Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus

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

INTRODUCTION

Like other fourth-century monks of Kellia, the hermit community in Lower Egypt where he passed the last fifteen years of his life, Evagrius Ponticus spent most of his waking hours in some form of prayer. Unlike the other monks, he also wrote about it. Evagrius was a genius at psycho-dynamic analysis in service of ascetic and contemplative development, and he used his skill to probe his own experience of prayer and to teach

others. Through Evagrius, modern scholars have their best access to this aspect of early monasticism often neglected in recent study of the ascetic life. The purpose of this essay is to explore how Evagrius deals with a tension fundamental to his own life of prayer, that between a theology of "imageless" prayer and the incarnational dimensions of a religion based on sacred texts. Although Evagrius posits imageless prayer to be the monastic spiritual goal, he writes of experiences of light during imageless prayer and describes such prayer using biblical metaphors. To understand how Evagrius resolved—or at least handled—this tension, we must consider his writings on prayer, his own practice of prayer, his understanding of mental operation, and his theory of biblical exegesis. First, however, we must note his theological presuppositions.

IN SEARCH OF A UNIFIED THEORY OF EVERYTHING

Evagrius was schooled in the philosophical and theological traditions of Christian Hellenism, particularly those of Origen. The greatest theologians of the day were his teachers: Basil the Great ordained him lector, and Gregory Nazianzen both ordained him deacon and took him to Constantinople in 379. Evagrius doubtless acquired his taste for Origen from them. His own Christology and Trinitarian theology, however, evidence much more than Basil's or Gregory's the influence of Origen's cosmic epic sketched in the treatise *On First Principles*. Evagrius' protological and eschatological speculations may have been encouraged by his later friendship with those ardent readers of Origen, Melania and Rufinus, whom he met in Jerusalem in the early 380s after his precipitous departure from Constantinople in the fallout of an impossible romance.[1] After Melania packed him off to Egypt, Evagrius continued to correspond with both Melania and Rufinus, and his most famous trilogy of writings is addressed to a monk who probably lived with them on the Mount of Olives.[2] One of his last letters, traditionally known as the *Letter to*

1. On Evagrius' relationship with Rufinus and Melania, see Palladius, *Lausiac History* 38.8–9 (ed. Cuthbert Butler, *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, 2 vols. Texts and Studies 6.1–2 [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1898 and 1904], 2:119.10–120.6). In references to the *Lausiac History*, I will use the division of the chapters into subsections as in Robert T. Meyer, *The Lausiac History*, ACW 34 (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1964). For analysis, see Gabriel Bunge, *Briefe aus der Wüste*, Sophia 24 (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1986), 29–37, 183–88, 193–200; Elizabeth Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 22, 188–93.

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

Melania (though perhaps actually written to Rufinus), contains the clearest exposition of his overall theological vision and is a valuable key to his more cryptic *Kephalaia Gnōstika*.[3]

As Evagrius tells the story, the "mind's long journey to the Holy Trinity"[4] is actually a return voyage.[5] The theological framework he proposes is based upon that advanced by Origen more than 150 years earlier as "a research theology" meant to engage philosophically educated Christian readers.[6] Certain biblical texts lent themselves to such speculation, and Evagrius used his imagination to correlate biblical themes and philosophical imperatives as had Origen.[7] Gabriel Bunge cautions that the story must be read ontologically rather than chronologically,[8] another way of reminding readers not to apply to Evagrius' own writings the kind of historical or literal reading that he considered limiting and even misleading.

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

4. Jeremy Driscoll's title for his translation of the *Sentences for Monks* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993).

5. For overviews of Evagrius' theological framework, see Antoine Guillaumont, *Les 'Képhalaia gnostica' d'Évagre le Pontique et l'histoire de l'Origénisme chez les grecs et chez les syriens,* Patristica Sorbonensia 5 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962), 37–39 and 103–13; Michael O'Laughlin provides a useful synthesis with extensive quotation of the *Kephalaia Gnōstika* in *Origenism in the Desert* (Th.D. thesis, Harvard Divinity School, 1987), 120–52. Gabriel Bunge seeks to correct what he believes are misplaced emphases in other accounts, especially Guillaumont's: see *Briefe aus der Wüste,* 140–64, and "Mysterium Unitatis: Der Gedanke der Einheit von Schöpfer und Geschöpf in der evagrianischen Mystik," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 36 (1989): 449–69, esp. 457–63. Jeremy Driscoll follows Bunge's lead in *The "Ad monachos" of Evagrius Ponticus,* Studia Anselmiana 104 (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1991), 5–10, 15–18. For an overview keyed to the role of prayer, see Bunge's *Das Geistgebet: Studien zum Traktat De Oratione des Evagrios Pontikos* (Köln: Luthe-Verlag, 1987), 62–73.

6. Henri Crouzel describes Origen's project in *On First Principles* as a discussion "*par manière d'exercice,* c'est à dire par manière de recherche, des points de doctrine sur lesquels la tradition de l'Église ne livre pas à son époque rien de clair" (Introduction to SC 252:48). For a more extended discussion, see his "Qu'a voulu faire Origène en composant le *Traité des Principes,*" *BLE* 76 (1975): 161–86 and 241–60, esp. 241–49.

7. For example, in the *Kephalaia Gnōstika* Evagrius frequently cites Rom 8.17 and 29, 1 Cor 15.24–28, Eph 3.10. The influence on both Origen and Evagrius of cosmological and eschatological themes from the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline letters (and of similar themes from the Wisdom literature) is enormous and deserves its own study.

8. "Mysterium Unitatis," 457.

The fundamental element of Evagrius' cosmic vision is the doctrine of the primordial creation of all rational creatures, the *logikoi*.[9] In this creation there was a unity between God and all *logikoi*,[10] and among the *logikoi* themselves there was common purpose, the contemplation of the Trinity, "essential knowledge."[11] Then came disruption of both aspects of primordial unity through distracted "movement" away from contemplation, a possibility inherent in rational creatures endowed with free will.[12] This choice resulted in a "second creation," an act of "judgment" and "foresight" (προνοία, "providence") in which each intellect was given a body as well as a status (a "world" and an "era") appropriate to its degree of declination from God.[13] Thus angels, humans, and demons are all rational creatures but they differ in bodily form and dominant energizing force.[14]

Thus, where there had been equality of nature and purpose there is now a diversity of rational creatures and of the arrangements made for them. Where there had been only essential knowledge there is now "wisdom full of varieties" (Eph 3.10).[15] The challenge, then, is to learn from the providential array of creation, and the kinds of knowledge it contains, a way back to essential knowledge. This learning is possible through the Son of God, agent and manager of the "second creation," who, as the Word, contains all knowledge and, as incarnate Savior, provides access to it.[16]

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9. This is sometimes called the "pre-existence of souls," though that imprecise term obscures both their created nature and the fact that for both Origen and Evagrius the "soul" is used to describe a subsequent stage in the evolution of *logikoi* (see *Melania* 29–30 [Frankenberg, 618.20–30; Parmentier, ll. 219–36]; *K.G.* 3.28).

10. *Melania* 29 (Frankenberg, 618.20–27; Parmentier, ll. 219–31); *K.G.* 1.50, 2.64, 3.24.

11. *Psalms* 88.21 (PG 12:1549A); cf. the Syriac *īda'tā 'ītyāytā* in *K.G.* 2.47, 3.12, 3.49, 4.77, 4.87, 5.55–56, 5.81, 6.34, 6.73. See also οὐσιώδης σοφία in *Psalms* 138.7 (Pitra, 342), 144.3 (Pitra, 354).

12. *K.G.* 1.49, 1.51, 3.22, 6.36.

13. *K.G.* 2.64, 2.76, 3.26, 3.38, 4.4, 6.20, 6.75, 6.85.

14. Following the tripartite anthropology he favored, in *K.G.* 1.68 Evagrius characterizes angels as particularly attuned to knowledge and contemplation (= dominated by the νοῦς), humans as typically motivate by (misdirected) desire (= dominated by ἐπιθυμία), and demons as driven by wrath (= dominated by θυμός). Their bodily compositions are predominantly fire (angels), earth (humans), and air (demons). Cf. *K.G.* 2.68 on relative lightness and heaviness of bodies.

15. For Evagrius' use of this text to refer to natural contemplation, see *K.G.* 1.43, 2.2, 2.21, 3.11, 4.7, 5.84; *Psalms* 122.1 (PG 12:1633C); *Proverbs* 27.9 (G 333); *Ecclesiastes* 3.14 (G 18).

16. See the *Letter of Faith* (*Epistula fidei*), *passim*; *Melania* 7–8, 18–21, 56–63, 67 (Frankenberg, 612.30–614.3, 616.6–20 + Vitestam, 22.4–27.2; Parmentier, ll. 47–60,

Evagrius followed hints in Origen's *On First Principles* about passage through many "worlds and ages" on the way to knowledge of the Trinity,[17] and about the eventual return of all rational creatures (including demons and Satan) to the original unity.[18] He also asserted that, in the final reunion of all rational creatures with God, "the form of the body" will pass away along with all else belonging to the second creation.[19] The exact status of these same points in Origen's theology has been debated since the fourth century.[20] Evagrius' highly compact literary style, especially in the *Kephalaia Gnōstika*, makes it difficult to know how definitively he himself held these views. Origen's more ample style lent itself to nuance and conditional statement. Evagrius can give the impression of a much more systematic approach, an impression strengthened by his biblical *scholia* with their often formulaic exegesis keyed to his schema of the monastic life.[21]

Evagrius believed that only those who had made some progress in monastic life could properly situate his esoteric teaching within a biblical and doctrinal framework, or avoid focusing on the system to the neglect of the fundamental obligations of monastic life. Thus he cautioned in his

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134–57, 430–97, 516–23) and Parmentier's commentary, pp. 36–37. The *Kephalaia Gnōstika* is permeated by a complex Christology and soteriology; see, e.g., *K.G.* 3.72, 4.2–4, 4.8–9, 6.14–16, 6.18, 6.33–34, 6.39–40, 6.42, 6.79. On Evagrius' Christology, see François Refoulé, "La christologie d'Évagre et l'Origénisme," *OCP* 27 (1961): 211–66; Guillaumont, *'Képhalaia gnostica,'* 117–19. Bunge situates it within a Trinitarian mysticism in "Mysterium Unitatis."

17. *K.G.* 1.17, 1.24, 2.25, 2.49, 5.11. Cf. Guillaumont, *'Képhalaia gnostica,'* 115–16, for analysis of the biblical imagery used by Evagrius.

18. *K.G.* 6.15, 6.27.

19. *K.G.* 1.26; cf. *Melania* 22–29 (Frankenberg, 616.20–618.27; Parmentier, ll. 158–231), *K.G.* 1.29, 1.58, 2.17, 2.62, 3.66, 3.68.

20. Henri Crouzel has sought to rehabilitate the picture of Origen's thought created by Koetschau's "restored" text of *On First Principles* in GCS 22; see the introduction to his own edition in SC 252:33. On the succession of stages and the question of *metempsychosis*, see *On First Principles* 1.6.3 (SC 252:200–204; cf. Crouzel's commentary in SC 253:101 n. 29) and 1.8.4 (pp. 228–32; cf. SC 253:119–25); on the restoration of all things (ἀποκατάστασις), see 1.6.1–3 (pp. 194–204; cf. SC 253:91–101 nn. 6–27), 1.8.3 (pp. 226–28; cf. SC 253:116–17 nn. 11–15) and 3.5.6–8 (SC 268:228–34; cf. SC 269:112–19 nn. 34–49); on the ultimate status of the body, 1.6.4 (pp. 204–6; cf. SC 253:101–2 nn. 30–34), 2.2–3 (pp. 246–74; cf. SC 253:137–58), 3.6 (SC 268:234–54; cf. SC 269:119–50). The papers published in *Origeniana Quarta* (ed. Lothar Lies [Innsbruck/ Wien: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1987]) address particularly the controversial aspects of Origen's thought.

21. See Michael O'Laughlin, "New Questions Concerning the Origenism of Evagrius," *Origeniana Quinta*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press/ Peeters, 1992), 528–34, esp. 529–32.

manual for monastic teachers, the *Gnōstikos*, "to the young, one must say nothing about things that pertain to knowledge nor allow them to handle books of that kind, for they cannot resist the perils that such contemplation entails."[22] Presumably he refers to Origen's *On First Principles* and his own *Kephalaia Gnōstika*. Evagrius' teaching on the ascetic dimension of monastic life (πρακτική) does not depend on the theological vision outlined in the *Kephalaia Gnōstika* or *Letter to Melania*. However, even in relatively accessible texts like the *Praktikos* and the biblical commentaries, Evagrius situates his teaching within the broader vision by describing stages of ascetic discipline and contemplation.[23] Thus, through fidelity to the *praktikē*, one grows into the emotional integration Evagrius calls *apatheia* ("freedom from [control by] the passions"). Deeper engagement with God's work in creation then becomes possible through "natural contemplation" (θεωρία φυσική), first of the visible and then of the invisible created orders.[24] The ultimate goal, of course, is "theology" (θεολογία), return to essential knowledge of the Trinity. For Evagrius, knowledge is the fruit of contemplation, and the usual contemplative medium is the Bible, which is to be interpreted according to the stages of the spiritual journey.[25] Attentiveness to oneself and to the natural creation are collateral forms of contemplation, but always in dialogue with biblical texts. Through asceticism, human beings hone their capacity for understanding the revelation of God's plan and intentions as found in the Bible, the key to multiform knowledge and necessary preparation for essential knowledge.

22. *Gnōstikos* 25 (Syriac ed. Frankenberg, 548.28–35). Cf. *Gnōstikos* 36 on not revealing the "highest explanation" (ὑψηλότερος λόγος) about judgment to seculars and the young, lest one unduly reduce the motivation of those still spurred to virtue by fear of punishment. Evagrius may be thinking here of the doctrine of ἀποκατάστασις, which suggests that all rational creatures are eventually saved. In *Gnōstikos* 23 he allows the teacher to feign ignorance about a matter inappropriate for the inquirer to know (Syriac ed. Frankenberg, 548.24–26)

23. Often as a preliminary stage setting, as in *Praktikos* 1–3, *Proverbs* 1–3, *Ecclesiastes* 1–3. The same themes recur elsewhere in those works and are the basis of the teaching program outlined in the *Gnōstikos*.

24. See *Melania* 5–18 (Frankenberg, 612.22–616.10; Parmentier, ll. 35–140); the *Kephalaia Gnōstika* is full of references to "first" and "second" natural contemplations, corresponding to the λογικοί as "first creation" (unembodied or invisible) and as "second creation" (embodied); see, e.g., *K.G.* 2.2, 2.4, 3.24 and 3.26, 4.10–11, 5.32. For a different numbering, but a complete schema, see *K.G.* 1.27. The best overviews of the system are the introductory chapters of the *Praktikos, Proverbs,* and *Ecclesiastes,* as noted above.

25. See, e.g., *Gnōstikos* 18–20 (Syriac ed. Frankenberg, 548.2–19) and the section on Evagrian exegesis later in this essay.

By the end of the fourth century, Origen's speculations were creating problems for those attracted to his theology. Questions that Origen could reasonably declare open in the third century had closed considerably a century-and-a-half later. The history of the "Origenist Controversy" is complex and much remains unclear about what was actually at stake.[26] Scholars still argue the precise links between the teachings of Origen and Evagrius, and between those of Evagrius and enthusiastic monastic readers in sixth-century Palestine who taught that human beings will eventually become "equals of Christ" (ἰσοχριστοί) as part of the eschatological restoration of all things.[27] Even before Evagrius' death in 399, his friend and admirer Palladius had been attacked in the campaign against Origenism begun by Epiphanius of Salamis.[28] Evagrius himself lamented the hostility abroad at the time.[29] After Theophilus of Alexandria's sudden embrace of the anti-Origenist campaign around the time of Evagrius' death, the monastic group with which Evagrius was closely associated, the "Tall Brothers" of Nitria and their followers, became a target.[30] As we shall see, it was Ammonius, eldest of the Tall Brothers, who accompanied Evagrius on a journey to Upper Egypt to consult John of Lycopolis about the experience of light during prayer.

26. On this controversy of the fourth–sixth centuries, see particularly Guillaumont, *'Képhalaia gnostica'*; Jonathan Dechow, *Dogma and Mysticism in Early Christianity: Epiphanius of Cyprus and the Legacy of Origen,* NAPS Patristic Monograph Series 13 (Macon: Mercer Univ. Press, 1988); Clark, *Origenist Controversy*; Brian Daley, "What did 'Origenism' Mean in the Sixth Century?" *Origeniana Sexta: Origène et la Bible,* ed. Gilles Dorival and Alain Le Boulluec, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 118 (Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press/ Peeters, 1995), 627–38. Bunge focuses on Evagrius' role in the fourth-century phase in *Briefe aus der Wüste,* 54–70, and more broadly in "Origenismus–Gnostizismus: Zum geistesgeschichtlichen Standort des Evagrios Pontikos," *VC* 40 (1986): 24–54, where he argues that Evagrius' seeming Origenism was actually a strategy for dealing with contemporary Gnosticism. For a useful assessment of the various perspectives on this question, especially Bunge's, see O'Laughlin, "New Questions."

27. Henri Crouzel, for example, blames Evagrius for turning Origen's supple thought into a condemnable system (see, e.g., *Origen,* tr. A. S. Worrall [New York: Harper & Row, 1989], 175–79). Gabriel Bunge has argued analogously against those, such as Antoine Guillaumont, whom he thinks have read Evagrius too much in terms of the anathemas of 553: see, e.g., *Briefe aus der Wüste,* 59 n. 166, 67 n. 188, 144 n. 153; "Origenismus-Gnostizismus"; "Mysterium Unitatis," *passim.*

28. Epiphanius writing to John of Jerusalem, preserved as Jerome's *Letter 51.9* (CSEL 54:411–12). See Clark, *Origenist Controversy,* 22–23.

29. *Letters 51–53, 59* (Frankenberg, 598.13–602.3, 608.14–27). See Bunge, *Briefe aus der Wüste,* 67–70 and 189.

30. See Theophilus' synodical letter of 400 (= Jerome, *Letter* 92.1 [CSEL 55:147–48]) and the discussion in Clark, *Origenist Controversy,* 105–8.

Evagrius' teaching lurks in this first round of the monastic Origenist controversy even though he is not named in the extant sources.[31] Given Jerome's professed loathing for Origen's *On First Principles* and especially for Rufinus' translation of it, one can only imagine his reaction had he seen the *Kephalaia Gnōstika*. When he finally did take note of Evagrius it was in a very different context.[32] In time Evagrius' propagation and development of views attributed (however fairly or unfairly) to Origen would severely damage his own reputation in the Greek and Latin Christian worlds (again, however fairly or unfairly). And, indeed, in the sixth-century phase of the controversy, Evagrius' teaching would move explicitly to the fore, and his name would join those of Origen and Didymus in the condemnations of the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553.[33]

Evagrius' theological sophistication and closeness to eminent representatives of Nicene orthodoxy make it difficult to understand his attraction to what had already in his day become risky theological speculation. Palladius records that his hero was once confronted by three demons (masquerading as clerics) who interrogated him in turn on charges of being an Arian, a Eunomian, and an Apollinarian.[34] The accusations manifest a range of concerns about Evagrius' teaching, including anxieties about the legacy of Origen. Palladius wanted Evagrius to have his day in court.

We know that Evagrius' talents were not always appreciated by those among whom he lived. Although he is honored in the Alphabetical Col-

31. Bunge argues vigorously (and apologetically) in his accounts of the Origenist controversy that Evagrius was unnamed because 1) the anti-Origenists must have seen nothing in his teaching that merited condemnation; 2) he himself chose not to engage in polemics (see note 27). Clark, however, sees traces of Evagrian theology in the positions condemned by Theophilus (*Origenist Controversy,* 84, 110–11, 114, 117).

32. In 415, Jerome, preoccupied with battling Pelagianism, attacked Evagrius by name for his teaching on ἀπάθεια (Jerome's *Letter* 133.3 [CSEL 56:244–45]).

33. The surviving documents of the Council itself do not name him, but contemporary accounts by Cyril of Scythopolis in the *Life of Sabas* (ch. 90, ed. Eduard Schwartz, *Kyrillos von Skythopolis,* TU 49.2 [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1939], 199.1–6) and Evagrius Scholasticus (*H.E.* 4.38, ed. J. Bidez and L. Parmentier, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius* [London: Methuen, 1898], 189.26–29) do include his name among those anathematized, as does the reaffirmation by the Sixth Ecumenical Council in 680–81 of the previous council's decrees. See Guillaumont, '*Képhalaia gnostica,*' 136–40.

34. See the very brief form of the story in *Historia Lausiaca* 38.11 (Butler, 2:121.9–122.1). Butler also provides the text of a much longer Greek form (*Lausiac History,* 1:131–35) that shows affinities with the Coptic life of Evagrius edited by E. Amélineau (*De historia lausiaca* [Paris: Leroux, 1887], 121.11–124.17). Bunge has argued for the Palladian origin of the longer versions ("Palladiana. I: Introduction aux fragments coptes de l'Histoire Lausiaque," *Studia Monastica* 32 [1990]: 106–7).

lection of the *Apophthegmata patrum*, the last piece (of seven) relates that, after he spoke up in a meeting at Kellia, one of the priests silenced him by remarking, "We know, Abba, that if you were still in your own land you would be a bishop and the leader (κεφαλή) of many; instead, you sit as a foreigner here."[35] He himself noted the risk of erudition, for in the *Gnōstikos* he alerts prospective monastic teachers to the likelihood of malicious criticism.[36] The pain was real: though at night demons themselves torment the spiritual teacher (πνευματικὸς διδάσκαλος), during the day they work through the slanders and threats of other human beings (*Prayer* 139).

Why then did Evagrius place his ascetic and spiritual theology within such a problematic framework? The question cannot be definitively answered. I would like to suggest, however, that Evagrius' teaching on prayer and his protological/cosmological framework are somehow linked. In thinking about the *purpose* of prayer he would inevitably have considered how an individual's practice of prayer relates to the larger process of salvation itself. In reflecting upon the *experience* of prayer, that is to say, its nature and development throughout a life of asceticism and deepening contemplative insight, he would have pondered theological issues about the nature of the human person and the knowability of God that would lead him, given his education and interests, to the cosmic perspective that had so intrigued Origen. Like Origen, Evagrius seems to have been fascinated by the idea of a "unified theory of everything"[37] that would offer a theologically and philosophically compelling vison of human existence. The framework Evagrius found in Origen's writings and then made his own allowed him to understand prayer not as escape from the world or avoidance of the complexity of human life, but as a move toward keener awareness of the vastness and intricacies of God's work in Creation, and thereby toward knowledge of God.[38] In the progress from wordy to

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35. Evagrius 7 (PG 65:176A).

36. *Gnōstikos* 32. Cf. *Antirrhētikos* 5.32 on restraining the urge to write harmful words against those who have caused one distress (Frankenberg, 516.20–21); *Antirrhētikos* 5.34 and 5.56 are about how to handle persecution by other monks (Frankenberg, 516.24–26 and 520.9–11). Of the sixty-four scenarios described in book 5 of the *Antirrhētikos,* only 5.32 and 5.56 are written in the first person.

37. The term comes from the effort of modern physics to unify both general relativity and quantum mechanics in a single theory.

38. Brian Daley cites Manlio Simonetti's characterization of fourth-century Origenism as "supratutto un modo di vivere la religione cristiana, in cui una grande fede si coniugava con altrettanto grande libertà di pensiero e un ardente slancio mistico," all formulated in Platonic terms (Simonetti, "La controversia origeniana:

wordless prayer, from image-filled to imageless prayer, Evagrius could anticipate the return to integrated, unified knowledge that he believed to be human destiny. This vision was not for himself alone: Evagrius' willingness to teach and to write about it suggests a pastoral generosity toward his fellow seekers, at least the educated among them, that was another legacy of his master, Origen.[39]

EVAGRIUS' WRITINGS ON PRAYER

The present state of the Evagrian corpus of writings is tangled, and those recovering his vision of the monastic life must negotiate a series of textual and linguistic challenges.[40] The original Greek text of many works has been lost or fragmented, and some of the ancient translations show evidence of doctrinal retouching.[41] Many key works remain unedited, and some of the most important survive only in Syriac and Armenian versions that have been only partially published.[42] The relative chronology of his works and some sense of their various audiences is only slowly emerging. Evagrius' writings often overlap, with both themes and actual texts shared among them. Nonetheless, good editions have been steadily emerging in the last decades through the work of Antoine and Claire Guillaumont and their student Paul Géhin.

Study of Evagrius' teaching on prayer relies on three principal texts: first, his treatise *On the Thoughts* (Περὶ λογισμῶν); second, a closely related collection of brief statements on various aspects of the spiritual life called *Reflections* (Σκέμματα); third, Evagrius' famous *On Prayer* (Περὶ προσευχῆς). I would suggest that we view these three works as a trilogy on the psychodynamics and theology of prayer. They seem to have been written after at least the first two parts of Evagrius' more famous

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caratteri e significato," *Aug* 26 [1986]: 29 as cited in "What did 'Origenism' mean in the Sixth Century?" 637).

39. On Evagrius as a teacher, see the introduction by Antoine and Claire Guillaumont to their edition of the *Gnōstikos* (SC 356:33–35). On Origen's pedagogical intentions, see Crouzel, "Qu'a voulu faire Origène?" 242–43.

40. See the introductions to the editions of Evagrius' works in SC 170 (*Praktikos*), 340 (*Proverbs*), 356 (*Gnōstikos*), 397 (*Ecclesiastes*), 438 (*Thoughts*); Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, "Le commentaire sur les Psaumes d'Évagre le Pontique," *OCP* 26 (1960): 307–48. Bibliographic information on the works of Evagrius can be found at the end of this article.

41. See Guillaumont, *'Képhalaia gnostica,'* 200–258, 333–37.

42. See Antoine Guillaumont, "Le rôle des versions orientales dans la récupération de l'oeuvre d'Évagre le Pontique," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1985): 64–74.

trilogy of *Praktikos*, *Gnōstikos*, and *Kephalaia Gnōstika*.[43] One can understand *On the Thoughts*, *Reflections*, and *On Prayer* as advanced works in two ways: they probe their topics in greater depth than do Evagrius' other works; they are probably the fruit of his mature consideration.

Of the three works on psychodynamics and the theology of prayer, *On the Thoughts* can be seen as a further stage of inquiry into themes of monastic psychology and demonic manipulation presented in Evagrius' fundamental ascetical work, the *Praktikos*. As a study of epistemology and neurology, it also explicates many of the central themes of *On Prayer*. Indeed, from a remark of Evagrius at the end of the first part (chs. 1–22) of *On the Thoughts*, he may have been writing *On Prayer* concurrently or at least had it in view.[44]

The *Reflections* are sentences touching on various aspects of Evagrius' teaching.[45] Most of the manuscripts contain about 60+ sentences. Three of the sentences are also found in *On the Thoughts* as parts of longer chapters,[46] suggesting that the *Reflections* were gathered and/or written later than *On the Thoughts*. Most of the material is not found in other extant Evagrian texts. None of it is to be found in *On Prayer*, though there are some thematic parallels.[47]

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43. The thematic pair of "place of God" and "light of the mind" to be discussed below distinguishes *Thoughts/Reflections/Prayer* from the other writings. When Evagrius refers to "light of the mind" in the *Praktikos* and *Gnōstikos*, he uses the term τὸ οἰκεῖον φέγγος, "own light," while in the other three works he uses φῶς. The distinction between "imprinting" and "nonimprinting" thoughts is not found in *Praktikos/Gnōstikos/Kephalaia Gnōstika*; in the latter work Evagrius does use some of the language of "impression" (*KG* 5.41–42), though in quite a different—and positive—way: the "intellectual world" is imprinted in the mind of the pure.

44. *Thoughts* 22.20–22, noting that the question of why *noēmata* of sensory matters destroy knowledge if they persist will be dealt with (λεχθήσεται) in the *Chapters on Prayer*. The text of *On the Thoughts* circulated in shorter (chs. 1–22) and longer forms, as did the *Praktikos*. The introduction to the recent edition of *Thoughts* is largely devoted to this issue; see especially SC 438:122–26. For the various forms of the *Praktikos*, see SC 170:120.

45. The Greek text of MS. Paris gr. 913 was edited by Muyldermans in his "Evagriana." In some Syriac MSS these sentences were included following the *Kephalaia Gnōstika*, and were sometimes thought to be a supplement to it; references to the Syriac tradition thus will describe the Σκέμματα as the "Pseudo-Supplement" to the *Kephalaia Gnōstika*. They are also known as the *Capita cognoscitiva*, the name given them by Jose Maria Suarez when he translated them into Latin in the late seventeenth century.

46. *Reflections* 13 = *Thoughts* 25.52–56; *Reflections* 23 = *Thoughts* 40.1–8; *Reflections* 24 = *Thoughts* 42.1–3; *Reflections* 40 is very similar to *Thoughts* 18.1–3.

47. E.g., the definition of prayer in *Reflections* 26 is similar to that of *Prayer* 71; for *Reflections* 23, also found in *Thoughts* 40, cf. *Prayer* 72.

The treatise *On Prayer*, the best known and widely circulated of these three works, is composed of 153 chapters of one to three sentences each. The chapters are compact, and the structure of the collection as a whole is elusive. Recurring issues weave a textual braid ornamented with thematic clusters. This treatise displays all of the ambivalences of its author's teaching on the nature and experience of prayer. As will be seen later, it contains some of the most radically apophatic dicta in pre-Dionysian Christian spirituality: prayer is the "laying aside" (ἀπόθεσις) of concepts (71), even "bare" ones (54–57). But Evagrius also writes about divine visitation in prayer and arrival at the "place of prayer." The challenge posed by Evagrius' paradoxical comments on prayer will be explored further below. At the very least, the descriptive range of Evagrius' teaching should challenge any tendency toward simplistic categorization of his spirituality as either apophatic or kataphatic.[48]

In at least one way, *On Prayer* stands apart from the way Evagrius writes about prayer in his other works. Almost everywhere else he describes an experience of seeing light during prayer. The only references to this "light of the mind" (φῶς τοῦ νοῦ) in *On Prayer* are warnings against the way demons manipulate it to suggest the illusion of spiritual progress ([73], 74–75). Perhaps Evagrius found himself more reticent about the light of the mind in this text keyed to the practice of prayer because of a fear that false experiences of illumination would mislead and prevent real progress. Fundamentally, however, *On Prayer* shares with both *On the Thoughts* and *Reflections* the central concern that thoughts and depictions be transcended in "true" or "pure" prayer. The theory of mental operation that underlies this concern is explained in the other two works.

DAILY PRACTICES OF PRAYER

Like other monks of his time and place, Evagrius prayed a liturgical office of twelve psalms during the latter part of each night and again in the early evening. The rest of the night and day, apart from a few hours of sleep (we are told that he slept a third of the night—four hours[49]), was used for his

48. One author has even described Evagrius (along with Origen) as an "intellectual, cataphatic theologian" while all of the other great spiritual writers of the Christian East are "apophatic saints." See John T. Chirban, "Developmental Stages in Eastern Orthodox Christianity," in Ken T. Wilber, *Transformations of Consciousness* (Boston: New Science Library, 1986), 285–314 and 322–23; see especially p. 323 n. 6.

49. This information about Evagrius' daily schedule is found only in the Coptic Palladiana (Amélineau, 113.5–7).

work as a copyist, seeing those who came for spiritual guidance, and his own writing. His work and other exercise was accompanied by the recitation of biblical texts. When copying he would have meditated on the text he was writing; when doing other kinds of manual labor he could recite from memory. The Coptic version of Evagrius' life records that he fought off sleep by spending most of the night walking in his courtyard "meditating and praying," "making his intellect search out contemplations of the Scriptures." The same source tells us that he also walked in the middle part of the day—when a monk was most vulnerable to attacks of accidie— to keep his mind focused on contemplation.[50]

This immersion in the Bible through copying, recitation, and "contemplation" would have been punctuated by prayer, standing or in prostration. According to Palladius, Evagrius prayed 100 such text-prayer units each day,[51] a figure also attributed to Macarius the Alexandrian.[52] Gabriel Bunge has suggested on Palladius' evidence that Evagrius would have stopped to pray every ten minutes throughout the day.[53] Both Evagrius' work and his interaction with visitors makes such periodicity improbable, though both copying and consultation could have included periods of prayer.

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50. Coptic: ⲉϥϥⲣⲟ ⲙⲡⲉϥⲕⲁ† ⲉⲙⲟⲩϣⲧ ⲛⲛⲓⲭⲓⲛ ⲛⲁⲩ ⲛⲧⲉ ⲛⲓⲅⲣⲁⲫⲏ (night) and ⲉϥϥⲣⲟ ⲙⲡⲉϥⲕⲁ† ⲉⲙⲟⲩϣⲧ ϧⲉⲛ ⲛⲓⲭⲓⲛ ⲛⲁⲩ ⲉⲧⲥⲙⲟⲛⲧ (midday); Amélineau, 113.8–13. The reference to midday contemplation is usually translated as "structured" or "systematic" reflection; could it be that ⲉⲧⲥⲙⲟⲛⲧ might have originally been ⲁⲧⲥⲙⲟⲛⲧ, "formless"? Despite the lack of extant manuscript support for this possibility, it is a tempting speculation given Evagrius' teaching on prayer.

51. Palladius' phrase ἐποίει δὲ εὐχὰς ἑκατόν (*Historia Lausiaca* 38.10; Butler, 2:120.11) does not mean, as Robert T. Meyer translates it, "he composed one hundred prayers" (*Lausiac History,* 113).

52. Macarius the Alexandrian was described as ἑκατὸν εὐχὰς ποιῶν (*Historia Lausiaca* 20.3; Butler, 2:63.13–14). Evagrius' teacher, Macarius of Egypt, would perform twenty-four prayers traveling through the tunnel from his cell to a cave a half mile away (εἰκοσιτέσσαρας ἐποίει εὐχάς, *Historia Lausiaca* 17.10; Butler, 2:46.15–16). Palladius gives these figures for other monks: fifty per day for Moses (πεντήκοντα προσευχὰς ἐκτελῶν, *Historia Lausiaca* 19.6; Butler, 2:60.22–23); 700 in five days by the virgin mentioned by Paul in *Historia Lausiaca* 20.2 (Butler, 2:63.10–11); 300 during an unspecified period for Paul, to be taken as the number of psalms plus other texts that he had memorized (τετυπωμένας . . . εἶχεν εὐχὰς τριακοσίας, *Historia Lausiaca* 20.1–2, Butler, 2:63.2, cf. 1.12, ὑπὲρ τὰς τριακοσίας οὐκ ἠδυνήθην ποιῆσαι). That these figures refer to the psalm (text) + prayer combination, cf. Palladius' description of Pachomian liturgical practice as consisting of offices of "twelve prayers" day, evening, and night, plus three at the ninth hour (*Historia Lausiaca* 32.6; Butler, 2:92.3–7). Palladius' evidence is of particular importance for terminology and practice because of his close ties to Evagrius.

53. *Geistgebet,* 31–32.

Evagrius' understanding of prayer followed the lines established by Origen. Various types of prayer were thought to be useful in particular circumstances, and some kinds of prayer were particularly "spiritual," purified of clouding passion or distraction. Evagrius accordingly uses the word "prayer" in a global sense that encompasses all kinds and qualities of prayer as well as with a narrower meaning of the purest, most spiritually intense "true" prayer that is the goal of monastic life. Most of his references to prayer are to such "pure prayer," especially in the texts I am considering here. He does give a nod to the four kinds of prayer listed in 1 Timothy 2.1[54] and we have a brief commentary on the Lord's Prayer.[55] He provides a substantial body of biblical verses for use as antirrhetic prayers, i.e., prayers targeted at specific temptations (the *Antirrhētikos*). He seems to regard the theology and practice of such prayer as basically self-explanatory, for he offers little commentary on it.

The highest kind of prayer, however, needs explaining. *On Prayer* is laced with definitions of prayer that are echoed particularly in *Reflections*. Most of them are about "pure" or "true" prayer, in which one becomes briefly free of temporal concerns and open to the "knowledge" only God can give.[56] That kind of prayer is the focus of the remainder of this article. Before turning to it, however, we must first consider Evagrius' understanding of how the mind works. Only then can his insistence on prayer beyond image, and the significance of his continued use of biblically based descriptions for prayer, be fully appreciated. For Evagrius, all forms of knowledge contribute to the journey of return to "essential" knowledge. His teaching on how the mind works explains what unifies and also what distinguishes each kind.

EVAGRIUS' THEORY OF MENTAL OPERATION

"Tell me how you think that you think, and I can tell you how you pray." Although this was not in fact written by Evagrius, it could have been. Many monastic texts refer to demons, distractions, and other incursions upon human freedom, but few deal explicitly with the way human beings actually process the whole range of stimuli that come at them. Evagrius, however, does just that. Fundamental for him is a distinction between a

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54. These are: δεήσεις, προσευχαί, ἐντεύξεις, εὐχαριστίαι; in *Reflections* 26–30 Evagrius comments on προσευχή (twice), δέησις, εὐχή, ἔντευξις.

55. Coptic text in P. Lagarde, *Catenae in Evangelia aegyptiacae quae supersunt* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1886), 13.

56. See *Prayer* 3, 14–16, 35–36, 53 (cf. 54–55), 83–86 (cf. 101 and 113), 118–21 (in Beatitude form); *Reflections* 26–27; *Psalms* 65.20 (PG 12:1504A).

logismos, "thought," usually meaning an external suggestion by demons, and *noēma,* "concept" or "depiction," the means by which the mind processes information. He is not perfectly consistent in the distinction, reflecting perhaps the difficulty of distinguishing between external and internal mental operation.[57] Sometimes *logismos* can describe input from angelic or purely human sources (*Thoughts* 8, 31). The word emphasizes origination, while *noēma* emphasizes operation: *noēmata* are simply the way the mind functions, they are its currency. Evagrius follows Aristotle in seeing the mind as creating an inner world of conceptual depictions relating to the things external to the self.[58]

This is a highly visual epistemology: thus my translation of *noēma* as "depiction."[59] Evagrius writes that as sight is "better than all the senses," so prayer surpasses all virtues.[60] All thinking and acting requires interior conceptualization, even of one's own thinking and acting. If I hand someone a glass, my mind "imagines" myself doing it as I physically hand over the glass. The mind, being without a body, must act via such representations. The *noēmata* carry the "form" (μορφή) of objects or ideas, enabling the mind to function (see esp. *Thoughts* 25).[61] Entrusted to our use, *noēmata* are ours to shepherd, wisely or not.[62] Depending on their origin, or their fate while in our care, they can bear positive, neutral, or negative moral valence. Evagrius notes, for example, that it is possible to think about gold covetously or noncovetously.[63]

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57. See, e.g., *Thoughts* 24.24–25, where λογισμός and νόημα are used synonymously in terms of operation though the λογισμός is described as impure. The demonology of the *Life of Antony* displays a similar ambiguity about the interplay of inner state and external suggestion.

58. Aristotle: νοεῖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἄνευ φαντάσματος: "one cannot think without imagery," *De memoria* 449b, ll. 35–36; ἡ δὲ μνήμη καὶ ἡ τῶν νοητῶν οὐκ ἄνευ φαντάσματος, 450a, l. 14.

59. In their edition of *Thoughts,* the Guillaumonts and P. Géhin have decided to translate νόημα as "représentation" (see SC 438:24).

60. *Prayer* 150; cf. *K.G.* 4.90: because the impure are able to reason about things, but only the pure can actually see them, knowledge of Christ is apprehended by "seeing" (γνῶσις . . . βλεπούσης).

61. Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas both taught that the mind cannot know itself in essence, but only in act; cf. *Summa theologiae* I q. 87.

62. *Thoughts* 17; cf. *Proverbs* 28.7 (G 344), the νοῦς as shepherd of impassioned νοήματα that should not be fed, and 29.3 (G 358B), the νοῦς with passionless thoughts is the Good Shepherd. Gregory of Nyssa describes the νοῦς as shepherd of the movements of the soul (*Life of Moses* 2.18, ed. J. Daniélou, SC 1bis:36), a theme originating with Philo and found in both Clement and Origen; see commentary by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguson in *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses,* CWS (New York: Paulist, 1978), 159 n. 25.

63. *Thoughts* 4.18–21 and 19.6–20.

Most *noēmata* result from sensory stimulation, particularly sight and hearing,[64] though they can also arise from the memory, especially in dreams (*Thoughts* 4), from temperament (*Reflections* 17), or from demonic suggestion.[65] They usually make an "impression" on the mind,[66] especially if they arise from the sense of sight.[67] The metaphor of "impressing" or "imprinting" is both tactile and visual, evoking the impressing of a seal into hot wax or moist clay,[68] or inscription by stylus onto a wax tablet.[69] Even what Evagrius calls "bare" depictions (ψιλὰ νοήματα), those uncharged by passion, impress or imprint the mind, though in a "bare form" less precoccupying than impassioned thoughts.[70] In *Reflections* Evagrius prefers to describe this action as "shaping" (μορφοῦν) the mind,[71] a term used in *On Prayer* for demonic effects on the mind. The demons subvert monastic intentions by introducing impassioned thoughts (λογισμοί) through the senses, the memory or in dreams. These create strongly imprinting *noēmata* that become distractions or fixations.[72] Such preoccupying *noēmata* are often described as "images" (εἴδωλα; also εἰκόνες) or "fantasies" (φαντασίαι). One depicts people who are objects of hatred or lust, replays memories of sin or suffering, creates scenarios of preferment and honor.[73]

Evagrius taught that the mind processes sensory *noēmata* serially: only

64. *Thoughts* 25.8–11, *Reflections* 17; cf. Aristotle on the sensory origin of all knowledge (*De memoria* 450a, ll. 11–12), followed by Sextus Empiricus (*Adv. math.* 8.56 as in Arnim, *SVF* 2:29.21–28) and later by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I q. 84 a. 6.

65. *Thoughts* 2.1–5, 4, 16; *Praktikos* 42. Cf. Diocles (of Magnesia) on non-sensory φαντασίαι (as quoted by Diogenes Laertius [7.51], Arnim *SVF* 2:24.15–25).

66. The verb is τυπόω: see *Thoughts* 2, 4; *Reflections* 17; "only those names and words that are of sensory things (αἰσθητῶν) impress and create a picture in the mind," *Psalms* 140.2 (Pitra, 348); *Ecclesiastes* 3.10–13 (G 15), ll. 7–9; *Prayer* 57 and 67; *Letters* 39.2 (Frankenberg, 592.4–6); *K.G.* 4.67–68.

67. *Reflections* 17 and 55. Cf. John of Lycopolis in *Historia monachorum* 1.19 (ed. André-Jean Festugière, *Historia monachorum in Aegypto,* Subsidia hagiographica 53 [Brussels: Bollandistes, 1961], 116.122–24) on the way that visual knowledge is imprinted on the mind like a picture.

68. Aristotle, *De memoria* 450a, ll. 33–35, later used by Stoics.

69. See Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 16–30.

70. μορφὴ ψιλή, *Thoughts* 8.19–21, cf. 40.6 and *Prayer* 57.

71. *Reflections* 17, 55.

72. *Thoughts* 2–4, 22; *Prayer* 69; *Reflections* 44; *Proverbs* 7.13 (G 93), 17.23 (G 166); *Psalms* 129.8 (PG 12:1648D–49A), 139.6 (PG 12:1664C), 145.8 (PG 12:1676A).

73. The words used here are:

1) εἴδωλον. *Thoughts* 4.16: "images" received in sleep; 16.28: "images" of loved ones who have allegedly been maltreated (occasion for θυμός; for the same

a single imprinting *noēma* can be present to the mind at one time,[74] though the succession of *noēmata* can occur so rapidly as to suggest simultaneity.[75] Evagrius' emphasis on singularity may be explainable by his Platonic imperative to move from multiplicity to simplicity in thought and contemplation. It may also relate to his view that, because the mind fixes on one thought at a time, an experienced ascetic can target that thought precisely, using another to knock it out. As he notes in the *Praktikos*, this practice is like "driving out a nail with a nail."[76]

However, not all *noēmata* leave an imprint on the mind. Those that arise from the mind's contemplation of nonsensory realities neither impress the mind nor create in it some sort of figure.[77] They simply bring

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see 25.55); 36.17: "image" of one's sin intruding at time of prayer. *Praktikos* 23: "images" stirred by anger at time of prayer; 55: dreams. *Reflections* 13: as synonym with εἰκών, as below.

2) φαντασία. *Thoughts* 2.14: not all [bad] memories are demonic: mind itself can be stirred up to recall "images" of things that exist; 2.18: thus the mind is incapable of receiving the "image" of the God who is the Lawgiver; 4.1: "fantasies" during sleep; 4.22: variety of "images," some good, some bad is a measure of demonic activity; 4.25: demons use external things to create an "image"; 27.8: anchorites having wild "fantasies" even after awaking; 27.16: "fantasies" while asleep (for the same see 27.17, 21, 27); 28.8: "fantasy" of priesthood; 29.1: "fantasies" in sleep. *Praktikos* 46.2–3: shameful "fantasies" (also 71 and 76); 48: unlawful "fantasies"; 54: during sleep; 89.3: irrational "fantasies." Cf. φαντάζεσθαι, *Thoughts* 17.26: shameful "fantasizing" when keeping vigil; 20.9: "fantasizing" about being bishop of Constantinople; 28.11: "fantasizing" healing powers; 33.8: "imagining" an explanation for the demonic effect on readers; 37.24: "fantasizing" the face of one's enemy at prayer. *Praktikos* 23: "imagining" images generated by anger while at prayer; 65: "imagining" things of this world at time of prayer.

3) εἰκών. *Reflections* 13: demonic thought is an image of a human being fixed in the mind with which one interacts.

74. Cf. Aristotle, *De sensu* 447b, ll. 11–449a, l. 34, followed by Cleanthes, who allegedly understood τύπωσις in a highly literal sense (as in Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. math.* 7.227, Arnim *SVF* 2:22.33–34). Chrysippus preferred to describe concepts (φαντασίαι) not as τυπώσεις but as ἑτεροιώσεις, "alterations," noting that the understanding (διανοία) can hold both a three-sided and four-sided figure in view at the same time; he claimed Zeno in support of this view (*SVF* 2:22.34–23.11). Diocles of Magnesia explicitly rejected the analogy of the seal because the soul, unlike wax, can hold several simultaneous τυπώσεις (as in Diogenes Laertius 7.50; Arnim, *SVF* 2:22.24–26). Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I q. 84 a.4.

75. Cf. *Reflections* 13, 22. The illustration he uses is a rapidly spinning potter's wheel: fix a pebble on either side of it, spin the wheel rapidly, and the two pebbles seem to be one as speed creates the illusion of singleness (*Thoughts* 24).

76. *Praktikos* 58 (cf. *Thoughts* 2.19–21; 34).

77. *Thoughts* 41.2–3: μὴ τυποῦντα τὸν νοῦν μηδὲ σχηματίζοντα. Evagrius does sometimes use the "imprinting" language where one would not expect it, such as in

"knowledge," a more acute kind of perception, about God (= θεολογία) or about "the things that exist."[78] Such insight can be inspired by angels in constructive counterbalance to demonic activity,[79] and can also occur in dreams when we converse with angels and saints (a "simple movement" of memory, *Thoughts* 4.11–14). Because of their contemplative orientation, these *noēmata* are sometimes called "beholdings" (θεωρήματα) to emphasize their nonimprinting, nonshaping quality.[80]

This review of Evagrius' teaching on how the mind works is the necessary background for his teaching on "pure" or "imageless" prayer. According to Evagrius, "pure" prayer is the move beyond all sensory knowledge (and corresponding mental impressions) to the God who is without form or body: "prayer is the setting aside of *noēmata*" (*Prayer* 71).[81] In this he follows Origen.[82] When standing before God in prayer, one must be "unimprinted" or "untouched" (ἀτύπωτος), for Jesus avoids the "crowd of depictions" (cf. John 5.13), that are—Evagrius adds another biblical metaphor here—like thorns choking off the word before it can grow and bear fruit.[83] He writes in the *Praktikos* that the mind is strengthened when it does not imagine (μηδὲν . . . φανταζόμενος) the things of this world at the "time of prayer" (*Praktikos* 65). Divine "brightness" (λαμπρότης),

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K.G. 5.41–42 on the "intellectual world" imprinted on the mind and visible at prayer, and *Thoughts* 40, on the "place of God" luminously imprinted on the mind.

78. This kind of contemplation (θεωρία τῶν γεγονότων) is an aspect of θεωρία φυσική. It includes the inner meaning or "raisons d'être" (λόγοι) of both corporeal and incorporeal beings, and the substance (οὐσία) of incorporeal beings (*Thoughts* 41.25–35; cf. 42.2–3); *Ecclesiastes* 3.10–13 (G 15). Cf. Diocles of Magnesia on nonsensory φαντασίαι that are about incorporeals and other things received by reason (λόγῳ, as in Diogenes Laertius 7.51, Arnim, *SVF* 2:24.15–25).

79. Thus the angelic-inspired thoughts about τὰς φύσεις τῶν πραγμάτων . . . καὶ τοὺς πνευματικοὺς αὐτῶν . . . λόγους, *Thoughts* 8.4–5 and 28.29–31.

80. *Thoughts* 15.13, 16.11, 25.6, 41.30; *Reflections* 22, cf. 17; cf. *Proverbs* 3.15 (G 30), 5.19 (G 67), 30.9 (G 288), *Ecclesiastes* 1.1 (G 1) and 4.6 (G 27). See also A. Guillaumont's introduction to *Thoughts* (SC 438:22). Cf. *Prayer* 64, which features a progression of λογισμός—νόημα—θεώρημα—γνῶσις.

81. On the need to discard impassioned νοήματα: *Prayer* 4, 10, 47, 54–55, 62, 64, 72; *Letter* 58.3 (Frankenberg, 606.32–33). On the need to discard simple νοήματα: *Prayer* 56–57; cf. "human" thoughts in *Thoughts* 8.17–20. On the need to discard νοήματα in general: *Prayer* 63, 70–71 (cf. 57 on contemplation of the λόγοι of things); *Thoughts* 2.20–21, 22.20–22, 40.1–3; *Reflections* 26; *K.G.* 5.64 (the soul in ἀπάθεια remains unmarked by earthly things); *Letters* 39.2 and 5 (Frankenberg, 592.4–8 and 19–25), cf. *Letter* 61.3 (Frankenberg, 610.21–24); *Ecclesiastes* 1.11 (G 3), ll. 7–9 (the νοῦς contemplating God and receiving the Holy Trinity).

82. Origen, *On Prayer* 20.2 (GCS 3:344.21–26).

83. *Thoughts* 6.12–14; cf. Matt 13.22; see also *Psalms* 140.2 (Pitra, 348).

the heart of Evagrius' experience of prayer, appears only when "depictions of things" are suppressed (*Thoughts* 2.19–21). Even nonimprinting depictions that convey knowledge about anything other than God subvert true prayer,[84] for they remain in the realm of diversified knowledge rather than of unitary divine knowledge (*Prayer* 58). Only knowledge of the Trinity is "essential knowledge," that is to say, knowledge without an object exterior to the self. To attain to such knowledge in prayer, all other *noēmata* must be left behind. And, as we saw earlier, for the mind to attain such knowledge is to have experienced a return to its primordial condition, to have anticipated its eschatological goal.

How does Evagrius' understanding of prayer beyond thought and depiction fit a religion centered on an incarnate Savior and based on sacred texts? Despite the imperative to put aside all thoughts in prayer, Evagrius does not in fact see *all* words and imagery as only propedeutic to true prayer. There are indeed *noēmata* and images from or about God[85] suitable for the kind of prayer he calls the "conversation of the mind with God" (ὁμιλία νοῦ πρὸς θεόν).[86] Evagrius' use of that definition of prayer inherited from Clement of Alexandria[87] is more than just a bow to tradition. Prayer is an encounter with a personal God, and Evagrius keeps biblical words and imagery in play even in his descriptions of the highest stages of prayer. To understand how this can be possible for him, one must turn to Evagrius' descriptions of the actual experience of prayer.

EXPERIENCES IN PRAYER

As noted earlier, in his treatise *On Prayer*, Evagrius provides an array of cautions against mistaking sensory phenomena for experiences of God. Evagrius' God is above all perception (αἴσθησις) and thought (ἔννοια) (*Prayer* 4). Encounter with God in prayer does not entail recognition of a form or shape, since God has neither (*Prayer* 67–75, 114–18). These are theological claims, or, more properly perhaps, metaphysical ones. We have already seen the epistemological corollary that true prayer means shucking, however briefly, the concepts and mental depictions that link us

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84. *Prayer* 57; cf. 70–71; *Reflections* 22–23.

85. *Prayer* 94, on asking God if the νόημα enlightening one is from him; *Thoughts* 41 on nonimprinting νοήματα about God; *Psalms* 140.2 (Pitra, 348).

86. *Prayer* 3 [cf. 4, 34, 55], *Reflections* 28. Cf. *Psalms* 140.2 (Pitra, 348): ἐστὶν ἕν εἶδος προσευχῆς ὁμιλία νοῦ πρὸς θεὸν ἀτύπωτον τὸν νοῦν διασώζουσα. . . . τὸ δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ νόημα διασώζει τὸν νοῦν ἀναγκαίως ἀτύπωτον.

87. *Stromateis* 7.39.6 (GCS 17:30.15–16).

to the world of normal experience. We are reminded to "approach the One who is immaterial immaterially," and that to "locate" or limit God with a mental image is fruitless and perhaps even demonic.[88] The goal is that we ourselves go to God in prayer without any notion of form (ἀμορφία), immaterial and dispossessed, in the surrender of all hope of sensory perception (ἀναισθησία).[89] These are all cautions against our presuming to control the encounter with our expectations of what it and God will—or should—be like.

Even so, Evagrius does not by any means claim that the encounter with God in "true" prayer is devoid of religious experience. With respect to limited things, including our own ideas about God, we must acquire *anaisthēsia*. But note the following descriptions, all from *On Prayer*. God draws near to accompany the one who prays (64–65, 66) and provides the gift of prayer (70), enlightening the mind with God's own *noēma* (94). Angels protect the one who prays while teaching true prayer (76, 81, 96; cf. 80). The Holy Spirit comes upon the mind in an act of divine visitation (ἐπιφοιτάω) to banish the crowd of thoughts and depictions, and to stir an *erōs* for spiritual prayer (63). That same *erōs* takes the one purified of disordered passion (ἀπαθής) to the "heights" of prayer (53), for pure prayer is fueled by desire (62): "Blessed is the mind that prays without distraction and increases in desire" (119).[90]

Although the mind is blessed when it has perfect *anaisthēsia* at the time of prayer, Evagrius writes about spiritual "sensation" in prayer. What Evagrius means is the trading of one kind of sensation or experience for another, the sensory for the intellectual. Adopting *anaisthēsia* toward sensory things allows for the *sunaisthēsis* of "spiritual prayer" (*Prayer* 28). Prayer is in fact meant to be a matter of perception or feeling (αἴσθησις) rather than rote habit (*Prayer* 42), and such "feeling" is rooted in compunction (*Prayer* 43). Like Origen before him, Evagrius maintains the notion of "spiritual senses" of the soul, though generally he avoids even metaphorical use of sensory language when referring to spiritual realities.[91] His theory of the sensory basis for ordinary human knowledge,

88. *Prayer* 67–68, 74, 116.
89. *Prayer* 117–18, 120.
90. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.163, 2.233, 2.235, 2.239 (SC 1bis:81, 107, 109).
91. See *K.G.* 1.33–38 and *Prayer* 27. For a more typical sidestepping of such language, see *Proverbs* 1.3 and 1.7 (G 4–5) and 14.18 (G 138), *Ecclesiastes* 3.10 (G 15) and 5.1 (G 35), with Géhin's commentary. In *Job* 12.10b/11b (= *Catena* 9.33, ed. Hagedorn, PTS 48:105), Evagrius marks the distinction sharply: νοῦς μὲν γὰρ τὰ νοητά, αἴσθησις δὲ τὰ αἰσθητὰ διακρινέι.

noted above, probably explains his preference for nonsensory language when describing spiritual knowledge. Nonetheless, in *On Prayer* he surprisingly resorts to language of sensation even as he insists most fiercely that true prayer lies beyond all depiction, shape, form, and image.

Here we can explore two examples of Evagrius' use of imagistic language to describe prayer. The first, an experience of light during prayer, is found throughout his writings, though it is muted in *On Prayer*.[92] The second, seeing or attaining the "place of God," is strongly evident in all three of the works about prayer emphasized in this essay.

In the *Praktikos* and *Gnōstikos*, Evagrius notes that when the mind has achieved an integrated emotional condition beyond the control of the passions (ἀπάθεια), it "begins to see its own light (τὸ οἰκεῖον φέγγος[93])."[94] In other texts he emphasizes the divine origin of such light, particularly as the light of the Holy Trinity or the Savior.[95] Elsewhere his remarks are ambiguous.[96] In a more general way, Evagrius often refers to divine knowledge as light.[97] As the mind was made to know God, so it is meant to

92. On the theme of light in the teaching of Evagrius (and others), see Hans-Veit Beyer, "Die Lichtlehre der Mönche des vierzehnten und des vierten Jahrhunderts," *JbÖB* 31 (1981): 473–512; Antoine Guillaumont, "La vision de l'intellect par lui-même dans la mystique évagrienne," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 50 (1984): 266–62, reprinted in *Études sur la spiritualité de l'Orient chrétien* (Bellefontaine: Abbaye, 1996), 144–50; Clark, *Origenist Controversy,* 70–71.

93. The term φέγγος is used only here and in *Eulogios* 30 (PG 79:1133AB). Other texts use the more common φῶς. It may be that Evagrius' choice of φέγγος was inspired at least in part by its occurrences in the theophanies to Ezekiel (Ezek 1.4, 13, 27–28; 10.4).

94. *Praktikos* 64, *Gnōstikos* 45, *Eulogios* as in the previous note. Cf. *Prayer* 74–75 on demonic manipulation of the light around the mind and the remark in *K.G.* 6.87 that the light appearing to the mind seems to be from the "sensory head"; *Psalms* 148.3 (PG 12:1677D), on light as the biblical symbol for the rational nature; cf. *Letters* 28.1 (Frankenberg, 584.24).

95. Trinity: *Thoughts* 42.6–7; *Reflections* 4, 27; *K.G.* 5.3. Savior: *Thoughts* 15.14–15. Divine but unspecified: *Reflections* 2, 23; *Letters* 17.3 (Frankenberg, 578.3). Light as the reflection from the face of God: *Psalms* 4.7 (Pitra, 453–54).

96. *Thoughts* 30.16–17, 37.35, 40.8–9; *Reflections* 25; *Monks* 77. Part of the ambiguity is that Evagrius writes both about the mind in its original created nature, in which it is filled with the light of the knowledge of God, and in its present state for which radiance is no longer natural because that original access to knowledge has been lost.

97. *K.G.* 1.74, 1.81; *Letters* 27.4 (Frankenberg, 584.4), 28.1 (p. 584.24), 30.1 (p. 586.17–18). The theme is common in Evagrius' scholia: *Psalms* 12.4 (PG 12:1204B), 33.6 (PG 12:1308B, both citing Hos 10.12, "enkindle for yourselves the light of knowledge"), 36.6 (Pitra, 10), 37.11 (Pitra, 23): "contemplation is the light of the eyes"; *Proverbs* 6.20 (G 79): knowledge of God is light; cf. *Ecclesiastes* 5.17 (G 42). Cf. being enlightened by the Lord, *Virgin* 1 and 53.

become like light, a rising star in its brightness.[98] He quotes another monk as saying that the soul is the mother of the mind, bringing the mind into light through asceticism (πρακτική).[99]

Evagrius was not alone among early monks in reporting an experience of light in prayer. Evagrius himself notes a journey he and Ammonius, one of the Origenist Tall Brothers from Nitria,[100] made to ask John of Lycopolis, "the Seer of Thebes," whether the mind is itself the source of the light seen in prayer or beholds light coming from elsewhere (presumably from God). John rules the question beyond the competence of human knowledge while claiming that the mind cannot be illumined in prayer apart from the grace of God.[101] We know from the *History of the Monks of Egypt* that Abba Anouph spoke to visitors about this subject.[102] Such experiences were by no means exceptional either then or later,[103] and were evidently the cause of some consternation among Egyptian monks. The frequency with which Evagrius mentions the "light" seen in prayer suggests that this kind of spiritual experience was precious to him.[104] Obviously intrigued by the vision of light, he was also aware of its dangers. Thus when writing *On Prayer* he said very little about the phenomenon except to note the real possibility that demons will manipulate the brain and stimulate the nerves to create a false show of light easily mistaken for the glory of God or the "location" of divine knowledge (*Prayer* 73–74). Angelic intervention is necessary to restore proper working of the light of the mind (*Prayer* 75).[105]

Antoine Guillaumont links Evagrius' descriptions of the light seen in prayer to the philosophical culture of his day, and notes parallels in the

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98. *Thoughts* 43.7 (ἀστεροειδής), *Eight Spirits* 1, *Monks* 107. On being able to see the star of knowledge or prayer, see *Letters* 27.3 (Frankenberg, 582.36); cf. the Syriac treatise *On the Proverbs* 36, attributed to Evagrius but of doubtful authenticity (ed. J. Muyldermans, *Evagriana Syriaca: Textes inédits du British Museum et de la Vaticane*, Bibliothèque du Muséon 31 [Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1952], 138).

99. *Proverbs* 23.22 (G 258).

100. On Ammonius, see Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 11 (Butler, 2:32–34). According to Palladius, Evagrius remarked of Ammonius, "Never have I seen anyone more passionless (ἀπαθέστερον) than him" (2:34.11–12).

101. *Antirrhētikos* 6.16 (Frankenberg, 524.7–14).

102. *Historia monachorum* 11.6 (Festugière, 91.27–32).

103. Cf. hesychasm and the debates over visions of the "uncreated light." A useful summary is in Beyer, "Lichtlehre."

104. Antoine Guillaumont suggests that Evagrius is certainly referring to an experience that was real for him ("Vision de l'intellect," 260).

105. This series of chapters (*Prayer* 67–76) is the key cluster on true and false experiences in prayer.

writings of Plotinus. There are certainly such parallels, though there are also significant differences.[106] We know, too, that experiences of light in meditation are frequently noted in other religious traditions. When comparing Evagrius to Plotinus, or to any other mystic, apparent similarity of terminology can mask vast differences in usage, just as apparently similar experiences can lead one to forget great differences of religious culture.[107] Evagrius' own education obviously included a thorough grounding in Hellenistic philosophy. But we need to remember that he learned his philosophy in a deeply, even completely, Christian environment: his father was a bishop, his teachers were Basil and Gregory Nazianzen.

What is most striking about Evagrius is not that he used the cultural and linguistic tools of his day to articulate his own deepest experience, but that he found in the sacred texts of Christianity metaphors that could suggest that experience without trapping it within the limits he considered fatal to "true prayer." When Evagrius set himself the task of writing thoroughly and explicitly about prayer, especially that rarest kind he calls "pure prayer," he developed two biblical themes, the "place of God" and the "sapphire-blue light" seen in prayer, as key elements of his exposition. These metaphors, taken from theophanies recounted in the book of Exodus and the prophecy of Ezekiel, witness to Evagrius' conviction that in the Bible he could find his spiritual universe, and through commentary on the Bible open that universe to his readers. These themes occur in the three key texts on prayer: *On the Thoughts*, *On Prayer*, and *Reflections*.[108] They are not found in the trilogy *Praktikos*, *Gnōstikos*, and

106. E.g., in some of the texts Guillaumont cites, Plotinus describes the light seen by the νοῦς when it transcends discursive thought as proper to itself and not as something other (*Enneads* [ed. P. Henry] 5.3.17, ll. 29–37; 5.5.7, ll. 23–32). In book 6, he speaks of the light as the constitutive nature of the νοῦς, given it from the light that engenders all intelligence (6.7.36, ll. 21–27; 6.9.9, ll. 56–61).

107. This is one strand of the controversy between Steven Katz et al. and those who argue for a "pure consciousness experience" beyond all cultural conditioning. See Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis,* ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22–74; "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions,* ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3–60; "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," in *Mysticism and Language,* ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3–41. For critics of Katz, see the essays in Robert K. C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), and Bruce Janz, "Mysticism and Understanding: Steven Katz and His Critics," *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 24 (1995): 77–94.

108. Place of God: *Thoughts* 39–40 (cf. 29: "places of the knowledge of God"; *Prayer* 58 (cf. "place of prayer": 57, 72, 102, 152); *Reflections* 20, 23, 25. Sapphire-blue light: *Thoughts* 39; *Reflections* 2, 4. For parallels in other texts, see the following notes.

Kephalaia Gnōstika,[109] further strengthening the suggestion that these two sets of writings were composed at different times.

Evagrius' use of the metaphor "the place of God" seems to be the fruit of his own experience of prayer and meditation of Scripture. The phrase is taken from the Septuagint version of Exodus (Exod 24.10–11). Moses and the seventy elders of Israel went up the mountain at Sinai and "saw the place where there stood the God of Israel." This circumlocution (or localocution) replaces the Hebrew's blunter "they saw the God of Israel." The Greek continues: "and what was under his feet was like a work of sapphire brick/tile, and in its transparency (καθαριότης) it had the appearance of the firmament of heaven" (Exod 24.10).[110] The clear sapphire pavement reappears in Ezekiel's theophanies, for upon it sits the throne of God (Ezek 1.26 and 10.1). Evagrius seems, however, to be inspired most directly by the Sinai vision. Sometimes he uses the themes of the place of God and the sapphire-blue light together, sometimes separately. Their common biblical source links them. Thus when Evagrius refers to the "place of God" or, more typically, the "place of prayer" in the treatise *On Prayer*, he is alluding to the vision of light while maintaining the reticence of that particular text about the actual experience.

Evagrius universalizes the place of God by shifting it from geographical Sinai to the human mind (νοῦς).[111] The relocation of biblical topography to an inner landscape, the reinscription of the biblical text on the heart, is a move typical of Alexandrian exegesis, though, as far as I can tell, not with the Sinai text. Another standard technique inherited by Evagrius is the concatenation of texts that have a thematic affinity with Sinai's place of God. This is especially the case with Psalm 75.3 (LXX), "His place is in peace, and his dwelling place is in Zion,"[112] and other Psalms that refer to God's "place" in Jerusalem.[113]

The internalization of the place of God presents one of the central

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109. Though cf. *K.G.* 5.39 in the first Syriac version (S₁), "The place of God is called peace," alluding to both Exod 24.11 and Ps 75.3. The normally more faithful second Syriac version (S₂) has a completely different text, referring to the "shining heaven" imprinted in the purified intellect.

110. Guillaumont suggests that Evagrius' biblical text read χρώματος, "color," instead of στερεώματος, "firmament"; the Syriac Peshitta reads *krōmā* ("Vision de l'intellect," 258).

111. See especially *Thoughts* 39–40 and *Reflections* 25.

112. See *Reflections* 25, *Psalms* 75.2 (PG 12:1536C).

113. God's τόπος as "peace of soul": *Psalms* 25.8 (Pitra, 483); "pure soul": *Psalms* 67.7 (Pitra, 82; PG 12:1505D), cf. *Psalms* 92.4–5 on the "house of the Lord" (Pitra, 175); the "pure mind": *Psalms* 131.5 (PG 12:1649C); "knowledge of God": *Psalms* 78.7 (Pitra, 131). Cf. the plural τόποι τῆς γνώσεως in *Thoughts* 29.10 (= *K.G.* 2.6),

paradoxes of Evagrius' theology. The place of God is to be found within the human person, more specifically within the human mind, but "seeing" it requires that one transcend all ordinary mental operation. Although potentially accessible to all, the place of God is hard to reach. Its sudden and ephemeral discovery is the culmination of monastic prayer. Indeed, the "place of God" is called the "place of prayer" in the treatise *On Prayer*.[114]

Evagrius' attraction to the biblical account of theophany at Sinai is evident in the way that imagery from the book of Exodus occurs at key points in the writings about prayer. Evagrius describes human existence as spent camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, guarding the flock of our thoughts, hopeful that we will be called higher (*Thoughts* 17). At the beginning of *On Prayer*, he presents the example of Moses, who spoke to God without intermediary but had to remove his sandals before approaching the burning bush (*Prayer* 4). To see the place of God, to speak to God in the place of prayer, means climbing above all impassioned thoughts[115] and all depictions, including nonsensory ones.[116] Alluding to Sinai at the beginning of *On the Thoughts*, Evagrius notes that a mind enmeshed in impassioned thoughts and depictions of various things becomes unable to receive the brightness (λαμπρότης) of God the Lawgiver (*Thoughts* 2). Both light and Word, the gifts of knowledge from Scripture, are to be found in the place of God.

The place of God is, by definition, "unimaged" (ἀνείδεος, *Reflections* 20, cf. 22), meaning that the mind itself, when it becomes the place of God, is free of self-created imagery.[117] In an exceptional use of "imprinting" language, Evagrius writes in *On the Thoughts* that, at the moment of prayer, light appears to the mind and "imprints" upon it the "place of God."[118] As this divine laser recreates the the mind's proper condition, it

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Proverbs 9.3b (G 106), and *K.G.* 2.54; this phrase is used to indicate the "realm of knowledge" that awaits beyond the life of πρακτική.

114. *Prayer* 57, 72, 102, 152; cf. 58 for τόπος θεοῦ in immediate juxtaposition to τόπος προσευχῆς in ch. 57.

115. *Thoughts* 40; *Reflections* 23; *Prayer* 2–3 (to converse with God), 72.

116. *Thoughts* 40; *Reflections* 20, 23, 25; *Prayer* 57–58, 152.

117. *Antirrhētikos* 7.31 (Frankenberg, 534.21–23). Indeed, according to *Reflections* 20, the attainment of imagelessness is what constitutes "the place of God." The term ἀνείδεος is also used for divine knowledge (*Prayer* 69), a mirroring of νοῦς and γνῶσις analogous to the ambiguity about the origin of the light seen at prayer.

118. *Thoughts* 40; the verb is ἐκτυποῦν. For another unusual use of "imprinting" language, see *K.G.* 5.41–42 on the intellectual world "imprinted" and "constructed" in the mind, seen best during prayer at night when sensory light is diminished.

becomes able to behold itself, "like sapphire or the color of heaven, which Scripture calls the place of God, seen by the elders upon Mount Sinai" (*Thoughts* 39). What is seen has brightness and color but no form.[119] The biblical image is self-effacing: Evagrius follows the careful translators of the Septuagint in choosing euphemism, seeing the *place* of God, rather than seeing *God*. It is a place of visitation rather than a location of essence; as Gregory of Nyssa says of the place "beside me" where God asked Moses to stand (Exod 33.21), "by using the analogy of a measurable surface he leads the hearer to the unlimited and infinite."[120] The metaphor of the place of God is imagery that is stretched thin as gossamer but still holds, like the net filled with 153 fish that Jesus' disciples hauled onto the lakeshore when their risen Lord appeared to them. Added to the marvel of the unexpected catch was the wonder of the net, filled but unburst (John 21.11). Evagrius alludes to that story in his preface to *On Prayer*; the work itself consists of 153 chapters.[121]

Evagrius' theme of the "place of God" with its "sapphire light" is a reminder of his keen sensitivity to the doctrinal concerns about the knowability and unknowability of God that are associated with his Cappadocian teachers. The uncertainty with which he speaks of the light itself reminds us that his teaching on this point came quite early, long before the great debates over such light in the Hesychast controversy. As noted earlier, when Evagrius wrote his treatise *On Prayer* he was reticent about the experience of light in prayer. He was surely being alert to the dangers of self-deception. But his teaching on the place of prayer, the place of God, and the sapphire-blue light points us to another reason: when the stakes were highest, he preferred more certain ground, which for him meant more explicitly *biblical* ground.

119. Cf. *Reflections* 2 and 4. On caution against seeking color in prayer, see *Prayer* 114.

120. *Life of Moses* 2.241 (SC 1bis:109).

121. In the Prologue to *Prayer*, Evagrius presents his total of 153 both in terms of John 21 and the arithmological significance of a number which is susceptible to several kinds of Pythagorean symbolic interpretation (on this point, see Tugwell's commentary on the Prologue in his edition of *Prayer*). Evagrius' allusion to John 21 emphasizes the contrast between his own fruitless toil before he received the request for the treatise and the abundance which the request produced (cf. John 21.3–6); he does not explicitly mention the unburst net, though that point is made in the same verse as the count of 153 fish (John 21.11).

EVAGRIAN EXEGESIS

In the "place of God" we find ourselves at the meeting point of experience and exegesis. For Evagrius, exegesis was not about finding suitable garnish for his theological speculations or merely an aspect of monastic pedagogy. It was a mode of being, a keying himself into texts recited by heart day in and day out. He wrote that monastic life means "knocking on the doors of Scripture with the hands of the virtues" (*Thoughts* 43). As Luke Dysinger has reminded us in his work on Evagrius and psalmody, the longest work by far we have from Evagrius' pen is his commentary on the Psalms. When that commentary is added to the scholia on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the fragments surviving of the scholia on Job, this vastness of biblical material points to what was central in Evagrius' own life and most important for his original readers.

Does Evagrius write enough about his understanding of Scripture to reconcile his use of biblical imagery with the strict exclusion of concepts in prayer? Like most early Christian exegetes, he provides little in the way of explicit rules or guidelines for interpretation. What he has to say is not especially gripping. Evagrius' description of exegesis is more systematic, even reductionistic, than his practice of it, and his practice in the scholia and other texts is closely tied to his theological system. As one would expect of a student of Origen, Evagrius speaks readily of the historical or literal versus the allegorical or spiritual sense of texts, with strong preference for the latter.[122] He relates both levels of meaning to his tripartite schema of *praktikē / theōria physikē / theologia*, suggesting that both the literal and the spiritual sense can be keyed to one of the three kinds of knowledge.[123] His greatest concern is a pastoral one, that those who teach know what they are doing and offer interpretations appropriate to the needs of those who come for guidance. He does not want spiritual interpretation to be offered before the hearers are ready for it.[124]

In one of the final chapters of *On the Thoughts*, however, Evagrius

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122. E.g., *Proverbs* 23.1–3 (G 250–51), 29.11 (G 363); *Psalms* 65.16 (PG 12:1501D), 113.8 (PG 12:1572A–73D), 118.18 (PG 12:1592B), 134.6 (PG 12:1653B), 135.6 (PG 12:1656C–57A).

123. See the discussion in *Gnōstikos* 18 and 20. Neither chapter survives in Greek, which makes precise interpretation difficult. It seems from *Gnōstikos* 18 that the literal meaning could apply το πρακτική or θεωρία φυσική but not το θεολογία, whereas the allegorical meaning could apply to any of the three.

124. See especially the chapters on exegesis in the *Gnōstikos*, 16, 18–21, 34; cf. similar concerns in *Proverbs* 17.2 (G 153), cf. 23.9 (G 253); *Ecclesiastes* 1.1 (G 1); *Psalms* 118.130 (Pitra, 298) and 134.7 (PG 12:1653C).

illustrates how certain *noēmata* are admissible at the highest stages of the life of prayer. His examples are biblical, two from the New Testament and one from the Old (*Thoughts* 41). The basic rule Evagrius offers is this: any direct biblical reference to God, the One beyond matter or form, does not imprint—viz., limit—the mind, but statements about sensory objects will leave impressions on the mind unless they are susceptible to spiritual interpretation.

The example provided from the Old Testament is the most relevant. Evagrius chooses the opening verse of Isaiah's vision of God (Isa 6.1), explaining that its first words, "I saw the Lord" (εἶδον τὸν κύριον), seem to make an imprint on the mind but in fact do not, for what signifies (τὸ σημαινόμενον) God cannot imprint. Isaiah's next words, that he saw the Lord "seated on a high and exalted throne" (καθήμενον ἐπὶ θρόνου ὑψηλοῦ καὶ ἐπηρμένου) could imprint, for a throne is a physical object that we can picture. However, if the words are properly understood, they do not limit the mind. The key is to move beyond a literal reading of the text, for there was no physical throne in Isaiah's vision. What Isaiah saw with his "prophetic eye," says Evagrius, was his own truest self (his "rational nature"), become the "throne of God" by receiving the knowledge of God.[125] Evagrius thus writes about the "throne of God" in exactly the same way as the "place of God."

Isaiah's *noēma* of God—and Evagrius uses that terminology, though in a kind of reserved sense—is the exceptional case of a depiction that occurs in the highest spiritual state. It is a truly divine depiction, like the light seen at prayer, the "place of God" and the "sapphire-blue light." Isaiah's vision is closely akin to the theophanies in Exodus and Ezekiel. Isaiah sees a place that is no place, an "image" that, like the "place of God," bends Evagrius' normal rules of imagery because it does not confine what it represents. Isaiah becomes the type of one who prays truly and purely, just like Moses arriving at the "place of God." Evagrius was brought there by his meditation of Scripture, which for him meant discovery and exploration of a universe of spiritual possibility waiting in the text. As he notes in his letters, it is through reading the Bible that one enters the "chamber in which we behold the holy and hidden Father" (Matt 6.6).[126] In that chamber—another biblically-described space, this time taken from Jesus' teaching on prayer in Matthew's Gospel—one sees

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125. Cf. *Proverbs* 25.5 (G 300). The νοῦς or its contemplative activity understood as the throne of Christ is a common theme in *Psalms,* e.g., 9.5 (PG 12:1188C), 46.9 (PG 12.1437B), 88.4–5 (Pitra, 158), 131.11 (Pitra, 331).

126. *Letters* 4.5 (Frankenberg, 568.31–32).

beyond the created world and its symbols to the One who made them, anticipating the eschatological journey from diversified knowledge to essential knowledge of the Trinity.

Even at the highest stage of prayer, then, Evagrius takes the imagery of Scripture, hammered thin through spiritual interpretation, and wraps it carefully around his experience, itself shaped by exegesis. At the end of *On the Thoughts*, writing of the two eyes of the soul, he describes the left eye, meant for the "contemplation of things that exist" (θεωρία τῶν γεγονότων), and the right eye, destined to behold "the blessed light of the Holy Trinity" at the time of prayer (*Thoughts* 42). Only when both eyes have first been on the Bible does such dual vision become possible, for it is the Bible that provides even the metaphorical place for seeing the blessed Light.

CONCLUSION

Evagrius was uniquely able to keep in play his teaching on ascetic psychology, his exploration of prayer, his reflection on the Bible, and his cosmic imagination. Evagrius' complex vision of the monastic life fragmented in the fires of controversy, shattering both his writings and his reputation. Admittedly, his effort to connect both the workings of the human mind and his exegetical strategies to the imperative of imageless prayer is difficult and idiosyncratic. I have suggested that Evagrius' fascination with the theological framework sketched by Origen and developed by Evagrius himself in a more systematic manner may help to explain why he undertook this complex task. It is impossible for us to know at this distance whether he was motivated primarily by his own intellectual and spiritual needs or by those of the monks who came to him eager to address the pressing philosophical questions of the day within a monastic theological framework.

Nonetheless, the tension Evagrius explored and attempted to resolve is familiar to anyone who now studies those shaped by the same philosophical and theological currents as he was. The heirs of Hellenistic Christianity in its various cultural and linguistic expressions kept facing the conundrum of biblical and devotional imagery for a God who is beyond human understanding, yet believed to have become human in Jesus Christ. The tendency has usually been to escape the tension by moving to one side or other, often in reaction to perceived abuses or threats. Some theologians rose to the theological and polemical challenges. Pseudo-Dionysius gloried in the paradox, while Maximus, John Damascene, and, much later, Symeon and Gregory Palamas negotiated the tension. With the dramatic

appearance of Islam in the seventh century, the largely Christian land in which Evagrius lived his monastic life was swept into a radically image-less—though imaginative and text-grounded—approach to God. Christians of the Byzantine Empire would fight long over the place of visual imagery in Christian prayer and worship, and then about experiences of light in prayer. Islam, iconoclasm, Hesychasm line up with the Anthropomorphite controversy of Evagrius' day in testimony that the struggle to understand a God unseen is fundamental to the great religious traditions of the Middle East. As we have seen, even the biblical text that gave him his fundamental spatial metaphor for prayer, "the place of God," was a Hellenistic Jewish nuancing of a more explicit Hebrew text.

Today, as images explode around us in a stunning array of media manipulated to entertain, entice, and sell, Evagrius' analysis of the powerful effects of imagery and his concern that we not mistake the virtual for the actual encourage deeper reflection on the effects of imaging technology on religious culture. Assumptions about the very basis of human knowing lurk in our daily lives even though description and hermeneutics of experience are more evident in the discourse. Evagrius had the insight and finesse to engage all three aspects of the issue. That he left a tenuous resolution and a host of unanswered questions underscores his most important insight, that in the "place of God" neither expectation nor satisfaction follows the usual rules.

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