



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

*Almighty and everlasting God,
who dost kindle the flames of thy love
in the hearts of the saints,
Grant unto us the same faith and power of love...
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
--Gothic Missal*

Some Minor Writers of the Sixth Century

Movement of ascetics from Egypt to Palestine

- begins in the 370s-380s,
- increases after
 - the devastation of Sketis in 407-408 by the barbarian Mazices (ferocious tribesmen who lived outside the desert of the Thebaid; *Imazighen* [sg. *Amazigh*] is a term Berber tribesmen have used to refer to themselves and apparently means “free men”) and
 - the second devastation which is variously dated to 434, 435, or 438 (initial migration to Sinai and Gaza).

Isaiah of Sketis (d. 488) *Ascetic Discourses*

- Cover the various stages from novice to solitary (urges against assuming to quickly that one is ready for the solitary life); appropriate moderation in ascetical practice counseled.
- Mixture of Pachomian cenobitic thought (Rule of Pachomius) plus seven of Evagrius’ eight evil reasonings but none of the latter’s controversial speculative thought
- The most interesting parts of his *Discourses* are
 - his theological treatment of nature and the passions in AD 2,16,18,25; see K. Ware, “The Meaning of ‘Pathos’ in Abba Isaias and Theodoret of Cyrus, in *Studia Patristica* 20, Leuven, 1989, pp. 315-322) and
 - his acute sense of what is required in interpersonal relationships (particularly in regard to the exercise of power and authority).
- Also urges against people appointing themselves to spiritual leadership;
 - these self-designated spiritual directors “want to have authority over others, who enjoy talking with...or who enjoy teaching others, without themselves actually being questioned...” (AD 17)
 - “Again he said about teaching: ‘There is a fear you can fall into that which you teach. For as long as you submit to a weakness, you cannot teach

others about it” (AD 26). One cannot teach or counsel others about a passion that continues to control us (AD 26). Indeed how can a person “holding on to one’s own will...either find rest or else see what is lacking” (AD 8)

- Negative judgment of others (=condemning and correcting others) are to be avoided (AD 1);
 - this is part of the renunciation of prideful self-will, which includes not only
 - “letting go of oneself before God” but also
 - “letting go of other people” and
 - “letting be of things in general” (see esp. AD 4; this is esp. difficult if we are accustomed to identifying our will with the will of God for our life or others’ lives—on the other hand, we can only truly grasp God’s will when we give up the equation my will=God’s will, with my will being first)
- It is not control but obedience leading to love for God and others that matters: “The one who obeys is actually the great one” (AD 3)
- Attached to the Monophysite cause (against the Council of Chalcedon) and the particular spirituality this encouraged (e.g. story of Peter the Iberian breaking the host at the fraction and blood spilling forth on the altar)

Barsanuphius and John the Prophet (d. 540-543)

Palestinian monasticism in the fifth and sixth centuries represents a transition between

- earlier Egyptian monasticism of the third to fourth centuries and
- the later Byzantine monasticism of Asia Minor (seventh to eight centuries; following the fall of Jerusalem to the Arab Muslim armies in 638).

Each of these different eras and the different centers of monastic culture with which they were associated had a somewhat different character and different emphases.

- Most of the monasteries in Palestine were located either
 - from Jerusalem north to the Dead Sea or
 - in Gaza.

It is to Gaza that Barsanuphius, an Egyptian ascetic, comes, settling there with a disciple named Seridos.

- As others gather around these two, a monastery is built.
- Seridos is appointed abbot, and Barsanuphius moves to a cell to pursue a more solitary life (c. 525-527), receiving only Seridos but indirectly providing spiritual direction to the community (an arrangement previously used by Abba Isaiah of Sketis) and communicating through the latter by letter with others (typically supplying written answers to written questions).

Another hermit named John came to live in a nearby cell.

- He and Barsanuphius both apparently died between 543-546.

- Around 850 letters of spiritual counsel survive from Barsanuphius and John and these cover a very wide variety of topics and are addressed to monks, clergy and laypeople.
 - Letters 600-607 are devoted to the Origenist heresy.

In the first half of the sixth century, when monasticism was becoming increasingly highly regulated in the West (e.g. the Rule of the Master and the Rule of St. Benedict), monastic communities in Palestine kept alive some of the more flexible traditions of community life and spiritual leadership typical of the Greek East.

What makes Barsanuphius and John interesting is their candor about the abuse of power that is possible in monastic leadership or spiritual direction.

- Earlier works emphasize the responsibilities of the spiritual director (e.g. to be a person of prayer who is willing to intercede in prayer for the directee, etc.) but little attention was given to what bad spiritual direction (esp. misuse of power) looks like or what kinds of harm it might cause.
- Barsanuphius and John describe in detail what authority the spiritual director actually has and what its limits and the scope of its legitimate exercise are. They then describe particular ways in which human longing for control over other persons or control over future outcomes turns out to be more destructive than helpful and give some guidance on how appropriate boundaries can be set in regard to issues of power and authority.

The Authority and Counsel of the Spiritual Director Must Come from God

- As with the earlier Egyptian ascetics, it is argued that no one can progress spiritually in isolation from others and that spiritual direction and submission to a spiritual guide is necessary to arrive at true detachment (renunciation of self-will).
- At the same time, the mutuality and reciprocity of the director-directee relationship is emphasized more strongly in Barsanuphius and John than in earlier Egyptian ascetic literature.
 - Thus, for example, we find a distinction drawn between συμβουλία and ἀνάγκη, consulting vs. compelling in arriving at “oneness of soul” (ὁμοψυχία) in BJ 187.

The Egyptian ascetics had emphasized the idea of humility to such an extent that they disdained the idea that one could be a teacher as a result of the simple, natural development of human skill.

- Persons with a reputation for holiness were described as *pneumatophoros* (bearing the Spirit) and any wise counsel they offered was not attributed to them as individuals but was rather seen as a direct work of the Spirit.
- The ascetical life was thus seen as a pattern of radical surrender and self-emptying so that one could be a fitting vehicle for the action of God; cf. the self-deprecating reminder in the letters of spiritual counsel:

“I write all these things not from my own will, but at the bidding of the Holy Spirit...I did not say anything of myself; I prayed and then said whatever God gave me confidence to say. It is not because I am capable of

anything myself that this answer was given through me; there was a need and God opened the ass's mouth." (BJ 13; 808)

"therefore the saints do not speak of themselves, but it is God who speaks in them as God wills—sometimes in a hidden, sometimes in an open manner" (BJ 778)

This same claim not to *be* an authority (in oneself) but to *have* authority (through the Spirit of Christ) is elsewhere made the only basis for spiritual leadership within the Christian community. Writing to a person afraid of taking up a position that involved the spiritual direction of others, John encourages him to take up the task in spite of his fears concerning his own limitations:

Say to them [the persons over whom you will have responsibility], 'Since the Lord Jesus Christ is looking after you, who said, 'I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you', pay attention to yourselves in all humility and love for God'
and if any of them reveals his thought to you, say in your own thought, 'Lord, if there is anything which will help the salvation of his soul, grant that I may say it to him, and that I may speak Your word, not my own.'
And then say whatever comes to you, telling yourself, 'This is not my word, for it is written, "If anyone speaks, let it be as oracles of God that he speaks."' (BJ 577)

The effectiveness of spiritual direction thus depends not upon the competence of the spiritual director but primarily on the Spirit of Christ and secondarily on the humility and receptivity (teachability) of the person speaking direction (see BJ 363, 693).

- It is never right for the spiritual director to seek to manipulate (directly or indirectly), dominate or control the person seeking direction.
- Human action can only secure short-term human results (followed by resistance, reaction and rejection), never lasting, spiritual change.

One must despair of the power of human intervention before one can become an instrument of God's purpose (BJ 35 [p. 69, first two sentences]). Writing to a sick person, Barsanuphius is quick to correct himself, when he senses himself being overly directive and operating out of an 'expert' human desire to fix things, rather than a willingness to wait on God for help:

But now see how proud I am! Mocked by the demons, I seem to think that I possess a Godlike charity! I have so far lost control of myself to say to you, "I will carry half of your burden now, and for the future, God can help us again." I speak madly.

I know I am weak and powerless and devoid of any good deed. But my shamelessness does not let me despair. I have a master who is kind and merciful and loving towards us, and he reaches out his hand to sinners until their last breath." (BJ 72 =p. 77 in Chryssavgis translation)

This is also why questioners may not expect to receive an answer at precisely time they wish to receive one. They may instead an answer different from what they want and at a different time than they wished (BJ 369 [p. 124]; cf. 35).

If, as this scheme suggests, the spiritual director is simply a vehicle for divine counsel, then it obviously makes no sense running around consulting different spiritual directors concerning a particular matter until one can get the counsel one wants to hear. If one goes to a spiritual director to hear what the Spirit of Christ is saying, but then wants to shop around for a second or third opinion, what precisely is supposed to be going on here? Will the Spirit change his mind in the interim between visits? Or, more candidly, isn't this spiritual consumerism really a refusal of faith and a sign of a self-willed, unteachable character that refuses all external counsel? (See BJ 361; 363; it is, however, acceptable to ask the same spiritual director twice if significant time has passed and there is reason to believe that there has been some development in the situation.)

Authority from God vs. Human Attempts to Secure Control Over Future Outcomes (Carnal Abuse of Power)

On other way in which spiritual direction is imaged as a charismatic, Spirit-based function rather than a human form of manipulating outcomes is seen in the reserved attitude toward future planning. Some monks wrote to Barsanuphius, fearing that the monastic communities in Palestine might be objects of hostile action by the government and asked whether they should hide their possessions, abandon their communities and flee. Barsanuphius wrote back, reminding them that all things are in the hands of God. Irritated, the monks wrote back, "Then why does it say, 'If they drive you out of this city, flee to the next?'" Barsanuphius calmly replied, "We have not yet been driven out."

Barsanuphius was also quick to condemn shortcuts to certainty, especially where this involved looking for a sign. One enquirer wrote to Barsanuphius:

I have heard that if anyone has a dream three times, it is a true dream [i.e. predictive of the future]. Is that so, father?"

Barsanuphius rejects all human means to know the future with a view to controlling circumstances:

It is not so and you ought not to put any faith in such a dream; he who appears to deceive you once can do it again three times or any number of times. So do not be taken in. Pay attention to yourself. (BJ 418=pp. 128-129 in Chryssavgis translation)

Barsanuphius' skepticism about human attempts to control future outcomes is nowhere clearer than in the first set of letters, which are addressed to Abba John of Beersheba, who has been put in some kind of leadership role in a local monastery. John is clearly a person suited by natural temperament to be an administrator (the perfect executive pastor!), but lacks the inward attitudes essential to the task of being a *spiritual* administrator of others. John is used to being put in charge and getting things done. He has high standards for himself and others in what he expects to be achieved, worries about the future and feels deeply disappointed and a bit angry when things don't turn out

as planned. He then feels the failure keenly and self-condemning, becomes discouraged and loses heart (anger leading on to akedia).

According to Barsanuphius, John needs to come to term with the fact that matters do not depend upon his planning and activity but on God. The essential task is not to sort everybody and everything out, but to learn how to love God and the neighbor within the varying circumstances of everyday life, depending on God and remaining at rest in God. At one point, John became angry when some bricks were left out in the rain and were spoiled. Seeing that John was going to make a scene about the loss and get the abbot of the monastery involved, Barsanuphius sent a message to the abbot, saying,

Write to Brother John and give him my greetings. He is all set to cause disturbance to others and to be disturbed by others. Say to him: Rejoice in the Lord (BJ 16).

On another occasion (BJ 12), John, acting upon his desire for control of persons and situations, has taken another monk to task for not completing a job as quickly as John desired, which caused the monk to take great offence and John consequently resolved not to speak to the irritated brother. In response, Barsanuphius wrote,

Tell Brother John, this generation is soft and delicate; you will find it hard to discover a man with a tough heart. But stick to what the Apostle says, “Reprove, rebuke, exhort in all patience and teaching.”

Barsanuphius follows this up in the next letter (BJ 13) by warning John not to “enslave” people (which is precisely what the desire for control does to others).

Some subsequent letters show how John’s desire for control expresses itself in regard to the spiritual life and the care of one’s soul. For John, making resolutions and trying to follow a demanding rule of life (the more austere the better) are the ways to gain control of oneself and get ahead. Barsanuphius (BJ 23) thinks this approach does more harm than good:

You are going round and round in too many circles to enter the narrow gate which leads to eternal life. Christ tells you very concisely how to enter. Leave men’s rules and listen to him telling you, ‘He who endures to the end will be saved.’ So if people do not have patience, they will not enter into life. So don’t desire a statute.

I want you to be under grace, not under law. It says, “There is no law set for the righteous.” I want you to be with the righteous. Stick to discernment like a helmsman steering his boat in response to the winds.

- Things simply cannot be settled in advance once and for all; in each situation, one must look to God to give one discernment and help (BJ 21).
- Barsanuphius also doubts that John’s penchant for dramatic asceticism and self-condemnation are real: “You call yourself a sinner and yet you do not believe this, judging from what you do. A man who holds that he is a sinner and the cause of his own troubles does not go round contradicting people and fighting them and

getting angry with them...Pay attention to yourself, brother: this is not the truth” (BJ 17; p. 63 in Chryssavgis’ translation).

Barsanuphius is even more critical of John’s attempt to control other people by imposing a rule of strict observance. Barsanuphius (BJ 25) rejects a plan by John and the abbot tighten up the monastic rule once and for all against the brethren, seeing this as unspiritual result of their lack of patience and their unhealthy desire for control over others:

I have written to you before about patience. And now I say to you: Milk the cow, and you will get butter, but if you squeeze the teat in your hand, blood will come out...If a man wants to bend a tree or a vine, he does it in stages. If he forces it all at once, immediately the whole business is ruined.

In discussing the necessity of nonattachment (ἀποταγή) in exercising spiritual authority, Barsanuphius concludes (BJ 35=p. 69 in Chryssavgis translation):

Do not force the will but sow in hope; our Lord never constrained anyone, but preached the good news and if anyone wanted to, he could listen to it.

This is repeated in BJ 368, distinguishing between guidance as passing on a judgment (γνώμη) and the issuing to the other person of a commandment:

Simple advice according to God is one thing, and a command is another. Advice is counsel without compulsion, showing a person the straight way in life; but a command has an inviolable bond.

Cf. the saying of Abba Mios, “Obedience responds to obedience,” not to authority. Only when the spiritual director is himself/herself submitted to God and has put away his/her own will can seekers confidently entrust themselves to such a person, knowing that both the directee and the director are subject to the same conditions and commandments and equally accountable before God.

What is necessary is not to control or manipulate others, but to extend mercy and forgiveness to them (BJ 371):

“The just man falls seven times a day and gets up again” (Prov. 24:16) and “You shall forgive your brother seventy times seven times” (Mt 18:22). If the just man falls seven times a day, we should not be surprised at our own failures; and if God tells us to forgive each other so extravagantly, how much more readily will he himself forgive. So we must not get anxious or become negligent, but must come back to “Now, O Israel” [Dt. 4:1] and continue to do our best.”