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Spiritual Exercises and Ascetic *Praxis* in Desert Monasticism

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Abstract

In this paper, we will highlight the question of the relationship between early monasticism and antique philosophy in late antiquity. In this sense, the spiritual exercise was played an essential role in this period. Thus, by using the expression “spiritual exercise” we introduced a distinction between two separate kinds of education – monastic and philosophical.

In first section, we will point out that spiritual exercise was characteristic of the philosophical and monastic landscapes of late antiquity. But if the goal of antique philosophy is wisdom itself, the goal of desert monasticism is holiness. To be more specific, we will stress that the weight monastic education place on holiness rather than wisdom does not isolate monasticism from antique philosophy. Rather, the monk’s life accentuates the importance of recognizing a shared education that links the monasticism with its philosophical counterpart. From this perspective, desert monk displays a great familiarity with the antique wiser, so that he was by default understood as a Christian philosopher.

In second part we will explore the relationship between spiritual grow and ascetic *praxis*. Desert teaching points out the need to control the passions to achieve a spiritual progress. The early monks understood the body as an ascetic environment for the training of the soul. In this context, we stress that the early monks cultivated holiness through rigorous ascetic efforts, and the purpose of this *praxis* was the spiritual transformation of the monk.

Our conclusion is that there is a close relationship between the control of the body and spiritual progress. Briefly, desert monasticism represents a lived territory of holiness and spiritual elevation.

Keywords

deification, spiritual exercise, early philosophy, desert asceticism, Late Antiquity

I. Introduction

My fundamental concern in this paper, however, is the question of continuity and discontinuity in teacher roles from antique philosophy to early monasticism. More exactly, we will see that although desert asceticism is very different from antique philosophy, shared some of its features.

The point of departure for this paper is the remarkable continuity between antique philosophy and desert asceticism. Our major premise is that the spiritual exercise was a fundamental practice in early philosophy and desert monasticism.

Also, one of the most distinctive features of the desert monasticism was a perpetual purification of the monk. In this sense, the spiritual exercise prepares the way for holiness by ascetic *praxis*. The spiritual elevation is understood in the monastic tradition as the gradual progress of a monk from the stage of ascetic practice to the stage of contemplation life. This alignment of the body with spiritual growth, together with an increased emphasis on ascetic discipline. Briefly, the ascetic effort led the monks toward personal transformation, toward the realization of holiness. We understand that the ascetic discipline is a concept which plays an immensely important part in the spirituality of the desert.

II. Spiritual Exercises in Antique Philosophy and Desert Asceticism: A Brief Survey

In this section we will explore the relationship between ascetic education and antique philosophy. In our opinion, there is a complex attitude of early monks towards antique *paideia*. In other words, their attitude ranged from assimilation to outright rejection or a prudent adoption. More exactly there is a creative assimilation of classical education (*paideia*) in the spirituality of the desert¹. In this context we stress that the monastic life, like antique

¹ For pertinent reflections on this subject, see Lillian LARSEN, Samuel RUBENSON (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia*, Cambridge University Press, 2018. For an overview on this subject, see Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve Van HOOF and Peter Van NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity*, Routledge, 2016; John A. MCGUCKIN, "Education (*Paideia*) as Kerygmatic Value in the Orthodox Tradition", in: Ann Mitsakos BEZZERIDES,

philosophy, was a kind of spiritual wisdom. Briefly, the philosophical wisdom was assumed and transfigured by the Desert Fathers².

In this context we stress that the early philosophy was primarily a way of life characterized by transformational and spiritual exercises: “Above all, philosophy is viewed as an exercise of wisdom, and therefore as the practice of a way of life”³. But for the early Christians, monasticism provides the ultimate and only true philosophy – way of life. In other words, as Nathan Jennings has remarked “philosophy is a way of life, and that true mode of life give only in Christianity”⁴.

Therefore, asceticism and renunciation of this world was necessary to gain spiritual knowledge. Pierre Hadot, in his book *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, has convincingly argued how in early philosophy exercises such as that of attention to oneself required meditating on and memorising rules of life, those principles which were to be applied in each moment of life. It was essential to have the principles of life, the fundamental “dogmas”, constantly, “at hand”. Hadot demonstrated how

Elizabeth H. PRODROMOU (eds.), *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2017, pp. 55-79; Bruce N. BECK, “«Learn from Me»: Embodied Knowledge through Imitation in Early Christian Pedagogy”, in: A. M. BEZZERIDES, E. H. PRODROMOU (eds.), *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections*, pp. 115-139; John BEHR, “Plundering the Egyptians: The Use of Classical *Paideia* in the Early Church”, in: A. M. BEZZERIDES, E. H. PRODROMOU (eds.), *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections*, pp. 140-154; Andrew LOUTH, “Orthodox Monasticism and Higher Education”, in: A. M. BEZZERIDES, E. H. PRODROMOU (eds.), *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections*, pp. 155-167.

² The best discussion of the relationship between early monasticism and antique philosophy, to which I am much indebted, is Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2017. For more details on this relationship between Christianity and late antique philosophy, see Eva ANAGNOSTOU-LAOUTIDES, Ken PARRY (eds.), *Eastern Christianity and Late Antique Philosophy*, Leiden: Brill, 2020.

³ Pierre HADOT, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1995, p. 49 and p. 102. On more this subject, see Nathan G. JENNINGS, *Theology as Ascetic Act: Disciplining Christian Discourse*, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 142-161.

⁴ Nathan G. JENNINGS, *Theology as Ascetic Act: Disciplining Christian Discourse*, p. 146.

this theme is operative once again in the desert monasticism – except that in the monastic tradition philosophical principles are replaced by the words of Christ. Both evangelical texts and the texts of the early philosophers were presented in the form of short sentences, which could be easily memorized and meditated upon. The numerous collections of apophthegmata and of kephalaia we find in monastic literature are a response to this need for memorisation and meditation⁵. Also, P. Hadot has drawn attention to the practice (and its implications) of presenting ancient philosophy in the form of short sentences, maxims which made easier their memorisation and their meditation⁶. As Yannis Papadogiannakis has remarked

“both apophthegmata and kephalaia were already in existence in the philosophical tradition and Hadot has pointed to numerous examples of them in the works of Diogenes Laertius, Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and Porphyry’s *Sentences*. Both of these literary genres are responses to the requirements of meditation”⁷.

Therefore, antique philosophical exercise “move the practitioner from an inadequate existence marred by the passions to a more perfected existence marked by the control and removal of the passion”⁸, so that “Intended to transform the self into something better than its current state, spiritual exercises educate and convert the self away from physical distractions to a life of contemplating wisdom. Although this wisdom was unattainable in life, it formed the goal of the system of spiritual exercises”⁹.

From this perspective, we understand that there is a continuity between philosophical model and monastic paradigm of spiritual guidance. Like ancient philosophy, monasticism practiced a form of ascesis, that is,

⁵ Cf. Nathan G. JENNINGS, *Theology as Ascetic Act: Disciplining Christian Discourse*, p. 66.

⁶ Cf. Pierre HADOT, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Éditions Albin Michel, 2002, pp. 52-54.

⁷ Yannis PAPADOGIANNAKIS, “An Education through Gnostic Wisdom”, in: Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve Van HOOF and Peter Van NUFELLEN, *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity*, p. 63.

⁸ Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, p. 173.

⁹ Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, p. 174.

discipleship. From this perspective, P. Hadot provides an interesting observation on this point:

“They entered into a community, under the direction of a spiritual master, in which they venerated the school’s founder and often took meals in common with the other members of the school. They examined their conscience and perhaps even confessed their misdeeds... They lived an ascetic life... (some) followed a vegetarian diet and devoted themselves to contemplation, seeking mystical uniform”¹⁰.

Therefore, Hadot compares the antique philosophy with early asceticism as it developed from the third through the fourth centuries. From this perspective, the purpose of the monk is the spiritual wisdom. In this context we point out, together with Fr. John Chryssavgis, that Desert Fathers was sources of spiritual formation, because

“the desert had its own system of education; it was its own school of thought... Yet, in general, the desert produced healers, not thinkers. It cultivated the heart, not letters. It sought to quench a thirst of the soul, and not merely a curiosity of the mind. The desert was a place of inner work and of personal experience”¹¹.

The ascetic life is an inner work characterized by stillness, silence, praxis and labor, humility, patience, solitude and charity. In other words, the desert was a locus of personal and spiritual experience. Scholars were made several associations between ascetic discipline and antique education. It is thus important to note that the early monasticism assimilated the model of the antique philosophy because the relationship between an elder and his disciple “can be viewed in terms of transformation, because it is informed by pre-existing patterns of education”¹². First of all, the spiritual

¹⁰ Pierre HADOT, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 247-248.

¹¹ John CHRYSAVGIS, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, World Wisdom, 2008, pp. 75-76.

¹² Nienke VOS, “«Father, Give Me a Word»: Transforming Traditions and Spiritual Direction in Early Christian Monasticism”, in: Nienke VOS, Albert C. GELJON (eds.), *Rituals in Early Christianity: New Perspectives on Tradition and Transformation*, Leiden, Brill, 2021, p. 254.

transformation of the monk is correlated by the pedagogical system of antique *paideia*. This system has implied notions of the development of character and moral virtue. In other words, the attainment of wisdom in antique philosophy is similar to the ascetic holiness from desert.

Therefore, as Samuel Rubenson has remarked,

“instead of a dichotomy between monastery and school, we need to search for the models used for training and formation within monastic life and for developments within the traditions of philosophical formation that can bridge the gap between the city and the desert”¹³.

In our opinion there is a continuity between late antique education and desert asceticism, so that the ascetic literature (*The Life of Antony*, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* and so on) can be read in light of this classical model. From this perspective, antique *paideia* served the same purpose as ascetic sentences, that is, to progress in virtue and wisdom.

According to Henrik Rydell Johnsen

“even if it is clear that the early monastic elders are dependent on Biblical teacher roles by resembling Christ in the Gospels, or elders in the Old Testament, the abba or the elder must also be seen as very much in continuity with several prominent teacher roles and positions within late antique philosophy”¹⁴.

¹³ Samuel RUBENSON, “Monasticism and the Philosophical Schools”, in: Lillian LARSEN, Samuel RUBENSON (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 503. For more details on this subject, see Edward WATTS, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, University of California Press, 2006, pp. 169-170 and Augustine CASIDAY, *Tradition and Theology in St. John Cassian*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 131-160. For the competition between monks and philosophers in Late Antiquity, see Arthur P. URBANO, “The Cell and the School: Geographical and Social Distance in the Competition for Philosophy”, in: Arthur P. URBANO, *The Philosophical Life: Biography and the Crafting of Intellectual Identity in Late Antiquity*, The Catholic University of America Press, 2013, pp. 205-244.

¹⁴ Henrik Rydell JOHNSEN, “Physicians, Teachers and Friends: Lower Egyptian Desert Elders and Late Antique Directors of Souls”, in: Peter GEMEINHARDT, Olga LORGEUX, and Maria MUNKHOLT CHRISTENSEN (eds.), *Teachers in Late Antique Christianity*, Mohr

Also, in the spirituality of the desert absolute submission to the teaching of an experienced monk is the essential practice that a young ascetic can realize. The importance of obedience to an elder is underlined in the spirituality of the desert. The most vivid sentence that illustrates this point is expressed by Abba Antony the Great: "If possible, the monk ought to reveal to the elders how many steps he takes or how many drops of water he drinks in his cell (to see) whether he does not transgress in those matters"¹⁵. This point is expressed by same monk in the following sentence: "I know some monks who fell after many labors and came to the point of losing their reason. This was because they had pinned their hopes on their own work and had ignored the commandment of him who said: «Ask your father and he will tell you» (Deut 32.7)"¹⁶.

There is a certain kind of ascetic instruction employed in *Apophthegmata Patrum* assumed by the relationship between a young monk and a wise man (*abba*)¹⁷. According to Kallistos Ware

"If we are climbing a mountain for the first time, we need to follow a known route; and we also need to have with us, as companion and guide, someone who has been up before and is familiar with the way. To serve as such a companion and guide is precisely the role of the 'abba' or spiritual father – of the one whom the Greeks call *geron* or *geronta* and the Russians *starets*, a title which in both languages means «old man» or «elder»"¹⁸.

Similarly, Edward Watts has remarked "education in all periods and all contexts depends upon a profound and personal exchange of information between a master who possesses knowledge and a disciple who wants to gain that knowledge"¹⁹. From this perspective, the metaphor of a coach

Siebeck, 2018, p. 201.

¹⁵ Abba ANTONY 38, in: *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. by John Wortley, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014, pp. 39-40. All quote from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* are from this translation.

¹⁶ Abba ANTONY 37 (trans. Wortley), p. 39.

¹⁷ More details on this subject, see George DEMACOPOULOS, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

¹⁸ Kallistos WARE, "The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity", in: Kallistos WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, St Valdimir's Press, 2001, p. 127.

¹⁹ E. WATTS, "Teaching the New Classics: Bible and Biography in a Pachomian Monastery", in: Peter GEMEINHARDT, Lieve Van HOOFF and Peter Van NUFELLEN,

training his athletes and a teacher instructing his disciples is correct. The importance of the spiritual guidance in the *Apophthegmata* has been widely recognized in the early ascetic tradition²⁰. The elder or old man (*géron*)²¹ is fundamentally a „charismatic” monk because he gives advice, not a confession. The holiness of the monk acquired through ascetic training and spiritual exercises was crucial to the monk’s popularity as a spiritual teacher for those who sought his guidance. Spiritual exercise is a central theme of desert asceticism because much of the spiritual growth of the disciple was conditioned by personal relationship with his elder.

We understand that the metaphor of a coach training his athletes and a teacher instructing his disciples is correct. The importance of the spiritual guidance in the *Apophthegmata* has been widely recognized in the early ascetic tradition. First of all, in the desert, as G. Gould has noted,

“teaching takes place in the context of a personal relationship, which makes great demands on both parties involved. The first responsibility of the abba or «old man» (*géron*) is to teach his disciple how to live the monastic life and to face up to the problems and temptations to which any monk is exposed. For

Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity, Routledge, 2016, p. 47.

²⁰ For a general survey of spiritual guidance in early asceticism, see: I. HAUSHERR, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Studies, 1990; Graham GOULD, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1993; Philip ROUSSEAU, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, Oxford University Press, 1978; John CHRYSAVGIS, *In the Heart of the Desert. The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, World Wisdom, 2008; H. DÖRRIES, “The Place of Confession in Ancient Monasticism”, in: *Studia Patristica* no. 5 (1962), pp. 287-290; A. LOUF, “Spiritual Fatherhood in the Literature of the Desert”, in: John R. SOMMERFELDT (ed.), *Abba. Guides to Wholeness and Holiness East and West*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1982, pp. 37-63; Thomas MERTON, “The Spiritual Father in the Desert Tradition”, in: Th. MERTON, J. LECLERQ (eds), *Contemplation in a World of Action*, London: Doubleday 1971, pp. 269-293; Benedicta WARD, “Spiritual Direction in the Desert Fathers”, in: *The Way* 24, 1984, pp. 61-70, and Kallistos WARE, “The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity”, in: *Cross Currents*, 1974 republished sub title “The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity”, in: K. WARE, *The Inner Kingdom*, Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001, pp. 127- 152.

²¹ Abba (*géron*) is a title which means “old man” or “elder”. The elder is essentially a “charismatic” figure, so that his ministry is less institutional and more personal. According to G. Gould, “the title and form of address ‘Abba’, suggesting the regard of a disciple for an experienced and authoritative father and teacher, is itself indicative of the importance of spiritual direction in the *Sayings*” (G. GOULD, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, p. 26).

the disciple, the process of learning requires self-disclosure, endurance, and obedience”²².

The spiritual transformation of the monk is correlated by the pedagogical system of antique *paideia*. This system has implied notions of the development of character and moral virtue. In other words, the attainment of wisdom in antique philosophy is similar to the ascetic holiness from desert. Thus, early monasticism was deeply rooted in the antique philosophical school, so that it “was in itself an educational movement rooted in previous school tradition”²³. We understand that the desert asceticism appears as an innovative continuation of Classical school tradition. In this sense, Samuel Rubenson points out that the monastic life assimilated four traits of antique school: leisure, tradition, exercise, and collective organization:

”There is no doubt that the early monasteries in the East share many of the basic characteristics of the contemporary Classical schools: what was fundamental for a school was also fundamental for a monastery. The monastic movement had the same emphasis as the school on the necessity for withdrawal, leisure, and undisturbed attention to learning and a focus on moral and spiritual progress. The monastic movement also shared the emphasis on transmitting a specific tradition using the same methods and even the same vocabulary for imitation, repetition, memorization, and various forms of mental and physical exertion”²⁴.

And indeed, it has become customary to speak of “spiritual exercises” in Seneca and in other ancient philosophers. The mental training can be considered a form of “spiritual exercise” (Hadot) or “technique of the self” (Foucault). Antique philosophy is an art that takes care of the soul analogous to gymnastics, the art that takes care of the body. These philosophical exercises must thus be conceived as in some sense exercises

²² Graham GOULD, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, pp. 26-27.

²³ Samuel RUBENSON, “Early Monasticism and the Concept of a ‘School’”, in: Lillian LARSEN, Samuel RUBENSON (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia*, p. 14.

²⁴ Samuel RUBENSON, “Early Monasticism and the Concept of a ‘School’”, pp. 31-32.

for the soul analogous to exercises for the body. Thus, just as the health of the body requires physical training, so the health of the soul will require some form of mental training, what we might call “exercise for the soul”²⁵.

According to Zachary Smith “intended to transform the self into something better than its current state, spiritual exercises educate and convert the self away from physical distractions to a life of contemplating wisdom. Although this wisdom was unattainable in life, it formed the goal of the system of spiritual exercises”²⁶.

In conclusion we would like to make a few points about the significance of ascetic education in antique philosophy and desert asceticism. First, the spiritual exercise is central to achieve the wisdom (early philosophy) and holiness (early monasticism). In this sense, the spiritual exercise and ascetic formation went hand in hand in the early philosophy and ascetic tradition. One clear conclusion may be drawn: the spiritual growth or elevation (*maturitas spiritualis*) is closely correlated to the spiritual exercise, or vice versa, so that the one is the goal of the other.

Thus, there are some similarities between early monasticism and antique philosophy because the spiritual transformation of the monk is correlated by the pedagogical system of antique *paideia*. Briefly, the attainment of wisdom in antique philosophy is similar to the ascetic holiness from desert. We must conclude that the early monks were influenced by some pre-existing ideas about philosophical self-care.

III. Spiritual Growth and Ascetic *Praxis* in the Spirituality of the Desert

In the previous section we saw that the spiritual exercises were important part of the educational system of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. These

²⁵ Cf. John SELLARS, *The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy*, Bristol Classical Press, 2009, p. 110. For more details on this theme, see especially John SELLARS, *Marcus Aurelius*, London/New York, Routledge, 2021; Nicholas D. SMITH *Socrates on Self-Improvement: Knowledge, Virtue, and Happiness*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021; John SELLARS, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018; Gregor DAMSCHEN, Andreas HEIL (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Seneca: Philosopher and Dramatist*, Leiden, Brill, 2014; A. A. LONG, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002.

²⁶ Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, p. 174.

spiritual exercises move the individual from an undesirable existence characterized by the external desires to a more perfected existence marked by the control of the passion. But, perhaps most significantly, alongside antique philosophy, desert monasticism functioned as ascetic *praxis* of this period.

And indeed, the spirituality of the desert is characterised by a strong educational dimension and ascetic *praxis*. In this sense, the sentences of the Desert Fathers can be understood as educational texts because they provide a consistent base for the spiritual training of a monk. This monastic conjecture appears strongly expressed in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*:

“Somebody said to the blessed Arsenius: «How is it that we have gained nothing from so much education and wisdom, while these rustic Egyptian peasants have acquired such virtues?» Abba Arsenius said to him: «For our part we have gained nothing from the world’s education, but these rustic Egyptian peasants have acquired the virtues by their own labors»²⁷.

This point is reiterated in another apophthegm of the same elder:

”Abba Arsenius was once asking an Egyptian elder about his own *logismoi*. Another person, when he saw him, said: «Abba Arsenius, how is it that you, who have such a command of Greek and Roman learning, are asking this rustic about your *logismoi*?» But he said to him: «A command of Greek and Roman learning I have, but I have not yet learned the alphabet of this rustic»²⁸.

Generally, the desert was a place for ascetic training where the monk practiced a lot of spiritual exercises²⁹ to become a holy person. In

²⁷ Abba ARSENIUS 5 (transl. Wortley), p. 41.

²⁸ Abba ARSENIUS 6 (Wortley), p. 41. Similarly, Abba Arsenius highlights what he saw as the deeper purpose of the desert life (cf. Abba ARSENIUS 7). As Daniel Lemeni has remarked “the holiness was a new *paideia* of the monk, born of the ascetic *praxis* of the desert. Two sayings sum up this new alphabet of the desert. The desert has its own education, an education by monks who wish to change themselves rather than satisfy their intellectual curiosity” (D. LEMENI, “You can become all flame: Deification in Early Egyptian Monasticism”, in: John ARBLASTER and Rob FAESEN, *Mystical Doctrines of Deification: Case Studies in the Christian Tradition*, Routledge, 2019, p. 27).

²⁹ Spiritual exercise always been regarded as indispensable to ascetic training, so that it served in monastic culture as a promoter of spiritual progress. Moreover, spiritual

this context we stress that monasticism played an important role in the growing popularity of holy man in Late Antiquity. As Inbar Graiver has remarked the charisms of the monk “acquired through years of withdrawal and ascetic training, would have been crucial to the holy man’s success as an impartial mediator, a healer, and a «power broker» for those who sought his assistance”³⁰. Similarly, Zachary B. Smith has remarked the spiritual exercises “serve to destroy the old self in order to rebuild a new, passionless, virtuous self”³¹.

We understand that the monks cultivated holiness through rigorous ascetic discipline, and the purpose of this life was the spiritual transformation of the ascetic. A sentence of Abba Antony the Great develops this transfiguration of the monk: Three monks visited Antony every year. Two of them discuss on their inner thoughts with him, but the third always remained silent. One time, Antony asked the silent monk: “You come to see me, but ask nothing”. The monk replied: “Abba, it is enough just to see you”³².

In other words, the disciplining of the body was key to the transformation of the monk into a wiser monk. The body contains passions that are to be purified, so that spiritual life engages the monk in the struggle for virtue and the control of the passions. The essence of this ascetic doctrine

exercise was the most radical method for cultivating self-transformation in the desert. In this sense, several spiritual exercises were listed by Desert Fathers: self-mastery (*enkrateia*), a complete elimination of passions (*apatheia*), fasting, prayer, manual work, self-denial, and so on. For pertinent reflections on the meaning and function of spiritual exercises in desert asceticism, see Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, Brepols, 2017, and Paul C. DILLEY, *Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

³⁰ Inbar GRAIVER, *Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2018, p. 190.

³¹ Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, p. 220. Also, Caroline T. Schroeder has suggested that “the cultivation of the body was part of a larger care of the self, in which discipline of the body was intimately connected to the cultivation of virtue in the soul” (Caroline SCHROEDER, *Monastic Bodies: Discipline and Salvation in Shenoute of Atripe*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, p. 12). For more details on this subject, see Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY, “Demons and Prayers: Spiritual Exercises in the Monastic Community of Gaza in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries”, in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 57/2, 2003, pp. 200-221; Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY, “Spiritual Exercises: The Continuous Conversation of the Mind With God”, in: Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY and Aryeh KOFKY (eds.), *The Monastic School of Gaza*, Brill, 2006, pp. 157-182.

³² ANTONY 27 (Wortley), p. 37.

is encapsulated in the words of Abba Arsenius: “A Brother asked Abba Arsenius if he could hear a saying from him. The elder said to him: As much as you are able, strive so that what goes on inside you be godly and you conquer your external passions”³³. Therefore, without asceticism, there is no spiritual life, and no spiritual progress because only through asceticism can the heart be cleansed of the passions. Briefly, *askesis* is valued in ascetic literature as a testing ground for spiritual progress.

This spiritual progress was conceived as an inner and outer freedom. Moreover, this inner state becomes one of the major sign for ascetic authority of the monk. There is one thing here that is particularly significant: the spiritual path of the ascesis is a transformative process by which the monk obtains an ascetic authority. Therefore, asceticism in the Late Antiquity assumes that monks are free to transform by spiritual exercises, and with divine aid can even cultivate extraordinary powers. This intimate relationship between physical effort and spiritual elevation is fully attested in the early ascetic literature. For example, in the *Life of Antony*, Athanasius describes the archetypal monk as having attained, through arduous, lifelong ascetic practice, an incorruptible body:

“Nearly twenty years he spent in this manner pursuing the ascetic life by himself, not venturing out and only occasionally being seen by anyone. After this ... Antony came forth as though from some shrine, having been led into divine mysteries and inspired by God. This was the first time he appeared from the fortress for those who came out to him. And when they beheld him, they were amazed to see that his body had maintained its former condition, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons, but was just as they had known him prior to his withdrawal. The state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not considered by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection. ... He maintained utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature”³⁴.

In this context, we stress that in the desert monasticism, the body was

³³ Abba ARSENIUS 9 (Wortley), p. 41.

³⁴ See ATHANASIUS, *Life of Antony* 14, trans. Gregg, Paulist Press, 1980, p. 42.

not an irrelevant part of the human person but it was an integral part of deification, and those who came to this holiness were monks that practiced an ascetic discipline. First and foremost, the monk's special charisma, his *askesis*, becomes increasingly the prerequisite for his *theosis*. In other words, monastic discipline, is above all a *praxis*, a spiritual progress. We understand that:

“the solution to the problem of the deformed self is a continual, progressive process of mental and physical performances, sometimes termed asceticism, that deny the passions, focus the self away from distraction, and elevate the soul. Because the self is deformed, it needs to learn from someone or something outside itself in order to recognize its own deformity and then to understand how to overcome the deformity with the application of self-practices. The practices require formal or informal instruction or modelling, from an advanced practitioner to a learner”³⁵.

These essential features witnessed the extreme valuation of attitudes and practices centered on the transformation of the body and the soul. Briefly, the ascetic discipline was centered on the spiritual elevation of the monk. In the desert asceticism, there is a close relationship between the control of the body and the spiritual growth. This typical conception for Desert Fathers is recorded in a sentence expressed by Abba Poemen: „Abba Isaac visited Abba Poemen and saw him pouring a little water over his feet. As he was quite familiar with him, he said to him: ‚How is it that some used severity and treated their bodies harshly?’ Abba Poemen said to him: ‚We were not taught to slay the body but to slay the passions”³⁶.

Also, Holy Scripture was central to the new *paideia* of the desert. Desert asceticism constantly invokes the central role of Scripture in the ascetic discipline. And indeed, Scripture stands as one of the most fundamental pillars which defined the quest for holiness in desert asceticism³⁷. This

³⁵ Zachary B. SMITH, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, p. 177.

³⁶ POEMEN 183 (trans. Wortley), pp. 257-258.

³⁷ For pertinent reflections on this subject, see Douglas BURTON-CHRISTIE, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

rumination of Scripture provides a key to understanding the significance of the monastic quest for holiness. But the meditation of Scripture reflects the philosophical tradition of spiritual exercises, which Pierre Hadot defines as practices leading to the “transformation of our vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of our personality”.

From this perspective, the model of Greek *paideia* followed by pagan philosophers was rejected by the desert monks. A new *paideia* was proposed in its place, one which Guy has described as “an altogether original method of spiritual education”³⁸.

The *Historia Monachorum*, in a comment which reflects a distinctly Christian and monastic notion of what constitutes true asceticism, tells of a certain Paternuthius, who, though unlearned, had “attained the highest degree of *ascesis*”—being able to recite the Scriptures by heart³⁹. Also, in the *Vita Antonii*, Antony is shown to have modeled his entire life upon the Bible, from his initial call through his long years of solitude in the desert. His own knowledge of Scripture was said to be profound:

“He prayed constantly, since he learned that it is necessary to pray unceasingly in private. For he paid such close attention to what was read that nothing from Scripture did he fail to take in—rather he grasped everything, and in him memory took the place of books”⁴⁰.

He held the Scriptures to be “sufficient for instruction”:

”One day when he had gone out, all the monks came to him, asking to hear a discourse. In the Egyptian tongue he told them these things. «The Scriptures are sufficient for instruction, but it is good for us to encourage each other in the faith. Now you, saying what you know, bring this to the father like children, and

³⁸ Jean-Claude GUY, “Educational Innovation in the Desert Fathers”, in: *Eastern Churches Review* 6 (1974), p. 45.

³⁹ *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 10:7; trans. Norman Russell, introd. Benedicta WARD, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, Mowbray, 1980, p. 83.

⁴⁰ *Life of Antony* 3 (trans. Gregg), p. 32.

I, as your elder, will share what I know and the fruits of my experience»⁴¹.

Also, he counseled his monks to

“have faith in the Lord and love him; to guard themselves from lewd thoughts and pleasures of the flesh, and as it is written in Proverbs, not to be deceived by the feeding of the belly; to flee vanity, and to pray constantly; to sing holy songs before sleep and after, and to take to heart the precepts in the Scripture; keep in mind the deeds of the saints, so that the soul, ever mindful of the commandments, might be educated by their ardor”⁴².

In his debates with philosophers, Antony criticized the Greeks for their syllogistic approach to knowledge and for their failure “to read the Scriptures honestly”⁴³. He proposed a new kind of wisdom based on the Scriptures and not requiring any special learning⁴⁴.

Also, numerous sayings refer to the authority of Scripture and its importance for the life of the monk. Epiphanius, a bishop for whom reading and study were more important than for many of the simple monks, insisted that to be without knowledge of the Scriptures was to be in “a precipice and a deep abyss”⁴⁵. “To know nothing of the divine law” he said, was a “betrayal of salvation”⁴⁶. The same matter-of-fact attitude toward the authority of Scripture is reflected in a response by Antony to some brothers who came seeking a “word” to help them discover how to

⁴¹ *Life of Antony* 16 (trans. Gregg), p. 43.

⁴² *Life of Antony* 55 (trans. Gregg), p. 72.

⁴³ *Life of Antony* 76 (trans. Gregg), p. 86.

⁴⁴ If the meditation of Scripture stands as one of the most fundamental pillars which defined the quest for holiness in desert asceticism, we must say that this practice reflects the philosophical tradition of spiritual exercises, which Pierre Hadot defines as practices leading to the “a metamorphosis of our personality”. For more details on this subject, see Paul C. DILLEY, *Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, 2017 and Douglas BURTON-CHRISTIE, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

⁴⁵ EPIPHANIUS 10 (trans. Wortley), p. 97.

⁴⁶ EPIPHANIUS 11 (trans. Wortley), p. 97.

be saved. Antony felt it sufficient to answer, “You have heard Scripture. That should teach you how”⁴⁷.

Meditation on Scripture was an oral phenomenon. The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* speaks often of the benefits of ruminating and meditating upon Scripture. We see this from the account of witnesses, who are said to both *hear* and *see* monks meditating on Scripture. In one story, Abba Ammoes relates that he went with a companion to see Abba Achilles: “We *heard* him meditating on this saying «Do not fear, Jacob, to go down into Egypt» (Gen 46, 3). For a long time, he remained, meditating on this word”⁴⁸.

The Desert Fathers were very careful to affirm that this reading (*mélete*) was primordial for their ascetic education and spiritual growth. Thus it is no surprise to find in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* such statements as “Reading the Scripture is a great assurance against sinning”⁴⁹. According to these sentences above, we understand that the Desert Fathers were so immersed in Scripture that they were memorizing Scripture.

The rumination of Scripture provides a key to understanding the holiness in the desert asceticism. Douglas Burton-Christie has highlighted that

“the high esteem in which the words of Scripture were held by the monks as well as the frequent recommendations to memorize and recite the sacred texts suggest the presence within desert monasticism of a culture nourished in significant ways on the Scriptures. Besides its place in the public *synaxis*, Scripture also played a key part in the life of the cells, where it was recited, ruminated, and meditated upon both in small groups of monks and by individuals in solitude”⁵⁰.

The Desert Fathers were very careful to affirm that reading Holy Scripture was primordial for their ascetic education and spiritual growth.

⁴⁷ ANTONY 19 (trans. Wortley), p. 35.

⁴⁸ ACHILLES 5 (trans. Wortley), p. 65.

⁴⁹ EPIPHANIUS 9 (trans. Wortley), p. 97. Similarly, see ANTONY 3, 17-19, 26; ARSENIUS 42; AMMOES 2; ABRAHAM 3; EPIPHANIUS Bishop in Cyprus 11; MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN 3; POEMEN 8, 119; SERAPION 1.

⁵⁰ Douglas BURTON-CHRISTIE, *The Word in the Desert. Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, p. 107.

Briefly, the Desert Fathers were so immersed in Scripture that they were memorizing Scripture, so that we can say that Bible became the essential element of their ascetic life.

In view of these insights, a simple conclusion arises: the monastic virtues were the result of long and arduous discipline and training. The acquisition of holiness or spiritual wisdom was closely connected with spiritual exercises and rumination of Holy Scripture. No doubt, this ascetic emphasis on the attainment of bodily incorruptibility through the exercise of spiritual effort likely provided the general background for early Egyptian monasticism.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that there is a complex attitude of early monks towards antique *paideia*. More exactly, their attitude ranged from assimilation to outright rejection or a prudent adoption.

In our opinion there is a creative assimilation of classical education (*paideia*) in the spirituality of the desert. In this context we stress that the monastic life, like antique philosophy, was a kind of spiritual wisdom obtained through effort and some monastic exercises.

In this context we would like to make a few points about the significance of the spiritual exercises in late antiquity. First, the spiritual exercise is central to gain the holiness. As we saw above, desert teaching points out the need to control the passions to achieve a spiritual progress. Briefly, early monks constantly invokes the central role of spiritual exercises in the spirituality of the desert.

Therefore, the practice of spiritual exercise and ascetic formation went hand in hand in the early ascetic tradition. And indeed, the spiritual growth (*maturitas spiritualis*) is closely correlated to the spiritual exercise, or vice versa, so that the one is the goal of the other.

Second, much of the spiritual growth of the disciple was conditioned by personal relationship with his elder. From this perspective there are some similarities between early monasticism and antique philosophy. Although the spiritual exercises of the early monks was influenced by some pre-existing ideas about philosophical self-care, we stress that the

model of Greek *paideia* followed by pagan philosophers was replaced by the desert monks.

One clear conclusion may be drawn: deification was central to the new *paideia* of the desert, not wisdom.