasius' soteriology at odds with Arianism.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

Antony's first monastic conference constitutes his lengthiest treatment of ascetic progress and, given the purpose of this chapter, it is notable for two specific reasons. The first is its treatment of time in relation to Scripture.¹⁶ The second is its practice of ascetic exegesis.

Time and Scripture

The practical concerns of Antony's conference may obscure, in a first reading, the philosophical assumptions operative in its introduction. Antony introduces his conference with a series of comparisons: the brevity of life versus eternity; the fleetingness of worldly goods compared to the glory of heaven; the insignificance of ascetic efforts when compared with their heavenly reward.¹⁷ These comparisons are in fact characteristic of the simple distinction between the finite and infinite or the creation and the Creator common to Athanasian theology. The difficulty, however, is that the affect of this radical division can be the undoing of ascetic efforts entirely. Given the divine/human disparity (an opposition of radically incommensurable poles that, in fact, logically resolves itself in the annihilation of the finite) why struggle? The answer lies in the reconciliation of the finite and the infinite in the ascetic life itself.

Having sketched the distinction, Antony immediately exhorts his brethren to "persevere in the practice of asceticism."¹⁸ He suggests that eternity and finitude meet in the present moment, and Scripture is the means by which Antony articulates this

¹⁶ My treatment of this question is provisional at best. It seems deserving of further consideration.

¹⁷ See *Life*, 16, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

meeting. It is through the exegesis of I Corinthians 15.31 that Antony brings together human finitude and divine eternity, that is, in St. Paul's "I die daily."

The exegesis of this passage is striking for many reasons. At the level of time, through St. Paul Antony resolves the disparity between finitude and infinity (itself potentially overwhelming) in a moment where both meet: death. However, death has a two-fold significance: on one hand, it is an ascetic "disposition" which insists on living always in the present, in a "now" imitative of the divine eternity:

And that we may not be careless, it is well to think over what the Apostle says: *I die daily*. Indeed, if we, too, live as if we were to die each new day, we shall not sin. As to the quotation given, its meaning is this: when we awaken each day, we should think that we shall not live till evening; and again, when about to go to sleep we should think that we shall not awaken.¹⁹

On the other hand, and more fundamentally, precisely this ascetic activity is a repetition in the life of each monk of the death of Christ, which effected the restitution and reconciliation of human finitude and divine infinity. That Scriptural exegesis is the key to resolving the disparity between eternity and finitude suggests a particular theology of Scripture. Scripture is the eternal word communicated in the finite. It is, at least by analogy with Christ himself, a union between the heavenly and the earthly. This union has a startling immediacy. The Scriptural word is always contemporaneous, present, powerful and applicable to every soul. We have seen this already in the sayings'

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

attribution of Biblical names to the ascetics. Telford Work comments on this quality of Scripture:

not only the divine word in Old Testament Scripture, but also that in New Testament Scripture, is a manifestation and a continuing work of the *Logos*... The Biblical words in the Old and New Testaments first prepare for and prefigure, then witness to and extend, the *Logos*' saving presence in the created order.²⁰

Scripture, then, as employed in Antony's first conference, is a divinely authored text mediating heavenly knowledge materially, as it were, in language. More than this, we might say that it is an agent of heavenly *gnosis*, a knowledge which itself provides the bridge, or reconciliation, between earth and heaven.

Ascetic Exegesis

Examples of ascetic exegesis permeate the *Life*. Already we have seen it in Antony's interpretation of I Corinthians 15:31. In this section I will consider briefly an archetypal example of said exegesis that has clear continuities with Antony's *Letters*.

In the *Letters*, Antony strongly asserts the "naturalness" of virtue and the unnaturalness of vice.²¹ Knowledge of the soul in its first formation reveals its created goodness, lost through pride and self-will. As such, vice belongs to the soul accidentally,

²⁰ Work, 45

²¹ See, for example, VII.4-15.

not essentially. The wound of the primal Fall irreparably damages the divine/human relationship. Healing is only possible through Christ.

The assertion of virtue's naturalness, and the aim of the ascetic *Life* as largely a recovery of natural self-hood, is made throughout the *Life*. In Antony's monastic conference this theme is emphasized through his use of Luke 17:21: "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you." The Kingdom of Heaven, argues Antony, is virtue. Virtue is conformity with the soul's natural state:

When you hear virtue mentioned, do not be afraid of it nor treat it as a foreign word. Really, it is not far from us; no, the thing is within us, and its accomplishment is easy if we but have the will... Virtue exists when the soul keeps its natural state. It is kept in its natural state when it remains as it came into being. Now it came into being fair and perfectly straight.²²

This identification of the kingdom with natural virtue resonates with Athanasius' general tendency in the *Life* to emphasize virtue over knowledge. By contrast, the *Letters* emphasis is without question knowledge, but the difference between the texts should not be overemphasized. According to the *Letters*, knowledge issues in love of one's neighbour (virtue). And according to the *Life*, there is a saving knowledge, emphasized in Antony's debate with the philosophers: faith.²³

²² *Life*, 20.

²³ *Ibid*, 77-80.

The strategy of ascetic exegesis suggests a view of Scripture that emphasizes its direct and practical applicability to the lives of monastics. We will see in the *Letters* that this method of exegesis takes place within an articulated schema of salvation history.

III.3.b *Scripture and Visions*

It is a striking feature of the *Life of Saint Antony* that it contains many kinds of “words.” That is, there is the Word himself, Jesus Christ, and there are also the words of the Fathers; then there are the revealed words of Scripture; and there are also the words of vision, or direct revelation. Antony was often the recipient of these latter words. For example, in saying 26 Antony is asked to explain a passage of Leviticus. Retreating into solitude, its explanation is revealed to him in a voice from heaven. Again, the first two sayings of the Antony collection themselves show Antony’s direct, divine mentoring, when his queries are answered directly by divine messengers. The *Life* reflects this aspect of Antony’s experience: “When Antony sat alone on the mountain, if ever in his reflections he failed to find a solution, it was revealed to him by Providence in answer to his prayer: the happy man was, in the words of Scripture, *taught of God*.”²⁴

Among Antony’s many direct revelations are visions modeled on Scriptural events. In the *Life*, for example, Antony has two visions informed by the book of Daniel: at Chapter 66 he has a vision of the passing of souls from earth to heaven and at Chapter 82 he has a vision of Arian sacrilege. Both of these revelations imitate aspects of Daniel’s visions. In particular, the second vision glosses Daniel’s account of the abomination of desolation in Daniel 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

An important question that arises in relation to such visions is how to understand them *vis-à-vis* Scripture. There must be a method of distinguishing authentic and inauthentic visions. In the *Life*, Antony suggests that devils can create false visions, either literally masquerading as phantasms or through ostensibly pious psychic suggestions that lead ultimately to discouragement and despair (such suggestions might include fasting beyond one's ability or disturbing much needed rest with encouragements to prayer etc.). How does Antony identify true and false visions?

There are two ways of note. The first is his general counsel on the discernment of spirits:

A vision of the holy ones is not turbulent... But it comes so quietly and gently that instantly joy and gladness and courage arise in the soul. For with them is our Lord who is our joy, and the power of God the Father. And the thoughts of the soul remain untroubled and unruffled, so that in its own bright transparency it is able to behold those who appear. A longing for things divine and for the things of the future life takes possession of it, and its desire is that it may be wholly united to them if it could but depart with them.... On the other hand, the attack and appearance of the evil ones is full of confusion, accompanied by crashing, roaring, and shouting: it could well be the tumult produced by rude boys and robbers. This at once begets terror in the soul, disturbance and confusion of thoughts, dejection, hatred of ascetics, indifference, sadness, remembrance of

kinsfolk, and fear of death; and then a desire for evil, a disdain for virtue, and a complete subversion of character.²⁵

Antony, then, provides a thorough account by which to distinguish between good and evil visions.

The second way of distinguishing them belongs to the character of the visions themselves. Arguably it is precisely the biblical structure of the visions mentioned above which lends them their credibility. Patterned on the book of Daniel, the visions are imbued with a standard of Scriptural revelation. Their Scriptural resonances establish, I would argue, the priority of Scripture to every personal revelation against which they can be measured. It is in their conformity to Scripture that visions are evaluated and authenticated. As we have seen elsewhere, the matrix of Scripture interprets life. Scripture provides the exegesis of lived experience including visions.

The sufficiency of Scripture, the tradition of ascetic exegesis and Scripture's exegesis of lived experience are all themes describing the *Life's* theology of Scripture. Combined with the uses of Scripture exemplified in the sayings, the *Letters* can now be read with the general sense of Antony's hermeneutics.

III.4 Scripture and Antony's *Letters*

The sheer volume of Scriptural references and citations in Antony's *Letters*, whether explicit or oblique, makes the question of Antony's use of Scripture both

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 35, 36. Since Antony uses Elijah as the ascetic's model, one might suggest that this account of discernment glosses Elijah's experience of the "still small voice". For this insight, I am indebted to a comment made by Father Ezra Pickup.

exciting and complex. As Charles Kannengiesser has shown (and, in a less exhaustive manner, Samuel Rubenson), a sampling of the *Letters*' Scriptural references include the books of Genesis, I Samuel, Joel, John, 2 Timothy and the Epistle to the Hebrews.²⁶ The array and diversity of Biblical citations/allusions, however, does not imply the absence of governing themes informing both Antony's apprehension and application of Scripture. Rather, there are discernible emphases in Antony's use of Scripture which reveal both the "privileged aspects" of Antony's theology and a general orientation to the Bible.²⁷

The critical touchstones of Antony's use of Scripture have been alluded to throughout this investigation. Fundamentally, the *Letters* interpret Scripture in light of a unique, twofold model of salvation history. At its heart is an emphasis on Christ's *kenosis*. Christ heals the wound of sin and restores humanity to the integrity of its first formation. Christ's incarnation, however, is understood within an overarching historical schema the climax of which is his life, death and resurrection. This historical schema, articulated primarily in his first *Letter* and then referenced in the others, is more than a chronology. Rather, it is a chronological history that also represents a spiritual history and an anthropology.

Recall that Antony begins the first *Letter* by dividing souls into three types: "Some," he writes, "were reached by the Word of God through the law of promise and the discernment of the good inherent in them from their first formation. They did not hesitate but followed as readily as did Abraham, our father"; others, "through the

²⁶ Kannengiesser, *Handbook*, vol.2, 1462-1464; Rubenson, 58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1461. He writes: "The regular recurrence of verses like Prv 9:9 and Is 53:5, not only signals privileged aspects of Antony's thought, but it betrays also something like a structural awareness in the composition of the *Letters*."

testimonies of the written law... are aroused, and they try to enter into their calling"; and finally, others still "whose hearts are hard from the beginning" are awoken through "afflictions and chastisement... until... through their afflictions they are made aware and repent and return."²⁸ These three types of soul correspond to ancient Israel's chronological history, the first to the patriarchs, the second to Moses, and the third to the prophets.²⁹

Antony's history, then, is the Scriptures' account of Israel's spiritual pilgrimage. However, by interpreting both the corporate history of Israel (including the Church) and the individual in terms of this common threefold paradigm, Antony makes a profoundly suggestive claim about Scripture and the spiritual life. Scripture's historical narrative is in fact a narrative of every individual soul and it is as such that Antony's soteriology is developed in subsequent Letters.³⁰ Consider, for example, *Letter* four:

Everyone who fears God, and keeps his commandments is a servant of God. But in this service there is no fulfillment, although it is just, and a guide to adoption.

²⁸ *Letters*, I,2,3; 11; 15, 16.

²⁹ This latter identification requires clarification. The letters that rehearse Antony's history of salvation generally assume a threefold division of history, patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets. While the first *Letter* nowhere explicitly identifies the third type of soul with the age of the prophets, the *Letter's* chronology makes the most sense when read in relation to the other epistles. The third type of soul, then, "whose hearts are hard from the beginning" are those to whom the prophets were sent. For Scriptural evidence of this position consider, for example, Ezek 11:19 and 18:31. Numerous references to the heart are also made in Isaiah, Jeremiah and in Proverbs (Antony's most often cited wisdom text).

³⁰ The extent to which this history is both corporate and individual is subtle. It is critically important for an appreciation of Antony's exegetical method that what belongs to corporate history also belongs, by analogy, to the soul. However, the individual as such rarely appears in Antony's *Letters*. He is far too concerned with the corporate life of the Church and his theology presupposes that its unity constitutes humanity's best and original condition. Thus, individuals are in God to the extent that they are united with and lovingly disposed towards their neighbours. Community is the ineluctable context of every individual. See *Letter* six, 30-39 and 63-71.

Even the prophets and apostles, the holy choir, those elected by God to be entrusted with the apostolic message, were thus made prisoners in Christ through the benevolence of God the Father. For Paul says: *Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle*. And so the written law works with us in a good service until we are able to restrain all passions and to fulfill the good ministry of virtue through this apostolic [life?].³¹

This striking exegesis of the apostolic “prisoner” demonstrates clearly the extent to which Antony’s threefold frame informs his reading of Scripture. Christ’s prisoners are those for whom the Law is the determinate spiritual guide. As Antony argues throughout the *Letters*, such servitude is not itself perfection but a step towards it. Thus, his reading of Paul’s self-identification as a prisoner enrolls it into his model of salvation history and spiritual progress. The model of salvation history is the exegetical and hermeneutical key to Antony’s reading of the Bible.

This is seen in the new dimension *Letter* four adds to Antony’s uses of the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. What stood for salvation history and types of soul, here becomes (and is in fact for many of the *Letters*) a series of stages in the soul’s progress. The first stage is the fall from patriarchal self-knowledge (described in *Letter* two, verse 4, as the cooling of the law of promise), the second is the beginning of the restitution of this knowledge through obedience to the Law, and the final stage is

³¹ 6. 4-8. The Scripture in this passage conflates Paul’s self-description as prisoner and his calling as an Apostle. As such, Rubenson argues that it is a conflation of two verses, Ephesians 3:1 and Philemon 1:1. However, his claim that “called” and “prisoner” never occur in the same verse of Paul’s letters is not true. See Ephesians 4:1, where Paul is the prisoner, and the Ephesians those called.

Adoption as sons and daughters of God.³² Thus, salvation history reveals the corporate life of the faithful, it reveals individual types of soul, and it operates in each soul. Scripture is the exegetical key to lived experience, but it is understood within a framework that Antony has discerned (but which is itself entirely Scriptural!). This method of reading Scripture, which insistently locates it in relation to the progress of souls towards friendship with God, is representative of Antony's primary concern for the spiritual welfare of his disciples and fellow monastics. It is an exegetical method directed towards the desert father's pastoral ministry.

Of the *Letters'* many and varied Scriptural citations and allusions there are dominant or repeated references which construct the *Letters'* theology and which highlight its most significant features. Antony's reuse of select passages is profoundly suggestive of his own theological and spiritual foci. Pamela Bright has begun the work of exploring the contexts of these recurrent Scriptural references, in particular Prov 9:9.³³ Her examination locates the repeated passages in their Scriptural context and in the process discovers the contextual Scriptural themes contributing to Antony's theology. These themes are often alluded to, or even well developed, but without immediately recognizable Scriptural precedent.

³² It is interesting to consider the extent to which these stages correspond to Origen's threefold allegorical reading of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. Though there do not appear to be explicit connections, Origen's allegorical treatment of these texts (Proverbs representing moral purification, Ecclesiastes intellectual illumination and the Song of Solomon contemplative union) may echo, at the least, in Antony's use of Proverbs in Letter one's ascetic catechesis (see in particular verses 57-60). The significant difference, of course, between Antony and Origen is the former's emphasis throughout the *Letters* on Adoption as the spiritual life's summit. However, for Antony this is clearly associated with a vision of God, *pace* Origen, as seen in the previous discussion of his application of Israelite ("mind that sees God") to the ascetics.

³³ See Bright, 977-986 at 983-985.

Bright explores Prov 9:9 (repeated throughout the *Letters*, most often as a concluding commendation) and its connection with Antony's description of the Church as the House of Truth. She writes:

There is another tantalizing suggestion of a biblical source for the "house of truth" in relation to one of Antony's frequent citations from Scripture: "give occasion to the wise man, and he will be yet wiser" (*Proverbs* 9.9). The phrase... occurs in the immediate context of the feast of Wisdom:

Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars.

Now, having slaughtered a beast, spiced her wine, and spread her table,

She has sent her maidens to proclaim from the highest point of town:

'Let the simple turn in here'

She says to him who lacks sense,

'Come, eat the food I have prepared

and taste the wine that I have spiced.

Abandon the company of simpleton

And you will live

You will advance in understanding' (Prov.9.1-6).

The three verses that follow contrast the way an exhortation or a correction is received by the insolent or by the wise, concluding with the phrase favoured by Antony...³⁴

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 984.

Bright's identification of a possible connection between the House of Truth and Proverbs chapter nine is further supported when Antony's discussion of the House of Truth is contrasted in *Letter* six with a house of robbers, or a house of war: "Truly, my children, we dwell in a house of robbers and are bound by the bonds of death."³⁵ While the first six verses of Prov 9 detail Wisdom's invitation to the feast in her house, verses thirteen to eighteen offer a diabolical imitation of Wisdom's magnanimity:

A foolish woman is clamorous;
She is simple, and knows nothing.
For she sits at the door of her house,
On a seat by the highest places of the city,
To call to those who pass by,
Who go straight on their way:
'Whoever is simple,
let him turn in here';
And as for him who lacks understanding, she says to him,
'Stolen water is sweet,
And bread eaten in secret is pleasant.'
But he does not know that the dead are in there,
That her guests are in the depths of hell.³⁶

³⁵ 6.97. See as well 6.45-48.

³⁶ Prov 9:13-18.

The explicit contrast in the wisdom text between the two houses parallels Antony's contrast of the House of Truth with the house of robbers. In particular, both Proverbs and Antony emphasize that death dwells in this house and that it is specifically the house of those who lack understanding and who are seduced by foolishness. Antony writes, in his description of the house of war:

In truth, my children, I tell you that every man who delights in his own desires, and who is subdued to his own thoughts and sticks to what is sown in his own heart and rejoices in it... the soul of such a man is the breath of evil spirits and his counsel towards evil... and over such a one the demons [see Prov 9:13-15] have great power, because he has not dishonoured them before all men.³⁷

This example of Antony's use of Scripture, both a text and its context, extends to other repeatedly used texts in the *Letters*. For example, consider the *Letters*' repeated citation of Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" This passage is a model of Antony's theology of *kenosis*, and it is cited in five of the seven *Letters*. Its citation in Letter three is typical (it occurs in a similar place in Letter six, though there is some question in certain passages of its conflation with Galatians 1:4): it follows on a discussion of the Law, which is identified as an instance of God's visitation to wounded humanity. The *Letters*' then rapidly transition from the discussion of the Law to the account of Christ's *kenosis* in terms of Romans 8:32. This transition in fact mirrors the argument of Romans 8, which begins with a discussion of humanity's inability to fulfill

³⁷ 6.46-48.

the Law according to the flesh and proceeds to a discussion of Christ's fulfillment thereof and of the extension of this victory to all people. Paul's discussion culminates in the concept of adoption, crucial to Antony's theology. Thus, the *Letters* parallel the epistle:

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit... For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'³⁸

Arguably, Romans 8 is the most significant Scriptural text for the whole of the *Letters* containing as it does not only an affirmation of the Law's righteousness (but ultimate weakness through humanity's inability to fulfill it), but also a clear theology of Christ's *kenosis* and humanity's adoptive sonship. The chapter is in effect a *summa* of the *Letters'* dominant themes, as seen in the verses cited: Law, Christ, Adoption. In addition to this, the dominant role of the Holy Spirit in the *Letters'* theology is present in the chapter, which is given over wholly to the distinction between the flesh and the Spirit – a distinction echoed throughout Antony's text: "Beloved in the Lord, our members and

³⁸ Romans 8:2-4, 14,15.

joint heirs with the saints, I beseech you in the name of Jesus Christ to act so that he gives you all the Spirit of discernment to perceive and understand that the love I have for you is not the love of the flesh, but the love of godliness.”³⁹ Love of the flesh, argues Paul in Romans 8, leads to death and is the antithesis of life in the Spirit: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually is life and peace.”⁴⁰

Antony's theology of Law and adoption is not the only feature of the *Letters'* theology found in Romans 8. As well, the *Letters'* ascetic imperative -- that is, their exhortation to ascetic struggle -- finds Scriptural warrant in Romans 8:18-23. Asceticism is the monks "groaning" in anticipation of adoption:

For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. And not only they, but we also who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.⁴¹

In addition, the *Letters'* emphasis on the Spirit's guidance of penitent souls (especially emphasized in *Letter one*) mirrors Romans 8:24-30:

³⁹ 3.3,4. See as well 4.2 and 5.2.

⁴⁰ Romans 8:5,6.

⁴¹ Romans 8:22,23.

Likewise the Spirit also helps our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.⁴²

Romans 8, then, provides a critical window onto the *Letters'* account of spiritual progress and illuminates the theological argument informing Antony's epistles. Antony's theology is fundamentally Pauline both in its emphasis on Christ's *kenosis* and in its account of the movement from sin to righteousness to adoption. Like Prov 9:9, Romans 8 is an example of another instance in which Antony's explicit use of a single verse of Scripture reveals a much deeper and more profound implicit engagement with the verse's context. The structure of his own arguments is actually built on the model of select passages of Scripture.

As with the sayings and the *Life*, Antony's *Letters* highlight the sufficiency of Scripture for the edification of Antony's monastic brethren. Recall Antony's repeated citation of Scripture in saying 19, discussed above. There, in response to his disciples' request for a word of guidance, he insists on offering Scripture. This insistence is echoed in the *Letters*. They are structured in imitation of Scripture, effectively repeating it to the brethren through allusion, paraphrase, and explicit citation.

In addition to this, Antony's use of Scripture relies upon a complex exegesis of salvation history, which reads the Bible at the levels of history, types of soul, and as

⁴² Romans 8:26,27.

operative within each soul. These levels of interpretation (and, indeed, his theology as a whole) are grounded on the *kenosis* of Christ. Scripture provides the narrative by which Antony appropriates, through theological reflection, a pastoral theology of spiritual perfection. This theology provides the ground for identifying types of soul and their level of spiritual maturity. Hence, it is a pastoral theology that aids Antony's discernment of spirits in the monks under his guidance. Scripture is the means to self-knowledge and knowledge of others. In this, Antony demonstrates that, prior to any exegesis he undertakes, Scripture is itself an exegesis of the world, revealing its history, the sources of its pain and division, and ultimately its perfection.

Conclusion:
A Forgotten Theme: Friendship with God

In the introduction to this thesis I sketched the outlines of an abiding question which, though not explicitly its subject, has informed this thesis: how can Christians know themselves and the unity of knowledge and experience in the wake of the fragmentation of knowledge? This was a general question motivating my research, but it was not the only question. I began this project with the intention of writing on the early twentieth-century theologian Pavel Florensky's *Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. In this text, Florensky explicates the faith through a rigorous reading of ancient and contemporary theology and philosophy, western and eastern, in a style largely indebted to the symbolist poets of the late nineteenth century. Amongst the issues that brought me to Florensky, and subsequently to Antony, are interests in the viability of asceticism in the Christian faith and in spiritual direction.

A practical response to the culture of excess characteristic of contemporary North American culture and media is the redefinition of the human not in consumptive terms, but relationally. Philosophers associated with the "ethical turn" in twentieth century philosophy and theology have attempted this, notably in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Strikingly, both Antony and Florensky highlight relationship, specifically friendship, as critical to the Christian life. Indeed, more than critical, it is for them (while in different ways) its summit.

For Antony, as we have seen, humanity's adoption as Christ's friends is the end towards which all of his spiritual counsel tends. In fact, this friendship is the highest moment in the spiritual life and the condition of true self-knowledge. It is in relation to

Christ that humans know themselves and such knowledge is proportional to the depth their lives in Christ. According to Antony, grace enables the struggle by which our wills freely choose Christ. That is, in his choosing us, we are made free to choose him. Thus, Antony argues that true freedom and self-authenticity are in our adoption as Christ's friends. Friendship is the *telos*. Friendship is one of the principles of the Christian life easily identifiable in Antony's *Letters*, among which are repentance, self-knowledge, asceticism, and discernment. These latter principles lead to friendship with God and *theosis*.

Are there models of this friendship? What does it look like? For Antony, it is known through Scripture's revelation and the appropriation of this revelation as true. This appropriation provides the context for spiritual progress.

I conclude this thesis with a long pasasage from Olivier Clément's *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology*, detailing a vision of transfiguration shared by St. Seraphim of Sarov and his disciple Motovilov. This vision, I think, is of the world into which Antony sought to guide his disciples, a world wholly transfigured by grace in which, even in this life, the body takes on something of the appearance promised to it in the resurrection. The intimacy of this shared vision between spiritual father and disciple suggests the primacy of friendship critical to Antony, both with God and, through him, with one another.

There are plenty of examples in Christian hagiography of the transfiguration of the senses and body, but the most significant is certainly St. Seraphim of Sarov.

After living for a longtime under a rule of silence, Seraphim seemed animated directly by the Spirit; he prayed continuously; thousands of visitors came to him; he read hearts and prophesied and healed souls and bodies. One day in the winter of 1831 he was in the forest talking to a young layman, Motovilov, whom he had cured, and whose spiritual father he had become. Motovilov, in a state of mental anguish, asked the old monk how to discern the presence of the Holy Spirit. Seeing that mere words would have no effect, Seraphim instantly appeared before him transfigured, and made him come into the light.

‘We are both in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Why are you not looking at me?’

‘I cannot, Father. Lightning is flashing from your eyes. Your face is brighter than the sun.’

‘Do not be afraid, you are shining as brightly as I. You are also now in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, otherwise you would be unable to see me... Have the courage to look at me. God is with us.’

‘I looked at him, and a still greater fear seized me. Imagine someone who is talking to you -- and his face appears like the sun at midday. You see his lips moving and the expression of his eyes changing, you hear the sound of his voice, you feel his hands gripping you by the shoulders, but at the same time you see neither his hands, nor his body, nor yours, only brilliance which spreads all around, to a distance of several yards, lighting up the snow which was settling on the grass and falling gently on the great staretz and on me.’

Then St. Seraphim, by a series of questions, makes Motovilov undertake a kind of exploration of his new state, bringing him to acknowledge that he feels 'extraordinarily well', and that he is filled 'with an inexpressible silence and peace'. And besides peace, gentleness, joy, warmth and fragrance. 'Years ago, when I went dancing, my mother would sprinkle me with scents that she used to buy in the best shops... but their smell could not be compared with these spices.' As a result of Seraphim's teaching, the Spirit enlightened not only the soul but the body, making it impervious to cold and transfiguring even the sense of smell, the most primitive of the senses, bound to the mysterious smell of the earth.

'And so it must be,' the saint concluded. 'Divine grace dwells in our lowest depths, in our hearts. As the Lord has said, the Kingdom of Heaven is within you. By the Kingdom of Heaven he means the grace of the Holy Spirit. It is within us at this moment, warming us, enlightening us, rejoicing our senses and filling our heart with joy.'⁴³

⁴³ Olivier Clément, *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology* (New York: New City Press), 67-68.

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