

***Repentance in Christian Late Antiquity***

***with special reference to Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and  
John of Gaza, and John Climacus***

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***A dissertation presented to the Faculty of Theology, University of Oxford***

***For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy***

***Trinity Term 2010***

## *Abstract*

From its beginnings, Christianity has been fundamentally conditioned by the idea of repentance. However, while the institutional practice of repentance in the early Christian world has received much scholarly attention, relatively little exists which deals with the development and applications of the wider concept (of which its institutional aspect is only a part). The purpose of this dissertation is to provide both a re-assessment and a re-framing of this foundational concept of repentance in Christian late antiquity, with special reference to formative Greek monastic sources from the fifth to seventh centuries. Following a discussion of scholarship, terms, and methodology in chapter one, the question of defining repentance in the Greek patristic world is addressed in chapter two, looking first at the major sources for later approaches (the Septuagint, the New Testament, and Classical/Hellenistic texts). A significant re-appraisal of the dominant scholarly narrative of repentance in the early church will be offered in the following chapter, making way for a close study of the chosen monastic authors: Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, and John Climacus in turn. A threefold framework whereby their respective approaches to repentance can be understood in their integrity and diversity will be suggested, involving 1) initial or ‘cognisant’ repentance, in which the sinner recognizes his or her fallen state and turns it heavenward; 2) ‘existential’ repentance, which involves the living out of repentance as a way of life, governing all the Christian’s actions and intentions; 3) ‘Christ-like’ repentance, which serves as the summit and ultimate goal of the Christian’s personal repentance, whereby the loving and sacrificial ‘repentance’ of Christ for others and the world at large is assimilated and worked out in the Christian’s own life. It will be argued that this framework provides a new and significant hermeneutical lens through which not simply the early Christian concept of repentance in itself can be better understood, but also through which the development of early Christian self-identity and self-perception, particularly in an ascetic context, can be gauged.

### *Long Abstract*

This thesis explores and reassesses the development of the concept of repentance in the Greek-speaking late antique Christian East, with special reference to Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, and John Climacus. Together with an introduction and conclusion, the study is made up of six chapters: 1) Scholarship and methodology; 2) Defining repentance in the Greek patristic world, part one: Hellenistic Judaism, the New Testament, and non-Judaeo-Christian Hellenistic sources; 3) Defining repentance in the Greek patristic world, part two: the early church; 4) Repentance in the treatises of Mark the Monk; 5) Repentance in the letters of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza; 6) Repentance in Christian late antiquity: John Climacus and the question of continuity. These chapters are followed by two appendices, the first on repentance in apocalyptic literature, the second on the saints in the *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza.

An abiding concern of the thesis is to provide a viable framework in which the many and various uses and applications of the idea of repentance (often within the same writer or text) can be placed. A threefold framework is proposed on the basis of the writings of Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and John, and John Climacus, involving: 1) initial or cognisant repentance (applied to the beginning or new beginning of Christian life); 2) existential repentance (applied to a state of continual repentance achieved through the practice of virtue and the keeping of Christ's commandments); 3) Christ-like repentance (applied to the experienced Christian's repentance for others and the world, after the likeness of Christ's vicarious repentance). This framework runs as a current throughout the thesis, and serves as its principal, guiding, and unifying proposition. The content of the thesis chapters may be summarized as follows:

### *1. Scholarship and methodology*

In rough chronological order, beginning with Jean Morin in the mid-seventeenth century, a survey of scholarship related to the topic of repentance in the early church is provided. The emphasis of such scholarship on the rise of disciplinary structures in the early church as opposed to the more varied understanding of repentance amongst early Christians is repeatedly highlighted. One notable exception to this is the careful and attentive work of many biblical scholars since the nineteenth century on the rich and multi-faceted approaches to repentance in Scriptural and extra-canonical texts. It is shown that only in recent years has a real sensitivity to the role of repentance in the early church emerged amongst patristic scholars, though even then treatments are often brief and cursory. The survey of literature ends by upholding recent trends as providing a way forward in the discipline, and places the current thesis in the lineage of these trends.

The question of methodology is then raised, with particular attention paid to the suggested threefold interpretative framework proposed in the thesis. Two other methodological issues are then addressed: preference for the term ‘repentance’ rather than ‘*metanoia*’ in the study, and the reasoning behind the choice of Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, and John Climacus as case studies.

### *2. Defining repentance in the Greek patristic world, part one: Hellenistic Judaism, the New Testament, and non-Judaeo-Christian Hellenistic sources*

The presence of the sense of repentance in Old Testament theology, even where specific terms describing this sense are lacking, is broadly demonstrated in the opening part of this chapter, dealing with the LXX, apocryphal, and pseudepigraphical texts. The way in which the idea of repentance develops from the covenantal and prophetic theology of the Old Testament is demonstrated, and the increased association of this idea with the term *μετάνοια* in Hellenistic Judaism is noted. Likewise, it is shown that the concept of repenting on behalf

of others (so important for later Greek monastic theology), at least in nascent form, is present in the LXX.

Moving on to repentance in the New Testament, the proposed threefold framework for understanding repentance is introduced and used as a hermeneutical tool for unravelling the various and at times unclear references to repentance in the New Testament. This section at once tries to accommodate the disparate uses of the term and idea of repentance in these texts, and sets the scene for the manner in which the texts were received by the early church, particularly amongst ascetic theologians. It is argued that the threefold approach to repentance as initial, existential, and Christ-like, is discernible with the kind of hermeneutical lens used by the ascetic fathers in their approach to Scripture, and that consequently, their views can to some extent be justifiably seen as rooted in New Testament thought. The last part of this chapter addresses the use of *μετάνοια* and *μετανοέω* in the Classical Greek world, arguing that while its use cannot be wholly disassociated from the Old or New Testament usage, the fundamental goal or target of *μετάνοια* is never the same for the two thought-worlds, and that in this lies the basic break between them (and by extension between the Classical use and that found in the ascetic theologians under discussion).

### *3. Defining repentance in the Greek patristic world, part two: the early church (a re-assessment)*

Taking a slightly different approach, this chapter provides a re-assessment of how repentance was conceived in the early church. The sheer mass of source material forbids the application of the proposed threefold framework, since the result would be hopelessly incomplete and so inevitably unconvincing. Instead, through a direct interaction with the dominant scholarly narrative of what repentance entailed in the early church, it is intended that a useful historical context be provided through which the work of the chosen ascetics can be more profitably appreciated. Five points are made and argued in contrast to the dominant narrative: 1) the

concept of repentance is an incredibly broad and multi-faceted one in the New Testament itself (as discussed in chapter two), and in most early Christian communities; 2) the recurring motif from the *Shepherd of Hermas* onwards of a single and unrepeatable repentance is perhaps more clearly a precursor to the monastic life than to auricular confession; 3) Tertullian, who is a key figure for most histories of repentance, provides more of an atypical than a representative take on the issue, and, by the same token, Novatianism did not necessarily involve the preservation of old norms, but could well have been a rigorist interpretation of those norms; 4) the rise of monasticism was pivotal in the development of repentance in the Christian world from the fourth-century onwards; 5) from early on, a synthesis of desert and ecclesiastical wisdom was underway, something examined in the case of John Chrysostom, who provided a synthesis that would characterize the approach to repentance (at least in the Christian East) thereafter. With this point, we come to the figure of Mark the Monk, who was active shortly after (and some claim was a disciple of) John Chrysostom.

#### *4. Repentance in the treatises of Mark the Monk*

This chapter begins with a discussion of the identity and date of Mark the Monk, who for all the popularity of his treatises in the generations of Greek-speaking monastics to come, remains himself an elusive and shadowy figure. His most likely provenance and date are given as the first half of the fifth century, active in Syria/Asia Minor (though with a definite link to Egypt). The basic contours of his theology are presented, before his specific theology of repentance is explored under the three proposed headings: initial/cognisant repentance, existential repentance, and Christ-like repentance. It is shown that his rich and varied approach to the theme fits well in such a framework, and that while unique in its way, it shows definite signs of affinity to the Scriptural and early church concepts of repentance delineated in chapters two and three. The popularity of Mark (and so of his theology of

repentance) for later generations is underscored, before attention is turned to Barsanuphius and John of Gaza.

#### *5. Repentance in the letters of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza*

The two influential Gaza ascetics and their letters are introduced, and their recent popularity in scholarship is discussed. A focus of this chapter is the notion of monastic pedagogy which preoccupies most scholars of Barsanuphius and John, and it is suggested that the ‘school of Christianity’ promulgated by these spiritual directors in their abundant correspondence might be fruitfully seen as a ‘school of repentance’. With this the proposed threefold framework is again applied, and the findings yield a similar (though in its own way unique) result of their approach to repentance to that found in Mark.

#### *6. Repentance in Christian late antiquity: John Climacus and the question of continuity*

The definitive and crystallizing role of Climacus’ treatise *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* in the history of Greek-speaking monasticism is emphasized at the opening of this chapter. The debate over Climacus’ exact dates is introduced, and recent discussions of the structure and meaning of *The Ladder* are outlined. Again, using the threefold hermeneutical framework at the core of this thesis, Climacus’ highly developed and intricate theology of repentance is explored. In the case of the third heading in the proposed framework (Christ-like repentance), the importance of Climacus’ less studied work *The Shepherd* is stressed. The similarities and affinities between John Climacus’ approach to repentance and that of Mark and Barsanuphius and John is highlighted, all the while emphasizing the unique aspects of his thought.

It is suggested that the broad threefold framework suggested for the interpretation of repentance in Christian late antiquity be adopted as a useful and profitable key to the understanding of much ascetic theology, especially in the Christian East. It is likewise offered as a corrective to the dominant understanding of repentance in the early church and in

early monasticism as a concept and practice bound to and directed towards gloom, self-flagellation, bitter confession, and periods of penance. While these often formed a part of the working out of repentance (this cannot be overlooked or forgotten), repentance for these ascetics consistently meant much more than such practices. Repentance was essentially a cipher for living out the commandments of Christ, and as such it contained all the variety of Christian *ascesis* and labour, so long as these were always geared towards being like Christ, through Christ, in whom the only authentic goal and source of repentance could be found.

Finally, several implications of the research are discussed, which merit further study. These include: 1) the possible application of the threefold framework of repentance to the question of the formation of Christian self-identity; 2) the impact of monastic ideals of repentance on the broader life of, in particular, the Byzantine Empire; and 3) the potential of the threefold framework as an alternative approach to the mysticism of the Christian East, which is usually conceived in terms of three stages/ways of purification, illumination, and union/theosis. These stages or ways of mystical ascent are not as easily discernable in the *oeuvres* of the chosen ascetics as is the threefold concept of repentance, which could provide a more helpful alternative to our understanding of Eastern Christian mysticism.

Two appendices are then offered. The first deals with repentance in apocalyptic texts, where it is argued that many of the same features of repentance found in more ‘mainstream’ church literature are similarly present in early apocalyptic. From here, it is argued that apocalyptic ought to be treated as a genre at the heart, rather than the periphery, of much early Christian discourse. The second appendix, which originally appeared in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, expands on the concept of the saints in Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, a topic which emerges briefly in the Christ-like repentance section of chapter five on the two old men. It is argued that the *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John devote unusual attention to the identity, role, and prayers of the saints. These aspects, building on the work of P. Brown, C. Rapp, and B. Bitton-Ashkelony, are discussed in the article, showing how

the saints fitted into an impressive soteriological model. The purpose of this appendix is to enlarge on the identity and role of the bearers of Christ-like repentance in Barsanuphius and John: the saints.

## *Acknowledgements*

There are many scholars to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude for their encouragement, support, and guidance throughout the process of researching for and writing this dissertation. The first and greatest debt belongs to Dr Jane Baun, my supervisor, who has always been equipped with a ready word to exhort, aid, and sustain. Similarly, thanks are due to Dr Yannis Papadoyannakis, who served as a supporting advisor and acted beyond his official responsibilities in helping and guiding certain aspects of my research. Both Drs Baun and Papadoyannakis petitioned for me to embark on an academic exchange at Princeton University, where I was given the opportunity to work with Professor Peter Brown, perhaps the most profitable academic experience I could hope for. Much gratitude is due to Prof. Brown for taking me on and offering me his careful and wise guidance, whose incisive counsels were always seasoned with salt.

Thanks are owed also to Rt Revd Dr. Kallistos Ware, who has taken the time on many occasions to read and comment on my work, again providing inspiration from a lifetime of patristic research and supervision.

I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, together with the electors of the University of Oxford's Bampton Studentship and Christ Church's Hugh Pilkington Scholarship, for generously supporting the research of this dissertation.

For their advice, encouragement, and guidance in various aspects of my research, I would also like to thank Revd Prof. Matthew Steenberg, Revd Prof. Andrew Louth, Prof. Claudia Rapp, Prof. Guy Stroumsa, Revd Prof. George Pattison, Dr. Mark Edwards, Dr. Johannes Zachhuber, and Mr. Daniel Greeson.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of my parents, who from the first have exemplified the virtues of parental care and encouragement. The dedication of this dissertation, however, belongs with much love and gratitude to Eugenia.

## *Abbreviations*

ACCS:NT	<i>Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament</i>
BBTT	<i>Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations</i>
CS	<i>Cistercian Studies</i>
CSCO	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i>
CWS	<i>Classics of Western Spirituality Series</i>
<i>DSp</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de Spiritualité</i>
<i>ECR</i>	<i>Eastern Churches Review</i>
FCS	<i>The Fathers of the Church Series</i>
GCS	<i>Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller</i>
GNO	<i>Gregorii Nysseni Opera</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
NPB	<i>Nova Patrum Bibliotheca</i>
NPNF	<i>Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers series</i>
NTA	<i>Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen</i>
PG	<i>Migne, Patrologia Graeca</i>
PL	<i>Migne, Patrologia Latina</i>
PTA	<i>Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen</i>
PO	<i>Patrologia Orientalis</i>
SBL	<i>Society of Biblical Literature</i>
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>
SH	<i>Subsidia Hagiographica</i>
SO	<i>Spiritualité Orientale</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>

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## *Introduction*

Perhaps unconventionally, I wish to begin this thesis with an extract from a magazine I stumbled across whilst browsing in a bookshop. The magazine is entitled *What is enlightenment?*, a popular publication originating in the USA that provides an eclectic mix of spirituality-related articles. Celebrating an anniversary year, it was re-publishing the editors' favourite interviews from the past. One of these was conducted with a certain Greek Orthodox archimandrite named Dionysios. In his reflections prefacing the interview, the editor who had chosen it writes:

Having seen so deeply into the insidious human tendency toward self-satisfaction, what would he consider to be the most effective weapon in the fight to overcome it?

Father Dionysios answered that question with a single word: 'Repentance'.

It was a haunting and unforgettable statement. *Repentance?* I remember thinking at first. Repentance for *what?* Isn't it a wee bit extreme to drag that old moth-eaten language of shame and sin down from the musty attic of yesteryear? Seriously. We're on the cusp of a whole new *millennium*, man; this is the kind of thing you aren't supposed to say anymore. Yet here he was saying it, and here *WIE* [*What is Enlightenment?*] was publishing it with a straight face . . . It was strangely cool. And the more I thought about it, the cooler it became. Somehow, Father Dionysios had taken a word that had always sounded like some dangerous leftover from our stifling religious past and made it seem new again—uplifting even. *Dude*, it suddenly occurred to me, *that is awesome!*<sup>1</sup>

In the interview with a Greek Orthodox monastic priest, the editor had been confronted with a term which to the ears of someone familiar with traditional Western Christian stereotypes had disagreeable, if not repulsive, connotations: of melancholy, gloom, and bondage. And yet, in the mouth of a man steeped in the often unbroken traditions of Greek-speaking Eastern Christianity, the term suddenly acquired new dimensions, and its content seemed inverted from a kind of negative asphyxiation to something more positive, 'uplifting even'. It seems that the editor's sentiments convey, at least in some measure, a state of affairs confronting any serious student of the history of repentance in Christian, particularly though not exclusively Eastern Christian, thought, something it is hoped will be brought out in what follows.

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson (2006), pp. 39-40.

Defining repentance (*μετάνοια*) in the early Christian world is a task that needs some attention.<sup>2</sup> Brief comments (more rarely discussions) exist regarding the concept, and these will be addressed in the survey of literature in chapter one. This chapter will also address questions surrounding methodology and approach. Following this, chapters two and three will deal broadly with the meaning of *μετάνοια* (both the term and the concept) in sources preceding the work of Mark the Monk (fifth century), with whom begins the core part of the thesis. The first of these (addressed in chapter two) are the Septuagint (LXX) and the New Testament (NT), upon which all future developments of the concept in early Christianity are (at least in theory) based. This undertaking intends by no means to be exhaustive; such study deserves several doctorates in itself. It will set the ground, however, for a more nuanced understanding of repentance within the early church as a dynamic and very much multi-faceted concept. Chapter three, on defining repentance in the early church, aims to offer a basic re-appraisal of the prevalent narrative of how the concept of repentance developed in the first centuries. The arguments offered are suggestive rather than definitive, but the evidence set forth nonetheless fulfils the chapter's principal purpose, namely to present the historical context in which the theology of repentance in Mark the Monk and the others should be placed, and in a manner, moreover, that is more persuasive than the dominant narrative. In this way, the theology of the chosen ascetic writers from the fifth to seventh centuries can be viewed as part of an organic developing tradition, and not as specimens of Christian thought confined to a theological and historical vacuum.

In an attempt to facilitate further interpretation of repentance in the history of Christian thought, in particular as it was expressed by the Greek-speaking monastic world,

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<sup>2</sup> Etymologically, the word itself literally means an 'after thought', a 'change of mind' or a 're-think', possibly, but not necessarily, in the sense of 'having second thoughts': see Liddell & Scott (1996) s.v. *μετάνοια* and *μετανοέω*; Nave (2002), pp. 40-70; and Dirksen (1932), pp. 165-96. This is an important point and the idea of repentance as a 'change of mind or direction' will re-emerge throughout the study. It cannot, however, bind the study of how repentance was conceived and interpreted in later Greek Christian authors: as any student of language knows, words do not necessarily retain or remain enclosed in the meaning suggested by their etymological root.

three headings under which repentance can be understood will be introduced. The first is that of ‘cognisant’ or initial repentance, a preliminary ‘awakening’ and ‘about-face’. The second is ‘existential’ repentance, an attempt to abide continually on the ‘way’ of repentance. The third is ‘Christ-like’ repentance, which manifests itself in a kind of vicarious repentance by the Christian on behalf of his or her neighbour, or the world in general (in the likeness of Christ).

Using these headings as a key, the work of Mark the Monk (chapter four), Barsanuphius and John of Gaza (chapter five), and John Climacus (chapter six) will be explored, and how the suggested headings provide a flexible yet viable framework for interpreting the diverse approaches to repentance contained in these texts will be shown. The cumulative findings of these chapters, together with an assessment of the question of conceptual continuity, will be presented following the engagement with John Climacus. Here the proposed framework will be defended as providing an important interpretative key for the understanding of the various approaches to repentance in the chosen ascetic writers. In conclusion, it will be suggested that the findings of the thesis raise important questions beyond their immediate context which call for further study: questions, for instance, related to the formation of Christian self-identity in the early church, the impact of these ideas of repentance on the day-to-day life of the Byzantine empire, and their relationship to the mysticism of the Christian East.

## *Chapter One*

### *Scholarship and Methodology*

To attempt to address all aspects of the development of repentance in early Christianity in a study such as this would be admittedly foolhardy. In this opening chapter, then, an overview of existing scholarship on the topic will be presented, followed by a section on questions of methodology and terminology. This will both allow the parameters and scope of the current study to be set out, as well as help to place the study within the wider context of scholarship on repentance in Christian late antiquity.

#### *Survey of Scholarship*

Material relating to the early Christian concept of repentance or *μετάνοια* in modern scholarship (in the Western world, at least), is in one sense relatively abundant, but in another quite limited. The abundance springs from a widespread interest in the institution of sacramental confession within the Christian church (usually termed ‘ecclesiastical penance’, and including ‘public’ and/or ‘private’ manifestations of it, as well as the disciplinary measures with which it is associated), often with a view either to applaud or deplore this institution. The limitedness of the scholarship arises from this preoccupation: in general the wider meaning and import of the term *μετάνοια* and related words is ignored or sidelined in favour of histories of the rise of penitential systems within the church. This can be demonstrated with a sketch of some of the major contributions made to the question, which will be presented roughly chronologically.

In the seventeenth century, Jean Morin (1591-1659), a highly erudite Roman Catholic convert from Calvinism, and French priest of the Oratory, wrote what can only be described as a monumental work on repentance in the Greek East and Latin West, entitled *Commentarius Historicus de Disciplina in Administratione Sacramentali Poenitentiae*

*Tredecim Primis Seculis in Ecclesia Occidentali, et huc usque in Orientali Observata, in Decem Libros Distinctus.*<sup>1</sup> As the title suggests, this is a work of sacramental history, and whilst a phenomenal work of scholarship (particularly in its presentation of many key source texts on the subject), its focus is not the early Christian understanding of *μετάνοια* as such, but the sources for, and the development of, the sacrament of confession.<sup>2</sup>

Most scholarship related to the theme of penance since Morin has been greatly indebted to his work, even if the overall outlook of later authors was different. In 1714 a significant work on the topic was published in London, written by Nathaniel Marshall, ‘a presbyter of the Church of England’. A new edition of Marshall’s opus was published in 1844 as part of *The Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology*. The title neatly summarizes what is to come: *The Penitential Discipline of the Primitive Church: for the first four hundred years after Christ together with its declension from the fifth century downwards to its present state, impartially represented.*<sup>3</sup> A year before, a brief yet in its own way valuable contribution had been published within the pages of Liddell and Scott’s first edition of *A Greek-English Lexicon: based on the German work of F. Passow.*<sup>4</sup> The value of the entries for *μετανοέω* and *μετάνοια* lies in their underlining the original sense of the term outside the context of Western confessional prejudices, which usually dominated such discussion. Thus we find that *μετανοέω* can mean ‘to perceive/come to a conviction afterwards’, ‘to change one’s mind or purpose’, ‘to change one’s opinion and thought’, ‘to repent’, and that *μετάνοια* consequently meant ‘after-thought: a change of mind on reflection’, and ‘hence repentance in much Ecclesiastical usage’.<sup>5</sup> The fact, however, that *μετάνοια* did not need to be defined in

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<sup>1</sup> Morin (1651).

<sup>2</sup> For more on this work, and the subsequent scholarship it inspired, see Palmer (1945-6).

<sup>3</sup> Marshall (1844); this edition has been re-issued in paperback (Kessinger Publishing, 2007), though with an amended title.

<sup>4</sup> Liddell and Scott (1843).

<sup>5</sup> Whilst the first edition of Liddell and Scott’s lexicon did not include citations from the LXX, NT, or intertestamental texts, later editions did. The entries, however, remain much the same, thus *μετανοέω*: ‘to perceive afterwards or too late’, to ‘change one’s mind or purpose or opinion’, ‘to repent [of]’; and *μετάνοια*: ‘change of mind or heart’, ‘repentance’, ‘regret’, and possibly ‘afterthought’ (Liddell and Scott [1996]).

terms of or vis-à-vis the later institutionalized *poenitentia* of the Latin-speaking church was by no means a ground-breaking discovery of 1843. It was precisely the question of (re-)defining *μετάνοια* that lay at the heart of Luther's *Disputatio pro Declaratione Virtutis Indulgentiarum* (or *Ninety-Five Theses*, 1517), which generally serves as the symbolic commencement of the Reformation. Luther insists, for instance, in his second thesis that the word 'repentance' 'cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e. confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests'. It rather refers, in thesis one, to 'the whole life of believers'.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, while the root meaning of *μετάνοια* and so repentance as a 'change of mind or heart' was clearly known to the theologians of the nineteenth century, attention still rested on the sacramental history associated with the word. Thus in 1868 F. Frank published *Die Bussdisciplin der Kirche*, and P. Schaff comes closest to dealing with the term with the brief study of 'Church Discipline' in his *History of the Christian Church*.<sup>7</sup>

Church historians were not terribly concerned with *μετάνοια*, it seems, beyond the question of the rise of disciplinary structures within the early church. But this was not the case amongst biblical scholars. A fascinating example of this is an article that appeared in *The Old and New Testament Student* in 1891 entitled, 'Outline of an Inductive and Historical Study of *Metanoëo* and *Metamelomai*'.<sup>8</sup> The author, who evidently felt a right understanding of *μετανοέω* was requisite in any biblical student, proceeds, without drawing conclusions, to give a method by which such an understanding might be correctly ascertained. He points the student to relevant etymological dictionaries, and provides probing questions as to the usage of the words. The substance of the article is a list of references in Classical, Hellenic (to ~100 AD), Hebrew, Septuagint, Apocryphal/other Jewish (to ~100AD), NT, and second-century sources which employ the words *μετανοέω/μετάνοια* or *μεταμέλει/μεταμέλομαι*. The

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<sup>6</sup> Translated in Luther (1912), p. 29. For more on this subject see Tentler (1977).

<sup>7</sup> See Frank (1867) and Schaff (1885), §57.

<sup>8</sup> Burton (1891).

author is at pains to point out the variety of meanings these words have within the sources, and urges the student to explore and assess them. It will become clearer that the concern to set the concept of repentance within a wide frame of reference recurs as a theme for biblical scholars.

But for ecclesiastical historians, the question remained on the whole one of debating the sacramental question. Not that this was badly done. K. Holl, for instance, raised a number of important issues relating to absolution and the authority of the priesthood in his *Enthusiasmus und Bussgewalt beim griechischen Mönchtum. Eine Studie zu Symeon dem Neuen Theologen*, and valuable discussion was added in the early twentieth century by G. Rauschen in *Eucharistie und Bussakrament in den ersten sechs Jahrhunderten der Kirche*, and J. Hörmann's *Untersuchungen zur griechischen Laienbeicht. Ein Beitrag zur allgemeinen Bussgeschichte*.<sup>9</sup> A major work by O.D. Watkins on the theme, which has yet to be bettered as a general treatment in the English language, was released in 1920 with the title *A History of Penance*.<sup>10</sup> This takes the reader on a tour of the texts and contexts relating to repentance 'for the whole Church to AD 450' (volume one) and 'for the Western church from AD 450 to AD 1215' (volume two). In its way it remains good, if dated, scholarship. R.S.T. Haslehurst, J. Hoh, P. Galtier, R.C. Mortimer, and in particular B. Poschmann continued the trend with *Some Account of the Penitential Discipline of the Early Church in the First Four Centuries* (Haslehurst), *Die Abendländische Kirchenbusse im Ausgang des Christlichen Altertums* (Poschmann), *Die Abendländische Kirchenbusse im frühen Mittelalter* (Poschmann), *L'Église et la rémission des péchés* (Galtier), *Die kirchliche Busse im II. Jahrhundert* (Hoh), *The Origins of Private Penance in the Western Church* (Mortimer), *Paenitentia Secunda* (Poschmann), and *Buße und Letzte Ölung* (again Poschmann).<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> Holl (1898); Rauschen (1908); and Hörmann (1913).

<sup>10</sup> Watkins (1920).

<sup>11</sup> Haslehurst (1921); Poschmann (1928); Poschmann (1930); Galtier (1932); Hoh (1932); Mortimer (1939); Poschmann (1940); and Poschmann (1951), subsequently translated into English with modifications: Poschmann (1964).

contents of these is taken up with questions relating to ecclesiastical penitence, such as whether it was only public, and if so how public, and whether there was such a thing as private penance (as traditionally practised in the Roman Catholic Church) during the church's earliest days. The point of reference for these studies, regardless of the various conclusions drawn, is the concept of confession as it developed in the Middle Ages in Western Europe. They are not studies of *μετάνοια* as such, but of the early church's understanding of *μετάνοια* as it relates to the medieval Latin practice of penance.<sup>12</sup>

While, as noted, this approach did not generally find a place in biblical studies, there were one or two exceptions. A.H. Dirksen works from what today seems (and even at the time had been seen as) a fervently devotional starting-point in *The New Testament Concept of Metanoia* (1932).<sup>13</sup> The aim of the work is to vindicate an association of the term *μετάνοια* with sacramental penance (comprising a fourfold structure of contrition, confession, amendment, and the performance of penitential works), both in some way before as well as during the church's earliest days. This is something which he convinces himself, and openly concludes, that he has achieved: 'we may regard the *Metanoia* problem as solved' is his final statement.<sup>14</sup> His confidence would not be shared by posterity.

A more creative approach to the concept of repentance came in the 1930s from an Eastern Orthodox theologian, M. Lot-Borodine, with her influential article 'Le Mystère du "Don des Larmes" dans l'Orient chrétien' (1936).<sup>15</sup> The significance of her contribution lay in introducing an aspect of repentance in the Christian East—the 'gift of tears'—which had hitherto been little noticed or studied. It thus helped to open up the study of *μετάνοια*, or at least to show that the concept was conceivable outside the idea of public or private confession and absolution as the overriding frame of reference. Such an approach would be

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<sup>12</sup> There are a great number of similar works which cannot all be cited here. Another worthy of note is that of J. Grotz (1955) entitled *Die Entwicklung des Bussstufenwesens in der vönländischen Kirche*, from which Rahner would draw heavily in his own work (see below).

<sup>13</sup> Dirksen (1932).

<sup>14</sup> Dirksen (1932), p. 219.

<sup>15</sup> Lot-Borodine (1936).

taken up in earnest by the Jesuit I. Hausherr, notably in his study of πένθος (broadly, ‘mourning’) in Eastern Christian texts.<sup>16</sup>

This tendency to broaden the scope of the investigation of repentance gathered pace through the 1930s. The three-volume work of R. Pettazzoni on the confession of sins in religious history is remarkable for its scope, although it does not treat of Christianity directly.<sup>17</sup> In 1936, a work by E.K. Dietrich entitled *Die Umkehr (Bekehrung und Busse) im A.T. und im Judentum* was published which addressed in some depth the question of the meaning of repentance as a reversal or change of direction.<sup>18</sup> Similar yet amplified sentiments resound in H. Pohlmann’s *Die Metanoia als Zentralbegriff der christlichen Frömmigkeit* published two years later.<sup>19</sup> Having denounced Catholic, Protestant, and pietistic interpretations of the term as quite off the mark, he endorses a view of repentance whereby it is recognized that ‘God is God’ and ‘man is creature’. This is the substance of repentance, he claims, and is the only path to salvation. His main inspirations are Jesus, Paul, and notably Barth, although Barth’s own interest in the idea of μετάνοια is limited in comparison to Pohlmann’s.<sup>20</sup>

A comparable attempt to assert μετάνοια as a largely lost yet most expedient concept was made by W.D. Chamberlain in his Smyth Lectures of 1941 at Columbia Theological Seminary, which were rewritten and published as *The Meaning of Repentance*.<sup>21</sup> This is the work of a pastorally-minded NT scholar, and while not concerned to provide extensive footnotes and references, Chamberlain manages to elucidate the use of μετάνοια in the NT, together with the issues surrounding the translation of the term, with admirable cogency.

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<sup>16</sup> Hausherr (1944).

<sup>17</sup> Pettazzoni (1929-36): volume two (1935) details three kinds of Israelite confession (individual, collective, and regular/periodic collective), pp. 140-311.

<sup>18</sup> Dietrich (1936).

<sup>19</sup> Pohlmann (1938).

<sup>20</sup> But see Barth (1958), pp. 627-60, and cf. Webster (1995).

<sup>21</sup> Chamberlain (1943).

A fuller *ad fontes* analysis of μετανοέω and μετάνοια as NT terms, however, was not far behind Chamberlain's Smyth lectures, and was published in 1942 in the fourth volume of the staggering *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, edited by G. Kittel.<sup>22</sup> The lengthy article written by Johannes Behm and Ernst Würtheim, sheds light on their pre- and non-Christian uses before providing an exegesis of them in the NT. One drawback is the unfortunately brief and ill-grounded treatment of repentance in the early church. After giving a small sample of a few relevant texts, wide-reaching conclusions are drawn along the lines of popular theories regarding the church's immediate degeneration from the NT standard into 'Jewish legalism', conclusions which are, needless to say, not so easy to justify. The trend for good analyses of μετάνοια in the NT continued in Germany with the work of M. Hoffer, *Metanoia (Bekehrung und Busse) im Neuen Testament* and R. Schnackenburg, 'Typen der Metanoia-Predigt im Neuen Testament'.<sup>23</sup>

A growing interest in exploring individual early church thinkers in their own right inspired studies of repentance in Origen and Clement of Alexandria by E.F. Latko and A. Méhat respectively.<sup>24</sup> The first 'discovers' a seemingly ingenious penitential system in Origen, whilst Méhat argues quite effectively for Clement's leniency when it came to the possibility of more than one repentance, and for his distinguishing voluntary from involuntary sins.

By far the most helpful contribution to any study of the patristic Greek concept of μετάνοια appeared, however, in 1961 with the publication of G.W.H. Lampe's *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*.<sup>25</sup> The entry for μετάνοια charts for the first time a concise and reliable guide to the complexity and depth of the term in patristic thought, citing some fifty or more definitions under an umbrella of three broader rubrics: 'change of mind, afterthought';

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<sup>22</sup> Behm and Würtheim (1942): *TDNT* 4.975-1008 (This refers to the English translation [published in 1967]).

<sup>23</sup> Hoffer (1947) and Schnackenburg (1950).

<sup>24</sup> Latko (1949) and Méhat (1954).

<sup>25</sup> Lampe (1961), s.v. μετανοέω and μετάνοια.

‘repentance, penitence’ (to which belongs the vast majority of ‘sub’ definitions); and ‘prostration’. Despite Lampe’s example, however, and the examples from biblical scholarship mentioned above, the general trend amongst early church scholars for studies of the history of repentance conceived primarily from the perspective of its sacramental development continued unperturbed throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

This bias for sacramental history is seen, for instance, in an overview of the early church’s approach to penitence in *The Forgiveness of Sins* by W. Telfer; in the work by P. Anciaux from a pastorally-minded Roman Catholic perspective called *The Sacrament of Penance*, the second edition being published in 1960 and translated into English in 1962; in the helpful presentation of texts by C. Vogel, as well as those given by H. Karpp; in the proceedings of the Maynooth *Sin and Repentance* conference in 1966 edited by D. O’Callaghan (though the witnesses of the early church on the matter are almost entirely ignored here); in the entries for *metanoia* and *penance* in *Sacramentum Mundi* edited (and in the second case written) by K. Rahner; and in four articles on the history and practice of repentance in Eastern Christendom by D. Kirk, N.P. Smiar, L. Ligier, and F. Nikolasch respectively.<sup>26</sup>

Of these, Rahner’s approach is especially worth noting, in that he divides his entry on penance into the ‘virtue’ of penance on the one hand, and the ‘sacrament’ of penance on the other (essentially relying on Thomistic categories). The virtue corresponds to the concept of *μετάνοια* as found in Scripture (he here refers back to the entry for ‘*metanoia*’ in *Sacramentum Mundi* by A. Feuillet, which does not treat the term beyond the documents of the NT), which can (and should?) be distinguished from the sacrament of penance. This points to a real awareness of the insufficiencies of treating the topic merely on the level of the history of confession (public or auricular) and absolution, even if such treatment remained

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<sup>26</sup> Telfer (1959); Anciaux (1960, 1962); Vogel (1966); Karpp (1969); O’Callaghan (1967); Feuillet (1969); Rahner (ed.) (1969), pp. 385-99; Kirk (1966); Smiar (1966); Ligier (1967b); and Nikolasch (1971).

the dominant approach. The four articles on Eastern Christian practice noted above are useful in their way, but are preoccupied, again, with the practice of sacramental confession, and how it relates to confession in Western Christian contexts: an interesting topic, but one which in and of itself does not get at the heart of much Eastern Christian thinking on the idea of repentance.

In the 1970s more work was published on the nature of penitence in the early church in specific contexts. Rahner, for instance, released volume 11 of his *Schriften zur Theologie* (volume 15 of the English *Theological Investigations*) on ‘Penance in the Early Church’, in 1973.<sup>27</sup> This is a collection of revised articles dealing with various ‘traditions’ of penance in the early church: the traditions of Rome (*Shepherd of Hermas*, Irenaeus), North Africa (Tertullian, Cyprian), and the East (Didache, Origen). It stands in the line of Watkins, Poschmann, Mortimer, Grotz, and others as an investigation into the intricacies of early Christian views regarding penitential discipline. Other studies from this period include E. Dassmann’s analysis of the forgiveness of sins in early Christian art and texts; V. Palachovsky’s look at the central place of repentance in the Byzantine liturgical cycle; E. Carr’s investigation into penance in the Armenian tradition; F. Leduc’s four probing articles (the last appearing in 1990) on the nature of sin and conversion in John Chrysostom; D. Power’s argument for a greater ‘sacramentalization’ of penance, drawing in part on associations between penance and the Eucharist in the early church; H. Maguire’s comments on *μετάνοια* in his extensive article on the depiction of sorrow in Byzantine art; F. van de Paverd’s study of a second repentance in Methodius of Olympus; and the work of H. Vorgrimler (a close student and in some ways disciple of Rahner) on repentance and the anointing of the sick, which supercedes the study of Poschmann on the topic.<sup>28</sup> In biblical and Qumran studies, T.M. Raitt wrote on ‘The prophetic summons to repentance’; A. Tosato

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<sup>27</sup> Rahner (1973): the English translation appeared in 1983.

<sup>28</sup> Palachovsky (1975), and cf. Walty (1975) in the same volume; Carr (1976); Leduc (1976, 1977, 1978, and 1990); Power (1977); Maguire (1977), esp. pp. 146-7; van de Paverd (1978); and Vorgrimler (1978).

on repentance in the Hebrew bible, concluding that the NT *μετάνοια* is a new concept, given the linguistic data; and H.-J. Fabry, leaning in some ways on W.L. Holladay's work on the OT's use of the word שׁוּב (*shuv*: 'return', 'turn back', sometimes, 'repent'), deals with the same in the Qumran texts both in a monograph and in a summary article entitled 'Umkehr und Metanoia als monastisches Ideal in der 'Mönchsgemeinde' von Qumran'.<sup>29</sup>

On the brink of the 1980s, R. Barringer presented his Oxford DPhil thesis on *Ecclesiastical Penance in the Church of Constantinople: A Study of the Hagiographical Evidence to 983 AD*, a work that analyses almost all known Greek hagiographical texts within a broad time frame as they relate to ecclesiastical penance.<sup>30</sup> The sheer bulk of the material he investigates is immense, and he manages firmly to establish several points which refute previous theories set forth by Holl, Hörmann, and others, as concerning the misleading concept of 'Institution versus Charisma', and the underestimated significance of the monastic influence on ecclesiastical penance from the fourth century onwards. The work, however, is explicitly on the concept of *μετάνοια* as it develops from the perspective of the ecclesiastical sacrament administered (primarily) by the clergy, and deals only with hagiographical sources: as should be expected, there is only occasional interaction with other material.

Barringer's supervisor, K.T. Ware, was to publish an important article on 'The Orthodox Experience of Repentance' a year later, in 1980.<sup>31</sup> It brings out several of the meanings for *μετάνοια* found in early church fathers—'great understanding', 'change of mind', 'new mind', 'conversion', 'illumination', etc.—as well as the place of repentance in Orthodox liturgical and sacramental life, and its relation to tears. Ware cites several texts from monastic authors on the incessant need for repentance in the lives of all Christians, which will re-surface later in this thesis. The article remains the best short introduction to the

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<sup>29</sup> Raitt (1971); Tosato (1972); Fabry (1975, 1977), cf. Holladay (1959), and more recently see Nitzan (1999) on repentance in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although this aspect cannot be looked at in depth here, it should be borne in mind that the kind of repentance evoked by the Dead Sea Scrolls serves to contextualize the preaching of repentance in the Gospels (particularly by John the Baptist), on which see Fitzmyer (2000), pp. 18-21.

<sup>30</sup> Barringer (1979).

<sup>31</sup> Ware (1980).

subject in hand. Rather than an exhaustive treatment of the concept of *μετάνοια* in the Christian East, it offers a select mosaic of texts from previous representatives of the Eastern Orthodox tradition on the topic, together with his a brief commentary.

In the same year, volume 10 of the colossal *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* was published, containing an entry for ‘*Metanoia*’ written by J. Guillet.<sup>32</sup> As with *Sacramentum Mundi*, the article ends with the term and concept as they are found in the NT. Also in line with Feuillet’s entry in *Sacramentum Mundi*, Guillet is particularly wont to translate *μετάνοια* as ‘conversion’, but more univocally than his predecessor. The other most relevant entry from the *Dictionnaire* is that of P. Adnès on ‘Pénitence (repentir et sacrement)’ published in volume 12(1) in 1984.<sup>33</sup> This lengthy piece explores penitence in the OT (the prophets and post-exilic authors in particular), intertestamental and other Jewish literature, the NT, and the early church, before leaping somewhat into Western medieval practices, the Council of Trent, the attritionist/contritionist debates of primarily the eighteenth century, and contemporary Roman Catholic thought on the matter.

The study of D. Papathanassiou-Ghinis on the *Théologie et Pastorale des Pénitences (epitimia) selon l’Eglise orthodoxe*, published in 1981, illustrates the increasing concern of Eastern Orthodox theologians for the place and application of the penitential canons.<sup>34</sup> It is shown that ever since the publication of Nicodemus Hagiorites’ *The Rudder (Πηδάλιον)* in 1800, the question of ‘penances’ (*ἐπιτίμια*: more literally ‘penalties’) has preoccupied most discussions of repentance within the Eastern Orthodox world.<sup>35</sup>

A key source text representing Eastern Orthodoxy’s overall appreciation for repentance was discussed and loosely translated by O. Clément in *Le Chant des Larmes*:

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<sup>32</sup> Guillet (1980).

<sup>33</sup> Adnès (1984).

<sup>34</sup> Papathanassiou-Ghinis (1981).

<sup>35</sup> This again is pointed out and addressed by E. Timiadis in an article, ‘Focusing Emphasis on True *Metanoia* Rather than on Penitential Canons’: Timiadis (1995). The essential argument of the piece is that not only in the works of many early church fathers, but even in some of the penitential canons themselves (as canons 2, 3, and 102 of Trullo), the relativity of the time of excommunication is underlined, since every situation is different, and what matters most is the fervour and authenticity of the repentance.

*essai sur le repentir* (1982).<sup>36</sup> This is the *Great Canon* composed by Andrew of Crete probably some time in the early eighth century, which occupies a central place in the Orthodox Lenten liturgical cycle. While the *Canon* itself lies outside the period under discussion in this thesis, Clément's work is worth mentioning in that it highlights themes and concerns in the *Canon* regarding repentance that are found in a great deal of the ascetic theology of the Christian East.

Other contributions from these years to the discussion of the meaning of *μετάνοια* include: J. Dallen's *The Reconciling Community: the rite of penance* (1986), which gives a history of ecclesiastical discipline written from a markedly pro-Vatican II standpoint; R. Taft's bibliographical article on the state of research on penitence (especially, unsurprisingly given his interests, its liturgical history); B. Ward's translation of and commentary on the lives of penitent harlots of the desert; Scopello's comments on the use of *μετάνοια* in *The Exegesis of the Soul*, a Coptic writing found near Nag Hammadi in 1945; P.C. Miller's fascinating article on dreams in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which points out the curious link in that text between literacy and *μετάνοια*; and P. de Clerk's study of a second repentance and daily conversion in the third and fourth centuries, drawing in particular, though not exclusively, on Western writers (Tertullian, Cyprian, and Ambrose).<sup>37</sup> The works by Ward, Scopello, Miller, and de Clerk, together with earlier studies mentioned above by Barringer and Ware, seem to tacitly indicate the beginnings of a general shift in the scholarly approach to repentance in late antiquity. This discernable shift amongst patristic scholars is one which moves away from dealing with repentance almost exclusively in terms of penitential institutions, becoming more sensitive to the nuances of the concept in the sources.

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<sup>36</sup> Clément (1982), though see also Iljine (1951).

<sup>37</sup> Dallen (1986); Taft (1987); Ward (1987); Scopello (1986); Miller (1988), esp. p. 331; de Clerck (1989).

This shift continued in the 1990s with the publication of several helpful studies of repentance.<sup>38</sup> J. Chryssavgis' short compendium of texts, with a brief introduction, is useful for its presentation of short extracts about repentance and confession from various fathers and spiritual guides, from the first to the twentieth centuries. The material, however, while often quite thought-provoking, is not commented on or analyzed.<sup>39</sup> A movement by American political scientists exploring 'civic repentance' led to an interdisciplinary publication entitled *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective* in 1997, which contains interesting and thoughtful articles on repentance in Christianity by theologians H. Cox, H. Brown, and J. Lyden.<sup>40</sup>

Two other interdisciplinary discussions of repentance and self-transformation, this time looking predominantly at ancient religions and late antiquity, took place around the same time, with conferences in Paris, Heidelberg, and Jerusalem. The proceedings of one were published in 1998, entitled *Retour, Repentir et Constitution de Soi* and edited by A. Charles-Saget.<sup>41</sup> Here, leading scholars in biblical studies, early Christianity, and Neoplatonism offer illuminating papers on aspects of return and repentance in a variety of contexts and source texts: ancient Israel (H. Rouillard-Bonraisin), the Septuagint (C. Aslanoff), Valentinian Gnosticism (J.-D. Dubois), Tertullian (G. Stroumsa), Plotinus (H. Blumenthal), Proclus (C. Steel), and others. While the contributions are quite disparate in content and approach, the volume's great strength is to have opened up the study of the concept of repentance in a new way, particularly through its bringing together of insights from various disciplines.

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<sup>38</sup> Proposing this shift should not, however, give the impression that histories of repentance from a dominantly sacramental perspective did not continue in the 1990s: see, for instance, Cuschieri (1992) and Rouillard (1996).

<sup>39</sup> Chryssavgis (1990). See also Chryssavgis (2000).

<sup>40</sup> See Etzioni and Carney (eds.) (1997), pp. 21-30; 31-42; 43-59. While these are not studies of the early church *per se*, they use early and medieval Christian sources to convey ideas of repentance which might be meaningful and applicable in contemporary secular societies.

<sup>41</sup> Charles-Saget (ed.) (1998).

This process of opening up historical enquiry into the concepts of repentance and self-transformation continues in the other collection mentioned, published in 1999 and entitled, *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*. While proposing to be an anthropological rather than a theological study, much of use emerges for the theologian. The most immediately helpful articles are those by B. Bitton-Ashkelony ('Penitence in Late Antique Monastic Literature'), and A. Kofsky ('Aspects of Sin in the Monastic School of Gaza').<sup>42</sup> These will re-surface below in the section on Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, whose letters are a particular focus of Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky's work. Both articles do a great deal to get away from an exclusive focus on repentance as an ecclesiastical institution, and they skilfully highlight late antique monastic concerns for a concept of perpetual repentance, something at the heart of this thesis. Some conclusions presented (such as the proposition that these monastic concepts of repentance were a 'deviation' from ecclesiastical tradition, as well a somewhat oversimplified division between 'church' and 'monastic' penitence) will be challenged below in due course. However, the general approach to the sources represented by these papers (one which digs deep to find the meaning of the concept of repentance without using sacramental confession as the key or only point of reference) is the one likewise used in this study.<sup>43</sup>

A similar approach is found in the work of M. de Jong, whose article on 'Transformations in Penance' does much to challenge prevalent assumptions about the nature and practice of public penance, particularly in the Latin West from the fifth century onwards.<sup>44</sup> It draws in some ways on the important work of P. Brown on the prehistory of

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<sup>42</sup> See Assmann and Stroumsa (eds.) (1999), esp. 179-194 (Bitton-Ashkelony) and 421-37 (Kofsky). An English version of G. Stroumsa's article on repentance in Tertullian (found in Charles-Saget [1998] in French) can be found on pp. 167-78. The articles by Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky re-appear, in a modified form, in Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (eds.) (2004), pp. 127-44 (Kofsky) and 145-56 (Bitton-Ashkelony).

<sup>43</sup> A comparably titled book to *Transformations of the inner self in ancient religions*, namely *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, appeared in 2002, edited by D. Shulman and again G.G. Stroumsa. The focus here, however, is notions of the self in itself more than the concept of repentance: see Shulman and Stroumsa (2002).

<sup>44</sup> See de Jong (2000).

purgatory in Western Christianity, which in turn is influenced by E. Rebillard's monograph on the development of pastoral care for the dying in fourth and fifth century Latin sources.<sup>45</sup> Such studies have served to open up questions surrounding the perception and practice of penance in the late antique and early medieval West, and some of their insights will contribute to chapter three, on the general re-assessment of repentance in the early church.<sup>46</sup>

Further progress in repentance studies appeared in 2002 with G. Nave's *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*. This is overall a good and helpful study of *μετάνοια*, dealing not simply with Luke-Acts, but with the word and concept in a great variety of sources, both Judaeo-Christian and Hellenistic.<sup>47</sup> This trend has continued with D. Lambert, who has published on fasting and penitence in the Hebrew Bible, and the question of repentance and redemption as expressed in *Jubilees* 1.<sup>48</sup> His doctoral thesis deals with the topic of repentance in the Hebrew Bible, early Judaism, and early Christianity.<sup>49</sup>

More directly relevant to the period under discussion here is H. Hunt's work on the concept of *πένθος* and 'tears of contrition in the writings of the early Syrian and Byzantine fathers'.<sup>50</sup> She distinguishes her study of mourning from a study of repentance, though at the same time recognizes some of the inevitable overlaps. Like the present thesis, she looks at several fathers individually and reasonably in-depth: John Climacus, Ephraim the Syrian, Isaac of Nineveh, and Symeon the New Theologian. In this way she consciously sets herself against the trend exemplified in Hausherr's *Penthos* of providing what are essentially modern

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<sup>45</sup> See Brown (1997) and Rebillard (1994).

<sup>46</sup> Another excellent and noteworthy recent study of the practice of repentance in the West is that of J. Carola, on Augustine and the role of the laity in ecclesiastical reconciliation: see Carola (2005).

<sup>47</sup> Nave (2002); see also Nave (2006), on repentance in the Synoptics and Acts. More will be said about these studies in chapter two below.

<sup>48</sup> Lambert (2003, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Lambert (2004): at the time of writing, a monograph by Lambert based on this thesis is forthcoming from Princeton University Press entitled, *Before Repentance: How the Rise of Repentance Changed the Way the Bible is Read*.

<sup>50</sup> See Hunt (2004), a revised version of her PhD thesis.

patristic *florilegia*.<sup>51</sup> Hunt's work, in a similar but more sustained way to that of Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky mentioned above, is an attempt to bring the study of themes in Christian ascetic literature into line with the methods of most present-day historico-theological enquiry.

The same year saw the publication of the proceedings of two meetings of the Ecclesiastical History Society in 2002-3 on the themes of *Retribution, Repentance and Reconciliation*.<sup>52</sup> Two articles from this collection are directly relevant to the question of defining *μετάνοια* in the early Greek Christian East. The first is by C. Trevett on 'The Second-Century Struggle for Forgiveness and Reconciliation'.<sup>53</sup> It examines the dynamics of forgiveness and the power of the keys within the early church, and rightly questions the assumptions of blanket rigorism often associated with early ecclesiastical penance.<sup>54</sup> The other, by R. Price, is entitled 'Informal Penance in Early Medieval Christendom'.<sup>55</sup> Here Price helpfully points out some of the many and various ways of repentance elucidated in early medieval Christian authors, including Cassian and Chrysostom. He envisages this period as a 'normative epoch' in the history of Christian penance, something also claimed in this thesis.<sup>56</sup>

In terms of the background to Greek Christian concepts of repentance, an article published in the same year on remorse and repentance in fifth- and fourth-century Athenian oratory is worth highlighting.<sup>57</sup> Though a study of classical texts from antiquity, it provides a balanced and informative view of the earliest associations of the terms *μετάνοια* and *μεταμέλομαι* with sentiments of moral culpability. Although not as significant as the

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<sup>51</sup> This trend is exemplified in Chryssavgis (1990). Studies such as these, while useful for giving a general sense of the topic, need to be supplemented with more detailed and extensive studies of individual authors in order to advance scholarly understanding of the topic.

<sup>52</sup> Cooper and Gregory (eds.) (2004).

<sup>53</sup> Trevett (2004).

<sup>54</sup> A similar questioning of these assumptions is made below, pp. 82-6.

<sup>55</sup> Price (2004).

<sup>56</sup> See Price (2004), p. 38.

<sup>57</sup> Fulkerson (2004).

Septuagint or in particular the NT for an understanding of how *μετάνοια* was conceived in the early church, the classical background is still important, and will be brought into the discussion at the end of chapter two.

The interdisciplinary interest in the development of repentance seen in the late 1990s continued with the publication of *Repentance in Christian Theology* in 2006, the fruit of two colloquia held under the auspices of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature.<sup>58</sup> Much of the emphasis is on biblical studies together with viewpoints from within various Christian traditions. Of the eighteen articles, two are on the ‘historical perspectives’ related to the theme, one of these focussing on early Christianity (by C.B. Horn), the other on private confession in the German Reformation (by R.K. Rittgers). Horn’s article, entitled ‘Penitence in Early Christianity in Its Historical and Theological Setting: Trajectories from Eastern and Western Sources’ is one of the best contributions to the topic to date.<sup>59</sup> Exploring the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Aphrahat, and some of the ascetic traditions of Egypt and Palestine, the article provides much helpful analysis and food for thought on various approaches to repentance within different early Christian writers and traditions. Engaging with the texts in more depth and breadth than many previous studies, it brings out a sense of the diverse facets of repentance present throughout late antique Christianity.

The most recent substantial offering to the field of repentance studies is a volume edited by Abigail Firey entitled *A New History of Penance* and published by Brill.<sup>60</sup> The bulk of material here is concerned with penance in the medieval West, but the initial chapter by R. Emmet McLaughlin on the historiography of high/late medieval and early modern penance is particularly helpful for an understanding of how and why ‘penance’ has been studied in a

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<sup>58</sup> Boda and Smith (eds.) (2006).

<sup>59</sup> Horn (2006b).

<sup>60</sup> Firey (ed.) (2008).

particular way since the high middle ages.<sup>61</sup> K. Uhalde's article on 'Juridical Administration in the Church and Pastoral Care in Late Antiquity' illuminates aspects of penance and its role in the Western Church from the fourth to sixth centuries.<sup>62</sup> The most relevant article from this collection for the current thesis, however, is that by C. Rapp on 'Spiritual Guarantors at Penance, Baptism, and Ordination in the Late Antique East', which deals with aspects of spiritual sponsorship in the Christian East, a topic of utmost concern to Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and John, and John Climacus, and corresponding in many ways to the category of 'Christ-like' repentance offered in the discussion of these authors below.<sup>63</sup> Rapp has likewise contributed other significant work both to the function of monastic repentance in late antiquity, and stemming from this, to the role of the holy man as intercessor and in some ways vicarious penitent on behalf of his disciples, which again intersects with the 'Christ-like' form of repentance discussed in this thesis.<sup>64</sup>

### *Summary of findings and general methodology*

Such, then, is a synopsis of much of the scholarly material relevant to a study of repentance in patristic and monastic authors. A few remarks summarizing the findings are in order before continuing. For one, it cannot be overlooked that the majority of the works cited (particularly the early ones) have a clear tendency to treat 'repentance' as coterminous with the sacrament of confession and the penitential discipline of the early church.<sup>65</sup> This tendency would no doubt have raised the spirits of N. Marshall, the eighteenth-century Anglican clergyman mentioned near the beginning of the survey. In the introduction to his work on penance, he writes:

So much of this duty as passes between God and our own souls, or as our neighbour may be concerned in, by way of restitution to him, is a large common-place in Divinity, which hath been

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<sup>61</sup> McLaughlin (2008).

<sup>62</sup> Uhalde (2008).

<sup>63</sup> Rapp (2008).

<sup>64</sup> See in particular Rapp (2005), pp. 71-99 and Rapp (1997, 2007, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> The confessional motivation behind this preoccupation is neatly summarized in Stroumsa (1999), p. 167.

copiously handled in practical discourses. But the external discipline of repentance, that which the Church of Christ for so many ages applied medicinally to the distempers of her body; this hath lain a great while under gross neglect.<sup>66</sup>

That neglect, it can safely be asserted, has been remedied. And yet, has this research covered the early church's theology of repentance adequately? Do investigations into the conceptualizations of repentance in early Christianity beyond the various manifestations of ecclesiastical discipline deserve to be limited—not to say degraded—to some obscure category of 'practical discourses', as something to be ignored by any 'good' theologian? Tracing the history of forms of confession, excommunication, and/or penances is certainly a valid pursuit, but it does not of itself give a reliable picture of conceptions of *μετάνοια* in the Greek patristic world. From early on, this has on the whole been recognized at least implicitly by scholars of biblical texts, inasmuch as it is they who have analyzed the concept with less of the bias towards 'penitential discipline' found among most ecclesiastical historians. They have thus been able to situate both the term *μετάνοια* and the ideas surrounding it in their proper, often broader, context.

Church historians have generally been slower to adopt a similar approach, although as was shown, particularly from the mid-1990s on, much progress has been made. The flurry of interdisciplinary work in particular, together with fresh, close, and illuminating readings of source texts has moved the discipline on substantially. The methodology adopted in this thesis has largely been shaped by these recent studies, being similarly characterized by an in-depth reading of several key texts on the topic, together with an awareness of the wider background, context, and relevance of these texts. Apart from offering readings of sources that have hitherto remained largely unstudied vis-à-vis repentance, two further aspects set this study apart from what has so far been written. The first is the concern to present the historical and literary context through which late antique monastic ideas regarding repentance were espoused and developed, with a special emphasis on Scripture and the first

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<sup>66</sup> Marshall (1844), pp. 1-2.

centuries of Christianity. So far, this kind of sustained pre-history of the late antique monastic concept of repentance has not, it seems, been attempted.

The second aspect which attempts to move the subject forward substantially is the proposal of an interpretative framework for the concept which can successfully be applied to a significant variety of early Christian sources. While repentance in Christian late antiquity has frequently been recognized, especially in recent studies, as a richly multi-faceted concept, there has yet to be an attempt to show how these various facets (repentance as baptism, repentance as mourning, repentance as confession, repentance as loving one's neighbour, etc.) work together as part of the same concept. The threefold framework (comprising initial or cognisant repentance, existential repentance, and Christ-like repentance) presented and applied in chapters two, four, five, and six endeavours to remedy this lack by supplying a viable hermeneutical lens through which the many and often disparate meanings of repentance in the sources can be better understood.

Having presented the issue of methodology in a general way, several more specific questions ought to be addressed regarding the terminology used and the choice of authors selected for study. First, a summary of the threefold framework put forward in the thesis and applied to the texts will be given, followed by a justification for using the word 'repentance' as a general rule rather than *μετάνοια* or simply *metanoia*. Finally, the reasons for choosing Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, and John Climacus for this study will be set out.

### *The Threefold Framework*

As mentioned, the proposed interpretative framework is made up of three aspects: initial or cognisant repentance, existential repentance, and Christ-like repentance. Each can be explained briefly as follows:

1. Initial or cognisant repentance denotes the beginning or new beginning of Christian life. As ‘beginning’, its target is Christian baptism, and as new beginning, it is expressed through ‘coming to oneself’, recognizing one’s shortcomings as a baptized Christian, and seeking help from on high (incidentally, this often includes an element of confession to a representative of the church).
2. Existential repentance is that aspect by which the whole of Christian life is identified with the path of repentance. This is predominantly done by associating repentance not simply with specific tasks or acts in the Christian life, but with the keeping and living out of the Gospel commandments generally. In this sense, repentance becomes humanity’s ‘single goal’.<sup>67</sup>
3. This radical enlargement of what is usually understood by the term repentance is further radicalized with the third aspect of the framework: Christ-like repentance. Here, what is meant by this subtle idea is not that Christ needed to repent or atone for his own failings: early Christians all insisted that Christ had no failings. Rather, Christ was put forward as having in a sense repented, in his own life, suffering, and death, for the sins of the world. This specific role of Christ, moreover, was used not simply to explain the mechanics of atonement, but was set forth as the goal towards which the repentance of each Christian strove. Thus, time and again, we find arguments in the literature that repentance is never complete for the Christian, even in the hypothetical case of the ‘holy man’ or saint, since such a one, if not in need of repenting on his or her own account, as a Christian is under a liability to follow the example of Christ, and so to repent and grieve for his or her neighbour, and the world at large.

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<sup>67</sup> *Εἰς σκοπός*—citing Mark the Monk, *De Paenitentia* [hereafter *Paen*] 1.4 (SC 445.214).

*Why 'repentance' rather than μετάνοια or metanoia?*

This is an important question with implications for methodology and approach. In a study such as this, it is in a sense necessary to dissociate one's own ideas and conceptions regarding repentance from those of late antiquity. One way of doing this might be to simply transliterate the word predominantly used for the concept (*μετάνοια* and so 'metanoia') and work from there, thus bypassing the intellectual baggage normally associated with the term 'repentance'. However the word repentance has been retained throughout for a number of reasons.

First, the main argument by some scholars for speaking of *metanoia* rather than repentance, penance, penitence, and so on is that the former means something entirely different from the latter.<sup>68</sup> While it is true that *metanoia* as a 'change of mind' is a broader term compared with repentance, it nevertheless contains within its semantic range (as will become clear) the concepts of regret, sorrow for sin, and moral amendment associated with 'repentance'. To completely dissociate the words, then, would be unwise, since it would give the impression of a total conceptual discontinuity when certain fundamental continuities are evident.

Second, while some have insisted that *metanoia* cannot properly be translated as repentance, penance, etc. and should be left transliterated, most scholars do not hesitate to use the term 'repentance', even if there is a tendency (particularly amongst biblical scholars) to recognize and iterate the nuances of the Greek word that are not captured by the English (or German, French, or Latin for that matter). Here this dominant attitude is followed: there appears to be no convincing reason for retreating to what is ultimately a kind of obscurantism for the sake of clarity. The word repentance may not be entirely adequate, but since it has been the term of choice for translating *μετάνοια*, at least since the publication of the Authorized Version of the English Bible in 1611, it will be treated as adequate enough. The

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<sup>68</sup> See, for instance, Treadwell (1896) and Guillet (1980), p. 1093.

aim is to look at the concept in Christian late antiquity on its own terms, yes, but not without bearings. The word repentance is one such bearing.<sup>69</sup>

Thirdly and lastly, this study is primarily a conceptual rather than a terminological study. To propose to explore ‘*metanoia* in Christian late antiquity’ rather than ‘repentance in Christian late antiquity’ would appear to limit the scope of the thesis to occurrences and uses of this one word in the sources, which is not the study’s intention. The linguistic question is important, but not binding, and an attempt has been made in what follows to draw out and demonstrate conceptual allusions to repentance in the sources often where explicit *metanoia* terminology is lacking.<sup>70</sup>

#### *Why these authors?*

Since at first glance the choice of Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, and John Climacus as case studies for this thesis might appear slightly arbitrary, an explanation regarding the selection of these authors for special consideration should be given. To begin with, the aim was to focus on texts that were representative of ecclesiastical orthodoxy and influential not only within their time period and milieu (from the fifth to seventh centuries), but throughout the development of Eastern Christendom.<sup>71</sup> As it was predictably in monastic sources that the most developed notions of repentance were developed, and since monastic thought was only beginning to flourish by the end of the fourth century, it seemed fitting and

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<sup>69</sup> Incidentally, repentance is generally used rather than ‘penitence’ or ‘penance’ in this study simply because the former is slightly less susceptible to the narrower application to ecclesiastical discipline evoked more readily by the latter. Historically, this seems to be linked both with the impact of the Authorized Version on the English language (which never uses the words ‘penance’ or ‘penitence’ for *μετάνοια*), and the subsequent debates between English Protestant and Roman Catholic thinkers (the former generally preferring a more generic ‘repentance’, the latter ecclesiastical ‘penance’ or ‘penitence’).

<sup>70</sup> Thus this study goes against a trend in scholarship exemplified in W.L. Holladay’s otherwise exemplary study of repentance in the Hebrew Bible which states: ‘there are no words in the OT for apostasy and repentance, and where there is no vocabulary there can be no concepts’: Holladay (1959), p. 157. See below, p. 44.

<sup>71</sup> That the texts of Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, and John Climacus can be considered representative and influential in this way is brought out in more detail below in chapters four, five, and six, in the introductory sections on each author.

sensible to take up the investigation from the early fifth century, bringing it to its completion with the rise of Islam and the summative work of John Climacus.<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, while it was important to explore texts that were representative both in their own time and beyond, it seemed best for there not to be too great a connection between the texts, so as to allow the arguments to speak for a wider pattern of thinking not limited to a few heavily inter-dependent sources. Thus while Mark the Monk is known, in part at least, to John Climacus (Barsanuphius and John, however, are never cited), he is not simply reproducing Mark's theology or arguments in his work (in particular, he never cites him in relation to repentance). And likewise, while Dorotheus of Gaza—perhaps the closest and most famous disciple of Barsanuphius and John—cites Mark on several occasions, his masters do not.<sup>73</sup> The texts thus speak for discrete ascetical traditions,<sup>74</sup> and having found that they develop the concept of repentance along similar lines, it can reasonably be concluded that such understandings of the concept pervaded the late antique Christian environment.

The texts as representative yet diverse, then, are two factors influencing the decision. Another is the manageable size and relatively uncontroversial state of each corpus of writings. Choosing a vast, disparate, or heavily debated set of texts for close study (e.g. the *oeuvre* of John Chrysostom, the Pachomian Koinonia, the *Apophthegmata* traditions, etc.) would make the kind of diachronic conceptual analysis attempted here a far more difficult task: for one, only a single author or group of texts could feasibly be chosen, and even this would call for a great deal of attention to textual issues not directly relevant to an analysis of the concept of repentance. The same problem would arise if authors that were either heavily involved in political and/or theological debates of their age (for instance Cyril of Alexandria,

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<sup>72</sup> As P. Brown notes, 'John's *Ladder of Divine Ascent* marks the end of late antiquity': Brown (1988), p. 239.

<sup>73</sup> It is also worth underlining the obvious: each author is separated significantly in time (early fifth, mid-sixth, and late sixth/early seventh centuries) as well as place (Mark probably writing in Syria, Barsanuphius and John in Gaza, and John Climacus at Sinai).

<sup>74</sup> Although the 'ideals' of monastic Egypt, as with virtually all Christian monastics in late antiquity, serve as a common denominator of sorts between them.

Maximus the Confessor, or John of Damascus) were chosen, or those whose names and works were tied up in complex webs of controversy (e.g. Origen, Evagrius, or Theodore of Mopsuestia). Choosing any of these or similar figures would again make it harder to home in on the central question of repentance in their writings, since each inevitably raises a whole host of questions to be answered by the scholar before the issue of repentance can even be raised.

Together with these reasons, there is also a stylistic consideration. The texts to be explored represent different types of the ascetic genre: among the treatises of Mark the Monk are the *kephalaia* ('chapters') and *erotapokriseis* ('question-answer') forms; Barsanuphius and John's work is entirely epistolographic; and John Climacus' main treatise is uniquely constructed as a literary 'Ladder' of thirty steps.<sup>75</sup> It can thereby be shown that repentance permeated all styles of ascetic literature. Moreover, each author boasts a relatively different setting and audience, and in the case of Barsanuphius and John, the audience covers all strata of political and ecclesiastical society. The findings, then, while applying predominantly to a monastic *milieu*, can be shown to have significance beyond the walls of the late antique hermitage or coenobium.

A final reason for the selection, and this should perhaps be taken as the chief justification, is that of all Greek ascetic literature of Christian late antiquity, these texts are particularly articulate on the notion of repentance. Indeed, both Mark the Monk and John Climacus dedicate large portions of their work to explicitly unpacking and commenting on the concept, and the idea is shot through the letters of Barsanuphius and John. Given this and the other reasons outlined above, looking at these particular authors seemed both logical and potentially very fruitful.

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<sup>75</sup> More will be said regarding the stylistic features of the works of each author in their respective chapters. In the secondary literature, Climacus' *Ladder* has gained most attention for its style: see in particular Johnsen (2007).

Choosing to focus on these specific authors has not meant, as will become clear presently, that the larger history of repentance in Christian late antiquity is to be ignored. In the following two chapters, the conceptual context in which the chosen authors wrote will be set out, firstly through a study of texts from Hellenistic Judaism (particularly the Septuagint), the New Testament, and Classical Greek sources (chapter two), and secondly through a re-assessment of the concept and practice of repentance in the early church to the fifth century (chapter three). From there, the attention will turn to the chosen monastic texts.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Defining repentance in the Greek patristic world, part one: Hellenistic Judaism, the New Testament, and non Judaeo-Christian Hellenistic sources.*

The centrality of Scripture to the establishing and early development of the Christian monastic movement is easily forgotten. However, as D. Burton-Christie has so ably demonstrated, the early monastics forged much of their spirituality through their reading and interpretation of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> When dealing with late antique monasticism, what faces the scholar is ‘a culture steeped in Scripture’ where ‘the monks sought to reshape their imagination around the world of Scripture and to allow it to penetrate to the core of their beings and their communities’.<sup>2</sup> To understand, then, how such a formative and transformative notion as repentance was conceived and applied among these monks, an effort must be made to set out the kinds of visions of repentance that Scripture offered them. In what follows, most attention will be given to the canonical texts (the Septuagint [LXX] and the New Testament [NT]). However, in order to give a broader picture of repentance in the Greek patristic world, other sources will also be considered for their views, from both Judaeo-Christian and pagan contexts.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Repentance in the LXX, apocryphal, and pseudepigraphical texts*

The question of ‘repentance’ in the Old Testament is a somewhat difficult one to address.<sup>4</sup> The kernel of the problem lies in the absence of any definite vocabulary for the idea. In the Hebrew Bible, the main word generally recognized as containing the Old Testament meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Burton-Christie (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Burton-Christie (1993), p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> Treatment of apocalyptic texts is not made in this chapter, but can be found below, in Appendix I. For some insight into early Valentinian Gnostic speculation on repentance, see Dubois (1998).

<sup>4</sup> Aside from the brief treatments in many and various biblical dictionaries (see especially *TDOT*, and *TDNT*), studies include Dietrich (1936); Holladay (1959); Raitt (1971); Tosato (1972); Rouillard-Bonraisin (1998); Dubois (1998); Nave (2002), pp. 111-8; Lambert (2003, 2004, 2006); and the first four chapters of Boda and Smith (eds.) (2006); Boda (2006); Fretheim (2006); Dempsey (2006); and Batach (2006).

for ‘repentance’ is the verb שׁוּב (*shuv*) and its derivatives. Yet this simply means ‘to return’/‘turn back’, and only on occasion does it have the connotation of ‘repentance’ (turn [back] to God from sin).<sup>5</sup> The LXX translators faithfully render it with στρέφω words (usually ἀποστρέφω or ἐπιστρέφω).<sup>6</sup> The normal background for occurrences of μετανοέω, on the other hand, is the Hebrew נחם (*naham*), meaning ‘to regret’, ‘to be sorry’, or ‘to comfort/console oneself’. From the point of view of the development of the concept of μετάνοια, this limited use for μετανοέω points for many scholars to the emergence of a new understanding of μετάνοια with the NT, where a sense of ‘turning’ rather than merely ‘regret’ is prevalent (something touched on in more detail below).

However, there are instances in which שׁוּב (*shuv*) as ‘[re]turning to God from sin’ is synonymous with נחם (*naham*) in the Hebrew Bible (and so ἐπι/ἀποστρέφω is synonymous with μετανοέω in the LXX), including: Jer 8.5-6; 38[31].18-9; Joel 2.14; and Jonah 3.9.<sup>7</sup> There is thus warrant to Behm and Würtheim’s claim that, at least to some extent, ‘in the LXX μετάνοια and ἐπιστροφή are related in meaning’.<sup>8</sup> But the connection cannot be pushed too far, if only for the simple reason that μετανοέω never translates שׁוּב (*shuv*) in the LXX. This would only occur in the later Greek translation by Symmachus the Ebionite (in the late second century CE), by which time the virtual synonymy of the words was already established among Greek-speaking Christians.<sup>9</sup>

How then can the Old Testament and Hellenistic Jewish approaches to repentance from a diachronic perspective be characterized? It is a difficult problem, as stated above, because of the lack of any real terminological coherence or consensus on the matter. This, it

<sup>5</sup> Examples of where a sense of repentance is quite clearly conveyed by the use of the verb ‘to return’ in the Old Testament include (note: biblical references in this chapter are to the LXX, and the Hebrew numbering, where different, is placed in square brackets; translations follow the LXX): Deut 4.30; 30.2; 3 Kgs[1 Kgs] 8.33, 48; Amos 4.6-11; Hos 14.1; Is 55.7; Jer 3.12; 31.18; 36.3; Ez 18.30, 32; 33.11; etc.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the LXX use of these words in conjunction with repentance, see Aslanoff (1998), esp. pp. 54-7.

<sup>7</sup> See also Is 46.8, which in the LXX is quite different to the Hebrew: ‘remember these things and groan; repent (μετανοέω) you who have gone astray; return (ἐπιστρέφω) in your heart’.

<sup>8</sup> Behm and Würtheim (1942), p. 990.

<sup>9</sup> On Symmachus’ use of μετανοέω for ‘covenantal *subh*’ see Holladay (1959), pp. 32-3, 48.

can be stated now, will recur as a fundamental predicament. One looks in vain, particularly in the Hebrew Bible and LXX, for a linguistic systematization of the concept of turning or returning to God from every way that is contrary to him. If we take the word for ‘return’ to mean ‘repentance’, for instance, we are soon faced with the dilemma of people who are ‘repenting’ from God, the same people being called simultaneously ‘to repent’ towards God (Jer 3.14, 22). Such verbal ambiguities are unavoidable, but this surely does not mean that the task is hopeless, as some have suggested. In Holladay’s conclusion to his study of covenantal forms of ‘return’ in the Hebrew Bible, for example, he states (alluding to Jer 3.14, 22): ‘there are no words in the OT for apostasy and repentance, and where there is no vocabulary there can be no concepts’.<sup>10</sup> Why this should be so is not, however, discussed, and it appears a rather hasty conclusion. While it is true that the terminology expressing the idea of conversion, repentance, turning towards God, and so on only receives shape in the later Second Temple and early Christian periods (and even then, not rigidly), that the idea itself was absent is another matter entirely. Before dealing with the clearer emergence of *μετάνοια* as a word for this idea, then, passages and themes in the Old Testament will be adduced which convey the sense of repentance at least as it was understood and developed in Greek-speaking Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

The fall of Adam and Eve provides the opening, in the Old Testament, for the concept of repentance.<sup>12</sup> Primordial man loses his God through disobedience, and although God immediately seeks him (‘Adam, where art thou?’—Gen 3.9), his sin brings the condemnation of death (‘for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return’—Gen 3.19).<sup>13</sup> The topos of God

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<sup>10</sup> Holladay (1959), p. 157.

<sup>11</sup> This will be done with only limited reference to contemporary historico-critical scholarship on the Hebrew Bible and/or Greek Old Testament. The intention, again, is not to provide a detailed analysis, but to draw out motifs that are significant in light of the approaches to repentance in Mark the Monk, Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, John Climacus, and the early Greek-speaking Christian world in general.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the motif of repentance in the reception history of the Adam and Eve narrative, see Anderson (2001), pp. 135-54.

<sup>13</sup> The verse ‘Adam where art thou?’ (Gen 3.9) is explicitly related to repentance by Dorotheos of Gaza: *Instructions* 1.9 (SC 92.160).

attempting to find his wayward creature remains as a permanent thread in the biblical narrative, expressed in various ways, but perhaps climactically with the concept of covenant.<sup>14</sup> The Torah, in its canonical form, as well as the Old Testament as a whole, can reasonably be seen as an effort to chart the calls and responses (or lack thereof) between God and humanity, and Israel in particular. The goal is ‘an everlasting covenant’,<sup>15</sup> one which depends on human receptivity, and attention: ‘incline your ear, and come to me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you’ (Is 55.3). This inclination and coming to the Lord with the hope of establishing with him an abiding and permanent ‘agreement’ (in the sense, perhaps, of ‘communion’) is, effectively, the essence of turning/returning to God, and so of repentance. For a select few (Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, David, and Isaiah) the divine call can be answered with memorable brevity: הִנְנִי (*hineni*) / ἰδοὺ ἐγώ / ‘here I am’.<sup>16</sup> However, the process for the most part is far more painful and changeable.

The need for restoring a right relationship with the ‘God of our fathers’ is recognized in ritual life: Lev 4-5 and Num 15, for instance, give details of how sacrifices for sins were to be performed. But the sin offerings are for sins committed ‘in ignorance’ or ‘unwittingly’, and are not necessarily attached to a mechanical system of repentance and restoration.<sup>17</sup> They could not, in other words, act as a substitute for struggle. Without a change of heart towards the keeping of the commandments delivered from above, destruction is always at the gates,

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<sup>14</sup> Analyses of covenant theology in the Old Testament abound, but still the best place to start is E.W. Nicholson’s *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Nicholson [1986]), together with the festschrift in his honour: Mayes and Salters (eds.) (2003). I have in mind here the idea of the conditional covenant in particular.

<sup>15</sup> See Gen 9.16; 17.7; Lev 24.8; Num 25.13; 2 Kgs[2 Sam] 23.5; 1 Chron 16.17; Ps 104[105].10; Is 24.5; Is 55.3; 61.8; Jer 32.40; 50.5; Ez 16.60; 31.16; 37.26.

<sup>16</sup> Gen 22.1, 11; 31.11; 46.2; Ex 3.4; 1 Kgs[1 Sam] 3.4-8; 2 Kgs[2 Sam] 15.26; Is 6.8. In the case of Moses (Ex 3.4), the LXX rendering is *τι ἐστίν;* (‘what is it?’).

<sup>17</sup> For more on this, see Milgrom (1976) and Boda (2006).

and this without regard to number or purity of ritual sacrifices. In the absence of the willingness of the people, God's call to covenant becomes a curse.<sup>18</sup>

Such unwillingness is the plane on which 'the wrath of the LORD' is kindled, the space in which the cries of the prophets resound as oracles of doom. But Israel at least came to perceive that such oracles were designed to inspire repentance: 'Perhaps the house of Judah will hear all the evils which I intend to do to them, that they might turn from their evil way, and so I will be merciful to their iniquities and their sins' (Jer 43[36].3). In several places, the prophet's primary function as preacher of turning/repentance is made explicit (4 Kgs[2 Kgs] 17.13; Zech 1.4; Jer 51[44].4). In a twice repeated passage in Ezekiel, such a function is absolutely necessary, on pain of the prophet's own judgment by God:

When I say to the lawless one, "you will surely die", and you [i.e. the prophet] do not warn him, or speak to warn the lawless one to turn from his ways, that he might live; that lawless one will die in his unrighteousness, but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet if you have warned the lawless one, and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he will die in his unrighteousness; but you have delivered your soul (Ez 3.18-9//33.8-9).

It should be borne in mind that for the early church, the prophets were mainly understood as, on the one hand, prophesying of Christ, but also on the other, as preachers of repentance. Apart from the roots for the latter view in received Scripture (what became the Old Testament), this is revealed by the characteristics of the 'greatest' prophet in early Christian tradition, who serves as the measure of the old covenant prophets: John the Baptist.<sup>19</sup> Thus while to our ears, or at least the ears of many biblical commentators, the prophetic calls to repentance seem no more than declarations of imminent and inescapable devastation (with no hope of real repentance),<sup>20</sup> these 'oracles of doom' can and perhaps should in many cases be interpreted as 'summonses to repentance'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In the Torah, this view of things is most clearly and fully stated in Deut 30. Outside the Torah, it surfaces forcefully in several places: Pss 39[40].6-8; 50.18-9 [51.16-7]; Is 1.11-20; Hos 6.6, etc.

<sup>19</sup> For the Baptist as 'greatest' among prophets, or among those born of women *tout court*, see Lk 7.28 and Mt 11.11 respectively. His teaching is pre-eminently one of repentance (see especially Mt 3.1-12).

<sup>20</sup> The classic example is the Book of Amos, particularly 4.12 which ends 'prepare to meet your God, O Israel' in the Hebrew, but 'prepare to call upon your God, O Israel' in the LXX.

<sup>21</sup> See Raitt (1971). Such a view is expressed in narrative form in the Old Testament with the episode of Nineveh's repentance in Jonah 3.

The persistent motif of turning back to God found especially, though not exclusively, in the prophets is, on the whole, a lesson to be learned by straying Israel, or her straying kings (David being the most well-known example—2 Kgs[2 Sam] 12). Yet as a concept of responding to the divine voice, it is seen on occasion as a requirement not merely of the apostate nation or her rulers, but of her holy prophets as well. Thus in the call narratives of Isaiah and Jeremiah, both confess their unworthiness of the prophetic ministry before heeding the call, Isaiah as a man of ‘unclean lips’, and Jeremiah as a ‘child’ (Is 6.5; Jer 1.6). They too, in other words, recognize their need for a kind of repentance, one exercised in their obedience to the call to fulfil the prophetic role. By accepting the call, they conclude their own covenant with the LORD, thereby becoming voices of the divine word (Jer 1.9; cf. Is 6.6-9).

This sense of necessary repentance springs, it seems, from an awareness of the universality of sin, which emerges unequivocally in a number of places.<sup>22</sup> As a statement, for instance, it is found in Eccles 7.20 (‘there is not a righteous one on earth who will do good and not sin’); as an aside in 3 Kgs[1 Kgs] 8.46//2 Para[2 Chron] 6.36 (‘for there is not a man who will not sin’); and under the guise of a rhetorical question in Prov 20.9 (‘who will boast that he has a chaste heart, or who will boldly say that he is pure from sins?’). It is also suggested by the psalmist’s association of human conception with sin in Ps 50.7[51.5] (‘for behold I was conceived in iniquities, and in sins my mother bore me’), although this could be taken as hyperbole for the psalmist’s own personal feeling of sinfulness.<sup>23</sup>

With this sense of universal and personal failure and the concomitant hope that the God of Israel can, with the willingness of his creature, amend such failure, it seems

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<sup>22</sup> On Old Testament hamartiology, see Staples (1947), Porúbčan (1963), and Knierim (1966).

<sup>23</sup> See also Is 53.6 (‘all like sheep have gone astray; man has gone astray in his way’); Ps 129[130].3 (‘if you Lord should mark iniquities, Lord who would stand?’); Ps 142[143].2 (‘and enter not into judgment with your servant, for in your sight no living thing will be justified’); and Job 15.14-6 (‘for who, being a mortal man, is one that will be blameless, or born of a woman, that will be righteous? Forasmuch as [the Lord] does not put faith in his saints, and heaven is not clean before him. Ah! How abominable and unclean is man, drinking unrighteousness like strong drink!’).

reasonable to suggest that for at least a substantial amount of Old Testament theology, the idea lying behind what we might call ‘repentance’ was very much in evidence. In later Jewish works, there is a noticeable shift in many sources towards assigning clearer terminology to this idea.<sup>24</sup> It has been noted already that this was the case with Symmachus’ use of *μετάνοια* in his translation of the Hebrew Bible, but there are many examples of a similar nature. In Greek texts we find, for instance, the phrase *τόπος μετανοίας* in Wis 12.10 and 4Esdras [2Ezra] 9.11,<sup>25</sup> words used for the reality that the ministry of the prophets intended to convey: a place or opportunity for repentance.<sup>26</sup> Other notable examples include: the Prayer of Manasseh (Odes 12 in the LXX), which is a prayer explicitly of *μετάνοια*; Sir 17.24 and 44.16, the latter passage putting forward Enoch as ‘an example of *μετάνοια* to [all] generations’; *Joseph and Aseneth*, which introduces *μετάνοια* as ‘the Most High’s daughter’ who ‘entreats the Most High on your [Aseneth’s] behalf every hour’ and who will look after her own ‘for ever’;<sup>27</sup> other references in *Wisdom of Solomon*, such as Wis 11.23 and 12.19; and Philo’s preoccupation with the theme, even dedicating a section of his treatise on the virtues to repentance,<sup>28</sup> and who, as in Sir 44.16, saw Enoch as the prototype of *μετάνοια*.<sup>29</sup>

While features such as the association of *μετάνοια* with Enoch and ‘the daughter of the Most High’ are innovative in their way,<sup>30</sup> the thrust of the word is that of the prophetic ‘turn’ to the Lord rather than a narrower ‘regret’ or ‘be sorry’. As Behm and Würtheim put it,

<sup>24</sup> On this shift (in both Greek and Hebrew sources), and for fuller analyses of the texts in question, see Dirksen (1932), pp. 126-64 and Nave (2002), pp. 70-111. The primary concern here is this development in Hellenistic Jewish texts. For more on repentance in Rabbinic Judaism, see Neusner (1999), pp. 551-53.

<sup>25</sup> See also the Syriac *Apocalypse of Baruch* 85.12, ET in Sparks (1984), p. 895, and Appendix I below.

<sup>26</sup> This emerges again in the NT, in Heb 12.17. For more on the use and influence of wisdom literature on early Christianity, see Wilken (ed.) (1975).

<sup>27</sup> *Joseph and Asenath* 15.5-8.

<sup>28</sup> *De Virtutibus* 175-86, *περι μετανοίας*.

<sup>29</sup> *De Abrahamo* 17. More references from Philo include: *Legum Allegoriae* 2.60; *Quod Deus Sit Immutabilis* 33; *De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* 132; and his *De Praemiis et Poenis*.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the rabbinic development of the noun תשובה (*teshuva*) and the verb עשה תשובה (*asa teshuva*) into the standard Judaic words for repentance/to repent, which includes speculation regarding תשובה (*teshuva*) as one of the seven words/commands created by God before creating the world: see Dirksen (1932), p. 139; Bonsirven (1934-5), vol. 2, p. 103; and Guillet (1980), col. 1096.

‘the predominant sense of *μετανοέω* is now “to convert”, and of *μετάνοια* “conversion”’.<sup>31</sup> But to re-iterate, this lexical development does not signify the emergence of an altogether new idea. It seems rather to demonstrate serious engagement with an existing idea in an attempt to define it more cohesively. The words *μετανοέω* and *μετάνοια* became, by the turn of the era, the more usual terms for denoting the idea of [re-]establishing right relationship with God.<sup>32</sup> By extension, these words and their underlying meaning increasingly denote the necessary state of Israel for the coming of the Messiah.<sup>33</sup>

Having seen to some extent how the notion of repentance in Old Testament thought and slightly beyond was conceived and conveyed, another more contentious element should be included, one which becomes significant in later writers. This is the idea that a human mediator might in some sense enact the repentance of other people in his or her person. From a ritual perspective, the closest approximation to such an idea is the scapegoat of Yom Kippur, which is invested with the sins of the people, and is instrumental in bringing about their atonement.<sup>34</sup> However, a similar concept can arguably be found in the mediatorial roles of certain Old Testament figures. The most striking example is Moses, who repeatedly pleads with the Lord that the sins of the people be overlooked, climactically ‘standing in the breach’ (Ps 105[106].23) after the apostasy of the Israelites and declaring: ‘and now if you forgive their sin forgive it, but if not, blot me out of your book which you have written’ (Ex 32.32).

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<sup>31</sup> Behm and Würtheim (1942), p. 991.

<sup>32</sup> This sense applies also to the Enoch analogy: in Sir 44.16, the proposition that Enoch is the paradigm of repentance ‘to all generations’ is followed by a charting of those generations with their various covenants, beginning with Noah, then Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron, Moses, and so on to Nehemiah, before speaking again of Enoch as well as Joseph, Shem, Seth, and Adam (49.14-6). The implication seems to be that *μετάνοια* functions in Sir as covenantal turning, that is, in the same way as the ‘turn’ towards the covenant in much prophetic and Deuteronomic material.

<sup>33</sup> On this idea of prerequisite repentance, particularly in Jewish apocalyptic, see Dirksen (1932), pp. 131-2.

<sup>34</sup> The scapegoat (‘goat for Azazel’) ritual is described in Lev 16. Together with the scapegoat (which was released), another goat was sacrificed for the people, and a bullock was sacrificed for the high priest. For an exhaustive treatment of the impact of Yom Kippur on early Christianity, see Stökl Ben Ezra (2003). On this impact generally, note the comment of G. Stroumsa: ‘Yom Kippur had totally disappeared from early Christianity—perhaps because the whole ethos of the new religion centred upon repentance from sins, thus allowing no special, limited place for one single day, hallowed as it may be, devoted to the repentance from sins’, in Stroumsa (1999), p. 169. The idea of scapegoating has received much attention in sociological studies via the theory of mimetic violence proposed by R. Girard: see Girard (1972).

Here Moses is effectively staking his life for that of the people with a view to their walking anew in the way of the Lord. His gamble is a success, and the divine wrath is ‘turned away’ (*ἀποστρέφω*—Ps 105[106].23), while the people, at least for a time, turn back to the worship of God (Ex 33.1-10).<sup>35</sup>

A comparable idea is at work in a number of other passages. Thus in the story of David and Nabal, Abigail (Nabal’s wife), although blameless herself, rushes to David as he comes to avenge Nabal’s ‘folly’, ‘and she fell on her face before David, and prostrated before him to the ground to his feet and said, “On me, my lord, be the wrongdoing”’ (1 Kgs[1 Sam] 25.23-4).<sup>36</sup> Again, the plea meets with success, even if Nabal is eventually struck down by the hand of God (1 Kgs[1 Sam] 25.38). The prophet Joel exhorts the priests to gird themselves with sackcloth and lament, mourning for the people: ‘Let the priests that minister to the Lord weep, and say, “Spare your people, Lord, and do not give your inheritance to reproach”’ (Joel 2.17; cf. 1.13). And as a last example—although an element of sharing in the burden of guilt is not so clear—we find Solomon dedicating the temple with a prayer of supplication for the forgiveness of those who turn to the Lord in his dwelling-place (3 Kgs[1 Kgs] 8//2 Para[2 Chron] 6), even for strangers to Israel (3 Kgs[1 Kgs] 8.41-3//2 Para[2 Chron] 6.32-3).

During the course of this analysis, various threads relating to the theology of repentance in the Old Testament and Hellenistic Jewish sources have been touched upon. Repentance can be seen as a turning or returning to God, enacted by individuals and nations (predominantly the nation of Israel), with a view to establishing an everlasting covenantal relationship with him. It involves heeding the word of the Lord, whether this comes directly from on high, through the mediation of a prophet, or (especially for post-exilic writers)

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<sup>35</sup> See also Deut 9.18-9. For an in-depth treatment of Moses and his mediatorial role, with special reference to Ex 32.32 and Num 13-4, see Widmer (2004). Barsanuphius of Gaza and John Climacus were particularly taken by the example of Moses: see below, p. 183 (Climacus) and Appendix II, p. 220 (Barsanuphius).

<sup>36</sup> The example of Abigail’s humble repentance was upheld by the early monks: see *Apophthegmata Patrum* Poemen 71 (PG 65.340B).

through emerging religious (often wisdom) texts and the received Scripture. Repentance is likewise defined ritualistically, though not without recourse to the idea of the need for personal asceticism, the sacrifice of ‘a broken spirit; a broken and humbled heart’ (Ps 50.19[51.17]). Lastly, the understanding of this concept extends on occasion to the recovery not only of the repentant person or nation, but also of another person or nation: repentance, as it were, by proxy, though its efficacy relies on the willingness of the one(s) for whom supplication is made. This defines repentance broadly, but when it is remembered that a chief concern in this section is to highlight points of relevance for analyzing the concept as it was preserved and developed in Greek-speaking Christian circles, defining it broadly is justified. It will become clearer as this study progresses that defining repentance narrowly (whether as a beginning stage of spiritual life only, a specific form of religious or ritual discipline, etc.) does a severe injustice to the host of ideas and images often integrated into this one concept, a concept progressively receiving a more easily discernible linguistic shape, expressed in Greek with the verb *μετανοέω*, and the noun *μετάνοια*.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Repentance in the New Testament: introduction*

It is surprising that the two most promising book titles in the field of New Testament repentance—Dirksen’s *The New Testament Concept of Metanoia* and Nave’s *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*—end up with very little to say about the New Testament itself.<sup>38</sup> Dirksen’s thesis revolves around proving that *μετάνοια* had a particular connotation both before and after New Testament times, especially amongst Hellenistic Jews and patristic authors, but also in rabbinical and Classical sources, which thereby provides, by extension, the meaning of repentance in the New Testament (hereafter NT). Most would agree

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<sup>37</sup> Again, it should not be assumed that the whole theme of Old Testament and Hellenistic Jewish approaches to repentance has been adequately dealt with here. Discussion of many pertinent factors such as penitential rites and exercises (fasting, wearing sackcloth, lying in dust and ashes, etc.), and alternative imagery to evoke the concept (e.g. ‘rising’, ‘awakening’, ‘seeking God’, and so on) has not been developed. Nevertheless, some of the more vital aspects as they would be received in early Christian thought have been outlined.

<sup>38</sup> Dirksen (1932) and Nave (2002).

that the definition Dirksen extrapolates from almost every source, namely that repentance is a fourfold process accomplished by contrition, confession, amendment, and satisfaction for sin, maps out later scholastic categories a little too conveniently.<sup>39</sup> But that aside, Dirksen's working assumption is that having 'proved' his definition in pre-NT and post-NT texts, one can safely ascribe the same definition to the NT itself without much further reflection; he consequently devotes only a few pages to the NT at the end of the book.

Nave's offering is less surprising in this respect, in that he wisely narrows his focus to one key source within the NT, Luke-Acts, and his treatment of the chosen source is a lot longer than a few pages. Nevertheless, while much helpful attention is given to approaches to repentance outside NT sources (with a notably extensive section on Classical sources), there is little on repentance in the NT outside Luke-Acts. One can sympathize with Nave's motivating complaint that scholars oversimplify the subject in attempting 'to arrive at *the* New Testament meaning of repentance',<sup>40</sup> but this makes his lack of developed interest in other NT texts (when a clear interest in non-NT material is there) all the more unexpected.

Nave is correct in saying that NT repentance studies would be better served by several focussed treatments of certain NT books or even passages, from which a more complete vision of what repentance in the NT might or might not mean could be supplied. However, this current study is not a thesis in NT studies. The intention here is to set the context for later Greek monastic readings of repentance in the NT. This will be done by providing a hermeneutical framework through which repentance in the NT can be viewed as a consistent whole, applicable to Christian life in all its 'stages', something it will be argued is explicitly being done in authors such as Mark the Monk, Barsnauphius and John of Gaza, and John Climacus. Relevant scholarship will be referred to on occasion, but only cursorily, since while the scholarship provides several deft readings and interpretations of various NT

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<sup>39</sup> See for instance a review by D. Tarrant in *The Classical Review*: Tarrant (1933).

<sup>40</sup> Nave (2002), p. 1. He has in mind Dirksen, Pohlmann, Chamberlain, Carlston, and Wilkes.

passages or texts related to repentance, little has been offered by way of interpretative frameworks through which repentance in the NT as a whole might be better understood.

The NT material related to repentance, while seemingly disparate at times, will be given the interpretative framework suggested in chapter one, a framework which attempts at once to account for the disparity, and to give a sense of the way in which Greek-speaking Christianity was establishing itself with this concept, laying much groundwork for the preachers and, in particular, ascetic theologians of the church in the generations to come. To re-iterate, three forms of repentance make up this framework: 1) a cognisant or initial repentance, applied to the beginning or new beginning of Christian life, wherein the person takes stock of his or her life, and turns it Godward; 2) an existential repentance, applied to the Christian life more generally, wherein the way of the Christian is, at root, one of *μετάνοια*; 3) Christ-like repentance, in which the Christian effectively repents for other people, bearing their sin and healing their estrangement, by virtue of the gift of Christ. Each of these three aspects will be looked at in turn.

*Repentance in the New Testament: beginning and new beginnings in Christian life*

Repentance is the inaugural concept of the good news in the NT, at least in the Synoptics and Acts, and is linked with a new polity, the kingdom of heaven.<sup>41</sup> As Chamberlain puts it in his pastorally-minded *The Meaning of Repentance*: ‘Jesus offered citizenship in the Kingdom, not the menace of hell, as the motive for repentance’.<sup>42</sup> This idea is extremely important for a sharper understanding of the self-consciousness of the early church, particularly when we

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. the first use of *μετανοέω* in the NT, which is also probably the best known: ‘repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Mt 3.2//4.17 and cf. Mk 1.14-5). It is worth noticing (as later ascetic writers would) that the present imperative second person plural form of the verb is used (*μετανοεῖτε*), which would more literally be rendered ‘do you keep repenting’. Modern scholarship is divided over the historicity of Jesus’ summons to repentance (as opposed to his emphasis on the kingdom, which none deny): for information and bibliography, see Merklein (1981).

<sup>42</sup> Chamberlain (1943), p. 20.

bear in mind the references to baptism (including the ‘baptism of repentance’) which permeate and set the scene for the evangelical summons to repentance.

What repentance meant, in a fundamental sense, was baptism into the kingdom brought by Jesus; and this kingdom was perceived as present in the church. This is most clearly seen in Acts, where the call to repentance for the sake of the kingdom is phrased as a call to repentance and baptism (Acts 2.38), and where the proper reaction to the preaching of the kingdom can be referred to as baptism rather than repentance (Acts 8.12). While Schnackenburg sees in John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ preaching of repentance a sense of the imminence of the kingdom, as opposed to a view more centred on the person of the resurrected Jesus in Acts,<sup>43</sup> it seems reasonable to assert the thematic continuity of repentance throughout the texts, as linked both to the coming kingdom as well as baptism into the resurrected Messiah. That an added emphasis is placed on Jesus Christ raised from the dead as the focal point of repentance in Acts is perhaps to be expected, and does not necessarily serve to alter the perceived nature of repentance in Acts over against that found in the Synoptics. Jesus is still central to Synoptic repentance in that his initial and repeated call to repent only gains a certain comprehensibility in light of the narrative outworkings of his own life, death, and resurrection. To ‘repent and believe the Gospel’ (Mk 1.15) is ultimately only realizable with belief in, and confession of, the lordship of the suffering and exalted Messiah.

Repentance as a foundational motif of Christian life, then, points to baptism into the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Repentance as ‘beginning’ might be defined as conversion to the person and message of Jesus, realized in baptismal initiation. Yet this is by no means the ‘end of repentance’ in the New Testament texts (not even in *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, to which we shall come presently). While the various exhortations ‘to repent’ are often directed at those outside the baptismal fold, this is not always the case. We thus hear that if a ‘brother’

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<sup>43</sup> See Schnackenburg (1950).

repents even seven times a day, he ought to be forgiven (Lk 17.3; cf. Mt 18.15-2); we are told of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, who all in a sense forsake the true path but find their way back (Lk 15.3-32; cf. Mt 18.12-14); we encounter the chosen apostle renouncing his faith before being reconciled through bitter tears (and/or the explicit agency of Jesus) (Mt 26.69-75//Lk 22.54-62//Mk 14.66-72; cf. Jn 18.25-7, 21.15-8); we see the Pauline communities dealing with serious lapses within Christian ranks, and the reconciliation that occurs through that ‘godly sorrow’ (*κατὰ θεὸν λύπη*) which leads to a repentance without regret (2 Cor 7.10);<sup>44</sup> we read in 1 John of the brothers who sin but are reconciled through the righteous advocate Jesus Christ in the keeping of his commandments (1 Jn 2.1-6); and we find in the ominous warnings to the seven churches of the Apocalypse a recurring call to repent from their various deviations through the remembrance of their ‘first love’ (cf. Rev 2.1-3.22).

What we have, then, is an idea of repentance which indicates not merely the beginning of Christian life, but indicates a new beginning as well, a re-integration into the community, a re-adherence to the Gospel commandments, a re-affirmation of discipleship, a return to that first love which had originally prompted conversion. As beginning or new beginning, however, repentance is still limited to a point of ‘awakening’ or realization, of taking stock of one’s life, and coming to oneself, after which repentance appears to be left behind until the situation requires it anew (if indeed it can, at that stage, ‘be found’ [cf. Heb 12.17]). Some of the early desert fathers, in an effort to raise this concept of ‘new beginnings’ to the plane of their constant repentant striving spoke of the possibility of ‘laying a new foundation every day’ and even ‘every moment’, and of hearing a voice until their last

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<sup>44</sup> The word *μεταμέλομαι* rendered here by ‘regret’ is used on two occasions in the NT with arguably the same force as ‘repent’, at Mt 21.29, 32. It otherwise means ‘change one’s mind’ (Heb 7.21, citing Ps 109[110].4), or a despair-filled regret (Mt 27.3: the ‘repentance’ of Judas). The interchangeability of *μετανοέω* and *μεταμέλομαι* seems logical from a linguistic standpoint (and the terms certainly acted synonymously in most Greek texts in the Classical and Hellenistic periods, on which see below, pp. 67-70), but *μετανοέω* is by far the preferred term in the NT for ‘repent’, used with little to no ambiguity.

breath which cries, 'Be converted today'.<sup>45</sup> In this way, the NT idea of repentance as a beginning or new beginning in Christian life became the focus of the whole of life for these ascetics, who strove to view themselves constantly as novices straining with all their powers to reach, before death, that fresh beginning which would serve as their unassailable and impregnable birth into the heavenly kingdom.

Yet other ascetics, while aware of the language of new beginnings, would also find and focus on a language of repentance in the NT which goes beyond the confines of starting-points or turning-points, to embrace the life of the Christian more holistically.<sup>46</sup> This leads us to the second aspect of the proposed hermeneutical framework: existential repentance.

### *Repentance in the New Testament: living as a Christian*

In Heb 6.4-6 we find perhaps the sharpest words in the New Testament regarding repentance:

it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the holy spirit, and have tasted of the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they fall away, to renew them again unto repentance, seeing as they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.<sup>47</sup>

The meaning of these verses, as interpreted by the vast majority in contemporary scholarship, is that there is no opportunity for repentance after baptism, at least in the case of apostasy.<sup>48</sup> However, several commentators in the early church, notably Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Mark the Monk, exegeted these verses (in response to the Novatianists and other rigorist-minded Christians) in another way. They each independently insisted that what was being denied in the text was not a second repentance,

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<sup>45</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Silvanus 11 (PG 65.412B-C); Poemen 192 (SH 36.30); cf. Sisoës 14 (PG 65.396BC) in which Sisoës, with a view to the grandeur of this new beginning found in repentance, prays to live a little longer to attain to it, feeling that 'truly, I do not think I have even made a beginning yet'.

<sup>46</sup> See in particular the writings of Mark the Monk, treated in depth below in chapter four.

<sup>47</sup> Ἀδύνατον γὰρ τοῖς ἀπαξ φωτισθέντας. ηὐσαμένους τε τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς ἐπουρανίου καὶ μετόχους γενηθέντας πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ καλὸν γευσάμενους θεοῦ ῥῆμα, δυνάμεις τε μελλοντοῦ αἰῶνος. καὶ παραπεσόντας, πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν, ἀνασταυροῦντας ἑαυτοῖς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ παραδειγματίζοντας.

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, Porter (2006).

but a second baptism ('renewal').<sup>49</sup> This partly depends on taking the words *πάλιν ἀνακαινίζειν εἰς μετάνοιαν* to mean 'to renew again *unto/into* repentance' rather than their usual rendition as 'to renew again *through* repentance'.<sup>50</sup> Far from excluding the possibility of repentance for grave sin after baptism, such a reading—especially as put forward by Mark the Monk—turns that argument on its head, making repentance the existential mark of the Christian, the overarching basis of all Christian life, initiated through the renewing waters of baptism. By reading the text in this creative (albeit plausible) way, these formative figures of early church history were testifying to an awareness of the whole of Christian experience as definable in terms of *μετάνοια*, and were doing so with an assurance that such was the witness of Scripture as a whole.<sup>51</sup> The New Testament more broadly can thus be engaged with in an attempt to bring out some of the main verses and themes which contribute to an understanding of repentance as not merely preliminary in Christian life, but as a constant requirement, an existential necessity, for following the Christian way.

As mentioned above,<sup>52</sup> the use of the present imperative form of the verb *μετανοέω* in Mt 3.2, 4.17 and Mk 1.15 evokes a sense of repentance as ongoing, a permanent 'state' into which the disciples of Jesus are called to enter.<sup>53</sup> Such a state of repentance is worked out through baptism initially ('the baptism of repentance'), but continues in the form of 'fruit(s) worthy of repentance' (Mt 3.8//Lk 3.8).<sup>54</sup> Such fruits prove one's place in the line of Abraham's descendants, and in Luke are first associated with basic ethical standards taught by John the Baptist: sharing one's surplus clothing and food, dealing fairly and honestly in business, avoiding violence and slander, and not murmuring at the amount of wages received

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<sup>49</sup> Ambrose, *De Paenitentia* 2.2 (SC 179.134-40); John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Hebrews* 9.4 (PG 63.80); Theodoret of Cyrhus, *Commentary on Hebrews* 6 (PG 82.717BC); and Mark the Monk, *De Paenitentia* 7 (SC 445.236-8). Cf. Ephraim the Syrian, *Commentary on Hebrews* 6 (ACCS:NT 10.84-5). See also below, pp. 108-9.

<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that grammatically speaking, the first is preferable.

<sup>51</sup> On the approach of the fathers to Scripture as a unified, integral whole, see Young (1997).

<sup>52</sup> On p. 53n41.

<sup>53</sup> This is not to argue that such a use of the verb is consistent in the NT. Notice, for instance, that Acts 2.38 and 3.19 use the aorist imperative form, which evokes more a firm once-for-all break with the past.

<sup>54</sup> On Luke's 'fruits of repentance' over against Matthew's 'fruit of repentance', see Nave (2002), pp. 150-1. On Barsanuphius and John's use of this phrase for an abiding repentance, see below, p. 149.

(Lk 3.9-14). In Matthew, however, the fruit in accord with repentance is more immediately associated with Jesus, who comes with a higher baptism in the Spirit, fulfilling the baptism *εἰς μετανοίαν* and taking it with him into the desert to be tempted and emerge victorious (Mt 3.9-4.11). That the idea of repentance is in the evangelist's mind throughout this section is reaffirmed with Jesus' opening *kerygma* in 4.17, a repetition of John the Baptist's call to 'repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'. The sense of finding the fruit of repentance somehow in Jesus is thus made clear, but the precise content of this fruit remains uncertain.

The content too is quick to emerge, however, as Chamberlain argues, with Jesus' first teaching episode in Matthew: the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7).<sup>55</sup> The question of what the fruit(s) of repentance involve is effectively answered in the sermon's opening verses: poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, straining for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, suffering, and being persecuted for Jesus' sake (5.1-12). These are the marks of discipleship, many of which are developed in various ways in the remainder of the sermon (and of the Gospel more generally). Significant for our purposes is the thread of repentance and its meaning stretching from chapter three and finding a resolution in chapter five. The call to repentance as a continuous imperative is lived out, or fulfilled, through the precepts of the sermon. In this way, repentance can be read in the text itself as something existential, always being exercised by the disciple in his or her bid, ultimately, to be 'perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5.48).

It is not difficult to see in the NT that holding to the paths of virtue—paths outlined clearly though not of course exclusively in Mt 5-7—is conceived as an existential, life-long task. This is the underlying assumption in the calls to perpetual vigilance or watchfulness, which would become the hallmark of later monastic theology (Mt 24.42, 25.13, 26.41; Mk 13.33-7, 14.38; Lk 21.36; Acts 20.31; 1 Cor 16.13; Col 4.2; 1 Thess 5.6; 2 Tim 4.5; 1 Pet 4.7). What is not as clear, but certainly discernible with a specific hermeneutical lens, is the

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<sup>55</sup> See Chamberlain (1943), pp. 54-5.

link between such paths of virtue and watchfulness with the working out of repentance. The examples of existential repentance taken from Hebrews and Matthew may not add up to much in themselves, but taken together with other instances in the NT, later readings in the early church of repentance as somehow a life-long task can be seen as rooted in NT thought. Such examples include Jesus' warning, using the cases of the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with Jewish sacrifices and the victims of the fall of the tower in Siloam, that no one is free from the requirement to repent (Lk 13.1-5).<sup>56</sup> Another is the various references to forgiveness as obtainable and to be sought for frequently (even if frequency is not always explicitly stated), and by a number of means, such as forgiving others, being rebuked by one's elders, correcting a straying brother, almsgiving, being anointed with oil in the name of the Lord, loving much, nurturing 'godly sorrow', confessing one's sins, etc. (see Mt 6.12-5, 18.21-2, 18.35; Mk 11.25[-6]; Lk 6.37, 7.47, 11.14, 17.3-4; 2 Cor 2.10, 7.9-11; Jas 5.14-20; 1 Jn 1.9-10). This attitude of seeking forgiveness and forgiving promoted in many NT texts is intimately linked with the concept of repentance, of finding a lived reconciliation between oneself and God, as well as one's neighbours. In particular, the idea that one forgives in order to be forgiven (Mt 6.12-5, 18.35; Mk 11.25[-6]; Lk 6.37, 11.4) indicates that the act of forgiving (which amounts to a lifelong task under the directives of the NT) is also in a sense an act of repentance. To live in a state of striving to forgive is to live, by extension, in a state of striving to repent.

In the context of what is of prime concern to this thesis, namely how repentance was conceived in later ascetical theology in Christian late antiquity (and on what basis such conceptions were formed), this link between repentance and the various activities which make up the Christian life, whether forgiving, showing mercy, almsgiving, correcting an

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<sup>56</sup> Mark the Monk draws on this verse at *Paen* 6.13-5 (SC 445.232). The point made by Jesus here is reinforced by the parable directly following, in which the call to repent is linked to a fig tree being tended in order that it bear fruit: the implication being that repentance is demonstrated with fruit (*καρπὸν*), which, again, points to a life that, *in toto*, is in accord with Jesus' teaching and example (Lk 13.6-9).

erring fellow Christian, having an abundance of love, etc. is of paramount significance. From Origen onwards, and present before—at least in nascent form—in other early Christian writers and homilists (especially Clement of Alexandria and the author of *2 Clement*), a clear association of repentance with various core and general aspects or virtues of Christian life was widely made.<sup>57</sup> The virtues named vary to some extent, but hover around almsgiving, forgiving others, humility, and love. In assimilating and practicing such virtues, one is not leaving repentance behind, but going deeper towards its fulfilment. This brings into question the tendency to see the NT and the early church as broadly positing that a person first repents and *then* lives the Christian life. Space must be made for the interpretation of repentance as applicable to the whole content, and not just the precursory stages, of the Christian path.

A final example of this way of thinking from the NT on which some scholars have drawn, and which will serve to open up the third aspect of repentance for discussion, is the Pauline ‘renewal of mind’ (*ἡ ἀνακαίνωσις τοῦ νοῦς* – Rom 12.2; cf. Eph 4.17-24, Col 3.9-11, Tit 3.5), and being ‘in the same mind’ (*ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ νοί* – 1 Cor 1.10; cf. Rom 15.6, 2 Cor 13.11, Phil 2.2), which ultimately means having ‘the mind of Christ’ (*ἡμεῖς δὲ νοῦν Χριστοῦ ἔχομεν* – 1 Cor 2.16, cf. Phil 2.5, 4.2).<sup>58</sup> The phrases using the word *νοῦς* are emphasized simply because of the direct verbal link with the word *μετάνοια*, but equivalent phrases that employ the term *φρόνημα* point to similar objectives, the nuances of each notwithstanding.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> On this phenomenon, and for references to lists of the ‘ways of repentance’, see de Clerk (1989), esp. pp. 370-4 and Price (2004). The major ‘lists’ can be found in Origen’s *Homilies on Leviticus* 2.4 (SC 286.106-12) and *Selections on the Psalms* 115.8 (PG 12.1577); John Chrysostom, *De Paenitentia* 2-3 (PG 60.699-763) and *De diabolo tentare* 2.6 (PG 49.263-4); John Cassian, *Conferences* 20.8 (SC 64.64-6); Nil of Ancyra, *Ep* 3.243 (PG 79.496-501); later John Climacus, *Ladder* 5.29 (PG 88.780BC) and see 9 (PG 88.841A-844A).

<sup>58</sup> Chamberlain is especially forceful in his reading of NT repentance as consisting of a Pauline ‘pilgrimage from the mind of the flesh to the mind of Christ’: Chamberlain (1943), p. 47, cf. pp. 55, 72, 148, 172-3. Such a reading resonates also throughout J. Pathrapankal’s study of *πίστις* as a functional equivalent of *μετάνοια* in Pauline theology: see Pathrapankal (1971). Current scholarship is generally averse to looking beyond the scattered references to *μετάνοια* and *ἐπιστροφή* in the Pauline Epistles for an idea of the Pauline concept of repentance: a representative example is the article by S. E. Porter in the recent collection entitled *Repentance in Christian Theology*: Porter (2006). However, significant study has been made into the Pauline notion of self-transformation and renewal in Christ (though without relating it to the idea of repentance): see in particular Hooker (1990).

<sup>59</sup> Another word occasionally used, but in the context of the darkening of the mind (and which is linguistically related to *μετάνοια*) is *διάνοια*: see Eph 2.3, 4.18; Col 1.21.

What is envisioned in this path of renewal is (to use M. Hooker's language) an interchange between the old and the new, an interchange that takes place as a continuing process towards the acquisition of 'the mind' or 'the spirit' or 'the love' or 'the measure of the stature of the fullness' of Christ. Having this labour of renewal as a constant task hits precisely on the idea of 'existential repentance' in the NT.

The six uses of *μετάνοια* or *μετανοέω* in the Pauline Epistles (including one use of *ἀμετανόητος*), moreover, are not out of step with this kind of reading. In Rom 2.4-5 repentance and the lack thereof are indicative of either walking along or abandoning the path of 'perseverance in doing good' (Rom 2.7), which evokes a continuous rather than a preliminary process. In 2 Cor 7.9-10, sorrow according to God (*κατὰ θεὸν λύπη*) is praised, a sorrow which is 'unto repentance' (*εἰς μετάνοιαν*), a repentance which is in turn worked out 'unto salvation' (*εἰς σωτηρίαν*).<sup>60</sup> Again, the idea that repentance is somehow an abiding feature of Christian life is not excluded. In 2 Cor 12.21, Paul expresses concern that on visiting the Corinthians for a third time, he will still find many who have sinned in the past but have not repented of their lewd acts. The emphasis is on a firm about-face, which does not entail on its own terms the kind of 'existential' reading discernible elsewhere, although the implications of turning firmly away from one's past actions would need to be borne in mind, implications which involve the same process of struggling to renew one's mind in Christ. Finally, in 2 Tim 2.25-6, repentance is set forth as the gateway 'to the acknowledging of truth' (*εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν ἀληθείας*), and to release from the captivity and snare of the devil's will. Repentance is conceived as an initial break here, it seems, although at the same time, it involves a continual push for conformity to truth, and to an obedience no longer to the will of the devil, but to the will of God. In this sense, here too repentance might be read—given a particular hermeneutical framework—as an existential act, as a condition to be nurtured rather than an initial rite of passage to be left behind.

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<sup>60</sup> For the ascetic use of this idea of 'godly sorrow', see below, pp. 151-7 (on Barsanuphius and John).

The brief examples above have been used in an attempt to place later ascetical readings of repentance in some context. To summarize, they include: the interpretation of Heb 6.4-6; the explanation of repentance in Matthew through the Sermon on the Mount; the idea that the virtues (such as forgiveness, mercy, almsgiving, and love) can be seen as expressions of a lived, necessary repentance, and are to be sought for with perpetual vigilance; and the concept in Pauline thought that one's *νοῦς* is to be renewed according to the likeness of the *νοῦς* of Christ, a concept which, while not expressed through the terminology of *μετάνοια* or *μετανοέω*, is not necessarily out of keeping with the Pauline usage of these words. This last example, that of repentance as ultimately a struggle to conform to the mind of Christ, brings us to the third and final aspect of repentance to be looked at: repenting in the likeness of Christ.

#### *Repentance in the New Testament: Christ-like repentance*

Reading repentance into the life of Christ is not, it should be made clear from the outset, an exercise in reading mistakes or sins into Christ's life for which he required repentance. Such a notion would have been outright heresy to the early church, and is categorically excluded in the NT itself, not simply by implication, but explicitly: 'Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth' (1 Pet 2.22); 'for we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin' (Heb 4.15); and 'he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him' (2 Cor 5.21). This last reference is particularly pertinent to the present discussion. While Paul states that Christ is sinless (and so in no need of repentance), he affirms nonetheless that Christ 'was made sin' for humanity. This points to the meaning given in this thesis to 'the repentance of Christ', namely the NT idea of Christ assuming sin (the sin of the world) blamelessly, and effectively 'repenting' for it through his sacrificial

life, death, and resurrection, thereby opening up through himself the way to righteousness for all human beings.

Christ-like repentance thus means a kind of repenting for the other, assuming the guilt, sin, and punishment deserved by another onto oneself, in imitation of Christ, and hoping thereby to save the one for whom repentance is offered. It is essentially a concept tied to the theology of intercession, only here it is placed in the continuum of repentance as the latter's final object and goal.<sup>61</sup> Intimations towards such an idea in the NT may not be framed explicitly in the language of *μετάνοια*, but this does not forbid their presence. Several occasions will thus be highlighted where a notion of vicarious repentance (after the likeness of Christ) can feasibly be read into the Gospels and Epistles.

The first can be seen in the Synoptic story of the bed-ridden paralytic, who is brought by his friends with great difficulty to the feet of Jesus, in order to be healed (Mt 9.2-8//Mk 2.3-12//Lk 5.18-26). In all three narratives, Jesus 'seeing their faith' (i.e. the faith of those carrying the sick man, though possibly including the faith of the sick man himself) said to the paralytic 'your sins are forgiven'. The helpful actions of the paralytic's friends become a means for the forgiveness (and physical healing) of the paralytic. The message of the passage is primarily that Jesus 'has authority on earth to forgive sins', but it also tacitly contains the fecund idea that selfless ministry to one's neighbour in his or her time of need is received by the one with power to forgive as if it were a cry of repentance from the neighbour's own heart.<sup>62</sup>

Related to this is the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10.30-7). While the notion of sin is not made explicit in the text, the wounded man who 'fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and went off, leaving him half dead' was frequently read in the early

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<sup>61</sup> This way of thinking, as will be shown, pervades the ascetic literature under discussion, being expressed in no uncertain terms in the treatises of Mark the Monk, developed as the defining feature of sainthood in Barsanuphius and John, and stressed at length by John Climacus as the normative state of a pastor or spiritual guide.

<sup>62</sup> Mark the Monk comments on this passage at *Leg* 132 (SC 445.108), and John of Gaza in Letter 387 (SC 450.436-8), each from a slightly different angle.

church as a figure of the sinful, passionate soul, or sinful humanity more broadly.<sup>63</sup> On this reading, the Samaritan is either a seasoned ascetic or pastor who takes the burdens and pains of the wounded person onto himself, making himself accountable to God for his or her health (‘whatever more you spend ... I will repay you’), or else the Samaritan is Christ himself, who heals and renews fallen humanity. Again, as with the paralytic, there is a sense of repenting on behalf of the broken and wounded, paying whatever it takes of one’s own person that the other might be restored.

Supremely, any sense of ‘repenting’ for others in the Gospels finds its expression in Christ’s redemptive life, death, and resurrection. Such is the inevitable focal point of this kind of thinking for the evangelists. The two examples above might be supplemented, then, with the simple topos of having Christ’s life as the paradigm for every Christian life: each is called to take up his or her cross (Mt 16.24//Mk 8.34//Mk 10.21//Lk 9.23) in an effort to follow the same path as Jesus. This is explained in terms of sacrificial love (and so of ‘Christ-like repentance’) most concretely in the Fourth Gospel, epitomized in the verse, ‘greater love has no one than this, that one lays down his life for his friends’ (Jn 15.13). This is how the ‘new commandment’ of love is to be expressed in the Christian community, through a love which involves itself for the salvation of the other even to the point of death. The same sentiment is present in the command to the disciples to be ministers and servants to all if they truly wish to be ‘great’: ‘for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (*δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν*)’ (Mt 20.28//Mk 10.45). Ransoming one’s own life for ‘many’ is the end-point, in other words, of Christian service, a ransom which strives to bear on itself the load of pain, failure, and sin carried by those around. Again, this is the concept of Christ-like repentance at work, even if the terminology within the Gospels themselves does not easily permit such a reading.

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<sup>63</sup> See, for instance, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.17 (SC 211.336); Clement of Alexandria, *Quis Dives Salvetur?* 28-9 (ed. Früchtel 178-9); Ambrose, *De Paenitentia* 1.11 (SC 179.94-8); and Barsanuphius and John, Letter 61 (SC 426.300).

In the Epistles, a similar concept is put forward on several occasions. The exhortation to ‘bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ’ in Gal 6.2 is a call to repent with, if not for, the fallen, leading those ‘overtaken in a fault’ to restoration (cf. Gal 6.1).<sup>64</sup> Those who are capable of bearing the faults of others are termed ‘the spiritual’ (*οἱ πνευματικοί*), surely the same kind of practiced Christians referred to in Heb 13.17 as ‘leaders’ (*οἱ ἡγούμενοι*) who should be obeyed since ‘they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give account’ (Heb 13.17).<sup>65</sup> Again, this notion of rendering account on behalf of another can be seen as a form of repentance, an extension of one’s own practice of repentance—of acquiring ‘the mind of Christ’—which embraces and upholds those faltering on the Christian way.

Burden-bearing also emerges in Rom 15.1-3, again with an emphasis on its Christ-like character: ‘Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not please [possibly ‘serve’] ourselves. Let each of us please [or ‘serve’] his neighbour for his good to edification. For even Christ did not please [or ‘serve’] himself; but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me [Ps 68.10/69.9]’’. Paul is exhorting his listeners who are strong in the faith to hope that the weaknesses of their neighbours might be deflected onto themselves, in imitation of Christ. This kind of repentance for the other comes across, moreover, as a natural bounden duty for the experienced Christian: the more he or she grows in the knowledge of Christ, the more he or she will move from serving him- or herself to serving, accommodating, and bearing the infirmities of his or her neighbour.

In 1 John we meet this idea again with the author’s emphasis on the need for brotherly love. As in the Fourth Gospel, the command to love entails a sacrifice to the death: ‘by this we perceive love, because he [Jesus] laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay

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<sup>64</sup> On the reception and development of this specific idea of ‘burden-bearing’ in late antique monasticism, see Bitton-Ashkelony (2006).

<sup>65</sup> *Ἀγρυπνοῦσιν ὑπὲρ τῶν ψυχῶν ὑμῶν ὡς λόγον ἀποδώσοντες.*

down our lives for the brethren' (1 Jn 3.16). The task of imaging Christ's redemptive role is thereby set up as the authentic mark of a faithful Christian life. In offering every means at one's disposal (including one's own life) for the healing and health of one's brother, discipleship is proved. This, moreover, clearly applies to healing the *sins* of one's brother as well as any other need, provided these are not sins 'unto death (*πρὸς θάνατον*)' (cf. 1 Jn 5.16-7). Interestingly, Ambrose of Milan argues that even supplication for sins 'unto death' is not forbidden outright in the epistle, although such is the preserve only of the very righteous.<sup>66</sup>

A final, and perhaps the most striking, passage in the Epistles which hints towards a 'repentance for the other' is Paul's bold statement in Rom 9.1-4:

I say the truth in Christ, I do not lie, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart: for I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren,<sup>67</sup> my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the worship, and the promises.

Paul's love for Israel compels him to a desire to stake his whole *raison d'être* as expounded at the end of chapter eight ('the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord') on somehow fulfilling through himself Israel's repentance, the nation's return to their promised glory, in Jesus Christ.<sup>68</sup> Such 'abundance of love' expressed as an attempt to repent not just for an individual or a few individuals, but for a whole nation, is the essence of what is meant by 'Christ-like repentance' in this thesis. It was to become an attitude that many ascetic and pastoral theologians throughout Christian late antiquity would seek to cultivate in themselves, and about which they would preach and theorize. We may soon proceed to examine their works, then, with some measure of assurance that their words were based, in at least a slight yet significant manner, on the testimony of their received Scriptures.

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<sup>66</sup> *De Paenitentia* 1.10 (SC 179.92-4).

<sup>67</sup> *ἡψυχόμεν γὰρ ἀνάθεμα εἶναι αὐτὸς ἔγω ἀπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶ μου.*

<sup>68</sup> For more on intercessory prayer in Paul, with a focus on its role and function (with some attention paid to these verses), see Wiles (1974).

### *The Classical use and understanding of repentance*

For principally two reasons, it seems necessary to add here a brief note on the use of the term *μετάνοια* and its underlying conceptual meaning in Hellenistic non Judaeo-Christian circles. The first involves the need to recognize that the thought-worlds of distinct groups (particularly with a shared language) can inform or be informed by one another: while for convenience we speak of various ‘worlds’ and ‘circles’ in existence simultaneously (Hellenistic, Hellenistic-Jewish, Jewish-Christian, Christian, and so on), the intermingling of those worlds should always be borne in mind. Such overlap, contrary to some assertions by scholars such as Norden and Behm, is evident in the case of *μετάνοια*. The second reason, which qualifies the first, revolves around the tendency, as seen to some extent in Dirksen and Nave, to collapse the understandings of different personalities and/or texts on the matter into one another. On this point, a more cautious approach will be suggested, one which takes account of the similarities without overstating them.

Since the link between pagan Greek thought and the chosen monastic authors is by no means as clear-cut as their link with Scripture or early church writers, the subject will not be treated with any pretence to completeness. There is much raw material in Dirksen’s and Nave’s assessments of the topic, to which could be added the ‘student’s guide’ to *μετάνοια* by Burton; the exploration by Thompson of ‘Μετανοέω and Μεταμέλει in Greek Literature until 100 A.D.’; and the more recent analysis in fifth- and fourth-century Athenian oratory of ‘Metameleia and friends’ by Fulkerson.<sup>69</sup> Here I wish simply to point out a few key aspects of relevance within the Hellenistic use of the word and/or the concept, and make one or two observations from this.

Etymologically, the words *μετανοέω* and *μετάνοια* are a combination of *μετά* and *νοέω* (hence *νόημα* and/or *νόος/νοῦς* for the noun). Literally, then, the meaning can be

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<sup>69</sup> Dirksen (1932), pp. 165-97; Nave (2002), pp. 40-70; Thompson (1908); Burton (1891); Fulkerson (2004).

associated with ‘to think after’ and ‘afterthought’.<sup>70</sup> In structure, the words are antonymous with *προνοέω* and *πρόνοια* (‘to forethink’ and ‘forethought’), but this antithesis is not often explicitly acknowledged in the ancient sources.<sup>71</sup> The words, moreover, are not necessarily or even predominantly (as Dirksen and Nave amply demonstrate), ‘morally-neutral’ in Hellenistic texts. They clearly imply an alteration in thinking or a change of mind over some past action or decision, which often entails some form of regret. Striking examples include the copy of an inscription from the Delphic temple found in Miletupolis in Asia Minor (dating from no later than the fourth-century BCE) which contains among its precepts: *ἀμαρτῶν μετανόει* (‘repent after wrongdoings’);<sup>72</sup> an ancient maxim attributed to Bias (one of the seven sages): *μίσει τὸ ταχὺ λαλεῖν μὴ ἀμάρτησι· μετάνοια γὰρ ἀκολουθεῖ* (‘hate quickness of speech lest you fall into error, for *μετάνοια* follows’);<sup>73</sup> and the personification of *Μετάνοια* (with the alternative name *Μεταμέλεια* on occasion) in the philosophically eclectic *Tabula of Cebes*, as the one who rescues those deceived in the outer circle of false education, leading them to the inner sanctum of true education.<sup>74</sup>

Even these few references serve to question the dismissal by certain scholars of precedents for the New Testament understanding of *μετάνοια* in Hellenistic sources. Behm, for instance, writes that ‘whether linguistically or materially, one searches the Greek world in vain for the origin of the New Testament understanding of *μετανοέω* and *μετάνοια*’, and similarly Norden, in his *Agnostos Theos*, claims that *μετάνοια* never meant ‘repentance’ in

<sup>70</sup> For the more ambitious suggestion that the words also contain a sense of ‘communal’ activity (when *μετά* is taken as ‘with’), see Pettavel (1983), p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> See Epicharmus, *Fragment 280* for an example of *μετανοέω* being contrasted with *προνοέω*. Cf. Nave (2002), p. 41.

<sup>72</sup> *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum* 1268.8, on which see Nave (2002), p. 51.

<sup>73</sup> *Septem Sapientes*, *Apophthegmata* 6.5, on which see Nave (2002), p. 52.

<sup>74</sup> For extensive discussions of this document’s views of *μετάνοια* as well as *μεταμέλεια* see Dirksen (1932), pp. 175-85 and Nave (2002), pp. 55-8; see also the introduction to the edition and translation of the *Tabula* in Fitzgerald and White (eds.) (1983), and the comments in Nock (1933), p. 180; for information on the interrelated meaning of *μετάνοια* and *μεταμέλεια* in fourth- and fifth-century Athenian oratory, see Fulkerson (2004), p. 245, 256. For the striking examples of ‘confession inscriptions’ in second- and third-century Lydia, cf. Rapp (2008), p. 136n48 and see Versnel (1991), pp. 75-9.

pre-Christian Greek usage.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, the kind of ‘repentance’ implied on occasion in the Hellenistic use is not altogether clear. It can variously be seen as ‘the appropriate response to inappropriate deeds’ and ‘a means of escaping punishment’ as well as a ‘source of reconciliation’.<sup>76</sup> It is likewise, however, considered useless under certain circumstances (as in the case of erroneously condemning someone to death), and it is judged (particularly by the Stoics) as an avoidable and inferior state to that of the morally-upright man (though it acts as a gateway to the life of wisdom).<sup>77</sup>

Depending, of course, on how one understands Scriptural allusions to repentance, these points might make a wholesale identification of *μετάνοια* in Hellenistic sources with the concept as it is found in Hellenistic Jewish and early Christian texts tempting. The similarity leads Dirksen to claim, for instance, that *μετάνοια* is at times used as ‘a technical term to signify *conversion*’, and Nave likewise contends that it could denote ‘a complete change in behavior and life direction’.<sup>78</sup> But to make such an identification appears to go, at least on one level, slightly too far. In one sense the similarity is there (the wrongdoer converts from bad actions to good ones through sorrow and regret for the bad), but an abiding distinction remains: the nature and goal of conversion.

Even if, for instance, the philosopher of antiquity could acknowledge a need for repentance among the unrighteous and sinners, and could himself engage in a kind of daily self-reproach for any wrong deeds committed, the concept that the well-doing righteous—and perhaps especially they—should consider themselves ‘worthless slaves’ (cf. Lk 17.10) would be unintelligible.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, as Charles-Saget explains, the importance ascribed not

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<sup>75</sup> Behm and Würtheim (1942), p. 980; Norden (1913), p. 134.

<sup>76</sup> These aspects of Hellenistic *μετάνοια* are explored in Nave (2002), pp. 60-9.

<sup>77</sup> On these points, see *ibid.* and Dirksen (1932), pp. 175-85. See also P. Hadot’s assessment of conversion and repentance in the philosophy of antiquity: Hadot (2002), pp. 223-35.

<sup>78</sup> Dirksen (1932), p. 188 (his italics); Nave (2002), p. 68.

<sup>79</sup> On the Pythagorean activity of daily self-examination, see Porphyry’s *Life of Pythagoras* 40, translated and discussed in Riedweg (2005), pp. 33-4, and the *Golden Verses of Pythagoras*, translated with commentary in Thom (1995), and see Schibli (2002), pp. 167-325. On the unintelligibility of the Christian attitude towards the

only to religious rites, but also to prayer and tears in the Christian act of repentance and conversion would have been foolish to the philosophers, in particular the neoplatonists: ‘rien de tel dans l’*ἐπιστροφή* du néoplatonisme. Dans les *Ennéades* de Plotin, les larmes restent le propres des enfants’.<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, it is above all what is converted *to* that delineates the trajectory and content of *μετάνοια* for the Judaeo-Christian and pagan traditions. In other words, the *direction* of *μετάνοια* is its defining feature, and the bearings of Hellenistic *μετάνοια* (as term and concept) are never set towards the ‘everlasting covenant’ with the ‘God of our fathers’, or the ‘kingdom of God’ brought through, and shown in, Jesus Christ.<sup>81</sup> It is these promises of repentance, we could say, that provide the fundamental break between pagan and Judaeo-Christian concerns with *μετάνοια*. With this in mind, we can turn to the concept as it was received and developed in the early church.

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righteous, cf. Celsus’ misgivings over the Christian concept of God being sent to save sinners rather than the righteous: Origen’s *Contra Celsum* 3.62-6 (SC 136.142-52).

<sup>80</sup> Charles-Saget (ed.) (1998), p. 14.

<sup>81</sup> If one were to characterize the direction of Hellenistic conversion and/or repentance, it would no doubt primarily be related to return to one’s origins or true essence through self-knowledge (‘know thyself’). For an exhaustive treatment of this aspect of Hellenistic philosophy together with its significant influence on Christian thought, see Courcelle (1974-5). For a discussion of why, while influential, the philosophical concept of return/conversion through self-knowledge was never equivalent to Judaeo-Christian concepts of repentance (as maintained here), see Khoruji (1998), as well as Stroumsa (2009), p. 16. For the basic incommensurability of Neoplatonism and Christianity in late antiquity, see Edwards (2006), pp. 146-61.

### *Chapter Three*

#### *Defining repentance in the Greek patristic world, part two: repentance in the early church*

##### *(a re-assessment)*

From the survey of literature in the first chapter above, it was shown that most scholarship dealing with the question of repentance in the early church is taken up with the institutional and ritualistic side of the concept's development. Because of this emphasis, several points regarding the history of repentance tend to be underplayed or overlooked. This chapter, by highlighting and discussing some of these points, will supplement the previous chapter's contribution to an understanding of repentance in the late antique imagination, particularly as it was passed on to the ascetic theologians of the fifth century onwards.

Beginning with a sketch of the dominant scholarly narrative of repentance in the early church, this narrative will be challenged with the following points: 1) the concept of repentance is an incredibly multi-layered, multi-faceted, and at times elusive one in the New Testament itself (as discussed above), and in most early Christian communities; 2) the recurring motif from the *Shepherd of Hermas* onwards of a single and unrepeatable repentance is perhaps more clearly a precursor to the monastic life than auricular confession; 3) Tertullian, who is a key figure for most histories of repentance, provides more of an atypical than a representative view of the issue, and connected to this, Novatianism did not necessarily involve the preservation of old norms, but could well have been a rigorist interpretation of those norms; 4) the rise of monasticism was pivotal to the development of repentance in the Christian world from the fourth-century onwards; 5) from relatively early on, a synthesis of desert and ecclesiastical visions of repentance was underway, notably in the figure of John Chrysostom, a synthesis that would dominate the approach to repentance (at least in the Christian East) thereafter.

There are chiefly two reasons for addressing the question of repentance in the early church through these five points. It is firstly due to the sheer immensity of source material, which would *a priori* consign any brief assessment along the lines of the proposed threefold framework to the sorry condition of being hopelessly incomplete and so inevitably unconvincing. Secondly, it is due, as mentioned, to the particular state of scholarship in the field of early church repentance. Consequently, this chapter will suggest a re-assessment of repentance in the early church, attempting to help move the discipline forward whilst providing a greater sense of the context and tradition in which the views of Mark, Barsanuphius and John, and John Climacus on repentance were expressed.

In doing this, there is admittedly a risk of losing sight of the Greek monastic sources to be addressed in chapters four, five, and six. Yet the points argued for below serve precisely to contribute to the opening up of the relatively closed field of early church repentance, and so to allow these ascetics to speak in their turn as representative rather than anomalous voices within broader church tradition. In other words, by attempting to redress and reassess the exclusive preoccupation with questions of institutional penance in most scholarship, the aim is indirectly yet convincingly to set the stage for answering the question of how and why these major ascetics of the fifth to seventh centuries said what they did about repentance.

### *The traditional narrative of the development of early church repentance*

There are numerous versions of the traditional account of the development of repentance in the early church. This brief sketch will inevitably not do full justice to the diversity of views on certain points, but should give a reasonable idea of the general thrust of the narrative.<sup>1</sup> It

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<sup>1</sup> Representative studies each containing or assuming something like the following narrative include: Morin (1651), Marshall (1844), Frank (1867), Holl (1898), Rauschen (1908), Hörmann (1913), Watkins (1920), Haslehurst (1921), Poschmann (1928, 1940, 1964), Galtier (1932), Dirksen (1932), Mortimer (1939), Palmer (1945-6), Vogel (1966), and Rahner (1973, 1983). Some degree of re-assessment is provided (with reference to Western sources) in de Jong (2000). See also Brown (1997) and, on Augustine, see Carola (2005).

is not intended to be a ‘straw man’ which will subsequently be demolished; it is rather put forward as a template which needs, at certain points, to be modified.

We begin with the New Testament declaration to ‘repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Mt 3.2, 4.17; cf. Mk 1.15). The verb used, *μετανοέω*, signifies etymologically to ‘think after’, to ‘reconsider’, ‘to change one’s mind’. This is received by many as a call to change one’s mind regarding Jesus Christ, to alter one’s attitude towards him, and so draw near to the kingdom. This turning is intimately bound up with baptism (cf. ‘repent and be baptized’—Acts 2.38) and illustrates that repentance generally meant simply to be baptized into the church. Having received this new birth, there was ‘no more sacrifice for sins’ (Heb 10.26), and the once-for-all nature of baptism obviously precluded the rite’s being repeated. A complete falling away from baptism was applicable, however, only to those who committed grave/mortal sins (cf. 1 Jn 5.16-7), often taken as murder, adultery, and idolatry/apostasy (cf. Acts 15.20, 29), or more simply blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt 12.31-2//Mk 3.29//Lk 12.10). Other sins were still pardonable for Christians, often through the prayers of the church (whose ministers had been given a certain authority to loose and remit—Mt 18.18, Jn 20.23), and anointing with oil by the presbyters (cf. Jas 5.14).

The rigour of the early communities led the more compassionate author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* to declare to the Christians at Rome and soon well beyond—via revelation from the Angel of Repentance—that there was another repentance after baptism, in view of the mercy of the Lord and the close proximity of the end of time. This was, however, only available once, and any further attempts at repentance would be to no avail. Such lenient tendencies were to be rejected (again in Rome) first by Hippolytus,<sup>2</sup> and then during the Decian persecution (which brought the issue of the *lapsi* to a head) by Novatian and his followers, who established a rigorist schismatic (though doctrinally orthodox) group

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<sup>2</sup> *Against all Heresies* 9.7 (ed. Miller 279).

which spread to much of Christendom and lasted several centuries, though it was always in a minority.

The procedure of the once-off repentance mentioned by Hermas, and its development, is deduced from Irenaeus, Tertullian (before he himself rejected the notion of post-baptismal repentance), the Didache, Cyprian, Gregory of Neo-Caesarea, Peter of Alexandria, the Councils of Ancyra, Neo-Caesarea, and Nicaea, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose, Augustine, Leo the Great, Socrates, Sozomen, and others. It involved a public confession and enumeration of sins before the whole congregation (though scholars are divided about how public the actual enumeration was), wearing sackcloth, and rolling around in tears. The sinner would then be placed in an order of penitents, which in much of the East involved disciplinary grades (the ‘standers/pray-ers’, the ‘hearers’, the ‘kneelers’, and the ‘weepers’). This would go on for a fixed period, determined by the bishop and eventually by disciplinary canons (though the bishop always had a certain authority in these matters). The public aspect of this act became more and more private, eventually being simply before a bishop or a ‘priest penitentiary’. However, this latter office was abolished in Constantinople and so the system fell into disuse in the East until it was revived under a different form by the growing monastic movement. In the West, however, it continued and retained its unrepeatable character until Celtic monastic influence brought the development of penitential catalogues which begat a desire for more frequent confession, eventually turning into the compulsory annual confession required by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Repentance in Eastern Christendom is usually set to one side after the fifth century, though with an occasional reference to the concept of absolution by non-clergy (especially with reference to the letters of Symeon the New Theologian).

Such, in sum, is the standard history of repentance in the early church. With this in mind, we can proceed to the five points suggested for its re-assessment.

### *1. Repentance as a multi-layered concept in the early church*

One of the first points to underline regarding the traditional view of repentance in the early church is the way in which it focuses rather narrowly only on what appears to be relevant to the rise of institutional penance. As mentioned in chapter one, however, it is enough to glance at the entries for *μετάνοια* and *μετανοέω* in Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon* to realise that repentance in the early church meant a variety of different things: the dictionary cites over fifty possible translations. And even this limits the discussion to a single term, while the concept is not thus limited.

The NT is replete with the idea of repentance, of returning to God from a fallen, imperfect state.<sup>3</sup> The call to 'repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand', is literally a call to 'keep repenting' (*μετανοείτε*, using the present imperative), and it was to be read as such particularly in later monastic sources.<sup>4</sup> Baptism was indeed, it seems, the culmination of repentance in some way (prefaced in the narratives of John the Baptist with confession of sins), but not necessarily its endpoint. The reconciliation of 1 Corinthians' fornicator in 2 Corinthians (as the episode was usually read in the early church<sup>5</sup>) is a good example of a post-baptismal repentance, one dependent on 'godly sorrow' (2 Cor 7.10: *κατὰ Θεὸν λύπη*, a key phrase for later ascetical literature). Another example is the repentance required repeatedly of the various seven churches in Revelation (Rev 2.5, 2.16, 2.22, 3.3, etc.). Similarly, and as Athanasius of Alexandria later points out, Peter offers the possibility of repentance to the baptized blasphemer Simon of Samaria (Acts 8.22).<sup>6</sup> Also, Paul exhorts the Christians at Rome to submit to the goodness of God, which leads to repentance (Rom 2.4).

Repentance in the NT can be seen as a dynamic and broad concept, conceived as that which reconciles the human person with God. Without it, at least in Luke's Gospel, we

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<sup>3</sup> While repentance in the NT was dealt with in some detail in chapter two above, a few different (and some similar) points need to be made here. They are not made in order to rehearse what has been said before, but to reaffirm the openness of repentance found in the NT. This is done with the conviction that the NT texts should not be separated too stringently from the early church, since they were, after all, products of the early church.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Mark the Monk, *De Paenitentia* 1 (SC 445.214); Isaiah of Scetis, *Logos* 16.20 (translated in SO 7.129); and Symeon the New Theologian, *Catechism* 4.503 (SC 96.354).

<sup>5</sup> On which see Poschmann (1964), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Athanasius refers to the episode in a fragment from *Sermon 3 Against Novatian* (PG 26.1317).

‘perish’ (Lk 13.3, 5). It is linked, to be sure, with baptism, but it is not necessarily fully accomplished by baptism. Thus in Luke 15 Christ presents the parable of the lost sheep (presumably, though not conclusively, already a member of the church), whose repentance and return to the fold gives more joy in heaven than ninety-nine just persons (Lk 15.3-7). This is followed by the parable of the lost coin which yields a similar result (Lk 15.8-10), crowned by the parable of the prodigal son, who as soon as he ‘comes to himself’ and sets his face homeward, is met by a fatherly embrace (Lk 15.11-32). It is in Luke also, as well as Matthew, that we find the injunction to forgive as often as a brother repents (Lk 17.3-4; cf. Mt 18.21-2).

These are only a few select points, and more has been said in chapter two above. Suffice it to say that repentance in the NT, whatever it means, is not limited to baptism, and that compassion and reconciliation are guiding principles in the treatment of repentance. The multi-layered nature of the concept led W.D. Chamberlain in his *Metanoia in the New Testament* to declare that repentance was in the NT ‘a pilgrimage from the mind of the flesh to the mind of Christ’, containing within it ‘ultimate perfection’.<sup>7</sup>

In early Christian writings outside the NT, we find a similar broadness in the idea of repentance. Clement of Rome’s *Letter to the Corinthians* has amongst its principal aims the repentance of members of the Corinthian community who are rebelling against the hierarchy.<sup>8</sup> Clement speaks of the blood of Christ as setting the grace of repentance before the whole world, of the ministers of the grace of God who have spoken of repentance, and of the Lord as desirous that all his beloved should be partakers of repentance.<sup>9</sup> The Corinthians

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<sup>7</sup> Chamberlain (1943), pp. 47, 223. For all the apparent leniency in the NT described here, a certain rigorism in the NT is sometimes present and should not be ignored. In particular, there are the startling sudden deaths of the avaricious Ananias and his wife in Acts 5.1-10. Perhaps the only charitable reading of the passage (which some would perhaps still refuse to find charitable), would be to relate the episode to Paul’s reference to delivering a person to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, ‘so that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord’ (1 Cor 5.5): cf. Poschmann (1940), pp. 27-40. Likewise, there is the complex references to repentance in Hebrews (invoked especially by the Novatianists), although on this issue, see above, pp. 56-7.

<sup>8</sup> For a recent introduction to *1 Clement*, see Gregory (2006).

<sup>9</sup> *1 Clement* 7-8 (SC 167.110-4).

should all implore forgiveness, and living in fear and love, they should prefer to bear blame themselves rather than allow their neighbour and the church to suffer.<sup>10</sup> He asks finally that those who initiated the sedition ‘submit yourselves to the presbyters, and receive correction so as to repent, bending the knees of your heart’.<sup>11</sup> His request is quite straightforward, and need not imply some sort of penitential discipline. If the presbyters were the offended party, surely they should be approached in repentance. While it is true that the presbyters dispense teaching towards repentance (*παιδεύθητε εἰς μετάνοιαν*), and this is surely of some significance, it cannot be directly matched to a clear and structured form of church penance.<sup>12</sup> The subsequent equation of repentance with ‘bending the knees of the heart’ is enough to seriously question this theory. This phrase is in fact a combined reference to the Hellenistic Jewish *Prayer of Manasseh* and 1 Paralipomenon (1 Chron) 29.20. It thus illustrates, moreover, the rootedness of Clement’s understanding of repentance in Jewish precedents, something clear also in his and countless others’ use of Old Testament exemplars of repentance (David being the most prominent). Overall, Clement’s concept of repentance revolves around it being a central act of Christian life, expressed primarily in a broken-heartedness which manifests itself in bearing blame for wrongs, whether committed or not.

Other early attestations to a broader view of repentance include: the *Didache*’s request that all those not holy should repent before approaching the chalice (without any clear intimation of what this entails);<sup>13</sup> the *Epistle of Barnabas*’ reference to repentance as a gift by which we are led ‘who have been enslaved to death’;<sup>14</sup> Polycarp’s exhortation to the Philippian clergy to be compassionate ‘knowing that we all owe the debt of sin’;<sup>15</sup> Ignatius’ injunction to pray unceasingly for those who stray, recognizing the hope of repentance for

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<sup>10</sup> *1 Clement* 51 (SC 167.182-4). Cf. the similar sentiment expressed by Paul in 1 Cor 6.7.

<sup>11</sup> *1 Clement* 57 (SC 167.190).

<sup>12</sup> As some argue: see in particular Dirksen (1932), pp. 12-3.

<sup>13</sup> *Didache* 10.6 (SC 248.182).

<sup>14</sup> *Epistle of Barnabas* 16.9 (SC 172.192-4).

<sup>15</sup> *Epistle to the Philippians* 6 (SC 10.210-2).

all,<sup>16</sup> and elsewhere his desire that heretics find *μετάνοια* with a view to strengthening the unity of the church around its bishop;<sup>17</sup> *2 Clement*, a homily essentially dedicated to repentance, which, using the image of a clay vessel under the craftsman's hand, envisages the whole of life as an opportunity to repent, after which the vessel is put into the oven, and can no longer be mended;<sup>18</sup> *2 Clement* likewise speaks of the recompense to be given to God the physician while we have time to be healed: the recompense is repentance from a sincere heart;<sup>19</sup> and as a last example the *Shepherd of Hermas* can be invoked, which speaks of Hermas repeatedly bowing to his knees and praying to the Lord, confessing his sins;<sup>20</sup> of repenting from the heart and the benefit that is derived from this;<sup>21</sup> of repentance as 'great understanding' (*σύνεσις μεγάλη*);<sup>22</sup> of good deeds in which there should be 'no restraint', including the encouragement and restoration of those who are sick in soul, that 'your repentance and the repentance of your household might be found simple, pure, innocent, and incorruptible';<sup>23</sup> and, what the text is best known for, of a single repentance after which future repentance no longer guarantees life.<sup>24</sup>

These examples point to a varied and broader approach to repentance in the sources than is usually ascribed them, where the emphasis is on the opportunity and gift, rather than the impossibility, of future repentance. Of these examples, it is usually the *Shepherd of Hermas* that commands most attention for its doctrine of *paenitentia secunda*, which brings the discussion to the second point, concerning the nature of single unrepeatable repentance in the early church.

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<sup>16</sup> *Epistle to the Ephesians* 10 (SC 10.78).

<sup>17</sup> *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 4-5 (SC 10.158-60).

<sup>18</sup> *2 Clement* 8 (PG 1.341A).

<sup>19</sup> *2 Clement* 9 (PG 1.344A).

<sup>20</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas* Vis.1.1 (SC 53.78), Vis.3.1 (SC 53.100); presumably it is this form of confession that is encouraged at Man.10.2 (SC 53.188) and Sim.9.23 (SC 53.338-40). For a discussion of penitence in *Shepherd of Hermas*, see R. Joly's comments in SC 53.22-30 and Rahner (1983), pp. 57-113.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, *Shepherd of Hermas* Vis.1.3 (SC 53.84), Vis.2.2 (SC 53.90), Vis.3.7 (SC 53.116-8), and Vis.3.13 (SC 53.132).

<sup>22</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas* Man.4.2 (SC 53.156).

<sup>23</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas* Man.2 (SC 53.146-8).

<sup>24</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas* Man.4.1 (SC 53.152-6) and Man.4.3 (SC 53.158-62).

## 2. *The nature of the one post-baptismal repentance*

The popularity and influence of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, particularly at Alexandria from the second to fourth centuries makes it necessary to look quite carefully at the concept of repentance in this document. It was hinted at above that there are several elements in the text which suggest that the idea of repentance does not centre wholly on the institution of a once-off penance, which in fact only receives a brief mention.<sup>25</sup> Since Hermas appears to confess and ask for forgiveness on different occasions, it seems that the kind of repentance envisaged by the unrepeatable repentance in this passage is of a different order. It need not be seen as ‘what repentance became’, however, but as an enlargement on what repentance already was, adapted to the needs of those who had grievously strayed from the Christian path. This new repentance is associated with the benefits of baptism, and for this reason it is said to be unrepeatable. The form it took is not clear from the text (though it involves keeping the ‘twelve commandments/mandates’), but becomes clearer in later writers. The apparent leniency of Hermas’ understanding of repentance led Tertullian in his Montanist years to label it ‘the shepherd of adulterers’.<sup>26</sup>

Clement of Alexandria cites Hermas as authoritative and does mention the single repentance in his *Stromateis*.<sup>27</sup> However, the scholar Méhat has argued quite convincingly for Clement’s leniency when it came to the possibility of more than one repentance, and for his distinguishing voluntary from involuntary sins.<sup>28</sup> Origen also appreciates Hermas, but in his second homily on Leviticus speaks of seven ways of remission of sins (one being baptism, so six excluding baptism).<sup>29</sup> The seventh way is ‘through penance, although admittedly it is difficult and toilsome, when the sinner ‘washes his couch in tears’ (cf. Ps 6.6) and his ‘tears

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<sup>25</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas*, Man.4.3 (SC 53.158-62).

<sup>26</sup> *De Pudicitia* 20.2 (SC 394.262).

<sup>27</sup> *Stromateis* 2.13 (SC 38.80-2).

<sup>28</sup> See Méhat (1954).

<sup>29</sup> *Homilies on Leviticus* 2.4 (SC 286.108-10).

become his bread day and night' (cf. Ps 42.3), when he is not ashamed to make known his sin to the priest of the Lord and to seek a cure according to the one who says 'I said, 'I will proclaim to the Lord my injustice against myself', and you forgave the impiety of my heart' (cf. Ps 32.5)'.<sup>30</sup> There is no mention of this being available only once, though he may assume that his audience knows of its unrepeatable character (particularly as it comes in last of the lot as 'difficult and toilsome').

That it was unrepeatable is attested to by Ambrose, although in qualified terms. He speaks of the 'outward practice' as one in the same way that baptism is one, but also speaks of constant repentance for our 'lighter faults' which do not require the heavy yoke of ecclesiastical penance. He continues with an attack on those who have engaged deceitfully on the path of ecclesiastical repentance, saying

Does anyone think that that is repentance where there still exists the striving after earthly honours, where wine flows, and even conjugal relations take place? The world must be renounced; less sleep must be indulged in than nature demands; it must be broken by groans, interrupted by sighs, put aside by prayers; the mode of life must be such that we die to the usual habits of life.<sup>31</sup>

This passage poses a challenge to the usual analysis of early ecclesiastical repentance as the straightforward precursor to the sacrament of confession. What we are confronted with here, it seems, is something little short of a monastic existence.<sup>32</sup> If this is so, it would partly explain the recurring emphasis on the unrepeatable nature of this form of repentance. If it was indeed a dramatic break with the world and the living of a radically self-restrained lifestyle, it would be less surprising to find church authorities unwilling to re-admit someone who had entered this way of life and then lapsed from it.

A significant problem with this theory is that it does not sufficiently account for the reconciliation of the penitent through re-integration into the communion of the church, and his or her consequent status as a regular lay person. But perhaps this re-integration (which

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<sup>30</sup> *Homilies on Leviticus* 2.4 (SC 286.110).

<sup>31</sup> *De Paenitentia* 2.10 (SC 179.192).

<sup>32</sup> For intimations towards the arguments that follow, see Poschmann (1964), pp. 106-13, and de Jong (2000). This is a topic that I cannot develop in any great detail here, but intend to do so in a separate article.

depended on the bishop's discretion, and often was not given until the hour of death anyway) was not supposed to signify a blessing for the penitent to return to his or her old habits and way of life. This is the point Ambrose seems to be making: ecclesial reconciliation does not mean the penitent should lessen his or her efforts at living the commandment of self-denial, but should increase them.

Other examples which serve this proto-monastic conception of once-for-all repentance include: Leo the Great's understanding that under normal circumstances, marriage is forbidden after repentance;<sup>33</sup> the canons of the Second Council of Arles which insist that penance is only to be given to the married on mutual consent;<sup>34</sup> Pope Siricius' letter to Himerius, which deals with the problem of lapsed penitents who revert to old ways, including indulgence in new marriages;<sup>35</sup> Jerome's letter to Sabinianus, in which he exhorts him to do penance, roll in sackcloth and ashes, seek solitude, and go to live in a monastery;<sup>36</sup> and Paulinus of Pella's autobiographical poem, in which he speaks of his hesitation in later life over whether to repent by going to a monastery or not, eventually being advised by clergy that it is still possible to avail of the old form of repentance, which suits him better.<sup>37</sup>

The argument here is not that the early form of unrepeatable repentance was monasticism *avant la lettre*. There are key fronts on which the two are different: the sinful qualifications needed for penitential discipline were not required for monasticism, for instance,<sup>38</sup> and there does not seem to be a need for the penitent to break the marital bond if there is one, or to move off to the desert (indeed, he or she was expected to be at the local church frequently, repenting before God, and asking for the prayers of the people). However, the similarities are also striking: the unrepeatability of the act, the need for radical self-denial

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<sup>33</sup> *Epistle* 167.13 (PL 54.1207AB)

<sup>34</sup> *Canon* 20; cf. *Canon* 24 of the Third Council of Orleans, both cited in Poschmann (1964), p. 107.

<sup>35</sup> *Letter to Himerius* 5 (PL 13.1137AB).

<sup>36</sup> *Epistle* 147 (PL 22.1195-1204).

<sup>37</sup> *Eucharisticos* 451-88 (SC 209.88-90).

<sup>38</sup> Although see Poschmann (1964), pp. 113-4 on the growing desirability of some form of penitential discipline among all ranks of Christian in late antiquity, even those training for the priesthood.

(including the avoidance of marital relations, wine, and general excess), and constant prayers for mercy. What we are soon to be faced with (to different extents), is a meeting and merging of these two worlds, the monastic trumping that of once-for-all repentance. This will be addressed in a little more detail at point four below.

### *3. Tertullian and Novatianism as anomalies within the wider tradition*

This title is deliberately harsh, but it will be argued that it contains a measure of truth. Tertullian, of course, ends up in an anomalous position by turning to the rigors of Montanism, which itself makes the frequent emphasis on Tertullian as an authority for the practice of repentance throughout the early church slightly questionable. It should be underlined, however, that the position he maintains and describes in his ‘orthodox’ treatise on repentance is not entirely in keeping with other significant contributions to the topic. For instance, Tertullian dwells repeatedly on the idea of a sinful repentance, in which repentance is misdirected or used at the wrong time, becoming ‘a means of sinning more readily than a means of right-doing’.<sup>39</sup> He complains about the good man who repents: ‘if he does not commit wrong, why does he invade (the province of) repentance, the private ground of such as do commit wrong? Why does he impose on his goodness a duty proper to wickedness? Thus it happens that an act, done where it ought not to be done, is neglected where it ought to be done’.<sup>40</sup> He also speaks of the justice to be rendered to God in the arena of repentance, where repentance is to ‘be brought to bear only on sins’ and nothing else.<sup>41</sup> This is an emphasis that does not really figure elsewhere, and it gives a markedly legalistic tone to talk of repentance.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *De Paenitentia* 1.5 (SC 316.146).

<sup>40</sup> *De Paenitentia* 2.14 (SC 316.150).

<sup>41</sup> *De Paenitentia* 2.12 (SC 316.150).

<sup>42</sup> Though the term ‘legalistic’ is used, this study does not intend to pit the ‘legal’ West against the ‘therapeutic’ East in the early history of repentance (as is often done, for instance in Horn [2006b], pp. 153-4). Tertullian’s legal background is a reasonable defence for his own approach, but it is not exclusively legal (he uses medicinal imagery in the treatise on several occasions), and such so-called ‘legalism’ does not appear as the ‘rule’ in

Tertullian is most often cited as the authority for the external procedure of repentance, or *exomologesis*.<sup>43</sup> Here he can perhaps be trusted to a certain extent, although to extrapolate (as is often done in general surveys of church history) the idea of the public enumeration of sins before the congregation from his description is to stretch slightly the evidence, and subsequently to apply this conception to all of early Christendom is simply to abuse the evidence. Tertullian himself speaks explicitly not of a public enumeration of sins but rather of a public self-chastisement before the congregation. Furthermore, Tertullian is not the only source of evidence for forms of ecclesiastical repentance in the early church. The evidence, it is true, only comes in snippets, but each gives a glimpse into a discrete community or situation. Thus, against the tendency to chart a steady and clear development of penitential discipline across the empire on the model set out by Tertullian (as is often done), the fluidity of the forms and procedures of institutional penance should be emphasized.<sup>44</sup>

The kinds of ‘snippets’ of evidence referred to, which at least call into question the necessarily public aspect of the penitential process, include: the reference in *1 Clement* to the ministers who instruct towards repentance (presumably the congregation as a whole, rather than an individual in the presence of the congregation);<sup>45</sup> the mention of confession in the *Didache*, though with no strong clues as to its structure/form;<sup>46</sup> Origen’s brief mention of the possibility for confession to a priest (with no mention of the congregation) as a way to remission of sins;<sup>47</sup> the *Didascalía Apostolorum*’s repeated emphasis on the bishop as the one approached for forgiveness, not the general assembly;<sup>48</sup> and Eusebius’ reference to the conversion of the heretical bishop Natalius, which involves confession to bishops, priests and

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Western approaches. Ambrose of Milan’s two books on repentance are a sufficient rebuttal of this assessment: they bear a thoroughly compassionate and therapeutic approach from a man, moreover, steeped for much of his life in legal affairs.

<sup>43</sup> *Exomologesis* is described in *De Paenitentia* 9-10 (SC 316.180-4). For a discussion of Tertullian’s theology of penance, see Rahner (1983), pp. 125-51 and Stroumsa (1999).

<sup>44</sup> This is the conclusion reached—conscious of being out of step with most scholarship—by T. Vivian in his study of Peter of Alexandria: see Vivian (1988), pp. 182-3.

<sup>45</sup> *1 Clement* 57 (SC 167.190).

<sup>46</sup> *Didache* 4.14 (SC 248.168) and 14.1 (SC 248.190).

<sup>47</sup> *Homilies on Leviticus* 2.4 (SC 286.110).

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, *Didascalía Apostolorum* 2.12-8 (ed. Funk, pp. 48-70).

‘even to the laity’, indicating that this was not normal practice.<sup>49</sup> Taking these intimations together with the formidable powers of common sense, it can safely be said that the act of repentance took different forms in different places, was dependent first and foremost on the bishop, and while it almost certainly did involve the congregation as intercessors for the fallen, detailed enumeration of sins and discussions seem to have been reserved, if at all, for the penitent and his or her bishop or other appointed minister. Leo speaks of a penitent’s public enumeration of sins as an aberration, and forbids it.<sup>50</sup>

That Tertullian should not be taken as representative of early church practice is not simply due to the presence of alternative voices, however, but more fundamentally, it seems, because of the lack in his treatment of repentance, seen also in the attitude of the Novatianists, of a tendency towards compassion.<sup>51</sup> In this lack lies their variance with wider church traditions on the matter. It is next to impossible to find extensive treatments of repentance in the early church without the topos of extreme compassion mingled with it, usually in the form of stories or biblical references. The biblical references include the mighty intercessions of Moses for the people, the lament of Jeremiah over Jerusalem, the tears of Paul for Israel, and of course, the life and sufferings of Christ for the world. The stories are varied, but perhaps the best known was that of John the Apostle and the robber, related by Clement of Alexandria and from there by Eusebius, and also told by John Chrysostom.<sup>52</sup>

On a visit to a provincial bishop, John noticed a strong youth whom he committed to the bishop. The youth was raised Christian, baptized, but the bishop left him to his own devices rather early. The youth then slipped into wild ways, eventually becoming the leader

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<sup>49</sup> *Ecclesiastical History* 5.28 (ed. Schwartz 528): *κυλιόμενον ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας οὐ μόνον τῶν ἐν κλήρῳ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν λαϊκῶν.*

<sup>50</sup> *Epistle* 168.2 (PL 54.1210C-1211B).

<sup>51</sup> This is likewise applicable, I would argue, to Hippolytus’ rigour vis-à-vis the compassion of Callistus in *Against all Heresies* 9.7 (ed. Miller 279).

<sup>52</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Quis Dives Salvetur?* 42 (ed. Früchtel 187-91); Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.23 (ed. Schwartz 236-44); John Chrysostom, *To Theodore* 2.19 (SC 117.202).

of a band of robbers. When John returned, he discovered what had happened and immediately set out to find the youth. When he found him, the man was ashamed and tried to flee. But John cried to him ‘Do not fear; you still have hope of life. I will give account to Christ for you. If need be, I will willingly endure your death, as the Lord died for us. I will surrender my life for you’. Hearing these things, the youth repented being, as Clement puts it (for the first time in patristic literature?) ‘baptized a second time with tears’, and was restored by John to the church.

This is the kind of compassionate touch that characterizes the early church’s assessments of repentance. It involves an inversion of any rigorist tendency by ascribing repentance not simply to the wayward sinner, but to the saintly intercessor too, who repents on behalf of that sinner by mimicking in some way the flawless intercessory love of Christ. Such power was considered by many to have been divinely imputed to the early martyrs and confessors (though Cyprian, for one, fought to temper the abuses that could arise from this). Many bishops too, were remembered (or occasionally, as in the case of Hippolytus on Callistus of Rome, attacked) as having been full of this bold forgiving nature, such as Polycarp,<sup>53</sup> Dionysius of Corinth,<sup>54</sup> Dionysius of Alexandria,<sup>55</sup> Pacian of Barcelona,<sup>56</sup> and Ambrose of Milan. Paulinus of Milan’s life of Ambrose is worth citing in this regard:

He was one who rejoiced with those who rejoiced, and wept with those who wept. For as often as any to obtain repentance confessed to him his lapses, he wept in such sort that he compelled him (the sinner) to weep too: for he seemed even to himself to lie prostrate with the prostrate. But the circumstances of the offences which they confessed to him he never divulged to any but to the Lord alone, with whom he made intercession: leaving a good example to priests after him, that they should rather be intercessors with God, than accusers to man.<sup>57</sup>

That bishops should have a similar approach to that seen in Ambrose is recommended, if not ordered, in sections of the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, of Syrian

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<sup>53</sup> See *Letter to the Philippians* 6 (SC 10.210-2), and the Latin additions in 11 concerning the possibility of repentance for the presbyter Valens and his wife (SC 10.218-20).

<sup>54</sup> See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.23 (ed. Schwartz 374-8).

<sup>55</sup> See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.44-6 (ed. Schwartz 624-6).

<sup>56</sup> Through his extant works, especially *Letters to Sympronian* and *Exhortation to Repentance* (PL 13.1051-90).

<sup>57</sup> Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii* (PL 14.40C).

provenance. The bishop is to judge the penitent strictly at first, to make him or her realize the seriousness of the error, but so soon as the penitent expresses deep sorrow, he should be all compassion.<sup>58</sup> He is described as the physician of the church and has received the power to forgive sins.<sup>59</sup> He is not to be deterred from showing mercy because of lay rigorists, and should be like God in how he accepts the repentant.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the bishop who rejects a repentant sinner commits murder, and if he does not forgive, he will not be forgiven.<sup>61</sup>

It is this recurring and basic element of compassion for the fallen in the literature on repentance that is nearly absent from Tertullian and the Novatianist movement. Novatian, who rejected that the power to bind and to loose was applicable to all sins (in particular, it was not applicable to apostasy), did not thereby become a leader of a more ‘traditional’ Christianity in the face of slipping standards.<sup>62</sup> As the critics of the Novatianist movement repeatedly emphasized, there was something monstrous in this theory: that rigour should overcome compassion. It has been little noted, but it is significant that within two years of Novatian’s first general statement (in 250) of his rigorist views, three sizeable councils had gathered in Carthage, Rome, and Antioch respectively to condemn his teaching and promote the possibility of repentance for the lapsed. On the other hand, a compassionate leniency, while criticized in certain isolated cases (by Tertullian, Hippolytus, Novatian, and a few others), would never be condemned on a large scale by the early church. A majority doubtless remembered what was said about longsuffering, gentleness, love, and so on, ‘against which there is no law’ (cf. Gal 5.23).

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<sup>58</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum* 2.12-3; 2.16 (ed. Funk, pp. 48-50, 60-2).

<sup>59</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum* 2.20 (ed. Funk, p. 76).

<sup>60</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum* 2.13-4 (ed. Funk, pp. 49-54).

<sup>61</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum* 2.21 (ed. Funk, pp. 76-80).

<sup>62</sup> As described, for instance, in Watkins (1920), p. 205. It is worth noting the intriguing description of Novatian in none other than the *Ad Novatianum* that, while still ‘in Christ’s church’, he was a model of compassionate supplication for sinners, *Ad Novatianum* 13.8 (PL 3.1214AC): discussed in Rapp (2005), pp. 96-8.

#### 4. *The vital contribution of monasticism to the development of repentance*

From arguing that early strands of penitential rigorism were more of a fringe than a traditional aspect of early Christianity, we turn to a different form of rigour, one which in many ways identified itself with the idea of repentance: desert monasticism. As Hannah Hunt has expressed it in her study of ‘joy-bearing grief’ in Syrian and Byzantine sources, ‘the desert exemplified the concept of *metanoia*’.<sup>63</sup> It should be no surprise that the desert would bring a renewal of understanding of what it meant to repent; it had after all been the source of such a renewal through the ascetic John the Baptist a few centuries before.

In what has preceded, the tentative suggestion was made that the rise of monasticism might serve as a good way of explaining the demise of a specifically unrepeatable institutional repentance, which was in a sense taken over by monastic ideals. This challenges the reading of such early repentance as the forerunner of frequent auricular confession and absolution. This latter phenomenon has firmer precedents, it seems, in the simple interaction between the presbyters and their people, which would undoubtedly have involved seeking advice of the minister, consulting him over serious issues affecting the layperson’s life or family life, and then receiving prayers of intercession from him.<sup>64</sup>

As regards the general understanding of repentance in the Christian world, particularly in the East, monasticism provided several ways of thinking about repentance that would have lasting impact. These include, amongst others, the ideas: that repentance is always applicable at any time and to anyone; that time is a highly relative factor in repentance; that laymen can achieve the heights of repentance; and that perfect love is an illustration of perfect repentance.

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<sup>63</sup> Hunt (2004), p. 42.

<sup>64</sup> As seems to be described of Ambrose by Paulinus, cited above, p. 86.

On the fact that repentance is always applicable, we read in the alphabetical collection about Sisoës ‘the Great’ who on his deathbed considers that he has not begun to repent;<sup>65</sup> of Matheos who insists that the closer one draws to God, the more he sees himself a sinner;<sup>66</sup> of Elias the Presbyter who asks ‘what can sin do where there is repentance?’<sup>67</sup> and so on. Most significant, however, is the seventh apophthegm ascribed to Abba Bessarion. It reads: ‘A brother who had sinned was turned out of the church by the priest; Abba Bessarion got up and went with him, saying, ‘I, too, am a sinner’’.<sup>68</sup> Is this perhaps a comment on the inadequacy of ecclesiastical repentance itself? It does not necessarily seem to be. While it may have undertones in this direction, it seems more to be a comment on the need for all, even the greatest, to consider themselves in need of repentance and deserving of ecclesiastical reproof (*contra* Tertullian). This is re-enforced by the surrounding apophthegms for Abba Bessarion, amongst the most striking holy men in the collection: he makes sea water fresh, walks over rivers, heals demoniacs with ease, and even temporarily stops the earth’s orbit of the sun. That he should consider himself a great sinner powerfully suggests that the concept of repentance lay at the heart of even the most dramatic figures in monastic history.

That time is a relative factor in repentance, fully dependent on the discretion of the bishop was often underlined by early ecclesiastical legislation.<sup>69</sup> But that it could be as short as an hour or so for a radically sinful life was perhaps inconceivable for most, though such a view is explicitly recounted in Abba John the Dwarf’s story of Paesia. A repentant prostitute, she dies shortly after resolving to repent in the desert: ‘one single hour of repentance’, says the apophthegm, ‘has brought her more than the repentance of many who persevere without

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<sup>65</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Sisoës 14 (PG 65.396BC).

<sup>66</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Matheos 2 (PG 65.289C).

<sup>67</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Elias 3 (PG 65.184B).

<sup>68</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Bessarion 7 (PG 65.141BC).

<sup>69</sup> E.g. *Canon* 12 of Nicaea (ed. Tanner, pp. 11-2), *Canon* 5 of Ancyra (NPNF 2.4.65), Basil’s *Canons* 74 and 84 in *Epistle* 217 (ed. Courtonne 2.213, 216-7); Gregory of Nyssa’s *Canonical Epistle* (ed. Mühlenberg); throughout the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (ed. Funk); and so on.

showing such heat (*θερμός*) in repentance'.<sup>70</sup> This kind of thinking (reminiscent of the story of the good thief in Lk 23.40-3) would highly influence John Chrysostom, as well as Barsanuphius and John.

That the laity could find a certain perfection in repentance is related in the story from the systematic collection of a monk seeking to know his measure, and who is led to a lay gardener in a bustling town as an example of someone great. The latter's greatness stems from his continual repentant prayer that 'all will go to the kingdom, I alone shall perish'.<sup>71</sup> The concept of perpetual repentance was thus, at least in theory, envisaged for the city as well as the desert.

That perfect love manifests a perfected repentance is clearest in another story from the systematic collection, which is in some ways reminiscent of the story of John and the robber:

Two brothers went to the market to sell their wares. And when they were separated one from the other, one of them fell into fornication. And when the other brother came he said to him, 'Let us return to our cell, brother'. But the other answered him saying, 'I am not coming'. And the other entreated him saying, 'Why, brother?' And he said, 'While I was separated from you I fell into fornication'. And his brother, desiring to win him back, began to say to him, 'And with me too, when I was separated from you, the same thing happened to me: but come, let us go and repent fervently, and God will forgive us'. And coming to the elders they declared what had happened to them. And they gave them the commandment to repent. And the first repented for the other as though he had committed the same sin. And God, beholding his labour of love, revealed to one of the elders after not many days that because of the great love of the brother who had not sinned, the sinner was forgiven. Behold, this is what it means to lay down one's life for his brother.<sup>72</sup>

By circulating stories such as these, the desert was supplying an ethos of repentance that challenged the wider church to follow suit. It may be the spread of this ethos that in part led to the abolishing of the relatively obscure office of 'priest penitentiary' at Constantinople under Patriarch Nectarius in the late fourth century. Socrates and Sozomen relate that this was due primarily to scandal, though Sozomen adds that similar positions were abolished by

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<sup>70</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum*, John the Dwarf 40 (PG 65.217B-220A).

<sup>71</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum*, 20.22 (SC 498.192-4). Cf. also the story of the repentant gardener translated in Chadwick (1958), pp. 81-2.

<sup>72</sup> *Apophthegmata Patrum*, 5.31 (SC 387.268-70).

the bishops in every region, the old way persevering only in the West.<sup>73</sup> This makes one wonder whether the priest penitentiary was not in fact the administrator of the ‘once-for-all’ repentance that was gradually losing ground to the decisively and comprehensively penitential monastic movement.

Another, and last, speculation on the possible monastic ‘take-over’ of once-for-all repentance has to do with the potential links between the ‘angel of repentance’ in the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the ‘spirit of repentance’ in the *Letters* of Antony. If this speculation has merit, it would point to the fact that monasticism did in some ways consciously re-interpret the tradition lying at the heart of the early church’s practice of single, unrepeatable repentance. The first link is to the theologians of Alexandria: Clement, Origen, and in particular Didymus the Blind, who all held the *Shepherd* in high esteem (Ehrman argues that Didymus included the *Shepherd of Hermas* in his NT canon).<sup>74</sup> Due to his reverence for this text, Didymus was thoroughly acquainted with the angel of repentance. But he also speaks of the *πνεῦμα μετανοίας* (a rare expression) linking it with the spirit of compunction in one of his commentaries.<sup>75</sup> We know that Didymus was a contemporary of Anthony, and that Anthony visited Alexandria at Athanasius’ request. Jerome even tells us in his *Letter to Castrutius* that when Athanasius summoned Anthony to help defend against Arianism, Anthony met and interacted with Didymus face-to-face.<sup>76</sup>

We then have Anthony’s *First Letter* (not, unfortunately, preserved in Greek), which has a great deal to say about the role of the ‘spirit of repentance’ in leading the faithful.<sup>77</sup> We also have the letters of Ammonas the successor of Anthony, which again refer to the ‘spirit of

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<sup>73</sup> Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.19 (ed. Hansen 293-4); Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.16 (ed. Bidez 322-4).

<sup>74</sup> See Ehrman (1983), though it should be noted that Ehrman appears not to take notice of Rufinus’ distinction between works that are strictly canonical and those that are edifying to the church (Rufinus explicitly cites the *Shepherd* in this context). Likewise, and this is especially the case for the blind Didymus, ancient authors rely heavily on memory when incorporating citations into their works, and thus are not necessarily always aware of their exact provenance.

<sup>75</sup> *Commentary on Psalms 29-34* 136.28 (on Ps 29.13 [LXX]) (ed. Gronewald).

<sup>76</sup> *Letter to Castrutius* (PL 22.652-3). On this episode, see Layton (2004), pp. 19-23.

<sup>77</sup> Translation found in Rubenson (1995), pp. 197-210; see also Rubenson’s comments on the influence of the *Shepherd of Hermas* on Anthony’s milieu: Rubenson (1995), p. 171.

repentance' which leads to the purity of adoption by the Holy Spirit.<sup>78</sup> More could be said about the possible link (the issue of 'angel' becoming 'spirit' would need particular attention),<sup>79</sup> but even from this it is plausible that some form of interaction of ideas existed, stretching from the intimations of an unrepeatable form of repentance by Hermas of Rome, through the Alexandrian School, to the theology and practice of the early Egyptian monastics. While all the details of such a theory cannot be sufficiently addressed here, it is clear that not only did monasticism herald a radical conceptualization of repentance as every Christian's target (applicable to and achievable by all), but it did so using tools and attitudes from within the wider non-monastic church tradition.

##### *5. Integrating ecclesiastical and monastic repentance: the case of John Chrysostom*

If monasticism was heralding a radicalization of the notion of repentance, many key representatives of the institutional church were paying heed, attempting to harness and integrate ascetic insights for the benefit of their pastoral teaching.<sup>80</sup> Figures such as Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea,<sup>81</sup> and Gregory of Nazianzus come to mind, but perhaps none so forcefully as the ascetic bishop John Chrysostom.<sup>82</sup> No assessment of repentance in the early church, at least in the Christian East, would do justice to the subject by omitting John Chrysostom, whose impact on the understanding of morality in the Byzantine Church was second only, perhaps, to Paul of Tarsus. And indeed, Paul was usually understood through Chrysostom in subsequent years. This final point will show, in a

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<sup>78</sup> Ammonas, *Letter* 13.2 (translated in SO 42.42).

<sup>79</sup> On aspects of 'angelomorphic pneumatology' in early Christianity, see Bocur (2008).

<sup>80</sup> On the whole question of the interaction between charismatic/ascetic and institutional authority, see Rapp (2005).

<sup>81</sup> For Basil's approach to repentance, see Rousseau (1994), pp. 216-20.

<sup>82</sup> The most extensive treatment of conversion, sin, and mourning in Chrysostom can be found in Leduc (1976, 1977, 1978, and 1990); see also Torrance (1999).

particularly influential case, how the ascetic understandings of repentance were brought to bear on ecclesiastical life in the empire more broadly.<sup>83</sup>

Chrysostom's *To Theodore after his fall*, and his homilies on repentance are classics on the theme and betray his acquaintance with the monastic ideals of repentance. Moreover, by disseminating these ideals through letters and homilies in the Christian centres of Antioch and Constantinople, and by doing so with such rhetorical genius, he was to have a lasting influence on the Eastern Christian understanding of repentance.

A few traits of monastic repentance have already been mentioned (that repentance is always applicable to anyone and at any time; that time is a highly relative factor in repentance; and that laymen can achieve the heights of repentance). All these are clear in Chrysostom's treatment where 'if we do not pursue repentance, we cannot be saved';<sup>84</sup> where 'repentance is judged not by quantity of time, but by disposition of soul', giving the example of the good thief, and of certain monks who had fallen but recovered.<sup>85</sup> He speaks repeatedly of the laity as having the same opportunities for glory as the monastics, and even suggests that they ought to weep more than the monks, they 'being in more need of the remedy of repentance'.<sup>86</sup> He is perhaps the most emphatic of the early church fathers to emphasize the therapeutic role of the church as opposed to one of legalism: 'the Church is a hospital, not a court of justice'.<sup>87</sup> He frequently returns to the idea that the 'medicine of repentance' can be found in many different forms. He provides a representative list in his *Commentary on Hebrews*: the condemnation of our own sins, humility of mind, intense prayers, almsgiving, forgiving others, and converting the brethren.<sup>88</sup> This approach may not

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<sup>83</sup> For a similar 'ascetical' approach to repentance among the Western episcopate of the fourth to sixth centuries as that represented by Chrysostom in the East, see Uhalde (2008).

<sup>84</sup> *De Paenitentia* 3.4 (PG 49.292A).

<sup>85</sup> *To Theodore* 2.6 (SC 117.108-10).

<sup>86</sup> *Commentary on Psalms* 6.4 (PG 55.77).

<sup>87</sup> *De Paenitentia* 3.19 (PG 49.294B).

<sup>88</sup> *Commentary on Hebrews* 9.4 (PG 63.80-1).

be particularly monastic (a similar list is, for example, present in Origen), but it certainly blossomed in the monastic climate of perpetual repentance.<sup>89</sup>

What Chrysostom's generous approach meant for the growing body of disciplinary canons is an interesting question.<sup>90</sup> Chrysostom does not mention canonical regulations for the performance of repentance, nor does he refer to the various 'grades of penitent' which were in place in various Eastern provinces. He prefers to emphasize the universal need for repentance in Christian life, and the relativity of external regulations leading to forgiveness. This does not, however, put him directly at odds with the growing canonical tradition. As has been said, the canons themselves repeatedly undermine their own authority, the method of their enforcement being at the mercy of the bishop. Chrysostom's approach is especially similar to what is said of the bishop's role in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*.

In bringing what he learned from the ascetic life and from his own compassionate nature to the topic of repentance, Chrysostom did not ignore the ecclesiastical side of repentance. It has been argued that the abolition of the office of priest penitentiary shortly before Chrysostom's arrival at Constantinople meant that any form of confession became obsolete in the East. But as Barringer contends, 'allusions in the *Dialogus* [of Palladius] to the ἐπιτίμιον (penalty/penance) imposed on transgressors by church law, to the power of the keys...and to the importance of ἐλεγχος (reproof/correction) in the episcopal ministry all imply...that some form of ecclesiastical penance was still known in Constantinople ten to twenty years after Nectarius is thought to have abolished it'.<sup>91</sup>

While the nature of the specific practice involved is unclear, it could certainly be repeated, something for which Chrysostom was attacked at the Synod of the Oak. The sixth charge by Isaac against John reads: 'he offers sinners immunity with his teaching, 'If you sin

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<sup>89</sup> See the list, for instance in Cassian's *Conferences* 20.8 (SC 64.64-6), and the treatment of the various ways of repentance in Mark the Monk's *De Paenitentia*, dealt with in chapter four below. See also above, pp. 59-60.

<sup>90</sup> The canonical question as a whole is an important one which, given the focus of this study on repentance in late antique monastic texts, can only receive limited attention. For discussion of the early church's penitential canons, see Hess (2002) and Vivian (1988), pp. 139-219.

<sup>91</sup> Barringer (1980), p. 35.

again, again repent', and, 'as often as you sin, come to me and I shall heal you'".<sup>92</sup> This is another example of an anomalous rigorism at work, which would be condemned by Christian posterity in its recognition of John as among the church's most authoritative moral voices.

Another, and final, point on the integration by Chrysostom of monastic and ecclesiastical approaches to repentance, is that he fits his policy of continual repentance into the sacramental life of the church (something not so obvious in most monastic texts). Thus he can speak of the goal of repentance as the baptismal font for the uninitiated, and as the Eucharistic offering for the baptized:

this is surely the time of confession both for the uninitiated and for the baptized; for the one, that upon their repentance they may partake of the sacred mysteries; for the others, that having washed away their stain after baptism, they may approach the table with a clean conscience.<sup>93</sup>

The argument, then, is that what we have in Chrysostom is a nascent synthesis of monastic and ecclesiastical concerns relating to repentance, one which became a model for much subsequent reflection on this topic in the Christian East. Moreover, his approach is not a creation of his own, but bears strong precedents in early and contemporary monastic communities, as well as in the multi-layered and more compassionate treatments of repentance stretching back to the communities of the New Testament.

### *Repentance in the early church: conclusion*

The suggestions above are not intended completely to overturn the usual interpretation of the history of repentance in the early church, but simply to question some of its premises and conclusions. In doing this, an attempt has been made to provide some material and suggestions towards a re-assessment of how repentance was perceived and how it developed within the early Christian period. This is above all in order to set the stage for the following

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<sup>92</sup> Cited in Kelley (1998), p. 300; cf. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.21 (ed. Hansen 344-5).

<sup>93</sup> *Commentary on Matthew* 10.6 (PG 57.190).

three chapters, allowing the dominant ascetic theology on the matter of repentance espoused in Christian late antiquity to be seen within a certain continuum of thought.<sup>94</sup>

With the growth of monasticism's emphasis on repentance as life-long, and with its strong association of repentance with a humbled heart, it was not long before Christian life as a whole became at once a kind of science of repentance and a science of the heart, at least for a great deal of the Christian East. This key and widespread way of thinking, with its firm beginnings in the New Testament and its more mature expression in later monastic writers (who seem to overshadow earlier witnesses to ecclesiastical penance), should hold a decisive place in any re-assessment of repentance in the early church, and perhaps in any re-assessment of early Christian identity *tout court*. With this point in mind, we can approach perhaps the most articulate of early Christian theologians on the theme of repentance, Mark the Monk, and see how the concrete yet at the same time elusive category of repentance was receiving an ever clearer and more discernible shape in Christian late antiquity.

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<sup>94</sup> In the concluding section of chapter six below (pp. 187-8), the five points made in this chapter are integrated more directly with the studies of Mark, Barsanuphius and John, and John Climacus.

## *Chapter Four*

### *Repentance in the treatises of Mark the Monk*

#### *Introduction*

As the figure of Mark the Monk (or ‘the Hermit’/‘the Ascetic’) is not widely known even amongst patristic specialists, the initial part of this chapter will introduce both the person and his writings. Then follows a more detailed analysis of Mark’s developed notion of repentance which, in line with what was presented in nascent form in chapter two, is divided into three categories: the initial/cognisant, the existential, and the Christ-like. This provides, it is argued, a helpful means of harnessing and exposing the differing uses and conceptions of repentance in his treatises. On the basis of the popularity of Mark’s *oeuvre* in the Byzantine (as well as the Syriac) Christian world, the need for wider recognition in scholarship of his contributions to this area is justified.<sup>1</sup> Above all, his popularity indicates that the way in which he understood repentance was largely reciprocated by the world for which he wrote.

Though pinning down a single idea that could serve as the heart of this analysis is not necessarily desirable (as will emerge, there are many rich ideas at work in Mark), nevertheless it may be useful to underline one concept in the proposed threefold framework that, especially in Mark, might be fruitfully borne in mind as a key to understanding his overall approach to repentance, namely ‘Christ-like repentance’. Although this precise term is not used, the idea behind it is frequent, namely the giving up of one’s self for the salvation of the other, in and through Christ, the one who gave himself for the salvation of all (without

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<sup>1</sup> A simple attestation to his popularity is the maxim that had apparently become commonplace amongst Eastern Orthodox monastics, and is mentioned in several Markan manuscripts: ‘sell all and buy Mark’, on which see Ware’s introduction to SO 41, p. ix. Mark’s circle of influence spans such dignitaries of Eastern Christian monasticism and spirituality as Dorotheus of Gaza, John Climacus, Isaac the Syrian, Theodore the Studite, Symeon the New Theologian, Peter of Damascus, Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas, and Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain. For more on the ‘afterlife’ of Mark the Monk in both the Greek and Syriac traditions, see Ware (1965), pp. 457-69; also his introduction to SO 41, pp. ix, xlii. Mark likewise figures widely and substantially in patristic florilegia. About 6% of the *Synagoge* of Paul of Evergetis, for instance, is made up of quotations from Mark: see Wortley (1994), p. 320.

whom the process of repentance in all its forms remains, as Mark explains, without abiding fruit). It is acquiring this ‘mind of Christ’, the way of authentic love, that constitutes the end of repentance, and it is the possibility of such an acquisition for Mark that makes repentance from the first meaningful.

*A general outline of the person of Mark and his theology*

Due to a relative lack of scholarly activity surrounding Mark the Monk, it is worth beginning with what is known about him, and the main contours of his theological work. Despite several studies of Mark the Monk, his precise identity has remained largely unclear.<sup>2</sup> Nothing in his writings and the manuscript tradition taken as a whole can give anything much more definitive than that he was a monk called Mark from somewhere in the Near East (Egypt, Syria, Cappadocia, and Cilicia have all been candidates), writing some time between the late fourth and early sixth centuries. The situation is by no means helped by the popularity—amongst many notable monks during this period—of the name he bore: Mark of Cellia, Mark of Scetis, Mark the Egyptian, the Mark questioning Arsenius in the *Apophthegmata*, the Mark of Pseudo-Nilus, the Mark won over to Chalcedon by Euthymius, Mark bishop of Arthethus in Syria, Mark the disciple of Silvanus, Mark of Penthukla, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Without being caught up too deeply in the discussion (which is not of primary concern to this study), several of the major elements involved in the debate surrounding the identity and date of Mark the Monk can be set out.

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<sup>2</sup> Studies include Ware (1965), pp. 55-66; Chadwick (1972); Hesse (1976); Grillmeier (1980); Gribomont (1982, 1984); Carlton (2002, 2007), and chapter 1 of the introduction to the SC edition of Mark’s works by de Durand (SC 445.13-35). Now see also the general introduction to the English translation of Mark’s works: Vivian (2009).

<sup>3</sup> For these (including citations) and other Marks, see de Durand’s introduction, SC 445.13-4 and Ware (1965), pp. 58-66.

Firstly, the earliest manuscript containing ‘sermons of Marcus the Monk’ is a Syriac translation dating to 533-4.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this manuscript twice refers to Mark as ‘the Egyptian’. Appendant to this point is the fact that Dorotheus of Gaza, a disciple of Barsanuphius and John writing between 540 and 580, cites Mark several times in his *Instructions*.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, Mark uses the Cyrilline term ‘hypostatic union’ with some frequency and without, it seems, an awareness of any novelty in doing so.<sup>6</sup> This surely suggests a date post-Ephesus (431), as Ware, Plested, and Carlton argue, at least for these treatises.<sup>7</sup> However, this coincidence of terminology, while striking, does not allow for a wholesale identification of Markan and Cyrilline theology. There is an absence, for instance, of any reference either to *θεοτόκος* or ‘one nature of God incarnate’, or of ‘natural union’ language. Moreover, Mark uses the concepts of *συνάφεια* and *ὁ κυριακὸς ἄνθρωπος* (when referring to Christ’s human nature) in *On the Incarnation*,<sup>8</sup> which would associate him more immediately with Nestorius than with Cyril.<sup>9</sup> The link with Cyril, then, while undeniable, is not necessarily all that close.

Thirdly, several later commentators such as George the Monk (mid-late ninth century) and Nicephorus Callistus (fl. 1320) link Mark with John Chrysostom.<sup>10</sup> While nothing can definitively be said against this, neither is any compelling evidence in favour

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<sup>4</sup> On which see Chadwick (1972), p. 125. For other links with, and influences on, the Syrian monastic tradition (particularly Abraham of Kaskar and Babai the Great), see Vivian (2009), pp. 26-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Instructions* 1.10 (SC 92.162), corresponding to *On those who think they are justified by works* (hereafter *Justif*) 197 (SC 445.192), and *Instructions* 8.90 (SC 92.308), corresponding to *On the Spiritual Law* (hereafter *Leg*) 14 (SC 445.78). Cf. also *Instructions* 1.3 (SC 92.150), reminiscent of *Discussion with a lawyer* (hereafter *Causid*) 7 (SC 445.46). For *Justif* and *Leg*, I follow the Migne/SC numbering, which is slightly different to the numbering in volume one of the *Philokalia* (which contains, by Mark, *Justif*, *Leg*, and the *Letter to Nicholas* [hereafter *Nic*]). All citations of Mark in this study follow the SC edition.

<sup>6</sup> The concept is found in his treatises *On Melchizedek* (hereafter *Melch*) and *On the Incarnation* (hereafter *Incar*; also called *Against the Nestorians* and, by Gribomont, *On the Hypostatic Union*): *Melch* 5.27-8 (SC 455.194); *Incar* 13.8-9 (SC 455.266), 17.10 (SC 455.270), 21.9-10 (SC 455.276), 26.5, 17-18 (SC 455.280), 30.1-5 (SC 455.284), 34.8 (SC 455.290), 42.8-9 (SC 455.300).

<sup>7</sup> See Ware’s introduction to the SO edition of Mark’s works (SO 41), p. xiii, Plested (2004), pp. 127-30, and Carlton (2007).

<sup>8</sup> At *Incar* 21.3 (SC 455.274) and 20.15-6 (SC 455.274) respectively.

<sup>9</sup> See Ware (1965), pp. 394-8 and Plested (2004), p. 128, but especially now Carlton (2007).

<sup>10</sup> See Ware (1965), p. 2 and de Durand in SC 445.18-20.

forthcoming. Theologically there are certainly similarities (as, for instance, their approach to pre-baptismal repentance, and their interpretation of Heb 6), but these similarities can be found between many others with whom Chrysostom was not personally acquainted. Moreover, Mark's free use of *2 Peter* runs counter to its absence in Chrysostom (as well as Syrian authors generally at the time). While not impossible, the Chrysostom link cannot be proved on the basis of the extant information.<sup>11</sup>

Fourthly and finally, Chadwick has made the ingenious suggestion that a certain abbot called Mark from a monastery near Tarsus in the early sixth century is none other than 'Mark the Monk'.<sup>12</sup> He is mentioned in two letters written by Severus of Antioch between 515-8 as having been requested to give an account of his Christological position. The response, so the argument goes, is *On the Incarnation* through which, as Gribomont puts it, Mark 'does everything in his power to satisfy the punctilious Severus'.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Mark's anti-Messalian polemic (most particularly *On Baptism*) and his *On Melchizedek* can both be neatly placed within the context of southern Asia Minor at this time.<sup>14</sup> But this theory does, as Chadwick and Gribomont both recognize, cut the chronology quite close, allowing at most two decades between Mark writing in Cilicia and his association with Egypt in a Syriac translation of his work.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, it seems sufficient for the purposes of the present study to allow for a Mark flourishing between 430-510, although I am personally inclined towards a date within the first half of the fifth century. His precise location remains, as far as can be determined, an enigma, though some relationship with Egypt, perhaps as his *alma mater*, followed by an exodus to the region of Syria or Cappadocia, seems to best fit the scant evidence.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For other points against the link, cf. de Durand's introduction, SC 445.18-20, and Ware (1965), pp. 54-6.

<sup>12</sup> Chadwick (1972), followed (with qualifications) by Gribomont (1982, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Gribomont (1984), p. 473.

<sup>14</sup> Chadwick (1972), pp. 128-9.

<sup>15</sup> For a criticism of Chadwick's theory, see Hesse (1976).

<sup>16</sup> This against Durand and Carlton's apparent dismissal of the evidence for a link with Egypt: see Durand's introduction in SC 445.13, and Carlton (2007), p. 392n45. It is quite possible that Mark, like Barsanuphius after

The theology of Mark the Monk is thankfully not as obscure as his dates and provenance. Aside from the texts themselves, a number of studies have looked at different aspects of Mark's theology, the results of which shall be integrated into the sketch that follows. The two main elements that have been the subject of scholarly scrutiny are Mark's view of baptism (and his corollary view of the fall), and his anatomization of the process of temptation.<sup>17</sup>

As a monastic author, Mark might not be expected to have written so extensively on the role of ecclesiastical sacraments, yet he constantly returns to the theme of baptism throughout his works, one of his treatises even being *On Baptism*.<sup>18</sup> Without mentioning any names, he makes it clear that the cause of this emphasis is the threat of Messalianism.<sup>19</sup> He conceives the underlying tenet of this movement as a gospel of self-salvation (or salvation by works), distorting the Christian life so as to place the source of its vitality and fruits not in Christ, but in human effort.<sup>20</sup> The kernel of his response lies in an insistence on the perfection and completeness of baptism, which freely redeems, obliterating both the person's own sins and the curse of death inherited from Adam. This was a direct confrontation to the Messalian view that in baptism what occurred was at best a 'shaving' of the evils attached to one's being (and by no means a complete uprooting of them). The consequent claim for Mark is that the fullness of divine grace is accorded in baptism, only to be revealed through the keeping of Christ's commandments, and that not because of any individual merit, but because such a way agrees with the divine will.

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him, began as an Egyptian monk and for one reason or another, left, settled, and flourished elsewhere (Syria for instance), being remembered by posterity there as 'the Egyptian'.

<sup>17</sup> For what follows I draw in particular on Ware (1965), Ware (1970), Carlton (2002), and Plested (2004), pp. 75-132.

<sup>18</sup> The Eucharist is another sacrament mentioned by Mark, though rarely: see *Bapt* 5.98-9 (SC 445.332); *Incar* 40-2 (SC 455.298-300).

<sup>19</sup> On Messalianism as the object of much of Mark's polemic, particularly in *Bapt*, see Ware (1965), pp. 310-2, and de Gribomont's introduction to *Bapt* in SC 445.261-95. For Messalianism more generally, see Stewart (1991) and Caner (2002).

<sup>20</sup> Mark never names his Messalian foes, and it is difficult to discern whether he has in mind specific people or, as with many defenders of orthodoxy, is simply attacking a threatening idea (in this case that a person's effort in prayer was salvific in itself). This idea, in an embryonic form at least, certainly circulated widely, but seems rarely to have been held in its 'integrity', that is, with the kind of implications that Mark deduces.

Baptism is the foundation of the Christian life for Mark, but at the same time it contains that life's fulfilment. This paradox is expressed by Mark through a distinction between the presence of grace *μυστικῶς* (secretly or mysteriously) within the baptized person, and its manifestation to human experience *ἐνεργῶς* (actively) through keeping the commandments.<sup>21</sup> In a sense, as Ware puts it, 'around these two terms *μυστικῶς* and *ἐνεργῶς* the whole of Mark's ascetic and mystical theology is centred'.<sup>22</sup> The distinction allows Mark to safeguard the concept of baptism as in itself an all-encompassing renewal in Christ while leaving room for the conscious experience of that renewal in concert with the spiritual development of the person. In doing this, he countered the Messalian equation of grace with spiritual feeling, and strove instead for an understanding of grace's perceptibility as merely an uncovering of the baptismal gift already bestowed freely from on high.<sup>23</sup>

The centrality of baptism in Mark's ascetic vision is linked to his view of the fall and the consequent death from which all human beings, as descendants of Adam, suffer.<sup>24</sup> Without baptism, death continues to reign. While Mark is not presenting a new teaching in saying this, he uses his *μυστικῶς-ἐνεργῶς* distinction to present it with an emphasis not found elsewhere: baptism completely effaces the effect of Adam's sin, so that no trace of 'original sin' remains. This view finds some parallel in Macarius-Symeon, Gregory of Nyssa, and Diadochus of Photice, in that all do dwell on the significance and necessity of baptism. However, Mark's emphasis on the efficacy of baptism as a complete renewal delineates him to a certain extent from these three, in that each of them appears to posit the continuation of some fallen element in the human being after illumination, whether Macarius-Symeon's 'veil

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<sup>21</sup> Mark gives perhaps the most direct and comprehensive summary of his teaching on baptism at *Bapt* 5 (SC 445.324-48), though, of course, the whole treatise is relevant; for his teaching in a nutshell, see *Justif* 85 (SC 445.156): 'all that have been baptised in an orthodox manner have received the whole of grace mystically, but they afterwards receive full assurance through the keeping of the commandments'.

<sup>22</sup> Ware (1965), p. 229.

<sup>23</sup> For Hausherr, the mentioned equation of grace with spiritual feeling was the Messalians' 'fundamental error': Hausherr (1935); for a detailed view of the *ἀποκάλυψις* of baptism in the life of the believer, from the angles of *καθαρισμός*, *ἐλευθερία*, and *ἐνοίκησης*, see Ware (1970).

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of original sin and 'death' in Mark, see Ware's introduction to SO 41, pp. xvi-xxi.

of the passions', Diadochus' 'abiding duality of wills', or Gregory's theory that with baptism there is a 'certain break in the continuity of evil' (but not a complete effacement of it).<sup>25</sup> That said, the absence of any fallen element after baptism for Mark is tempered by his insistence that a single engagement with sin automatically re-introduces the fall into one's life, even if the potential for renewal remains by virtue of the continued presence of the grace of baptism *μυστικῶς* in the person.

The process of temptation and sin is the second aspect of Mark's thinking that has been stressed as a significant and fresh contribution to monastic spirituality. Mark explores and comments on this process by mentioning five stages of temptation and two factors which essentially govern the process. The five stages are: *προσβολή* (assault/suggestion), *παραρπίπισμός/λογισμός* (flick of the mind/thought), *ὁμιλία* (converse), *συνδυασμός* (intercourse/union), and *συγκατάθεσις* (consent).<sup>26</sup> The first of these (assault/suggestion), does not involve sin, and would be present in human life with or without the fall (and also, by implication, is not removed by baptism).<sup>27</sup> The others, however, represent varying degrees of sin. When the suggestion, which is imageless, is taken up by the mind and receives an image or any slight degree of acceptance, sin is involved.<sup>28</sup> This continues if a 'conversation' ensues with the thought or image, which then culminates in a union with the thought and a full consent to its suggestion. The two determinative factors involved overall are *πρόληψις* (predisposition) and *πάθος* (passion). The first is gradually acquired after baptism (having been altogether effaced in baptism) through the misuse of free will in attaching itself to

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<sup>25</sup> For Diadochus see *Gnostic Chapters* 78 (SC 5.136); Gregory of Nyssa: *Catechetical Oration* 35 (ed. Mühlenberg 89); for Macarius-Symeon, and more on this theme generally, see the citations and discussion found in Plested (2004), pp. 85-9. Cf. also Ware (1970), pp. 448-9.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed investigation of these stages in Mark, see Ware's introduction to SO 41, pp. xxviii-xxxiii; Plested (2004), pp. 95-100; and Ware (1965), pp. 263-97. The main texts which deal with temptation are: *Leg* 139-42 (SC 445.110-2); *Justif* 211 (SC 445.196-200); *Bapt* 5, 9-14 (SC 445.324-48, 354-80); and *Nic* 7 (SC 455.128-34).

<sup>27</sup> The reason for this according to Mark is the fact that human nature was created mutable: only immutable nature does not suffer evil assaults (*Bapt* 10.6-8 [SC 445.362]).

<sup>28</sup> John Climacus takes up Mark's analysis of temptation virtually *in toto* except for part of this point: the initial assault/temptation can be an image (see *Ladder* 15 [PG 88.896]), and so the mere presence of an untoward image does not imply sin.

assaults/suggestions. This build-up of predispositions incites the soul ever more powerfully towards union with evil suggestions, often despite that person's outward rejection of such union. The result is passion, which plunges the person into a state of slavery. To wrench oneself out of this downward spiral is the task, *par excellence*, of repentance (*μετάνοια*).

Such, then, are two of the main elements in Mark's theology which have received most scholarly attention. In looking at the relatively untouched area of Mark's approach to repentance, these elements will resurface as intrinsic to what Mark means by repentance, both informing and being informed by the concept.

### *Three approaches to repentance in Mark*

Mark begins his treatise *On Repentance* with an incisive exegesis of Mt 4.17, and one which serves as a fitting keynote to his whole approach to repentance:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the power and wisdom of God, foreseeing for the salvation of all what he knew was worthy of God, decreed the law of liberty by means of various teachings, and to all set a single goal, saying: 'Repent', so that we might understand by this that all the diversity of the commandments is summed up by one word: repentance.<sup>29</sup>

Repentance is for Mark a term that describes the aim of Christian life comprehensively. Yet while it may be 'the single goal for all', its manifestation is not static. Mark's view of repentance will be analyzed under the three headings of initial/cognisant, existential, and Christ-like outlined in chapter one. These headings, as they apply to Mark, are understood in the following way:

*Initial/cognisant repentance*: by this is indicated what Mark sees as the initial movement of the mind towards re-configuring itself with regard to its past errors, where the intellect 'comes to itself' and turns for help to the divine.

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<sup>29</sup> *On Repentance* (hereafter *Paen*) 1.1-7 (SC 445.214): 'Ὁ Κύριος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, ἡ τοῦ Θεοῦ δύναμις καὶ σοφία, θεοπρεπῶς ὡς οἶδεν αὐτὸς τῆς πάντων προνοῶν σωτηρίας, διαφόροις δόγμασι τὸν τῆς ἐλευθερίας θέμιος νόμον ἕνα σκοπὸν πρόποντα τοῖς πᾶσιν ὠρίσατο λέγων· Μετανοεῖτε, ὡς ἐκ τούτου δυνατὸν ἡμῖν ἐπιγνῶναι ὅτι πᾶσα ἡ ποικιλία τῶν ἐντολῶν εἰς ἕνα καταλήγει τὸν τῆς μετανοίας ὄρον.'

*Existential repentance:* here the initial ‘cognisant’ movement is extended throughout a person’s activity and thought to become the mode of that person’s way of life. Each outward and inward occurrence affecting the individual becomes an occasion for orientating life away from contradiction and slavery to abiding in the unity and freedom of the commandments, and so in Christ (which is what Mark usually has in mind when he speaks of repentance). There is a conviction in Mark, moreover, that such an understanding implies that the only term that can be fixed for repentance is death (since the commandments are to be kept until death, and repentance is a commandment). Subsequently repentance is to become an integral act of life: existential.

*Christ-like repentance:* because both the ‘initial/cognisant’ and ‘existential’ paths of repentance are concerned with turning towards and living for God, they point to this perfected form of repentance, the Christ-like. This is a repentance which imitates the humble love of Christ by bearing the errors and faults of the other. While Christ himself is without sin (and so has no need to repent), Mark explains that he constituted (*καθίστημι*) himself as a debtor in order to abolish sin and death. It is this role of Christ which is identified with Christ-like repentance, and it is argued that in this, all genuine repentance for Mark finds its *raison d’être*.

Finally, it should be stressed that this framework is meant simply to provide a hermeneutic key, and its categories ought not to be dissociated one from another too sharply. It will become clear that repentance is conceived by Mark as ultimately a single movement, albeit with various expressions and manifestations.

#### *Repentance in Mark the Monk: initial/cognisant repentance*

The beginnings of repentance are what concern us here, and regarding this, we are presented with several ideas throughout Mark’s *oeuvre*, revolving around concepts of grace, free will, tribulations, and baptism.

‘Initially’, says Mark, ‘grace arouses the conscience (*συνείδησις*) in a divine manner. That is how even evildoers have repented and so have become pleasing to God’.<sup>30</sup> The consciousness, then, of one’s sinfulness and the need to repent, is a divine gift, the action of grace on the mind, piercing the conscience and directing the person towards God. Yet this action does not occur outside the context of the malefactor’s dispositions and way of life. A prerequisite Mark mentions, for instance, is humility: ‘whoever seeks the forgiveness of his sins must cherish humility’.<sup>31</sup> Thus God can never force repentance. This is based on Mark’s belief, shared with a great deal of the Christian East, that the human being is endowed with free will/self-determination (*ἀντεξούσιος*) to the extent that nothing external, not even God himself, can impose anything on him or her. The caveat in Mark worth highlighting is that the free will is only ‘liberated’, so to speak, through baptism, and fulfils itself by keeping the commandments.<sup>32</sup> In any case the point remains: for the gift of grace to be truly received, voluntary repentance must be present.

While God does not force repentance, he does inspire it, and there are many ways in Mark through which this takes place. A primary means is the onset of tribulations and sufferings. There is a steady insistence throughout the corpus that the purpose of one’s sufferings and unexpected trials is to lead to repentance.<sup>33</sup> Without using them as a means to this end, the person’s life loses worth: ‘when a sinful soul does not accept the afflictions that come to it, the angels say: ‘we would have healed Babylon, but she was not healed’ (Jer 51.9)’.<sup>34</sup> The use of this verse evokes an abandonment when the healing purpose of tribulations is consistently rejected. The same idea, again quoting Jer 51.9, is found in the

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<sup>30</sup> *Justif* 56 (SC 445.146).

<sup>31</sup> *Leg* 127 (SC 445.106).

<sup>32</sup> Among the main passages relating to free will in Mark and this point in particular are *Bapt* 2.44 (SC 445.302), 3.11 (SC 445.306), 9.44 (SC 445.358), and 13.8 (SC 445.374); see also *Justif* 178 (SC 445.186).

<sup>33</sup> See in particular *Leg* 57 (SC 445.88: involuntary suffering can provide a starting-point for repentance); *Leg* 117 (SC 445.104: suffering evil things leads to repentance); *Justif* 8 (SC 445.132: unexpected trials train us towards repentance); *Justif* 130 (SC 445.168: involuntary sufferings draw the victim towards repentance); and *Causid* 2.5-8 (SC 455.30: everything that befalls us after our own misdeeds has as its aim our repentance).

<sup>34</sup> *Justif* 75 (SC 445.152).

*Discussion with a lawyer*, in which ‘the ascetic’ deals with the question of worldly philosophers who do not pray and do not appear to sin or suffer. Their state, he claims, is the result of a supremely negative act of will. Finding themselves in a fallen state, they refuse to turn to repentant prayer, abiding instead in arrogance and negligence. The warfare against them (both spiritual and bodily, outward and inward) has ceased precisely because of their conviction that they have no need of redemption or salvation; that as they are is as it should be.<sup>35</sup>

Two other ways broached by Mark through which a person is prompted to repent, apart from sufferings and tribulations, are through Scripture and the admonishments of the faithful. The first is perhaps implied more than stated, but takes concrete form with the interpretation in *On Repentance* of Heb 12.16-7. Mark takes up the Epistle’s warning regarding Esau who ‘when he would have inherited the blessing, was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it with tears’. The text, he claims, works on two levels. First of all the true meaning of the text is only apparent to the more spiritually and Scripturally aware. What Esau sought with tears was not repentance, but the blessing (here he justifies his claim using Gen 27.41, in which Esau is grieved over the blessing, not repentance). If he had truly sought repentance with tears, Esau would not have been rejected. Rather, his tearful seeking was deceitful, rooted in his desire for the blessing, not in his desire to make amends with God. But on another level, the verse is written as it is, continues Mark, in order to ensure that the more negligent (and Scripturally ignorant) who put off repentance might take it up now, so as not to end up as Esau, a castaway.<sup>36</sup> Scripture thus becomes a focal point for conversion, for the awakening of repentance.

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<sup>35</sup> *Causid* 7 (SC 455.44-8); a similar position is taken by John of Gaza (who also cites Jer 51.9) in *Letter* 685.18-21 (SC 468.122). In painting this picture of the unrepentant who are beyond receiving benefit from the chastisement of God, Mark defines their life as 1 Jn’s ‘sin unto death’, which he similarly describes elsewhere as ‘the sin for which we do not repent’ (*Justif* 40 [SC 445.142]).

<sup>36</sup> *Paen* 8 (SC 455.238-40). Similar sentiments regarding Esau’s ‘deceitful’ tears are expressed by Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Hebrews* 12 (NTA 15.211), Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Commentary on Hebrews* 12 (PG 82.776AB), and Ephraim the Syrian (ACCS:NT 10.221).

Lastly, Mark mentions the admonishments of the faithful as a remedy which can induce repentance and consequent forgiveness of sins. He does this using the Synoptic story of the paralytic (Mt 9.1-8//Mk 2.1-12//Lk 5.17-26): the paralytic let down through the roof represents one who is reproached according to God by the faithful for his misdeeds, and who through them (and his lying at the feet of the Lord), receives forgiveness.<sup>37</sup>

It has been established that Mark views the beginnings of repentance as an act involving the freedom of the human person that always has as its backdrop the provocations of grace, most particularly through sufferings, Scripture, and the admonishment or intercession of the faithful. But in what does this repentance consist? I have determined to speak of it as ‘initial or cognisant’, a decisive movement of the mind towards divine-human reconciliation, but what are its immediate manifestations?

As mentioned above, the essence of repentance for Mark rests in a determination to abide by ‘the law of liberty’ through keeping the Gospel commandments (repentance itself being the supreme commandment).<sup>38</sup> The need to emphasize the commandments cannot be underestimated in Mark’s vision. The reason for this is found most succinctly in the statement: ‘the Lord is hidden in his own commandments, and he is to be found there in the measure that he is sought’.<sup>39</sup> Redirecting the mind towards the commandments becomes a means of directing it towards Christ. It is in this sense that ‘cognisant repentance’ needs to be understood. It is, on the one hand, an act of conscious struggle, but on the other it is an act of faith, which will admit no sense of self-reliance or merit: ‘Some without fulfilling the commandments think that they possess true faith. Others fulfill the commandments and then

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<sup>37</sup> *Leg* 132 (SC 445.108). Cf. Barsanuphius and John’s mention of the episode of the paralytic in similar terms: *Letter* 90.16-9 (SC 427.382: Barsanuphius); *Letter* 387 (SC 450.436-8: John).

<sup>38</sup> The ‘law of liberty’ (ὁ νόμος τοῦ ἐλευθερίου) is an important concept for Mark. It denotes the way of the commandments through which grace (which liberates) is found. He contrasts this to doing good works which, if not properly directed, do not manifest baptismal grace, and so cannot lead to freedom: see in particular *Bapt* 2 (SC 445.302-4); also *Leg* 28, 30 (SC 445.82); and *Justif* 16 (SC 445.134).

<sup>39</sup> *Leg* 191 (SC 445.124).

expect the kingdom as a reward due to them. Both have parted with the kingdom'.<sup>40</sup> Repentance shuns both these errors by being itself the herald of the kingdom and thus it must establish the Christian way of life.<sup>41</sup> Such foundational repentance, that of 'beginners', is elsewhere called 'the entry into piety':<sup>42</sup> cognisant or initial repentance is an entry, a resolve to live under the directives of Christ, shedding all confidence in one's own efforts. This latter point is again highlighted elsewhere: 'The one who repents rightly does not imagine that it is his own effort which cancels his former sins; but through this effort he makes his peace with God'.<sup>43</sup> Grace effects forgiveness through the effort of repentance, which is the directing of life towards the Christ-bearing commandments, themselves only being truly fulfilled 'by the mercies of our Lord Jesus Christ'.<sup>44</sup>

The unpacking of Mark's analysis of the first stage of repentance remains incomplete as it is, however, when we bear in mind the introductory note on baptism, a theme at the centre of his ascetical thought. Mark is explicit that 'in all our activity, there is but one foundation of repentance—and that is the one baptism in Christ'.<sup>45</sup> This statement arises through Mark's interpretation of Heb 6.1-6 and 10.26, on the impossibility of restoring/renewing the apostate again unto repentance.<sup>46</sup> The purpose of these lines is by no means, Mark insists, to question the validity or possible frequency of post-baptismal repentance (*μη γένοιτο*, he says). The 'renewal', 'enlightenment', and 'sacrifice' mentioned in these verses is not repentance, but baptism: not, then, 'there is no second repentance', but 'there is no second baptism'. He uses this platform to argue that what is in fact being said is

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<sup>40</sup> *Justif* 17 (SC 445.134). The error of the latter group, who fulfil the commandments and then see the kingdom as their due, lies in the second element (not the first), which betrays the fact that they set a temporal limit to the commandments, where Mark insists that the only term we have for their fulfilment is death (*Paen* 10.27-31 [SC 445.248]). He deals in other places with those who fulfil the commandments only in appearance, deceitfully: *Leg* 170, 192 (SC 445.118, 124); *Justif* 14 (SC 445.134).

<sup>41</sup> Mark elaborates on the idea of repentance as the 'herald of the kingdom' (cf. Mt 4.17) in *Paen* 1-2 (SC 445.214-20).

<sup>42</sup> *Paen* 7.13 (SC 445.236).

<sup>43</sup> *Justif* 41 (SC 445.142).

<sup>44</sup> *Leg* 30 (SC 445.82).

<sup>45</sup> *Paen* 7.25-6 (SC 445.238).

<sup>46</sup> *Paen* 7-8 (SC 445.234-44).

that baptism is the basis of repentance, its enabling. It is thanks to baptism that repentance is possible.<sup>47</sup>

Overall, Mark's take on these verses fits in well with his views both of baptism and initial repentance outlined above. The vital link is the manifestation of grace that nourishes repentance. As we have seen, the only outlet of grace in Mark is baptismal, and so the function of repentance can be seen as the means of uncovering the treasure of the baptismal gift hidden within. This inevitably raises the question of the status of the repentance of the unbaptized. Mark, as far as can be determined, does not address this problem directly, but his use of Acts 2.38 allows us to make a simple observation: what the 'repentance' of this verse implies for him is baptism.<sup>48</sup> This may not seem a satisfactory solution, but as outlined in the section on initial repentance in the NT in chapter two, it is in full keeping with what was discovered there. Also, given Mark's stress on the centrality of baptism to authentic life with God, it becomes almost inevitable.<sup>49</sup>

Cognisant repentance is an entering into the battle for life, which is the way of the commandments.<sup>50</sup> It consists in the initial break of the mind from its destructive and slavish attachments in order to exercise its baptismal right to repent integrally. The target of this repentance is unequivocally Christ, in whom baptism has occurred, and who is hidden and found in the evangelical commandments. Without such a movement, a 'repentant cry to God that puts us on the right way of all the commandments and washes us of the sin of infidelity',<sup>51</sup> the human person remains trapped and cannot escape death.<sup>52</sup> But while such a

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<sup>47</sup> This interpretation was touched on above (pp. 56-7), being shared with Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom, as well as Theodoret of Cyrrhus. All four, incidentally, are explicitly reacting to the Novatian interpretation of these verses (this is the only point at which Mark explicitly names a heretical group).

<sup>48</sup> Acts 2.38 reads, 'And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"'. Mark cites it at *Bapt* 5.139-42 (SC 445.336).

<sup>49</sup> John Chrysostom has a similar take on pre-baptismal repentance: see his *Commentary on Matthew* 10.6 (PG 57.190).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Bapt* 3.32 (SC 445.308): 'The battlefields of the faithful are the commandments'.

<sup>51</sup> *Bapt* 3.78-80 (SC 445.312).

movement may be continually refreshed, as it were, it cannot remain simply a beginning, but repentance according to Mark must extend from this cognisant plane to every aspect of life, and so become the existential basis of Christian being.

### *Repentance in Mark the Monk: existential repentance*

It will be evident by now that repentance is of signal importance for Mark's theological thinking. The task here is to demonstrate how Mark proposes that the concept be translated into a permanent state of life. This will be done by underscoring Mark's concern to argue for the incessant need of repentance for all human beings, together with his approach to how this need is fulfilled, which rests on living the commandments of Christ.

It has already been mentioned that Mark opens his treatise *On Repentance* by linking the injunction to 'repent' with all the commandments, going so far as to make it their explanatory key.<sup>53</sup> This idea persists throughout the treatise, and it allows Mark to work out a way of insisting that repentance is always necessary, regardless of time, place, status, and so on.<sup>54</sup> He tells us that 'repentance, in my opinion, is neither limited to times or actions, but it is practised in proportion with the commandments of Christ'.<sup>55</sup> Just as we eat, drink, listen, and speak, so for the believer repentance is a necessity of nature, and to fix a term on it 'is to turn backwards and renew the falls of times past'.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Leg* 95 (SC 445.98): 'without prayer and repentance, no one has escaped the inevitable'. Elsewhere, Mark identifies death, following Jas 1.15, with the realisation of a sinful thought in deed (*Bapt* 5.133-5 [SC 445.336]); cognisant repentance marks a stepping out of such a state, and thus a stepping out of death.

<sup>53</sup> *Paen* 1.1-7 (SC 445.214).

<sup>54</sup> The question of why Mark wishes to make this point is an interesting one. It may be another reaction to the Messalians, here to their belief in a human capacity to achieve *ἀπάθεια*, the final expelling of one's inner demon, after which no repentance is necessary. However, the treatise as a whole comes across more as an exhortation than a polemic, something furthered both by the absence of an *erotapokriseis* or question-answer structure (present in the more polemical *Bapt* and to some extent in *Incarn*), and the frequent use of the first person plural (rather than the third person) when speaking of the errors being committed, which contravene the path of unceasing repentance.

<sup>55</sup> *Paen* 6.25-7 (SC 445.232). This sentence, along with others in the same vein, is cited by the late seventh century Syrian ascetic Dadisho Qatraya in his *Commentary on Abba Isaiah* (CSCO 326-7), *Discourse* 14.6 (see also 15.43 and 3.9). While Syriac-speaking authors lie beyond the scope of this thesis, the conception of repentance in ascetics such as Aphrahat, Ephraim, John the Solitary, and Isaac the Syrian closely resembles that of the ascetics studied here, on which see, e.g. Alfeyev (2000b), pp. 129-42 and Horn (2006b), pp. 175-82.

<sup>56</sup> *Paen* 12.3-5, 15-7 (SC 445.252).

Several reasons are suggested by Mark for why this should be. First of all, ‘since the devil does not cease to wage war against us, likewise repentance should never remain inactive within us’.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, Mark has an acute awareness of the devastation wrought by sin. While there may be, he admits, people who live in perfection, they have not always done so. The sins of their past, however apparently slight (and here he cites the Sermon on the Mount and other texts related to this theme: anger towards another is like murder, an impure glance equals adultery, we are accountable for every vain word, etc.), sins such as these make them ‘in need of repentance until death’.<sup>58</sup> Thirdly, constant repentance is necessary even in the case of a hypothetical person who is foreign to all vice. This is because of his or her Adamic origin which necessitates salvation through Christ, the one whose blood redeems us, and who ordained that all should repent, giving the commandments ‘by which repentance is realized’. He also ‘fixed death as the term for their [the commandments’] accomplishment saying: ‘whoever has lost his life for my sake and the Gospel’s, shall keep it for eternal life’ (cf. Mk 8.35//Mt 10.39//Jn 12.25)’. ‘Thus’, Mark continues, ‘since he fixed death as the term for repentance, as we have shown, the one who says that it has been fulfilled before death destroys the commandment by filching away death’.<sup>59</sup>

This last reason for adopting a theory of perpetual repentance, focussed on repentance as a commandment, seems to be his mainstay argument. Repentance remains a constant

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<sup>57</sup> *Paen* 11.14-5 (SC 445.250).

<sup>58</sup> *Paen* 10.1-14 (SC 445.246): *μετάνοιαν κεχρεώστηκεν ἕως θανάτου*. Elsewhere he makes a comparable and striking point regarding the inability of present virtue to make up for past laxity: ‘the greatest degree of virtue which we have accomplished today is a reproach for our past negligence, not a compensation for it’ (*Justif* 43 [SC 445.142]). Neither of these points mean that Mark considers forgiveness unattainable, only that according to him, no matter how much we do (and we should always do as much as we can), we are not worthy of forgiveness.

<sup>59</sup> *Paen* 10.15-38 (SC 445.246-8). There is one passage in Mark which on the surface appears to go against his trend of removing all temporal boundaries (apart from death) from repentance: ‘it is not possible for a sinner to escape retribution except through repentance appropriate to the act’ (*Justif* 54 [SC 445.146]). However, given Mark’s overall view, appropriate repentance whatever the act seems to imply a life-long repentance which does not see itself as deserving any consolation or peace. Such a reading of this text is also borne out to some extent by the line that prompts Mark’s statement (in the Migne/SC edition) or which at least directly precedes it (according to the *Philokalia*, which separates the two: 57-8). It reads: ‘the one who does good and seeks a reward is not serving God, but his own will’. Mark’s point is that once human calculation is introduced into the way of justification, the whole process breaks down. This applies also to his statement on repentance: it must be appropriate to the offence, but this cannot be a basis for humanly calculating or limiting it.

precisely because it is a divine ordinance: ‘He who lives in faith lives for the sake of repentance, even if it was not because of our own sin, but because of the sin of the transgression, that we were purified by baptism and once purified, received the commandments’.<sup>60</sup>

Because repentance is a commandment of the law of liberty, and for Mark an all-encompassing one, it demands the full attention of every human person. The liberty it ushers in is the presence of the kingdom, a point Mark is at pains to convey in *On Repentance* 1-2. The association of repentance and the kingdom in Mt 4.17 (which Mark also attributes to Mt 10.7, at the sending out of the apostles) is no accident. ‘The Lord knew well’, he explains, ‘that his word held within itself with power both the kingdom and repentance’.<sup>61</sup> While Mark refuses to deny faith in the kingdom to come,

the word of the Lord contains the power itself of the kingdom, having become for believers ‘the substance of things hoped for’ (Heb 11.1), the ‘pledge of the inheritance to come’ (Eph 1.14), the first fruits of eternal good things, but for unbelievers and the impious it is a concrete reproach of their atheism. Wherefore it is said: ‘repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Mt 4.17).<sup>62</sup>

The kingdom manifests itself in the life of a person according to the measure of his or her repentance, since repentance entails abiding in the word of the Lord (which contains the power of the kingdom).<sup>63</sup>

Having dealt somewhat with Mark’s view concerning the need for repentance throughout life, the content of this repentance needs examining. This will be achieved by concentrating on how Mark tackles the way of existential repentance, with particular reference to his concept of the commandments.

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<sup>60</sup> *Paen* 12.6-9 (SC 445.252). It is suggested in Ware (1965), pp. 199-200, 348 that this and two other passages (*Paen* 10.15-38 [SC 445.246-8] and *Leg* 155 [SC 445.114]) may imply a person repenting for original as well as actual sin. The point, however, in the passages from *Paen* is not that there is a need to repent for original sin, but that original sin necessitates that all, even a perfect person, find salvation in Christ, who commands us to repent (and so repentance is unavoidable). The most natural reading of *Leg* 155 is that a person should consider himself responsible for the vain chatter of others because of ‘an old debt’ in his own life, not ‘the ancient debt’ of Adam.

<sup>61</sup> *Paen* 1.14-5 (SC 445.214).

<sup>62</sup> *Paen* 2.3-8 (SC 445.216-8).

<sup>63</sup> His point here is similar to that mentioned earlier, that Christ is hidden in his commandments, and found there in the measure that he is sought (*Leg* 191 [SC 445.124]).

Repentance is in Mark's thought a commandment which encapsulates the way of the commandments generally. He makes a distinction between general commandments and particular ones, the latter being included in the former.<sup>64</sup> In *On Repentance* he emphasizes three 'general commandments' through which the even more general commandment to repent is substantially realized: rejection of thoughts, unceasing prayer, and enduring what befalls.<sup>65</sup> Without these 'it is not possible to fulfil the other virtues through which repentance is made more acceptable'.<sup>66</sup> What he means by these virtues thus requires attention, since they are in Mark constitutive of repentance.<sup>67</sup>

The first, rejection/suppression of thoughts (*λογισμῶν καθαίρεσις*) is taken from 2 Cor 10.4-5, usually translated 'destroying arguments', or, closer to Mark's meaning, the Authorized Version's 'casting down imaginations'. What Mark has in mind is the refusal to assent to any form of *προσβολή* (assault/suggestion) which comes from without, thereby proving one's love for God.<sup>68</sup> He explains that this general commandment encompasses the commandments against impurity, adultery, and murder, since it forbids all these evils any opportunity to develop.<sup>69</sup>

The second, unceasing prayer (*ἀδιαλείπτως προσευχή*), is taken from 1 Thess 5.17, and captures for Mark all the other more particular Scriptural injunctions related to prayer. This is not the place to give an exhaustive account of Mark's theology of prayer, though the most salient features can be outlined.<sup>70</sup> He gives a summary of his high view of prayer as follows: 'prayer is called virtue, and indeed is the mother of virtues, for it gives birth to them

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. *Justif* 25 (SC 445.138); *Paen* 6 (SC 445.230-4); *Bapt* 5.182-4 (SC 445.340); *Causid* 6.8-9 (SC 455.42).

<sup>65</sup> *Paen* 7.2-4; 11.24-5 (SC 445.234, 250). De Durand makes the observation in his introduction to *Paen* that this approach sharply distinguishes Mark from a manual of confession: 'on est donc à l'opposé d'un catalogue de recettes pénitentielles' SC 445.205n1.

<sup>66</sup> *Paen* 11.25-6 (SC 445.250).

<sup>67</sup> Mark proposes a similar triad through which 'all that is good' is found, at *Justif* 94 (SC 445.158): prayer, endurance, and right faith.

<sup>68</sup> *Bapt* 3.60-71 (SC 445.310-2). It is worth underlining that Mark does not envision a suppression of the mind (*νοῦς*) itself, since this never remains inactive (cf. *Paen* 11.18-9 [SC 445.250]), but only the adverse thoughts which attack or fill it.

<sup>69</sup> *Paen* 6.42-8 (SC 445.234).

<sup>70</sup> A useful treatment of Mark's approach to prayer (in conjunction with that of Macarius-Symeon), can be found in Plested (2004), pp. 102-7.

through its conjunction with Christ'.<sup>71</sup> It is by prayer that the kingdom of God and his righteousness are sought.<sup>72</sup> Unceasing and uninterrupted prayer is 'the habit (*ἔξις*) of sacred virtue' which is acquired by the grace of the Lord.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, true prayer is prayer 'from the heart', the heart being the person's 'innermost chamber' and 'the house of Christ'.<sup>74</sup>

Here a contrast can be drawn between the first virtue/command (rejection of thoughts), and that of prayer, and so our awareness of the nature of both (and so of repentance) for Mark can be deepened. While the renunciation of thoughts involves suppression and an absolute negativity (if not negation), the way of prayer bears an unmistakably positive vitality, which seeks rather than discards. The ultimate role of both is somewhat clarified by Mark's powerful image of the 'inner liturgy'.<sup>75</sup> Here he discusses the way to the Jerusalem within, along the path of the commandments. Following this path leads to entry to the temple of the soul where Christ, who has entered 'that within the veil' (the heart) through baptism, is found. From there, every 'first-born thought' (*πρωτογενής λογισμός*) can be purely sacrificed to Christ, who in turn sends his divine fire on the offering.

There are clear similarities here with Mark's 'unceasing' and 'uninterrupted' prayer 'from the heart'. Mark is firm that this state is that of the spiritually mature who have observed the commandments. Before then the person is still on the way to Jerusalem. Yet it demonstrates that for him, the rejection of thoughts (*λογισμοί*) is not an end in itself. It is ultimately a tool for the journey, which is replaced at the destination by the priestly and prayerful relationship to *λογισμοί* that occurs at the inner sanctuary. The process of suppression, then, is to be seen in Mark as a preliminary way of cleansing so that a positive involvement between thoughts and the heart can be attained. Without this stage, however, the

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<sup>71</sup> *Justif* 33 (SC 445.140).

<sup>72</sup> *Causid* 1.28-9 (SC 455.28).

<sup>73</sup> *Causid* 4.32-5 (SC 455.36).

<sup>74</sup> *Justif* 81 (SC 445.154); *Bapt* 11.66-7 (SC 445.370).

<sup>75</sup> Outlined in *Bapt* 4 (SC 445.312-24). For more on this image, see Plested (2004), pp. 107-11.

heart is dulled and the desired end cannot be found: ‘until you have eradicated evil’, Mark warns, ‘do not obey your heart; for it will seek more of what it already contains within itself’.<sup>76</sup>

Mark joins the two virtues of prayer and the rejection of thoughts with a third, the patient endurance of what comes our way (*τῶν ἐπερχομένων ὑπομονή*). This he equates with two commandments of Christ: ‘sell what you have and give to the poor’ (Mt 19.21) and ‘take up your cross and follow me’ (Mt 16.24).<sup>77</sup> In order to be effective, such endurance should be engaged in with joy, not sorrow.<sup>78</sup> As a general commandment it fulfils an array of more particular commandments, such as: ‘give to whoever asks of you’ (Lk 6.30) and ‘do not refuse the one who would borrow from you’ (Mt 5.42).<sup>79</sup> It is through this virtue that we undergo a complete natural attachment to repentance (*πάνυ προσφύεσ τῇ μετανοία*).<sup>80</sup>

Mark’s treatment of the virtue of bearing afflictions allows a further key observation to be made. While endurance promotes unceasing repentance, it also promotes unceasing remembrance of God (*μνήμη Θεοῦ*).<sup>81</sup> This remembrance lies at the centre of Mark’s doctrine of contemplation.<sup>82</sup> It is a ‘labour of the heart’ which keeps a person in the presence of God.<sup>83</sup> What is significant is that Mark associates the concept of learning the remembrance of God through affliction with repentance: ‘let all involuntary suffering teach you to remember God, and you will not lack occasion for repentance’.<sup>84</sup> This is not to equate repentance and the remembrance of God, but it shows that this remembrance is the platform for repentance. Repentance takes place, in other words, in the context of *μνήμη Θεοῦ*.

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<sup>76</sup> *Leg* 178 (SC 445.120).

<sup>77</sup> In *Paen* 6.32-8 (SC 445.234).

<sup>78</sup> Cf. *Dialogue with the soul [Consult]* 4.20-5 (SC 445.408).

<sup>79</sup> See *Paen* 6.29-33 (SC 445.232-4).

<sup>80</sup> *Paen* 9.19 (SC 445.244). For more on bearing suffering and its profit for Mark, see *Leg* 42-51 (SC 445.86-8). A noteworthy passage regarding the link between suffering reproach and repentance is found at *Leg* 134 (SC 445.108): ‘The one who repents properly is derided by the foolish, which is proof that he is pleasing [to God]’.

<sup>81</sup> See *Leg* 56 (SC 445.88) and *Justif* 125 (SC 445.166).

<sup>82</sup> On which see Ware (1965), p. 354.

<sup>83</sup> *Justif* 122 (SC 445.166). Forgetfulness (*λήθη*) is the loss of this presence, and Mark goes so far as to identify such forgetfulness with perdition (*ἀπώλεια*) (*Leg* 62 [SC 445.90]).

<sup>84</sup> *Leg* 57 (SC 445.88).

Existential repentance is cultivated in an environment of divine recollection, which itself, like repentance, is formed in the crucible of sufferings.<sup>85</sup>

Such, in outline, is the manner in which Mark envisages a lived repentance: through the prompt annihilation of all thoughts opposed to the content of the baptismal gift; through tireless and uninterrupted prayer which begets virtue and ascends the path of inner priesthood; and through bearing afflictions with fortitude, which pierces the heart with a constant remembrance of God, where authentic repentance can occur. These three virtues, and so repentance, are suitable for beginners, those making progress, and the perfect.<sup>86</sup> If these paths are ignored or neglected, repentance is lost, and the person falls. Such was the case, for instance, in the lives of Samson, Saul, Eli, and his sons, who may have gained a certain measure of sanctity, but because of their rejection of repentance they suffered fearful deaths.<sup>87</sup> Even spiritual people, then, must exercise themselves in the labours of repentance, since any slight contradiction left unchecked will grow.<sup>88</sup>

What Mark urges in presenting his audience with an existential form of repentance is that at the very least the need for one's repentance should be acknowledged. Losing this sense causes the loss of all. Thus, while we may not live up to the commandments 'by which repentance is realized', we should at least accept them as our goal, acknowledging that 'for the small as for the great, until death, repentance is incomplete'.<sup>89</sup> Or as he puts it elsewhere, if we are incapable of living this way

either because of a lack of faith or any other weakness, let us at least recognize the truth and apply ourselves to it as far as possible, all the while accusing our own infancy. For it is better to give an account for an insufficiency than for a delusion and conceit (*πλάνη και οίησις*).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> The remembrance of God is likewise the substratum for efficacious prayer (again, like repentance, the two are not identified with one another): 'at the times when you remember God, increase your prayers, so that when you forget him, the Lord may remind you' (*Leg* 23 [SC 445.80]).

<sup>86</sup> This point is made twice, at *Paen* 7.13-4; 11.23-5 (SC 445.236, 250).

<sup>87</sup> *Paen* 11.10-3 (SC 445.248-50).

<sup>88</sup> *Paen* 8.37-43 (SC 445.242).

<sup>89</sup> *Paen* 11.1-5 (SC 445.248).

<sup>90</sup> *Causid* 6.21-5 (SC 455.42).

Losing one's orientation towards repentance is tantamount for Mark to abiding in despair, in a life bereft of the hope of eternity. It blocks off Christ, the gift of baptism, since it implies a refusal to acknowledge one's shortcomings, and so involves a tragic slip into the 'sin unto death'.<sup>91</sup> For this reason, it seems, Mark places the criterion of God's final judgment (and so the human being's final destiny) not on sins, but on repentance: 'it is not for our great number of evils that we are judged, but for refusing to repent and recognise the wonders of Christ'.<sup>92</sup> He sees in repentance the only path to liberty, the only gateway to the kingdom, and so the only way out of despair.

But Mark's view does not mean that if a person has no sins he or she ought to sin a little to give an opportunity for repentance. For a start, repentance involves keeping the three general commandments of rejection of thoughts, unceasing prayer, and constant endurance that have as a specific aim the avoidance of sin. But more fundamentally, Mark claims that repentance continues outside the realm of one's individual sin and failure to embrace the broken communion of the world in merciful and redemptive love. This is the crowning *μετάνοια* of the perfect which reaches out to bear the pain of the other. The length of the journey of repentance thus has as its measure not the presence or gravity of personal sin (however great or small), but the repentance of Christ.

### *Repentance in Mark the Monk: Christ-like repentance*

There is no doubt that Mark would have considered the view that Christ needed to atone for his own failings heretical: Christ had no failings.<sup>93</sup> Yet when faced with the question of

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<sup>91</sup> Cf. *Causid* 7 (SC 455.44-8) and *Justif* 40 (SC 445.142).

<sup>92</sup> *Paen* 6.13-5 (SC 445.232). Mark justifies this with Lk 13.1-5, which contains the refrain, 'unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish', to which he then adds: 'note well that it is for turning away from repentance that we are condemned' (*Paen* 6.23-4 [SC 445.232]). This point emerges in Barsanuphius and John as well as John Climacus, though with the terminology of mourning (*πένθος*): see below, pp. 155 (Barsanuphius and John) and 174 (Climacus).

<sup>93</sup> Mark twice alludes to Heb 4.15, speaking of Christ's humanity as full, only 'without sin': *Incarn* 49.22-3 (SC 455.310); *Nic* 9.6-7 (SC 455.136).

whether the sufferings Christ endured were for a personal debt (since he had argued that all sufferings have this as their source), Mark gives a nuanced answer:

‘Tell me, those who fall into debt because of their own borrowing, are they alone debtors or are their guarantors (ἐγγυώμενοι) also?’

The subordinate answered saying: ‘their guarantors also of course’.

The old man went on: ‘Know it well that in becoming our guarantor, Christ constituted (καθίστημι) himself a debtor according to the Holy Scriptures: ‘the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (Jn 1.29), ‘the one who became a curse for us’ (Gal 3.3), ‘the one who took upon himself the death of all and died on behalf of all’ (cf. 2 Cor 5.14).’<sup>94</sup>

This idea of Christ as ‘guarantor’ of humanity sums up what ‘the repentance of Christ’ (my phrase) in Mark entails. The incarnation and economy are the occasioning of Christ’s underwriting human life with his own, becoming the focal point of all human failure and sin, and at the same time the focal point of their forgiveness, and of hope. If we are to speak of perfected repentance among disciples of Christ as ‘Christ-like’ in Mark, then, it must be shown that it is in some way akin to this process of underwriting the life of humanity.

Mark does this in *On Repentance*: ‘the saints are obliged to offer repentance for their neighbour, since without an active love it is impossible to be perfected’.<sup>95</sup> The end of repentance is not found for Mark in the forgiveness of one’s own failings, but in an imitation of Christ’s atoning love and vicarious suffering. This reinforces for him the point that repentance is always incomplete in this life and cannot be left aside. Even if great gifts from God are found, the process has not ended. Such gifts, he says, are the ‘riches’ to which Christ refers saying, ‘woe to you rich, for you have received [for Mark: held onto] your consolation’ (Lk 6.24).<sup>96</sup> These riches, and Mark has in view primarily spiritual gifts, are given for distribution, not for oneself. Such ‘almsgiving’ is necessary for the continuation of repentance, and so of Christian life.<sup>97</sup> This path is again the repentance of ‘active love’ which imitates the loving repentance of Christ.

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<sup>94</sup> *Causid* 15.12-23 (SC 455.70).

<sup>95</sup> *Paen* 11.15-7 (SC 445.250).

<sup>96</sup> *Paen* 4.31-8 (SC 445.226).

<sup>97</sup> *Paen* 4-5 (SC 445.224-30) deals with this theme in some detail.

The fullest exposition of the Christian imitating Christ in this way is found in the *Discussion with a lawyer*. Here, ‘the ascetic’ provides an answer to the question of the sufferings of the righteous, and of suffering more generally. He had previously stated that all sufferings are accorded to people by the just judgment of God, ‘some for their own misdeeds, and others for those of their neighbour’.<sup>98</sup> Chapters 18-20 are an elaboration on this latter point (suffering for others), involving what Mark calls ‘the two types of communion’: one of love, the other of evil. ‘Because of this communion, without even knowing it, we stand surety for one another’.<sup>99</sup> Mark then briefly explains the communion of evil which begets involuntary sufferings in the one who enters it. The result of such entry is an overall increase of evil rather than its lessening.<sup>100</sup> This leads to his explanation of the communion of love and how the saints become sponsors (*ἀνάδοχοι*) for their fellows. He begins by declaring that ‘the sponsoring (*ἡ ἀνάδοχῆ*) that comes from love is that which the Lord Jesus transmitted to us’.<sup>101</sup> Having taken on all our sufferings, and death itself,

to his own apostles he passed on this law, as to the prophets, fathers, and patriarchs: the latter being taught before by the Holy Spirit, the former being shown the example through his immaculate body.<sup>102</sup>

The essence of this teaching and law is encapsulated, says Mark, in the words ‘no one has greater love than the one who lays down his life for his friends’ (Jn 15.13).<sup>103</sup> This law was perpetuated by the apostles who taught that ‘if the Lord laid down his life for us, we also should lay down our lives for the brethren’ (1 Jn 3.16) and that we should ‘bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ’ (Gal 6.2).<sup>104</sup> Entering the communion of love entails

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<sup>98</sup> *Causid* 16.5-6 (SC 455.72). He then cites the example of the three children in Babylon (Daniel 3) who in their hymn assumed the sin of their people, a point found again in *Paen* 12.37-41 (SC 445.254) in which the hymn is held up as an exemplary song of repentance.

<sup>99</sup> *Causid* 18.36-8 (SC 455.80): *Δύο δέ εἰσιν οἱ τρόποι τῆς κοινωνίας, εἷς ἀπὸ ἀγάπης καὶ εἷς ἀπὸ κακίας. Διὰ δὲ τῆς κοινωνίας, ὡς οὐκ οἶδαμεν, ἀλλήλους ἀναδεχόμεθα.*

<sup>100</sup> *Causid* 19 (SC 455.82).

<sup>101</sup> *Causid* 20.5-6 (SC 455.84).

<sup>102</sup> *Causid* 20.21-4 (SC 455.84).

<sup>103</sup> *Causid* 20.27-9, 60-3 (SC 455.84-8).

<sup>104</sup> *Causid* 20.63-7 (SC 455.8).

suffering in imitation of Christ for our fellow human beings. It is through living for this communion that Christ-like repentance is found.

When Mark writes that the saints are obliged to offer repentance for their neighbour, what he has in mind is this process of entering the communion of love after the example of Christ. This is, moreover, a process of suffering, an idea also formulated elsewhere:

Do not say that a dispassionate person (*ὁ ἀπαθής*) cannot suffer affliction; for even if he does not suffer on his own account, he is under a liability to do so for his neighbour.<sup>105</sup>

Such, then, is the meaning of Christ-like repentance in Mark. In the life of the believer it involves a radical enlargement of individual repentance in order to embrace and relieve the pain of his or her neighbour.

In this attempt to delineate Mark's approach to repentance into three successive stages, the intention has not been to impose a strait-jacket on his thought, but to provide an interpretative framework through which the richness and depth of his approach can be cogently presented. It remains to probe his overall theology of repentance for insights which might draw this presentation together more clearly.

*The efficacy and necessity of all forms of repentance: towards an integral vision of Mark's concept of μετάνοια*

Throughout the preceding analysis, two factors remain intrinsic to Mark's approach: on the one hand, repentance is an efficacious act at all levels, and on the other, it is a *necessary* target for all, humanity's 'one goal'.<sup>106</sup> In this concluding section, Mark's thought relating to these two factors will be discussed, emphasizing that for him, the binding feature of repentance is the person of Christ, who gives it its value and purpose.

We saw that Mark considers repentance singularly helpful on the spiritual way, taking the human being out of subjugation and leading him or her to liberation through the

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<sup>105</sup> *Justif* 123 (SC 445.166).

<sup>106</sup> *εἰς σκοπός*: *Paen* 1.4 (SC 445.214).

commandments and into the communion of love, where the person continues to repent, perhaps not so much now for him or herself as for surrounding people. Yet of what ultimate value is this path? In the case of Christ, his suffering abolished sin and death. But this was an event once for all. Mark firmly argues (doubtlessly against the Messalians) that through fulfilling the commandments (and repentance is, to recall, an all-inclusive commandment for Mark), the Christian does not abolish sin: ‘the commandments themselves do not destroy sin, for this has been done through the cross alone’; rather the commandments ‘protect the boundaries of the freedom given us [through baptism]’.<sup>107</sup> Mark’s concern here as often elsewhere is to distance salvation from human effort and root it firmly in the economy/cross of Christ.<sup>108</sup>

Yet this surely does not imply that he considers one’s abiding in the commandments—repentance being the most comprehensive of these—as futile both for one’s own salvation and that of one’s neighbour. He attempts to resolve the issue with a fundamental point already mentioned above: through keeping the commandments one finds Christ, since he is hidden within them.<sup>109</sup> It is finding Christ that marks the crucial value of the repentance of the faithful, both for themselves and for their neighbour. The commandments are not there to provide a system for creating an *élite* of autonomous Christs, in other words, but function as the way of assimilating, or discovering, the one Christ and his single, all-embracing philanthropic sacrifice. It is on this basis alone that human repentance can be made and prove itself effective at all levels: whether during its initial inception (cognisant), its continual presence (existential), or its outward movement on behalf of the other (Christ-like).

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<sup>107</sup> *Bapt* 3.43-6 (SC 445.310).

<sup>108</sup> A point also clearly made at *Justif* 29 (SC 445.138): ‘do not seek the perfection of this law [of liberty] in human virtues, for it is not found perfect in them. Its perfection has been hidden in the cross of Christ’.

<sup>109</sup> *Leg* 191 (SC 445.124); cf. *Justif* 210.9-10 (SC 445.196): ‘do you see how he [Christ] has hidden his own manifestation in the commandments?’.

Mark makes this last point concerning the basis of repentance by arguing that Christ alone inaugurated this activity: before his advent there was ‘no means for repentance, there being no priest without stain’.<sup>110</sup> We noted that Mark conceives of Christ as the ‘guarantor’ of humanity, underwriting human life with divine life. He is likewise explicit that it is Christ who underwrites repentance: ‘Christ became the guarantor of repentance for us: the one who abandons it rejects the guarantor’.<sup>111</sup> In other words, the economy of Christ does not negate the efficacy of repenting, either for one’s own sin or that of one’s neighbour: it guarantees it.

The centrality of Christ to every facet of repentance for Mark is seen in two major elements involved in the success of repentance on the initial/cognisant and existential planes, dealt with above: baptism, on which repentance is grounded, and the commandments, through which it is fulfilled. These two are not envisaged in and for themselves: baptism is ‘into Christ’, and the commandments bear Christ. One’s individual repentance is at root the process of relating positively to the gift of baptism (which is Christ hidden in the chamber of the heart), and assimilating Christ’s way of life shown in the commandments (most particularly in the commandment of self-giving love). In pointing exclusively to Christ, cognisant and existential repentance pave the way for participation in the repentance of Christ, which bore and effaced the sins of the world. The success of this last form of repentance, however, is not so easily measured, as it introduces a fresh dynamic: the unbreakable will of the other.

In Mark, Christ accomplished absolute victory for the human race through the cross (his ‘repentance’), a repentance which he shares with those seasoned in the path of their own repenting. But the fact remains that this ‘repentance for the other’ does not spread where there is no receptivity; where the ‘communion of love’, and so repentance, is opposed. In this vein Mark writes: ‘there is a sin which is always ‘unto death’ (cf. 1 Jn 5.16): the sin for

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<sup>110</sup> *Incarn* 31.16-7 (SC 455.286).

<sup>111</sup> Paen 12.19-20 (SC 445.252): *Χριστὸς ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ μετανοίας ἐγγυήσατο· ὁ ἀφίων αὐτήν ἀθετεῖ τὸν ἐγγυησάμενον.*

which we do not repent. For this sin even a saint's prayers will not be heard'.<sup>112</sup> The efficacy of Christ-like repentance (which is how 'a saint's prayers' here can be interpreted), is directly related to the sinner's desire for inner reform. If a person lacks this desire, the profit of the repentant prayer of the saints for him or her (a prayer founded in Christ) remains inaccessible, remote, and fruitless.<sup>113</sup> This assertion of the need for individual effort brings us to the second binding factor of repentance in Mark, namely the necessity for repentance, firstly but not exclusively, on the initial/cognisant level.<sup>114</sup>

The point that Mark implicitly makes by both associating the 'sin unto death' with a lack of repentance and setting repentance as the single goal of humanity is that the only anthropological basis for finding salvation is repentance. From a human being's point of view, nothing else matters, since for Mark all else is accomplished by Christ and given 'secretly' in baptism. Once this way of repentance is embarked upon, the believer is led from one form of repentance to another, with the goal of repenting in the likeness of Christ, being constituted through him 'without sin' as a debtor 'for the brethren'.

The actual necessity of repentance, however, seems limited to the initial cognisant stage: there is no clear indication that beyond the first authentic movement of repentance any consistent 'existential' or 'Christ-like' repentance is requisite for a person to find salvation (though further progress is clearly desirable for Mark).<sup>115</sup> Yet while the more developed ways of repentance may not be necessary in the context of the salvation of each individual, Mark betrays a sense that they are in some way necessary in the broader scheme of things. This is done most clearly in *On Repentance*. Here Mark makes two relevant points. The first is that nature itself 'teaches us not to abandon repentance before death'.<sup>116</sup> The intellect, he

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<sup>112</sup> *Justif* 40 (SC 445.142).

<sup>113</sup> This is underlined on several occasions by Barsanuphius and John: see Appendix II below.

<sup>114</sup> The necessity of what I have termed 'the repentance of Christ' (i.e. Christ's own appropriation and abolishing of all sin) is a given here: it is through this that all forms of repentance, for Mark, find their place.

<sup>115</sup> This relates to the common desert trope that repentance is not primarily a concept governed by time: see above, pp. 88-9.

<sup>116</sup> *Paen* 11.17-8 (SC 445.250).

goes on, when it inclines to evil thoughts but then distances itself from them, is at this point immediately pulled back towards the right way, a way of perpetual repentance. Thus it appears that Mark posits a faculty in (presumably baptized) human nature which necessarily urges towards existential repentance.

Further on in the same chapter he makes an even bolder claim: ‘through repentance, in my opinion, the whole world holds together’.<sup>117</sup> His phrase is reminiscent of Col 1.17 in which Christ is described as the one in whom all things hold together/consist (*τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν*). From this perspective, Mark seems to be saying something substantial indeed: repentance itself keeps the universe in existence, providing it with a sense of purpose and meaning.<sup>118</sup> But the ‘repentance’ he means is not simply, it seems, of the cognisant or existential type, but depends likewise on Christ-like repentance. This is evoked by the words which surround his statement: ‘Since, therefore, the merciful will be shown mercy, through repentance, in my opinion, the whole world holds together, one finding mercy through another according to the divine will’.<sup>119</sup> The act of mercifully reaching out to other people, in other words, is the repentance that holds the world together. In this sense Christ-like repentance is, like other forms of repentance, necessary in Mark’s vision of reality. Without it, the world would lose all coherence, and forfeit all meaning.

According to Mark, repentance is not only helpful and necessary for one desiring to set aside the destructive and fleeting attachments of one’s life in order to find a life of permanence and meaning. Beyond this, the believing mind is constantly urging this initial wave of repentance to persist through growing in the law of liberty, whose first fruits are experienced here below as a pledge of eternal good things. And again beyond this, these first fruits are spiritual gifts that are meant for the building up of the communion of love, for

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<sup>117</sup> *Paen* 11.30-1 (SC 445.250): *ὁλος ὁ κόσμος συνέστηκεν*.

<sup>118</sup> This does not necessarily clash with the Pauline concept, especially when it is remembered that repentance for Mark is ultimately grounded in Christ.

<sup>119</sup> *Paen* 11.30-2 (SC 445.250).

Christ-like repentance. This is a repentance of cosmologically profound consequence. Through it the *κόσμος* itself retains coherence, being aligned through ‘the merciful’ with the one Christ, the source and model of Christ-like repentance. His way (shown in the commandments) provides for Mark the only authentic gauge of life, and the only true measure of repentance.

### *Concluding remarks*

Such, then, is the concept of repentance in Mark the Monk. What should perhaps be underlined by way of conclusion, however, is that for all the complexity and seeming innovation of what we could legitimately characterize as a ‘system of repentance’, Mark’s thought was developed within a context and within traditions that were very much open to the kind of theology of repentance he presents. Unpacking his ideas thus opens a window onto the way in which the concept of repentance was received and developed by the ascetic theologians of the early Christian East. Far from being a discrete category of ascetic practice, the concept of repentance was a means of framing the meaning and purpose of Christian life from the cradle to the grave, drawing always for inspiration on the example of the suffering and loving Christ.

Having outlined Mark’s vision of repentance, it would be tempting to ascribe similar notions of repentance only to those ascetics in direct contact with Mark’s writings (particularly his treatise *On Repentance*). However, as has been shown in the preceding chapters, the forming of Christian concepts of repentance along similar lines to those expressed in his works was long in the making. Even if Mark was the first to develop the concept so comprehensively, the resources for such development were by no means absent from the Christian tradition in which and for which he wrote. The next question that ought to be addressed, then, is whether similar views of repentance would persist in the same level of

detail in the following generations. For an initial answer, we turn to the sixth century, to the Gaza desert of Barsanuphius and John.

## *Chapter Five*

### *Repentance in the letters of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza*

#### *Introduction*

The significance of the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John for our understanding of the theological, ecclesiastical, social, and even political history of the Gaza region and beyond in late antiquity has only recently begun to be properly appreciated.<sup>1</sup> Scholars of Palestinian monasticism in general, not least scholars of Barsanuphius and John and the monasticism of Gaza, have often felt the subject to be marginalized by the much greater attention, comparatively speaking, paid to both Egyptian and Syrian monasticism in academia: Egypt as source and chief centre of the Christian monastic world, and Syria as home to the extroverted, experimental, and captivating holy man. Derwas Chitty was among the first to bring the question of Palestinian monasticism to a wide audience in his concentrated work *The Desert a City*, something built upon by John Binns in his assessment of the monasteries of Palestine from 314-631.<sup>2</sup>

These and other studies emphasize the vital and creative role played by monasticism in Palestine, not simply in the intricacies of local ecclesiastical affairs, but in areas which were to radically affect the East Roman Christian world: whether involving monastic structures, discipline, or liturgical practice (the popularization of the lauritic form of monasticism, the composition of model *typika*, and hymnography), the compilation and dissemination of popular works of piety (pre-eminently the *apophthegmata patrum*), or the vexed question of how to confront such affairs as the Council of Chalcedon, the Origenist controversy, or later,

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (eds.) (2004), Bitton Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006), and Hevelone-Harper (2005). Note that, unless direct citation is made, references to the letters will normally take the simple form *Letter #* in the body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> Chitty (1966) and Binns (1994). See also Perrone (1995) and the useful summary of the development of the field of Palestinian monasticism in Hevelone-Harper (2005), pp. 13-8.

iconoclasm.<sup>3</sup> Much of this influence had to do with the unique place of honour held by this region: as the central place of pilgrimage it also served as the central place of interaction between devout Christians from all parts of the empire and beyond. It had also to do, however, with the presence of spiritual masters in the area. Many of these were not in fact native to the region; elders who, for one reason or another (whether persecution or the desire to flee that ‘pernicious snake’ of vainglory), had come to find a suitable place of retirement. In the process, perhaps ironically, they often gathered armies of disciples fervent to hear and apply their hallowed words. One such elder was Barsanuphius of Gaza.

### *Barsanuphius and John*

Barsanuphius and John were fellow ascetics in the monastery of Thavatha in sixth-century Palestine.<sup>4</sup> Thavatha (about five miles south-west of Gaza) was already noted among Christians as the birthplace of the great Palestinian ascetic Hilarion. However, Barsanuphius had not always been at Thavatha: he was Egyptian, and had retired to Thavatha from Egypt already, it seems, a seasoned ascetic. The circumstances surrounding Barsanuphius’ departure from Egypt are unknown, though given the generally pro-Chalcedonian stance of the region in which he settled (the monastery at Thavatha was Chalcedonian), it is at least possible that his reasons for leaving included the tensions in Egypt over the Christological question. The near certain link between Barsanuphius and Abba Isaiah of Scetis (or of Gaza) might cast doubt over this possibility, given that some of Abba Isaiah’s disciples, at least, were among the leaders of the anti-Chalcedonian movement in the area (as John Rufus, bishop of Maiuma), but this need not be so. The similarities between Abba Isaiah’s path and

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<sup>3</sup> For a basic introduction to the importance of the institutions founded by Sabas for Byzantine monasticism and liturgical practice, see Hirschfeld (1992) and Patrich (1995); for the role of Palestinian monasticism in the editing and distribution of the most prominent *sayings* collections, see Regnault (1987), pp. 73-83, Gould (1993), pp. 1-25 (esp. 9-10), and Harmless (2004), pp. 248-51.

<sup>4</sup> Specifically Palestine I (Palestine being divided into three provinces during this period). The little we can glean of the lives of Barsanuphius and John from the letters has been assembled in various places: Hausherr (1937); Chitty (1966), pp. 132-40; the introduction to the SC edition of the letters by Neyt and de Angelis-Noah in SC 426:11-46; Chryssavgis (2003); and Hevelone-Harper (2005).

Barsanuphius' are striking (both came from Egypt—though Isaiah some time before Barsanuphius—and walled themselves up in the Gaza region, answering the queries of many and various interlocutors by letter), and Barsanuphius and John freely cite Abba Isaiah, which points to at least some sense of shared tradition. But this does not necessitate an association with the tendencies of certain of Abba Isaiah's disciples.

How far Abba Isaiah was himself anti-Chalcedonian is itself an open question: his ascetic *oeuvre* cannot be convincingly shown to be of one persuasion or another, and certainly the citations used by Barsanuphius and John are not loaded with any pro- or anti-Chalcedonian polemic.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the subsequent heritage associated with Abba Isaiah, Barsanuphius and John were primarily interested in the ascetic profit to be gleaned from his work, something which, by definition (as we shall see), would not allow for theological controversy to get in the way of the monk's task of repentance, of mourning for his sins. That said, this concern for what was spiritually profitable to the ascetic did not prevent Barsanuphius and John from supporting the pro-Chalcedonian cause through their approval of Chalcedonian candidates to the episcopacy, and their good relations with the Chalcedonian bishops already in place.<sup>6</sup>

Barsanuphius, known in general as 'the Great Old Man' in the correspondence, comes across as a powerful and experienced master of the desert tradition. He was approached by Christians of all stripes (monks, laymen, clergy, and bishops), though predominantly monks (both anchoritic and cenobitic) in and around the monastery at Thavatha. From his enclosure he dictated letter after letter to the monastery's abbot Seridos, answering queries of all kinds, from the smallest practicalities (can I make the sign of the cross with my left hand if my right

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<sup>5</sup> On the link between Barsanuphius and John and Abba Isaiah, see the introduction to volume 2.1 of the critical edition of the letters by F. Neyt and P. de Angelis-Noah, SC 450:111-17. On Abba Isaiah himself see Chitty (1971), and Horn (2006), pp. 152-64, 334, 342-47. For more on Barsanuphius' Christology, see Hevelone-Harper (2005), pp. 24-30, 110-11.

<sup>6</sup> On which, see Hevelone-Harper (2005), pp. 106-13. Thus I would not be as quick to adopt the position proposed in Bitton-Ashkelony & Kofsky (2006), esp. p. 222, that Barsanuphius and John were essentially crypto-Monophysites who feigned homage to Chalcedon for the sake of a quiet life of theological tolerance.

hand is otherwise incapacitated? – *Letter 437*) to the most loftily spiritual and theological (bearing the whole of a disciple’s sin – *Letter 73*; why the saints sometimes made theological mistakes – *Letter 604*).<sup>7</sup> His responses are characterized by a striking humane compassion. As will be addressed in the section on Christ-like repentance in Barsanuphius and John below, he saw his role as essentially that of burden-bearer, as a focal point for the sufferings, pain, and anguish of his fellow monastics, and more broadly of anyone who asked for his advice and prayer with sincerity.<sup>8</sup>

To those whom he perceived to be approaching for false and dishonourable reasons, however, his tender words could become a drawn sword, precluding a spiritual father-disciple relationship, or severing it (‘your blood is upon your own head’ – *Letter 549*). The criterion for a favourable response in Barsanuphius’ eyes was an honest heart, a heart seeking renewal and amendment: in short, a repentant heart. It certainly was not linked, as he saw it, to any preference for the interlocutor based on worldly status or ties (cf. *Letter 348* to his brother according to the flesh). That said, once he had taken someone on as his spiritual disciple, the kinship he felt with the person compelled him to take care to respond to all his questions, even if we find him patiently repeating essentially the same injunctions and giving the same advice to questions from the same person which are largely variations on a theme. The closeness he felt to his disciples despite the absence of any material contact with them (beyond the odd gift/blessing he passed on or received), is, from a purely psychological perspective, quite remarkable.<sup>9</sup> His basis for claiming such great intimacy was his unceasing

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<sup>7</sup> Many distinguish Barsanuphius’ answers as more ‘inspirational’ or ‘charismatic’ compared to the more ‘practical’ and ‘institutional’ answers of John. This may be somewhat true in tendency, but cannot be pushed very far: Barsanuphius deals with practical detail almost as much as John, and John is by no means averse to responding to more spiritual concerns. For the distinction, see for instance Chitty (1966), p. 133 and Chryssavgis (2003), p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> The prominence of the idea of burden-bearer in Barsanuphius and John’s theology is dealt with by Bitton-Ashkelony (2006), and Rapp (1999); see also Appendix II below.

<sup>9</sup> Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky note that ‘physiognomy and similar skills of character discernment from a person’s outward appearance are...irrelevant to Barsanuphius and John’ in Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006), p. 90. This feature of their ministry deserves more attention than can be allowed here, but at least the fact that they were guiding ‘blind’, and the possible repercussions of this (did it make the inevitably awkward

prayer for his disciples (*Letters* 16, 48, 113, 613). The *telos* of such a relationship was an intimacy paralleling that of the Father and the Son (*Letter* 188) a *telos* realized in the case of Barsanuphius' closest disciple, 'the Other Old Man', John.

We know less of John's story than of Barsanuphius', except that John was clearly not ordained (*Letters* 44, 138), something not known either way in Barsanuphius' case. John's identity with John of Beersheba (one of the correspondents in the letters) has been asserted by some, most forcefully by Hevelone-Harper, but this is not at all certain, not least since one of the letters to John of Beersheba is purportedly from John himself (*Letter* 3).<sup>10</sup> Whatever the case, he seems to have taken up Barsanuphius' *mode de vie* in earnest when the latter gave him his old cell on moving to a new one, some time between 525-27. He continued his spiritual direction beyond the lifetime of the monastery's abbot Seridos, who died in about 543, but only briefly: he survived him by a fortnight, just time enough to give directives to the abbot's successor on how to order the monastery's affairs.

On the death of Seridos and John, his closest earthly companions, Barsanuphius withdrew completely, cutting all contact with the outside world. By this stage, the two ascetics had provided enough material for a vast collection of spiritual questions and answers, of which just over 850 survive. These were probably compiled by one of their most devoted and certainly most famous disciples: Dorotheus of Gaza (to whom *Letters* 252-338 are addressed).

Before examining the concept of repentance under the three suggested headings, several issues related to the function of the *Letters* and their implications for our understanding of monastic *paideia*, asceticism, and sanctity, will be addressed. This is necessary in order to set the epistolary collection's approach to repentance in the context of wider discussions amongst scholars of *Amt* versus *Geist* in late antique monasticism, as well

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process of disclosure easier for the interlocutors? Did it potentially jeopardize the efficacy of the elders' responses? etc.) should be borne in mind during the discussion.

<sup>10</sup> See Hevelone-Harper (2005), pp. 38-44; Chitty (1966), p. 133, for one, is against the identification.

as the concept of self-formation in the early church. It can then be more convincingly shown how the idea of repentance in Barsanuphius and John might profitably contribute to current debates regarding theories of monastic formation, the definition of asceticism and sanctity, and the relationship between monastic piety and the institutional church.

*The function of the Letters: spiritual authority and Christian paideia*

The function of the *Letters* has been assessed in different ways by scholars, broadly under two headings. The first is through the nature of the two elders' spiritual authority, specifically its relationship both to programmes of self-promotion, and to the institutional church. The second is through the idea that the elders' correspondence is a new kind of 'school' of Christianity, a new monastic *paideia* that comprises a unique Christian 'curriculum' specific to the region and concerns of the Gaza monks.

The question of spiritual authority in the correspondence has been well addressed by Hevelone-Harper in her *Disciples of the Desert: Monks, Laity, and Spiritual Authority in Sixth-Century Gaza*, and her points will not be rehearsed in detail here.<sup>11</sup> However, her sensitivity to the paradoxical creation of authority by Barsanuphius and John through a radical self-effacement and personal humility is not always shared in other discussions.<sup>12</sup> The point of confusion appears to be the language of deprecation constantly informing the responses of the old men on the one hand, and the frequent allusions to their own boldness (*παρρησία*) in supplicating for their disciples on the other. This latter aspect leads Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky to speak of their 'awareness of a superior morality' which 'nourished the self-confidence of the holy person'; of Barsanuphius' employment of techniques to strengthen 'his image as a quasi-divine guide'; and of Barsanuphius as perceiving himself not

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<sup>11</sup> Hevelone-Harper (2005).

<sup>12</sup> In particular, the slightly more recent work by Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006).

merely as a privileged disciple of Jesus, but as Jesus himself.<sup>13</sup> Such readings depend on the separation of one kind of language in the letters (the language of self-condemnation and humble monastic obedience) from another kind (the language of authoritative intercession and burden-bearing). Such separation, and the consequent assertions that arise, however, are not justifiable from the letters either textually or theologically.<sup>14</sup> As will be shown, the concept of burden-bearing, of repenting for others, is organically linked (as in Mark the Monk), to one's own continual repentance. The common ascetic tropes of obedience and the like found throughout the correspondence do not belong to 'the banalities of monastic culture' over against the more exalted ideas of burden-bearing and becoming 'one-soul' with the disciple.<sup>15</sup> The exalted level of such Christ-like repentance is only attainable within a framework of constant personal repentance.

The, at times, highly authoritative voice of the old men naturally also suggests tension between them and the institutional church. In terms of repentance, Bitton-Ashkelony has argued with specific reference to Barsanuphius and John (though the same point is made by various scholars with reference to other texts) that monastic repentance was a 'deviation' from the institutional norm, facilitated by the magnetic authority of the charismatic elder. The way repentance developed in Barsanuphius and John and others as not being confined to fixed periods pitted it firmly against the 'institutionalization' of repentance which saw penance as merely an element of a larger sacramental system (for which Basil of Caesarea is held largely responsible).<sup>16</sup> This again is misleading, since it presupposes an *Amt* versus *Geist* mentality that simply was not there, especially in the letters of Barsanuphius and John, who were at ease interacting with and directing laity, clergy, and bishops (the 'institution',

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<sup>13</sup> See Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006), pp. 93, 114, 125.

<sup>14</sup> This issue is also addressed in the context of the theology of the saints in the *Letters* in Appendix II below.

<sup>15</sup> As Bitton-Ashkelony would have us think: Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006), p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> See Bitton-Ashkelony (1999).

for which they never show disdain), together with the usual anchorites and cenobites.<sup>17</sup> There is thus little to allow for the assumption that the letters' spiritual authority functioned within a framework of an ever-growing 'parting of the ways' between the ascetic and the episcopal. Rousseau's call for an adequate distinction 'between the episcopal programme of homily and sacrament and the ascetic programme of wisdom, dialogue, and moral effort' and the recognition of their 'concurrent rivalry' cannot properly be borne out in the correspondence of the old men.<sup>18</sup>

Linked with the idea of spiritual authority in the letters is the question of the form of teaching, the particular monastic *paideia*, that the letters aim to transmit.<sup>19</sup> The correspondence can be seen, in this perspective, as embodying a 'school of Christianity' with its own particular strengths and weaknesses.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, what exactly serves as the core content of this 'school' is hard to pin down, and opinions differ. Perrone identifies this school with the idea of the disciple being one soul (*ὁμόψυχος*) with the elder, which presupposes the cutting off of the disciple's will through humility in an effort to find a kind of freedom which might be described as 'being for the other', the context in which *ὁμοψυχία* can take place.<sup>21</sup>

This 'being for the other', says Perrone, 'may conveniently sum up both the essential dynamics of the human and religious experience of this monasticism, and its lasting significance as a 'school of Christianity''.<sup>22</sup> Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, however, prefer to stress the element of individual prayer in their discussion of the 'spiritual school of Gaza'. The monastery of Thavatha did not find the strength of its legacy in liturgy or a new *tyikon*: 'its major contribution in this domain is to be found in its individual direction and help to

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<sup>17</sup> Hevelone-Harper (2005) currently provides the best assessment of the intermingling of charismatic and institutional authority in the letters.

<sup>18</sup> Rousseau makes this point in his contribution to Peter Brown's *festchrift* on the cult of saints: Rousseau, (1999), p. 59. As will be shown below, Barsanuphius and John's commitment to an ascetic programme by no means precludes their commitment to the sacramental and institutional life of the church.

<sup>19</sup> L. Perrone deals with this topic in Perrone (2004). It is likewise addressed in Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006) and Hevelone-Harper (2005). More generally, Rousseau (1999), makes some important points on the perception of the Christian ascetic milieu as 'the *schola*, the world of the *paidagogos*' (p. 59).

<sup>20</sup> See Perrone (2004), p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> See Perrone (2004).

<sup>22</sup> Perrone (2004), p. 148.

each member in constructing his new self through the mechanism of prayer'.<sup>23</sup> The work of the philosophers Foucault and Hadot is drawn upon to paint the concept of prayer in the correspondence as the Christian's pre-eminent *technique du soi*, a 'technique' involving unceasing, pure, and remembrance prayer, all of which, as private prayer, were propelled into the limelight of ascetic culture by 'the new perspective on demons in late antique Christian society'.<sup>24</sup> In other words, it was the development of the sense of the individual Christian's enmity with the demonic, which according to Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky guided the direction of monastic *paideia* in Gaza.

Achieving oneness of soul through the cutting off of the will, or the construction of a new self through personal, anti-demonic prayer, are important aspects of the Gaza school seen in the letters. I would like to add a further observation to the work of these scholars by underlying another key and arguably central aspect of what these elders, as monastic pedagogues, were aiming to achieve. The diversity of the interlocutors in the correspondence inevitably gave rise to a diversity in the kind of responses given. While the bar was always set in Barsanuphius and John's minds to the height of Christian perfection (finding, in Christ, oneness of soul with one's brethren), there was always the possibility, especially for laymen, of approaching the bar in a more modest way than did the strict ascetics, as long as all was done with humility.<sup>25</sup> It was this humility, in the face of Christ's mercy and the prayers of the saints, that was among the chief tenets of the 'monastic school of Gaza' (if we wish to speak of it in those terms). At its most general and basic, the teaching of the correspondence is one not simply of the heights of *δμοψυχία* and the complete renunciation of the will to an abba,

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<sup>23</sup> Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006), p. 158.

<sup>24</sup> Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006), pp. 158-63.

<sup>25</sup> See in particular *Letter* 691, in which John speaks of the layman's disposition for hospitality as lower than the monastic path, but still by all means salvific, if only it is pursued with humility. See also, for instance, *Letter* 225 (doing all for humility's sake), *Letter* 277 (the pre-eminence of humility over labour); and *Letters* 664-5 (a secular professor of philosophy should accept promotion and pursue his work with humility). Along similar lines, Barsanuphius and John were averse to any form of ascetic extremism in the Christian life, Barsanuphius bluntly stating (following the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Poemen 129 [PG 65.353D]), 'we have heard that all that is done with agitation and grief, as well as all that is beyond our measure, is from the demons' (*Letter* 433.10-1 [SC 451.512]).

nor only of the power of prayer in self-transformation, but a teaching of how to repent, a process which remains individual to each enquirer, even if such virtues as humility, patience, and prayer run as core threads throughout the personal repentance of each. It is argued in what follows, then, that a way of more profitably and comprehensively conceiving the *paideia* of Thavatha would be to see it as promoting a ‘school of repentance’, in which the resolution to all manner of problems, concerns, and debates could be resolved, from the most basic to the most intricate, complex, and exalted.

*Repentance in the letters of Barsanuphius and John: initial or cognisant repentance*

Unlike the treatises of Mark the Monk, the nature of the epistolary collection of Barsanuphius and John adds a difficulty to the task of discerning its teachings on repentance. Whereas Mark freely employed the literary form of question-and-answer (*erotapokriseis*) in four of his treatises, this form was imposed from without on Barsanuphius and John.<sup>26</sup> While Mark was in the position to formulate the questions as he wished, with his own style and terminological preferences, the questions put to Barsanuphius and John were formulated by outsiders, and this dynamic inevitably summoned a more fluid manner of expression, even if the same basic points were visited and revisited time and again.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, while the manner of expression varies, the idea of an initial, beginning, or what we could call cognisant repentance is clearly present in the correspondence, even if it frequently gives way to a concept of continuous or existential repentance.

A fundamental meaning of repentance (*μετάνοια*) endorsed by the letters is that found among the sayings of Abba Poemen in the alphabetical collection of the

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<sup>26</sup> How far Barsanuphius and John may have known the work of Mark the Monk is unclear, but it is certainly possible, since their disciple Dorotheus of Gaza cites Mark on two occasions (*Instructions* 1.10 [SC 92.162], 8.90 [SC 92.308]). But as stressed before, the pinning down of the interrelationships between the chosen authors is not a primary objective of this study, which is more to do with framing the concept of repentance within a wide-ranging sample of texts and contexts, in an effort to understand more broadly the often strikingly similar ways in which otherwise unrelated or little related texts speak of repentance.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the literary style of *erotapokriseis* in late antiquity and Byzantium (focusing on the form adopted by Mark the Monk and others), see Papadoyannakis (2006).

*Apophthegmata Patrum*: ‘repentance from sin means no longer committing the sin’.<sup>28</sup> This sense of a clean break with past bad actions and habits serves as a guiding principle in the advice of the *Letters*. Several ways by which it is aroused in the disciple are mentioned. For one, there is the basic desire to be saved and reconciled to God: ‘care for the soul’s salvation and love for God cause him to disgorge any evil that he possesses and to repent purely’.<sup>29</sup> Repentance conceived as a sharp break with the past, a new beginning, describes the essential path to salvation from the death brought by wallowing in sin: ‘if you want to be saved,’ Barsanuphius explains to a brother who has allowed the wounds of his soul to fester secretly, ‘repent and cut off all those seeds of death, and say with David: ‘Now, I have begun’ (Ps 76.11 LXX)’.<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere, Barsanuphius uses the image of death again to stir up a sense of repentance in an older disciple who is asking for inappropriate rules beyond his measure: ‘your rule is to take care of your thoughts and to have the fear of God, saying: ‘how shall I meet with God? How have I spent the time that is past? I will repent even now since my departure approaches’’.<sup>31</sup>

Linked to death as an incentive for repentance is the approach of possible persecution at the hands of heretics, addressed by John. In order for crisis to be averted, he exhorts the people to repent like the Ninevites, in which case ‘God will pacify everything’.<sup>32</sup> The occasion for repentance, however, need not always be a negative experience such as the thought of death or persecution. Giving Paul as an example, Barsanuphius explains that every sinner is prompted towards repentance by what comes his way, even the good things of life, which are supplied by God ‘as a benefit to help them come to repentance’.<sup>33</sup> It is the elders’

<sup>28</sup> *Letter* 244.11-2 (SC 450.196); cf. *Letter* 543.17-9 (SC 451.688). The saying is found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Poemen 120 (PG 65.353A).

<sup>29</sup> *Letter* 261.19-21 (SC 450.236).

<sup>30</sup> *Letter* 379.11-3 (SC 450.414). Cf. the use of the Copticism *βάλλειν ἀρχήν* (to make a beginning) used in many letters: 234, 266, 276, 493, 500, 560, 562, 788, etc.

<sup>31</sup> *Letter* 92.27-31 (SC 427.390).

<sup>32</sup> *Letter* 786.12-3 (SC 468.242).

<sup>33</sup> *Letter* 403.8 (SC 451.466). 1 Tim 1.15-6 is cited to give evidence of this in Paul, though his vision on the road to Damascus recorded in Acts 9 is probably in Barsanuphius’ mind as well.

strong sense of the loving providence of God which allows them to see in every situation a cause for hope, even in the case of a sinful person living with every earthly benefit.<sup>34</sup>

The question of whether or not someone might be beyond the reach of repentance is implicitly answered in the negative throughout the correspondence, but is explicitly addressed in a letter to a former soldier who wants to become a monk. The soldier asks if it is still possible for him to repent (given his terrible past), and Barsanuphius replies: ‘Brother, God does not reject anyone, but calls all to repentance’.<sup>35</sup> What matters is approaching God with all one’s heart, expecting temptation to the very end.<sup>36</sup> This is the same line of thinking that underlies Barsanuphius’ appraisal of the mass conversion of pagans and schismatics after the edict of Justinian in 529. He advises the bishop that those approaching from a genuine desire and fear of God should be received, but not the others, since they convert out of necessity, and so deceitfully.<sup>37</sup> In the cases of both the soldier and the new converts, a genuine repentance or conversion required the proper ordering of one’s desires, the re-orientation of one’s priorities towards a God who answers the needs of each. Without this, repentance and conversion begin on faulty premises, and remain without fruit.

Having found an initial repentance, the question arises as to whether this suffices for the Christian life. In many letters, we find references to the interlocutor being forgiven his sins. Thus a brother, after forty days of labour, will be forgiven all his transgressions through the intercessions of Barsanuphius (*Letter* 107); Dositheus is twice confirmed to have been forgiven all his sins (*Letters* 218, 220); all the falls of a brother’s youth are forgiven through the intercessions of the saints and of his abbot (*Letter* 233); a layman’s confessed sins are all forgiven by God (*Letter* 399); and so on. Once sins have been forgiven, however, does the need for repentance cease? In one sense, yes, since the advent of forgiveness implies

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<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to Peter Brown for pointing out to me the great dependence Barsanuphius and John have on the idea of divine providence.

<sup>35</sup> *Letter* 492.5-6 (SC 451.606); as in Mark the Monk, John identifies despair for oneself as the ‘sin unto death’: *Letter* 532.

<sup>36</sup> *Letter* 492.6-8 (SC 451.606).

<sup>37</sup> *Letter* 821 (SC 468.290-2).

reconciliation with God and the resolution of inner turmoil: to one brother upon his receiving such forgiveness, Barsanuphius writes: ‘you have become new, free from guilt, and pure’.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the positive experience of an initial or cognisant form of repentance is not to be received carelessly. Barsanuphius continues: ‘stay in this purity...sweat, toil, and violence are needed’.<sup>39</sup> In another place, the retaining of this kind of forgiveness is explicitly associated with ‘bearing fruit worthy of repentance’ (cf. Mt 3.8).<sup>40</sup> Thus in another sense, the labour of repentance cannot disappear after the forgiveness of sins. Perhaps the main reason for this is the almost inevitable faults that the Christian continues to commit after his forgiveness. There is a constant need to lay a new foundation of repentance as long as falls continue to occur. These falls needn’t be great or mortal, and can even be unknown and secret: one brother specifically asks Barsanuphius to be revealed his secret sins, that he might repent of them more directly (*Letter* 68). Slips, falls, and wrong attitudes generally, even after forgiveness, require repentance in order for greater health and progress to ensue: one brother is warned to leave off his slackness and negligence and persevere in repentance that he might receive not only forgiveness of any former sins, but the preparation by God of ‘forgiveness for your later sins’ (*Letter* 200); another brother is told that any time the elders’ advice is forgotten through negligence, he need only repent again, and God will forgive (*Letter* 264); another is advised that if he should ever be spiritually captured or distracted, he should pick himself up and make a new beginning (*Letter* 269). In short, Barsanuphius explains to one monk, ‘for every passion there is a medicine, and for every sin there is proper repentance’.<sup>41</sup>

This way of speaking about repentance, which seems to imply a certain legalistic approach (whereby each sin is ‘satisfied’ through an appropriate penance), is clearly present

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<sup>38</sup> *Letter* 239.42-3 (SC 450.180).

<sup>39</sup> *Letter* 239.43-7 (SC 450.180); the same applies, for instance, in *Letter* 118.

<sup>40</sup> *Letter* 115.15-6 (SC 427.444).

<sup>41</sup> *Letter* 226.10-1 (SC 450.142); John refers to such repentance in a similar way, as a ‘plaster’: *Letter* 179.7 (SC 427.582).

at various points in the correspondence.<sup>42</sup> It is an emphasis, moreover, that is almost entirely absent in the work of Mark the Monk.<sup>43</sup> Together with this idea of repenting adequately for each fall, however, is a more general concept of repenting without recourse to set times or occasions. When asked how he should repent, Dorotheus is told by Barsanuphius: ‘if you want to begin to repent, learn what the adulterous woman did: with her tears she washed the Master’s feet’.<sup>44</sup> Learning to weep, however, is no easy matter. It

comes only with pain, through much attentiveness and endurance, through the thought of the dread judgment and eternal shame, and by the denial of oneself...Denial of oneself and taking up the cross mean cutting off the will in everything and not reckoning oneself as anything.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, making a beginning in the task of repentance involves the whole range of the monk’s lifelong duties: weeping, remembrance of the judgment and the possibility of eternal damnation, self-denial, taking up one’s cross, and humility. Repentance is thereby loosed from the confines of this or that fault or fall to become a radically broad and encompassing notion, pertinent not simply to the various sins committed by a person, but to his or her underlying state of imperfection generally.

Does a conflict exist, then, between the ‘legal’ or ‘mathematical’ idea of repentance found in the correspondence, and this idea of an all-embracing repentance guiding Christian life as a whole? It seems to be not so much a conflict as a tension between two uses of the word and concept of repentance, a tension largely resolved within the threefold framework put forward here. The first use of repentance is properly ‘initial’ or ‘cognisant’ repentance, in which the sinner realizes or calls to mind his errors of the past and present, and starts again with God (and his spiritual father), as many times as this is necessary (and according to

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<sup>42</sup> Other instances of this kind of approach can be found in *Letter* 229.43-4 (SC 450.154): ‘repent for forty days before God over your sins of yesterday’; *Letter* 273.8-9 (SC 450.258): ‘when you transgress a commandment, hasten to repentance’; *Letter* 345.6-13 (SC 450.358): a spiritual debtor must repay his debt, then he can move about as he pleases; and the various references to the sinner’s contribution of his own spiritual wealth/‘coins’ in his efforts to find salvation through the prayers of the saints (*Letters* 234, 261, 616, etc.; dealt with in more detail in Appendix II below, pp. 214, 221).

<sup>43</sup> Apart, perhaps, from one passage: ‘it is not possible for a sinner to escape retribution except through repentance appropriate to the act’ (*Justif* 54 [SC 445.146]). This is discussed above, p. 111n59.

<sup>44</sup> *Letter* 257.18-21 (SC 450.222).

<sup>45</sup> *Letter* 257.22-9 (SC 450.222-4).

Barsanuphius and John, it will probably be necessary more often than one thinks). The second use of repentance is more properly called ‘existential’ repentance (treated below), since it refers beyond specific instances of failure to the whole enactment of Christian life as a struggle to attain unity with Christ. And yet this use is not altogether removed from the person’s initial/cognisant repentance. By coming to an initial sense of shame for one’s past, and embarking on a path of renewal, one is thereby engaging, at least on a preliminary level, in the second, existential form of repentance. The barrier between repenting for one’s deeds and repenting for one’s state of being is not hard and fast, and in the eyes of Barsanuphius and John, the two are not mutually exclusive.<sup>46</sup>

Repentance, whatever form it takes, must begin with the cognizing or recognizing of failure in oneself, with shame at one’s unworthiness to call on God as ‘Father’ (cf. *Letter* 140). Without this, the person abides in a false pretence to rights (*δικαίωμα*) in the manner of Adam, Eve, Cain, and the others who sinned ‘yet in order to justify themselves, denied their sin’.<sup>47</sup> Rather, we should live so as to ‘regard ourselves as more sinful than every other’, always seeking repentance, yet always with confidence in the possibility of repentance both for ourselves and for all fallen brethren (regardless of their sinfulness), that same repentance which ‘in one critical moment’ (*ἐν μιᾷ ροπήῃ*) saved the publican through humility and confession.<sup>48</sup> Once such repentance has begun, it finds a certain measure of fulfilment in the forgiveness of past sins and offences, which may arrive quite quickly. Yet its surer fulfilment is found, according to the correspondence, in a life of constant striving towards likeness to Christ, which thus makes of repentance not simply something to be performed and discarded (whether once or many times), but a necessary and governing attribute, an existential mark of Christian life.

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<sup>46</sup> Without pressing the generalization too far, the first use of repentance is usually associated with Roman Catholic approaches (penance and reparation), and the second use with a more Protestant mindset (holistic conversion). It is clear that both hold a central place in the thought of Barsanuphius and John.

<sup>47</sup> *Letter* 477.8-11 (SC 451.580).

<sup>48</sup> *Letter* 453 (SC 451.534-6). See above, p. 88-9, on the relativity of time in the desert understanding of repentance.

*Repentance in Barsanuphius and John: existential repentance*

As in Mark the Monk, the *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John reveal a strong sense of the Christian's need to assimilate the paths of repentance, allowing them to form a kind of matrix through which the Christian life would find structure. When asked about the necessity of repentance, Barsanuphius simply refers to it as 'doing whatever you can' and 'contributing according to your possibility' for one's forgiveness and salvation.<sup>49</sup> The openness of this approach reflects the tendency of Barsanuphius and John to prevent their advice from being received as strict regulation or law. Thus again when a soldier is worried about how much repentance he will need for all his sins when just one sin requires so much time, he is greeted not with a certain set period and regimen for finding the forgiveness of his sins, but with words of encouragement and comfort about living out the monastic life for the Lord's sake (*Letter 499*).

Barsanuphius and John have a general aversion to giving precise prescriptions to their interlocutors concerning progress in the spiritual life. When repentance is spoken of, as we saw above, as a medicine of changing forms depending on the sin or the passion (*Letter 226*), what Barsanuphius has in mind is not a specific number of acts of penitence for each sin, but the devoted practice of the virtue opposing the sin or passion in the sinner's life. To one brother who seeks for a strict rule as to how he should order his life, Barsanuphius responds that seeking for such rules is like embarking on a path of ever-expanding circles, when the route is narrow and concisely laid out: 'let go of the rules of men', he orders, 'and listen to Christ who says, 'he who endures' to the end will be saved' (Mt 10.22)'.<sup>50</sup> This principle recurs throughout the correspondence, whereby the inquirer ought not to feel bound by rules,

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<sup>49</sup> *Letter 616.9; 22-3* (SC 451.866-8). Such a personal contribution is considered necessary to the Christian life, and cannot be sidestepped with appeals to other factors, such as God's mercy or the prayers of the saints.

<sup>50</sup> *Letter 23.14-5* (SC 426.210).

but be carefree, even when a specific recommendation is given (*Letters* 51, 56, 85, 87, etc.). John gives the reasoning behind such a policy: ‘we do not give any commandments in order not to afflict anyone’.<sup>51</sup> What they were aiming for in their disciples was not a slavish and minute adherence to an intricate code of conduct, but an ever-growing association with the virtues (most especially humility, patience, obedience, mourning, and thanksgiving) and so with Christ. This is where repentance is most clearly seen as an existential task in the letters, and in what follows, the most prominent ways in which repentance as ‘doing what you can’ is variously conceived will be fleshed out, taking in turn: thanksgiving, the sacraments, self-blame, patience, mourning, and humility (which includes obedience).

The occasional emphasis on thanksgiving in early monastic literature is one of its most underappreciated features.<sup>52</sup> One tends to associate the concept of thanksgiving (*εὐχαριστία*) with the institutional development of the Eucharistic Liturgy, not with the sombre shades of monastic theology. Yet its place in Barsanuphius and John as a way of repentance is key. Its significance is summed up in the phrase ‘thanksgiving pleads on behalf of our weakness before God’.<sup>53</sup> This function of pleading or interceding (*προσβέω*) performed by thanksgiving is effectively a form of repentance. By giving thanks in all circumstances,<sup>54</sup> the person actively and perpetually repents, returning to God by commending all that he has to the heavenly Father, entrusting both the good and the ill to his loving providence as one weak and unable to deal with it properly without God’s constant care. Thanksgiving, moreover, gives no occasion to boasting or self-opinion (enemies of repentance – *Letter* 333), re-enforcing as it does the person’s dependence on God. It must go hand-in-hand, according to Barsanuphius and John, with endurance of trials (*Letters* 45, 89,

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<sup>51</sup> *Letter* 743.8-9 (SC 468.186).

<sup>52</sup> See in particular N 186 from the anonymous collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (SC 387.278-80), which describes the path of thanksgiving as equal to lamentation and mourning for repentance.

<sup>53</sup> *Letter* 214.17-8 (SC 427.666); cf. *Letters* 77, 92, 123 for a repetition of the same concept in similar terms.

<sup>54</sup> Among the most popular scriptural ‘proof texts’ used in the correspondence is 1 Thess 5.18 (‘in all things give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you’), appearing in seventeen separate letters (2, 6, 45, 96, 106, 151, 214, 267, 351, 383, 384, 385, 404, 507, 574, 681, and 778a).

106, 123, etc.). This sense of gratitude can even bring hardened sinners or unbelievers, as mentioned above, to an initial repentance and reconciliation with the Most High (*Letter* 403).

Thanksgiving as a mode of repentance appears, perhaps, to be a counter-intuitive claim, and yet it is a natural association to make in the minds of Barsanuphius and John, where all aspects of Christian life contribute toward the working out of one's repentance. This repentance itself should be the main subject in one's thanksgiving to God. In a letter on how one can give God worthy thanks, Barsanuphius explains that one should give thanks 'above all' (*τό μείζον πάντων*) for his granting of 'a place of repentance', coupling this with 'the reception of his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins and the establishing of our heart'.<sup>55</sup> This mention of the Eucharist is one of the relatively rare references to the sacraments in the collection, but by being linked with a place of repentance (*τόπος μετανοίας*) shows how the two were closely associated in the minds of the two old men. We can thus turn to the role of sacramental and ecclesial life in the practice of repentance according to Barsanuphius and John.

Unlike in Mark, there is no developed notion of baptismal regeneration and its connection to repentance, although similar sentiments emerge in *Letter* 60. Here Barsanuphius explains that to every human person are delivered 'keys of the household as stewards', the keys being free will. In order to be faithful stewards, we must be baptized and live according to our baptism, producing the works of baptism.<sup>56</sup> This is not expanded upon in any detail, but (from the rest of the letter about helping the sick) implies always labouring in humility and finding salvation thereby. While not a preoccupation for Barsanuphius as it would have been for Mark with his anti-Messalian edge, this letter makes it clear that however one lives out the Christian calling, and so one's own repentance, it must be rooted in, and according to, one's baptism.

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<sup>55</sup> *Letter* 404.12-4 (SC 451.468).

<sup>56</sup> *Letter* 60.49-54 (SC 426.296).

In the following letter, the Eucharist is mentioned, which, we are told by the interlocutor, brings about ‘daily healing’.<sup>57</sup> This is not denied by Barsanuphius, though he warns that one who approaches the doctor must conform to the ordinances of the doctor.<sup>58</sup> The church services, and the Eucharistic Liturgy in particular, are held in high regard by Barsanuphius and John.<sup>59</sup> Communion seems to form in many ways the backbone of ascetical life, being the source of renewal and, as noted, the highest thing for which thanks to God are due (*Letter* 404).

However, while baptism and the Eucharist might serve as a constant backdrop in the theology of repentance communicated by the letters, is there any direct reference to a sacrament of repentance in itself? Not as such, although the practice of confessing one’s thoughts and falls to one’s superiors, and asking for their prayers, is frequently referred to. John, for instance, dictates a prayer to the new abbot Aelianos which should be used when hearing the confession of thoughts of the brethren (*Letter* 577). John also recommends that a brother should confess his fantasy in prostration (*μετάνοια*) before the older brethren, seeking their prayers for his forgiveness (*Letter* 171). Even a layman is found confessing his sins individually in a letter to Barsanuphius, who assures him of God’s forgiveness (*Letter* 399). That said, elsewhere Barsanuphius explains that the remembrance of past sins (presumably those already forgiven) was not the remembrance of individual sins: the sinner should remember how fallen he is, but not cling to the memory of specific sins, which could lead to grave distortions in the spiritual life (*Letter* 428). Not a great deal, then, from the correspondence can be directly used for the history of ecclesiastical confession beyond its

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<sup>57</sup> *Letter* 61.19-21 (SC 426.300). Frequent, even daily, communion comes across as common at the monastery of Seridos.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> See especially *Letters* 240-1 to a deacon; and for an analysis, see Hevelone-Harper (2005), pp. 50-1. See also *Letters* 32, 170, 212, and 742. In *Letter* 607, Barsanuphius intimates his high view of ordination when he compares the glory of the body in its resurrected state to that of a deacon being suddenly glorified with the dignity of bishop.

testimony to a fluid process of confession and forgiveness between the disciple (even a lay disciple) and God through his elder (who was not necessarily a priest) or elders.

A final point worth making with regard to repentance and liturgical practice is the use of the word *μετάνοια* for ‘prostration’ throughout the correspondence. This has its roots in Egyptian monasticism and the linguistic interaction between Coptic and Greek.<sup>60</sup> By associating the most common Greek word for repentance with making prostrations either to one’s offended neighbour or to God inevitably gave the concept of repentance a firmer status of permanence in the Christian life, since prostrations seem to have been made daily by all but the most sickly and bedridden.<sup>61</sup> This facet of repentance had as a function, particularly in the context of prostrating before others, the shaming of one’s own arrogance and self-righteousness, which Barsanuphius and John saw as among the greatest obstacles to finding mercy. This brings us to the next way of repentance in the correspondence, that of self-accusation or self-blame.

To blame oneself for one’s sins and failings, recognizing how they render the person spiritually weak and in need of help is a fundamental aspect of repentance: ‘it is part of repentance to recognize one’s faults and to ask for assistance from the fathers’.<sup>62</sup> This state of self-blame should constantly accompany the Christian: ‘we should always be convinced that we are in all things sinful, alike in deed, word, and thought’, even if we cannot and should not explicitly say ‘I have sinned’ each time we fall short (which would lead to despondency).<sup>63</sup> This state is thus not conceived as one of morbid dejection. Its chief aim is not to promote despair, but to soften the heart hardened in a state of unsalutary self-

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<sup>60</sup> On which see Vivian (1999), esp. pp. 554-8. The verb used in conjunction with *μετάνοια* as ‘prostration’ is normally *βάλλω*. Also worthy of note is the current usage in the Greek Orthodox Church, where the word *μετάνοια* is often associated with the monastery and monasticism as a whole: see Zacharou (2006), p. 214. The root of such usage is harder to trace, and is beyond the scope of this study, although it could be linked to naming monasteries *Μετάνοια* (‘the monastery of repentance’), a practice first attested in 391 by Pachomian monks about twelve miles to the east of Alexandria: see Copeland (2001), p. 177.

<sup>61</sup> For John’s practical counsels on the performance of prostrations, see *Letters* 302-3.

<sup>62</sup> *Letter* 498.9-10 (SC 451.618).

<sup>63</sup> *Letter* 442.8-10 (SC 451.520); likewise Barsanuphius tells Dorotheos, while he is in his cell, to ‘blame yourself in all things and cast your weakness before God’ (*Letter* 260.21-2 [SC 450.234]).

justification, which admits no repentance: ‘in continually condemning yourself, your heart feels compunction in order to receive repentance’, which justifies.<sup>64</sup> Abiding thus prevents many other pitfalls and dangers. Barsanuphius reproaches one monk whose lack of self-blame has led him to judge his brother: ‘behold, you have described your brother’s faults, but you do not speak of your own’.<sup>65</sup> Barsanuphius himself is aware of the possibility of losing the protection of self-accusation when a monk compliments him for his great virtue by letter. He turns away from the compliment since it ‘does not permit us to look upon the shame of our own countenance’.<sup>66</sup>

Self-blame is desirable not just for the obviously sinful (though Barsanuphius and John expect themselves and all their interlocutors to consider themselves sinful), but for the upright too. ‘Whether you are righteous or whether you are a sinner, you ought to bear the burden of blame’, John tells one monk.<sup>67</sup> This is because bearing blame, according to Barsanuphius and John, is a gateway to spiritual rest and to peace with one’s neighbours. In a series of letters (*Letters* 757-60), John fervently insists on this point and on the need to preserve self-blame no matter what the circumstance. He tells the inquirer that he ought to blame himself when his brother is offended—even if he cannot find how he might have offended him—and ask for his forgiveness (*Letter* 757). The interlocutor wonders what should be done in an extreme situation, and proposes the scenario of being randomly struck by a passer-by, and then asked by the same passer-by for an apology. John maintains that the same principle applies, and that one could still preserve self-blame in this case by accusing oneself for walking on that particular path at that particular time (*Letter* 759).<sup>68</sup>

It is the element of safety that underlies this insistence on the need for self-blame: there is never any danger, as Barsanuphius and John see it, in blaming oneself and thereby

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<sup>64</sup> *Letter* 242.14-5 (SC 450.192).

<sup>65</sup> *Letter* 101.12-3 (SC 427.414).

<sup>66</sup> *Letter* 126.9-10 (SC 427.476).

<sup>67</sup> *Letter* 96.11-2 (SC 427.402).

<sup>68</sup> The point is re-iterated in *Letter* 760, and cf. Dorotheus of Gaza’s *Instructions* 7.82 (SC 92.292-4).

repenting before God and one's neighbour, but there is always a danger in not blaming or accusing oneself, since this can easily lead to a pharisaic self-justification, and will only provoke enmity between people (particularly monks in community). Whether in matters great or small, whatever afflicts the person should be used as an occasion for self-blame. Barsanuphius and John knew that this was of especial importance for the tense atmosphere of the coenobium, where it was often the small niggling irritants that provoked wider and more serious discord. When such irritants arose, John gave simple advice: 'just blame yourself and be silent'.<sup>69</sup> Such practical counsel shows clearly how repentance was not simply about the Christian's individual peace and salvation, but also about getting on with others, living more fruitfully and profitably in the community.

The ability continually to blame oneself inevitably called forth a certain measure of psychological and spiritual stamina from the monk or lay Christian. The struggle for such stamina, the struggle in other words for patience, endurance, and longsuffering (*ὑπομονή / μακροθυμία*) in the life of the Christian, is among the most major concerns in the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John, and so of major concern for this investigation into the nature of existential repentance there. Among the most oft-quoted Scriptural texts in the *Letters* are verses to do with enduring what befalls: Mt 10.22 ('he that endures to the end will be saved') in 18 letters; 1 Cor 10.13 ('God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape') in 15 letters; Lk 21.19 ('in your patience you will gain your souls') in nine letters; Acts 14.22 ('through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God') in eight letters; and Jas 1.2 ('count it all joy, my brethren, when you fall into divers temptations') in six letters.<sup>70</sup> As mentioned above, the first and most popular of these texts, Mt 10.22, was linked by

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<sup>69</sup> Letter 293.10-1 (SC 450.284).

<sup>70</sup> Mt 10.22: *Letters* 23, 27, 30, 55, 57, 59, 66, 74, 76, 77, 90, 115, 118, 187, 214, 382, 613, 823; 1 Cor 10.13: *Letters* 44, 45, 46, 57, 74, 130, 210, 258, 385, 391, 406, 496, 510, 516, 703; Lk 21.19: *Letters* 26, 76, 88, 92, 106, 115, 256, 488, 554; Acts 14.22: *Letters* 2, 27, 59, 66, 96, 106, 192, 386; Jas 1.2: *Letters* 92, 93, 392, 467, 691, 829. In Letter 13.23-8 two texts, 2 Tim 4.2 and Heb 11.25, are used to inspire and justify the claim that 'longsuffering gives birth to every good' (SC 426.186).

Barsanuphius and John to the need for a certain reticence in the face of ‘the rules of men’ in spiritual life.<sup>71</sup> Rather than slave over the letter of this or that ordinance and thereby find a measure of self-satisfaction in its completion, one should hold fast above all to the principle of ‘endurance to the end’, of realizing that the only terminus for the practice of repentance is death itself.<sup>72</sup> Final salvation, in any case, was not going to be found here below; it belonged to those who died in a state of *ὑπομονή*, of sustained struggle and sweat: ‘brother, here below the work, there the salary; here the battle, there the crowns’, Barsanuphius warns one monk.<sup>73</sup> Through such perseverance, the Christian would bring forth ‘fruits worthy of repentance’ (cf. Lk 3.8).<sup>74</sup>

While always seeking to comfort their contrite inquirers, Barsanuphius and John never allowed them to grow slothful or careless about the task of salvation, which was pre-eminently a task of repentance. Barsanuphius reminded the monk Andrew that for all of God’s fidelity and the assistance of the prayers of the saints, the promise given to Adam after the fall remained absolute and immutable in this world: ‘you shall eat your bread in the sweat of your face’ (Gen 3.19). This promise was enjoined, moreover, to both the outer and inner man, and without the sweat that comes through the furnace of trials and ascesis, there was little hope of true consolation (*Letter* 105).

Enduring the hardships of the ascetic life with its tiring rota of psalm-singing, praying, prostrations, fasting, vigil, and manual labour was not the only form of endurance posited in the letters. Another form, and one of the most prominent, was patience in sickness and verbal (even physical) abuse from one’s neighbour. When one brother, broken by a fierce

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<sup>71</sup> *Letter* 23.14-18 (SC 426.210), to a monk who wants a rule to follow for psalmody, fasting, and prayer, reads: ‘let go of the rules of men and listen to Christ who says, ‘he who endures to the end will be saved’ (Mt 10.22). Thus unless a man has endurance, he will not enter into life. Do not desire a directive, for I do not wish you to be under the law, but under grace (cf. Rom 6.14)’.

<sup>72</sup> This thinking lies behind the frequent use of another text, Lk 17.10 (‘when you have done all those things that are commanded you, say ‘we are useless servants: we have done that which was our duty to do’’), which is found in six letters (65, 69, 282, 347b, 410, 559).

<sup>73</sup> *Letter* 600.90-1 (SC 451.810).

<sup>74</sup> The ‘fruits of repentance’ are mentioned at line 99 of the same letter. The Matthean ‘fruit of repentance’ (Mt 3.8) occurs in *Letter* 115.15-6 (SC 427.444), which involves the effort of endurance (Lk 21.19 is cited).

illness and high fever (which had prevented him from eating or sleeping for many days), insulted the abbot and others, he was reproved by Barsanuphius for his watered-down heart, and told to endure all with thanksgiving (*Letter 45*). Even in the extremes of tribulation and illness, Barsanuphius and John held firmly to the standard that ‘God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape’ (1 Cor 10.13). The presence of greater trials and harsher ailments was simply an opportunity for greater experience, and deeper consolation. By allowing such trials to come, God was lovingly treating his servant like Job who, Barsanuphius reminds one monk, ‘is among the saints’ thanks to his endurance: just as the presence of fire makes gold appear brighter, he continues, ‘so do the excessive temptations of the righteous brighten them’.<sup>75</sup>

Enduring trials, for all its harsh implications, was not a matter, according to the correspondence, of simply gritting one’s teeth and carrying on. Endurance was essentially a doxological act, and Barsanuphius and John expected endurance to be coupled with thanksgiving.<sup>76</sup> Offering praise to God for one’s misfortunes may appear to contain something of the absurd, but when considered in the light of the practice of self-blame promoted by the correspondence, it becomes more understandable. Thanks were not to be offered to God by the Christian for the fact that misfortunes exist, but for the fact that in seeing that he deserved chastisement and was in need of correction, God had sent some or another misfortune to deliver him, and lead him to repentance.<sup>77</sup>

When the battle seemed truly overwhelming, the policy of the old men was to enjoin even greater forbearance, rather than offer words or prayers for the allaying of the trouble or sickness, though they did offer the latter on occasion.<sup>78</sup> This was not out of some sadistic

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<sup>75</sup> *Letter 118.25-7* (SC 427.450). In *Letter 106*, Barsanuphius commends Abraham as an example of patience through testing, and underlines that the testing occurred even after the promises (in the monk’s case, the ‘promises’ refer to the initial sense of forgiveness experienced by him in the beginning).

<sup>76</sup> As noted above, in the section on thanksgiving: see for example *Letters 45, 89, 106, and 123*.

<sup>77</sup> Trials sent by God as an impetus for repentance is stated in *Letter 521.14* (SC 451.658).

<sup>78</sup> As Hevelone-Harper, Rapp, and others have noted, Barsanuphius and John were not so interested in miraculous physical healings, setting much more store by the need to endure ‘to the end’.

desire to see their disciples in pain and suffering. After advising one disciple to endure in bearing his heavy burdens, John asks, ‘am I giving you this advice because I do not want you to find rest? God knows that if I were able, I would serve you all the days of my life’.<sup>79</sup> They rather perceived that if the disciple could bear it in the right spirit, the trials and afflictions he met with would train him towards perfection: ‘do not think that God is unable to diminish the combat for you’, Barsanuphius tells one monk, ‘he could of course, especially because of the saints who pray for you. But because he loves you, he wants you to be trained by many trials and exercises, until you reach the perfection of virtue’.<sup>80</sup>

The nature of endurance was such that, by definition, it could not be checked off as a completed task of repentance. The virtue of endurance furnished the concept of repentance with an element of constant self-conditioning. One might wonder whether this was potentially detrimental or dangerous to the Christian’s psychological health, but bearing in mind the association the old men make between endurance and thanksgiving, the concept is stripped of much of its possible morbidity. Endurance essentially meant offering a grateful heart to a loving, providential God, in whose hands all the pains and trials of asceticism, illness, and personal animosities or misunderstandings were committed with faith and hope. If one could not accept trials with patient joy, then one should struggle to abolish the inner turmoil that arises from the trial, telling oneself to take heed ‘and see that you are not troubled’.<sup>81</sup> In this way, one can learn to accept gratefully whatever occurs as God’s will. Not, John is quick to add, because of any good that is inherent in our struggle, but because of God’s power and will, upon which the value of our struggle depends.<sup>82</sup>

While gratitude is the hallmark of fruitful endurance and so of fruitful repentance in the correspondence, the theme of perseverance with thanksgiving cannot be isolated from the

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<sup>79</sup> *Letter* 96.36-7 (SC 427.404).

<sup>80</sup> *Letter* 461.19-23 (SC 451.554-6).

<sup>81</sup> *Letter* 467 (SC 451.566-8).

<sup>82</sup> *Letter* 467 (SC 451.568).

more characteristically monastic theme of perseverance in mourning (*πένθος*) and compunction (*κατάνυξις*) which likewise permeates the letters.<sup>83</sup> The potential exuberance that comes from joyful thanksgiving is always to be tempered by a certain pain and contrition of heart. To the question of how to reconcile the beatitude ‘blessed are those who mourn’ (Mt 5.4) with the apostolic injunction to ‘be cheerful’ (Rom 12.8), John makes the suggestion: ‘let the heart have mourning, while the face and the words should bear modest joyfulness’.<sup>84</sup> Elsewhere John warns of the presence of excessive gladness. Too much overt gladness is a sign, he says, of inexperienced craftsmen, and they ought to take care over themselves, ‘lest they completely deviate from the way of mourning’.<sup>85</sup>

We saw above that to one disciple, Barsanuphius recommends the way of mourning as the normative path of repentance: ‘if you want to begin to repent, learn what the adulterous woman did: with her tears she washed the Master’s feet’.<sup>86</sup> John speaks of mourning as ‘godly sorrow, which engenders repentance’ (cf. 2 Cor 7.10).<sup>87</sup> Repentance is made alive, in other words, through the discipline of mourning. Mourning, however, is not equivalent to godly weeping, although tears are begotten, says John, through mourning. Mourning when in the presence of other people involves the cutting off of one’s own will and the absence of fault-finding, which serves to gather the thoughts, in turn leading to godly sorrow and tears.<sup>88</sup>

Not all compunction, Barsanuphius warns one monk, is from God. If the memory of one’s sins is acted upon for the correction of our past, then ‘this is genuine compunction, through which sins are forgiven’. But if in remembering our sins we continue to fall into the

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<sup>83</sup> Notable studies of *πένθος* in the Eastern Christian tradition include: Lot-Borodine (1937), Hausherr (1944), and Hunt (2004). However, I would not agree with the latter’s proposals for distinguishing *πένθος* and *μετάνοια* so sharply in Hunt (2004), pp. 14-5. Such a distinction, which allows to *πένθος* the capacity to grieve for others but forbids it to *μετάνοια*, is unknown in the ascetic sources.

<sup>84</sup> *Letter* 730.11-5 (SC 468.174).

<sup>85</sup> *Letter* 459.19-20 (SC 451.552).

<sup>86</sup> *Letter* 257.18-21 (SC 450.222).

<sup>87</sup> *Letter* 730.7 (SC 468.172).

<sup>88</sup> These points are made by John in *Letter* 250.

same sins or worse, then ‘this memory comes from the enemy, who suggests this memory to you only in order to condemn your soul’.<sup>89</sup> In another place, John responds to someone who feels he ought to be sorrowful when he is harmed by others, telling him simply (in order to keep from cultivating a sorrow of self-pity), ‘one should not feel sorrow about anything at all in this world, expect for sin’.<sup>90</sup>

Profitable mourning can only take place, according to the correspondence, when the mind’s eye is directed towards one’s own sinful inadequacies. However, this must be done with a proper goal and assurance, with a view to being healed. If we despair, John cautions, we tumble into the ‘sin unto death’ of 1 Jn 5.16. True mourning is directed towards and accompanied by the healing word of Jesus, as in the case of Peter: ‘we know the results of tears; for the experience of Peter’s mourning has taught us’.<sup>91</sup> To a layman who laments his lack of tears, Barsanuphius explains the root of the problem: ‘he who realizes what he has lost will want to weep for that’.<sup>92</sup> Only in having the experience of losing grace and recognizing its loss does a person find true tears, true mourning, and so true repentance. Without this, the exercise of mourning lacks its proper bearings (finding lost grace), and risks becoming an unhealthy pathology (which in *Letter 394* is described as the soul’s condemnation), alien to the kind of ascetic culture promoted by Barsanuphius and John.

True compunction, true sorrow for sin, or true mourning, can be acquired through various means, but the most important thing is to preserve it when it arrives. To a sick anchorite who seeks a rule for unceasing prayer, Barsanuphius affirms his stance against rules, and tells him to cling to compunction whenever it comes: ‘thus, when you happen to be reading, and you see compunction in your heart, read as much as you can. Do the same when you recite the Psalter’.<sup>93</sup> Growing in this activity leads to the overshadowing of natural

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<sup>89</sup> *Letter 394* (SC 450.454).

<sup>90</sup> *Letter 674.6-7* (SC 468.110).

<sup>91</sup> *Letter 532.88-9* (SC 451.676).

<sup>92</sup> *Letter 400.4* (SC 451.462).

<sup>93</sup> *Letter 87.16-8* (SC 427.378).

desires, recalling the words of the Psalmist, ‘I have forgotten to eat my bread; because of the voice of my groaning my bone has cleaved to my flesh’ (Ps 101.5-6 LXX). The monk’s bread is replaced by tears (cf. Ps 79.6 LXX), and so he can gradually begin to be ‘fed by the Spirit’.<sup>94</sup> The whole of a monk’s life in his cell ought to be concentrated on mourning: ‘to sit in one’s cell means to remember one’s own sins and to weep and mourn for these’, and so avoid captivity.<sup>95</sup> Genuine weeping and compunction, Barsanuphius explains, do not come and go, but are ‘like a servant submitted to us without separation’.<sup>96</sup>

Two aspects of such mourning are particularly striking and worthy of consideration. The first is the conflict between the monk’s need to maintain the virtue of mourning, and the desire to give alms. In *Letters* 618-9, John explains to a monk that his preoccupation cannot be with distributing the wealth of others, since he himself has renounced all possessions, but must rest on mourning: ‘If you want to mourn for your sins, do not pay attention to this matter, even if you see someone dying in front of your very cell. Do not take part in the distribution of another person’s possessions and be distracted from your mourning’.<sup>97</sup> John’s intention is not to belittle almsgiving, however, but to emphasize that there are those Christians who devote themselves to almsgiving (i.e. lay Christians), and there are those who devote themselves to mourning (i.e. monks): if the latter revert to the former way, they endanger their chosen way of life. This kind of thinking occurs again in *Letter* 627, where a layperson inquires how those who have nothing to give can find the blessing expressed in Mt 25.34-5 to those who clothed, fed, sheltered, and visited the poor and needy. John’s response is that this way of almsgiving is only one of many ways to inherit the kingdom and reap the reward, pointing to the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5.1-10) as different paths with a similar goal.

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<sup>94</sup> *Letter* 152.10-3 (SC 427.542).

<sup>95</sup> *Letter* 172.5-7 (SC 427.574).

<sup>96</sup> *Letter* 461.8-9 (SC 451.554).

<sup>97</sup> *Letter* 619.6-10 (SC 468.42).

Another striking aspect of the theology of mourning in the correspondence is the way in which mourning is conceived as inherently opposed to theological debate. This is especially stressed in a series of letters on Origenism (*Letters* 600-7) to a monk somewhat learned in theological matters, and in another series on doctrine and heresy (*Letters* 694-704). When a brother declares his interest in the ideas of Origen, Didymus, and the *Gnostic Chapters* of Evagrius, and his confusion as to why they seem to hold unorthodox opinions, Barsanuphius opens with a bitter lamentation: ‘Brother woe upon and alas for our race... We have left behind the straight ways and want to walk in the crooked ones... Truly, brother, I have left behind my own mourning, and I mourn over your fall’.<sup>98</sup> On no other issue in the correspondence does Barsanuphius show such vigorous opposition:

These things do not lead those who believe in them to the light but only to darkness... these things do not lead to progress according to God, but rather to progress according to the devil... these things are tares sown by the enemy in the field of the Master... they are entirely falsehood, entirely darkness, entirely deceit, entirely estrangement from God... they dry tears, blind the heart, and quite simply destroy those who pay any attention to them. Do not dwell on them; do not study them; for they are filled with bitterness and produce fruit unto death.<sup>99</sup>

Barsanuphius’ reasoning as to why such speculation must be completely rejected is of specific interest: it is because such speculation ‘dries tears’, that is, it causes the monk to deviate from his primary task, and so bear ‘fruit unto death’. The solution, Barsanuphius goes on to say, is to bear ‘fruits worthy of repentance’, namely progress in humility, obedience, weeping, ascetic discipline, poverty, not reckoning oneself as anything, and so on.<sup>100</sup>

The initial victim of curious theological investigations is, according to the letters, mourning, and by extension, the loss or absence of mourning in a monk can be a sign of too much theological conjecture.<sup>101</sup> Concerning oneself with theological matters inevitably takes away from concern over one’s passions, and Barsanuphius is clear that ‘our time here is for

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<sup>98</sup> *Letter* 600.45-52 (SC 451.806-8).

<sup>99</sup> *Letter* 600.65-79 (SC 451.808-10).

<sup>100</sup> *Letter* 600.94-103 (SC 451.810).

<sup>101</sup> Another situation mentioned by the letters in which a monk’s mourning cannot flourish is that of too much friendship or familiarity with those of one’s own age (*Letter* 340).

the examination of our passions, to weep and mourn over them'.<sup>102</sup> The point is re-iterated in the next letter: 'you will not be asked about these matters...therefore weep and mourn',<sup>103</sup> and again in *Letter 607*: 'your time is for weeping and mourning over your sins'.<sup>104</sup> That said, Barsanuphius does not use this line of thinking as an excuse to sidestep the various and often dense theological conundrums put to him. His aim in answering these queries, however, is not to undermine the argument that the monk's primary need is to mourn, but to try, by giving some response, to set the disciple's mind at rest and allow him the freedom to return to mourning with an untroubled spirit.

The same principle applies when a disciple asks what to do when told to anathematize Nestorius and the heretics. He is told by John that, while it is clear that Nestorius and the heretics are under anathema, he must under no circumstance anathematize anyone, since 'he who considers himself a sinner must mourn for his sins, and not concern himself about other things'.<sup>105</sup> John's reasoning is elaborated in the next letter: if the disciple anathematizes someone, even if they are worthy of it, he should be worried whether in judging another he condemns himself:

For if I anathematize Satan himself, all the while doing his works, I anathematize myself. The Saviour says, 'if you love me, keep my commandments' (Jn 14.15), and the apostle says, 'if any does not love the Lord, let him be anathema' (1 Cor 16.22). Thus he who does not keep his commandments does not love him, and he who does not love him is under anathema. How then can he anathematize others?<sup>106</sup>

If pushed still further on the issue, however, John tells him to anathematize the heretic and be done with it.

This preoccupation with mourning in the context of theological discussion reveals a key insight into the ascetic mindset of Barsanuphius and John, and through them of much

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<sup>102</sup> *Letter 603.14-5* (SC451.814).

<sup>103</sup> *Letter 604.141-3* (SC 451.824). Cf. John Climacus' statement that 'when we die, we will not be criticized for having failed to work miracles. We will not be accused of having failed to be theologians or contemplatives. But we will certainly have some explanation to offer to God for not having mourned unceasingly': Step 7.25 (PG 88.816D).

<sup>104</sup> *Letter 607.39-40* (SC 451.832). Cf. Isaac the Syrian's maxim: 'this life has been given to you for repentance; do not waste it in vain pursuits' (*Homily 74*, trans. Miller, p. 364).

<sup>105</sup> *Letter 699.6-7* (SC 468.144).

<sup>106</sup> *Letter 700.7-14* (SC 468.144-6).

Eastern Christian ascetic thought. It shows not simply that repentance for them took precedence over such discussion, but more significantly that theological deliberation and debate (at least in the case of monks and laypeople) was to be outright *rejected* on the basis of repentance and the need to mourn.<sup>107</sup> Mourning was their trump card when theological discussion arose, since they saw in it, and expected their disciples to see in it too, the safest, surest, and the only required path to salvation, something they frequently underlined as exemplified in the discipline of the Egyptian desert fathers (especially ‘Poemen and those around him’).<sup>108</sup>

This culture of repentant mourning was linked, as we have said, to the other virtues, but perhaps to none so intimately as the virtue of humility (*ταπείνωσις / ταπεινοφροσύνη*), which was to Barsanuphius and John the benchmark and most requisite asset for any and every Christian life. Worth highlighting at the outset is the terminological link between *μετάνοια*, ‘change of mind’, and *ταπεινοφροσύνη*, ‘lowliness of mind’. If there was to be any truly healing change of mind, any real repentance (*μετάνοια*) for Barsanuphius and John, it had to involve the lowering of that mind, or humility (*ταπεινοφροσύνη*). It is in finding humility, Barsanuphius tells one monk, that we find the forgiveness of our sins.<sup>109</sup> It is to humility that we should turn, then, fittingly to conclude our investigation into existential repentance according to Barsanuphius and John.

On the topic of labours and humility, John underlines the primacy of the latter:

True labour, brother, does not exist without humility. Indeed, labour in itself is useless. For it is written, ‘behold my humility and my labour, and forgive all my sins’ (Ps 24.18 LXX). Thus he who has both of these rapidly reaches the goal [of salvation]. And he who has humility with self-contempt has reached the same goal, since self-contempt takes the place of labour. But he who has humility itself alone, will also enter, but more slowly. If anyone wishes to possess true humility, let him not consider himself in anything; for that is true humility.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> The same point is made by John Climacus: ‘theology will not suit mourners, for it is of a nature to dissolve their mourning. For the theologian is like one who sits in a teacher’s seat, whereas the mourner is like one who spends his days on a dunghill in sackcloth’: *Ladder Step 7.9* (PG 88.805CD).

<sup>108</sup> On this, see especially *Letters* 600 and 604. For more on Barsanuphius and John’s dependence on the Egyptian tradition, see the introduction to the letters by F. Neyt in SC 450.69-105.

<sup>109</sup> *Letter* 359.18-9 (SC 450.380). He justifies this with Ps 24.18 (LXX): ‘behold my humility and my labour, and forgive all my sins’.

<sup>110</sup> *Letter* 277.5-14 (SC 450.262).

In a sense, John is giving an answer to the age-old question of works' righteousness. Works, or labours, are vain if they are bereft of humility. If humility is not at the base of Christian life, grounding ascetic activity, all that activity counts for nothing in the working out of salvation.

This answer evidently caught the monk's attention, and he enquired further about the nature of humility, and whether and how it could be sought out. John answers with a new definition: 'humility is the detachment of oneself in all things and the cutting off of one's own will in everything, and the bearing untroubled of what comes one's way from outside'.<sup>111</sup> Cutting off one's will was an implicit summons to obedience, of preferring the will of another to one's own.<sup>112</sup> Humility, that is, did not lead to or manifest itself as a kind of manic self-obsession with 'being lowly', but as a fervent desire to obey and serve both God and one's fellow human beings.

The complete levelling of oneself for the sake of God and one's neighbour is highly prized by Barsanuphius and John as the safest place for the retention of grace: 'Go in all things to humility, for he who is humble lies on the ground, and where shall he who lies on the ground fall?'<sup>113</sup> This is the attitude we should have if we have been converted and corrected, recognizing thereby that our conversion and correction are a gift of God.<sup>114</sup> Such a path of continual self-abasement is integral to the experience of repentance, as already mentioned: 'in continually condemning yourself, your heart feels compunction in order to receive repentance'.<sup>115</sup> If we follow after our own high-mindedness, we thwart our attempts

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<sup>111</sup> *Letter* 278.9-11 (SC 450.264).

<sup>112</sup> Obedience is another rich theme in the correspondence which unfortunately cannot be addressed in any great detail here. An excellent study of spiritual obedience in the Greek ascetic tradition (with special reference to John Climacus) can be found in Müller (2006). As underlined, obedience was considered by Barsanuphius and John to be the outward manifestation of humility; they were essentially two sides of the same coin. For some key references to obedience, see *Letters* 9, 73, 99, 246, 249, 553, 566, 574, and 576.

<sup>113</sup> *Letter* 70.43-4 (SC 426.342).

<sup>114</sup> *Letter* 70.44-8 (SC 426.342).

<sup>115</sup> *Letter* 242.14-5 (SC 450.192).

to repent: ‘guard yourself from pride and the pretence to rights’, warns John, ‘for these hinder repentance’.<sup>116</sup>

The struggle to consider oneself beneath all is described as the essential task of Christian life by Barsanuphius: ‘with all your strength despise yourself, struggling to regard yourself as beneath every person. This is the true way. Outside of this, there is no way for someone who wants to be saved in Christ, who gives us strength’.<sup>117</sup> Engaging in this process of humility must affect every aspect of the Christian’s life: ‘humility means regarding oneself as ‘dust and ashes’ (Gen 18.27; Job 42.6) in deeds and not words alone, saying, ‘Who am I? Who counts me as anything? I have nothing to do with anyone’’.<sup>118</sup> If the ascetic feels his passions have slackened, he must keep to the path of humility and flee any sense of pride, considering not that his passions have actually weakened, but that ‘they are all laid up in me, as if in store’.<sup>119</sup>

Likewise, if the ascetic feels a certain peace which leads him to think that he no longer needs to call on the name of Christ, he must flee this ‘peace’ through more fervent and unceasing prayer: ‘we should not have such peace, if we consider ourselves sinners’.<sup>120</sup> This kind of continual self-abasement forbids the judgment of others, since it forces us ‘to regard ourselves as more sinful than all others’.<sup>121</sup> Such a state is sought by the experienced not simply for themselves, but for their disciples too: ‘May God lead you to that measure’, prays John, ‘of considering yourself to be beneath all creatures’.<sup>122</sup> Humility as a measure to be attained evokes the idea of a kind of ‘downward ascent’, a concept grounded in the biblical

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<sup>116</sup> *Letter* 333.21-2 (SC 450.338).

<sup>117</sup> *Letter* 450.8-11 (SC 451.530-2).

<sup>118</sup> *Letter* 100.5-8 (SC 427.414).

<sup>119</sup> *Letter* 44.27-8 (SC 426.248).

<sup>120</sup> *Letter* 425.8-9 (SC 451.488).

<sup>121</sup> *Letter* 453.12-3 (SC 451.534); cf. *Letter* 17.19-22 (SC 426.194): ‘he who considers himself a sinner and a cause of evil, is not argumentative, nor contentious, nor angry against anyone, but considers everyone else to be better and wiser than he’.

<sup>122</sup> *Letter* 276.8-9 (SC 450.260).

precept, ‘whoever exalts himself shall be abased; and he who humbles himself shall be exalted’ (Mt 23.12; Lk 14.11, 18.14).

The presence of sin and passion in the Christian’s life is among the principal vehicles for bringing him or her to humility. Not that God wishes us to fall into such things, explains Barsanuphius, but ‘in his love for mankind, he uses our vices to get us humility unto salvation’.<sup>123</sup> Further on in the same letter, a crucial element of Barsanuphius and John’s understanding of humility is mentioned. Humility may be a complete self-debasement and so come across as an altogether negative and destructive path, but Barsanuphius reminds his interlocutor that positively speaking, it involves throwing all one’s cares on the Lord (cf. 1 Pet 5.7), ‘who can do far more than we ask for or imagine’ (Eph 3.20).<sup>124</sup> It entails, in other words, recognizing one’s incapacity properly to govern and decide one’s destiny, instead giving all the space of one’s hopes and desires to the God who knows better than we what is to be hoped for, and desired.

As with mourning, the quest for humility is averse to speculative thinking and theology. Barsanuphius admonishes one monk who writes to him in riddles, that even where such riddles are not bad in themselves, they are a risk to humility: ‘Why is it necessary, tell me, to speak in lofty ways, which can cause humility to pass us by?’<sup>125</sup> Dogmatic books, Barsanuphius explains elsewhere, serve to exalt the intellect upward, when it should rather be humbled downward through reading the sayings of the fathers.<sup>126</sup> This primacy of humility for ascetic formation was, we have said, about making the person ever-accessible to divine mercy. When the mind began turning its attention to concocting even the most righteous of riddles or dwelling on even the most noble of dogmatic tenets, it was considered a risk to the nurturing and maintenance of that safe-haven of humility, which alone could preserve from

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<sup>123</sup> Letter 102.16-8 (SC 427.418).

<sup>124</sup> Letter 102.34-5 (SC 427.418).

<sup>125</sup> Letter 136.26-8 (SC 267.496).

<sup>126</sup> Letter 547 (SC 451.696). He explains the difference between the two with a play on words: the sayings of the fathers are a nourishment (*τροφή*) for the soul, while dogmatic books are an indulgence (*τροφή*) for it.

the total inner ruin brought by self-promotion and self-righteousness. Barsanuphius and John felt they had firm backing on this point not only from the examples of their ascetic forbears, but more decisively, from the example of Christ, in whom they saw the epitome and fullness of the way of humility.

Such a Christocentric perspective on humility emerges in Barsanuphius' reply to an anchorite who inquires about the acquisition of perfect humility:

Concerning the acquisition of perfect humility, brother, the Saviour taught us saying: 'Learn of me, for I am meek and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls' (Mt 11.29). If therefore you wish to acquire perfect humility, learn what he endured and endure it too, and cut off your will in all things. For he himself said, 'I came down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of my Father in heaven' (Jn 6.38). This is perfect humility: bearing the insults and injuries and all that our teacher Jesus endured.<sup>127</sup>

It is often forgotten that, however one interprets the result, Christian ascetic theology (at least as exemplified by Barsanuphius and John), had as its basic spur the example and teaching of Christ.

Humility was to be chased after, says John, for the sake of the praise of Jesus Christ, 'who humbled himself, made himself 'obedient to death' (Phil 2.8), and gave himself to us as a model of humility'.<sup>128</sup> Such was Barsanuphius' strong sense of the humility of Christ and the need to acquire it, that he finds this humility typified in a verse that would not normally be associated with Christ's humility. In reproaching his natural brother for thinking that he had a measure of holiness simply by virtue of his fleshly kinship with him, Barsanuphius exclaims, 'Do you not know that we are all children of the transgression of Adam? And that we are 'dust and ashes' (Gen 18.27; Job 42.6)?' Barsanuphius then concludes, 'if we had the humility of Jesus, we would say, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brethren?''<sup>129</sup> Even a text which the NT does not clearly connect to humility is read thus by Barsanuphius in his effort to promote an integral vision of Christ's humility, present in all his words, and all his deeds. He thereby attempted to promote the ascetic pursuit of humility, of lowliness of mind,

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<sup>127</sup> Letter 150.6-14 (SC 267.536).

<sup>128</sup> τύπον ἡμῖν δόντος ταπεινώσεως: Letter 455.47.-50 (SC 451.544).

<sup>129</sup> Letter 348.16-21 (SC 450.368).

which served as the bedrock for the ascetic's broader pursuit of a fuller and deeper *μετάνοια*, or repentance.

As in Mark the Monk, the theme of repenting on an existential level is rich and multi-faceted in Barsanuphius and John. Different aspects are emphasized to different degrees, of course, than in Mark's treatises. For instance, the recurring element of confession or disclosure of thoughts in the *Letters* is not present in Mark. Likewise, where baptism is upheld time and again as the treasury of perfection in the latter, it is the humility of Christ that more readily comes to the minds of the two old men when contemplating the way of perfection. Nonetheless, a basic unanimity remains. Whether in pursuing thanksgiving, the sacraments, self-blame, patience, mourning, or humility, the Christian was trying to live by the commandments and example of Christ (the explicit root of existential repentance in Mark), and so to continuously re-orientate the mind from the tug and pull of the passions to a living and abiding communion with God. Moreover, such a process, as in Mark the Monk, did not limit itself for Barsanuphius and John to repentance for oneself, but was extended in the saints to an other-orientated repentance, a repentance imitating the sinless repentance of Christ.

#### *Repentance in Barsanuphius and John: Christ-like repentance*

As with Mark the Monk, we find the concept of Christ-like repentance uncovered in Barsanuphius and John's deliberations on the role and function of the righteous, or the saints.<sup>130</sup> The basic testimony to a preoccupation with the saints in the correspondence is the unusually frequent references to the prayers, support, and guidance of the *ἄγιοι*.<sup>131</sup> Such was Barsanuphius' high regard for the saints and their power that, as with the humility of Christ,

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<sup>130</sup> It is Barsanuphius and John's approach to sanctity that underlies their clear affirmation of what is termed 'Christ-like repentance' in this study. Not all aspects of their thought on the saints can be treated here, but for a fuller picture, see Torrance (2009), which is found below, as Appendix II.

<sup>131</sup> Explicit references number over eighty, on which see Appendix II below.

it influences his interpretation of Scripture. In *Letter* 61, for instance, Barsanuphius is asked to interpret Mt 24.16 which reads, ‘then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains’. He replies, ‘as for the mountains ... understand that these have to do with holy Mary, the Mother of God, the other saints, and those who will be found at that time having the seal of the Son of God. By them, he himself will save many, for to him is the glory forever’.<sup>132</sup> Later in the correspondence, in a series to the monk Andrew, Barsanuphius boldly interprets several NT passages referring to the Son as applicable also to the saints:

Each of the saints, bringing before God his sons whom he has saved, will say with a loud voice, with great assurance... ‘Here I am, I and the children God has given me’ (Is 8.18; Heb 2.13). And not only will he hand them over to God, but himself also, and then God will be ‘all in all’ (cf. 1 Cor 15.28).<sup>133</sup>

From these interpretations, we gain an understanding not just of the importance of the saints in the correspondence, but of their perceived function. They serve as conduits, as it were, of salvation: fatherly mediators who fight for and commend their disciples to God, taking responsibility for them up to the last judgment.<sup>134</sup> The way of attainment to this measure is of particular interest here, since it is inextricably bound with what has preceded, the path of initial and existential repentance, expressed through the pursuit of the virtues and the practice of the commandments. At root, it means arriving at likeness to Christ: ‘‘Strive for your neighbour as for yourself’ (cf. Lev 19.18) says the Old Testament, but the New, demonstrating perfection, enjoins us to lay down our lives for each other (cf. 1 Jn 3.16), just as the Perfect and Son of the Perfect laid down his life for us’.<sup>135</sup> It involves the inheritance by the saint of God’s own way of dealing with humanity: ‘his goodness, longsuffering, patience, his love for humanity (*φιλανθρωπία*) and love (*ἀγάπη*)’, in short, his constant desire to help, succour, and save the human race.<sup>136</sup> This is the aim of the Christian’s

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<sup>132</sup> *Letter* 61.112-6 (SC 426.306-8).

<sup>133</sup> *Letter* 117.22-7 (SC 427.448); cf. *Letter* 187, and Appendix II below.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. also the use of Ex 32.32 in the letter just cited, and in *Letter* 790 (‘now if you will forgive their sin, forgive it; and if not, blot me out of your book, which you have written’). For a study of late antique holy men as ‘safe-conducts to heaven’, with special reference to the role of writing, see Rapp (2009).

<sup>135</sup> *Letter* 484.12-6 (SC 451.592-4).

<sup>136</sup> *Letter* 484.6-12 (SC 451.592).

struggle, the aim of repentance. But as the goal itself is one of assuming and redeeming burdens through and in likeness to Christ, the concept of repentance, albeit in altered form, is nonetheless present here too.

The content of sanctity is always in the correspondence linked with helping, protecting, and guiding one's neighbour in a spirit of humility and love. But as such, it implies the assumption and bearing of the sins, failings, and faults of the other. 'I bear half your burden', Barsanuphius tells the monk Andrew, with whom he had extensive correspondence, and to whom he expresses himself most clearly on this issue.<sup>137</sup> The perfect, he goes on to say in the next letter, are able to 'bear the whole' (*τὸ ὅλον βαστάζειν*), 'having become brothers of Christ, who gave his life for us and who loves that they who love us with a perfect love should do this'.<sup>138</sup> Praying and labouring for the fallen or stumbling disciple becomes the saint's vital task: 'I am unable to pray for my own soul more than for yours', Barsanuphius compassionately and reassuringly tells one disciple.<sup>139</sup> And to another, with more urgency, 'I have set aside mourning for myself, and mourn over your fall; I have set aside weeping for my sins, and weep for you as my own child'.<sup>140</sup>

The need to preserve this ideal is set out by John when he is asked by a younger monk about sharing in the pain of others, and how it might be a risk to concern for his own sins. Evidently wishing to point out the risk, but also desiring to uphold the ideal of compassion, John answers that the fathers did indeed warn against 'abandoning their own dead and weeping for the dead of another', but this was directed only to the youth: 'for it belongs to the perfect to suffer with their neighbour'.<sup>141</sup> But since the young monk has not attained to the measure of 'sharing the suffering of someone else through love', he should avoid the false desire to be compassionate which is simply a gratification of his own will and an

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<sup>137</sup> *Letters* 72-123, this reference *Letter* 72.21 (SC 427.346).

<sup>138</sup> *Letter* 73.17-21 (SC 427.350).

<sup>139</sup> *Letter* 507.7-8 (SC 451.632).

<sup>140</sup> *Letter* 600.51-3 (SC 451.808).

<sup>141</sup> *Letter* 341.13-5 (SC 450.350). The saying on 'abandoning one's own dead and weeping for the dead of another' is from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Moses 18 (PG 65.289B).

illusion of the demons.<sup>142</sup> In order to be compassionate in a true sense, John explains elsewhere, one must be compassionate with everyone without exception, something not to be understood lightly: ‘for if a person has not compassion for all, in that for which he does have compassion, he reveals his own will’, and so, by implication, such compassion is robbed of benefit.<sup>143</sup>

The need for compassion is often expressed in the correspondence, as Bitton-Ashkelony has shown, in the language of burden-bearing.<sup>144</sup> There is, Barsanuphius says, ‘no other settlement (*κάθισμα*) of salvation than to bear one another’s burdens (cf. Gal 6.2)’.<sup>145</sup> It is felt by him and by John as an imperative of Christian life, particularly of life in a monastic community. Burden-bearing is especially relevant to the spiritual father-disciple relationship.<sup>146</sup> Through the spiritual father’s tender bearing of the burdens of his disciple, he becomes ‘one soul’ (*ὁμόψυχος*) with him, a key term in the language of spiritual authority conveyed by the letters.<sup>147</sup> Such prayerful intimacy leads not just to claims of the elder’s literal unceasing remembrance of his disciple—‘God knows that there is not one bat of the eye nor a single moment in which I do not hold you in my thought and in my prayer’<sup>148</sup>—but to the language of self-sacrifice: ‘gladly and with much ardour I sacrifice myself for your souls, as God knows, who alone knows our hearts’.<sup>149</sup> In this, Christ-like repentance is realized, in a bold all-embracing compassion rooted in a life taken up with the commandments and example of Christ.

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<sup>142</sup> *Letter* 341.15-6, 31-3 (SC 450.350).

<sup>143</sup> *Letter* 315.19-20 (SC 450.310).

<sup>144</sup> See Bitton-Ashkelony (2006).

<sup>145</sup> *Letter* 104.7-8 (SC 427.422).

<sup>146</sup> It is likewise relevant to the relationship of a bishop to his flock, as Barsanuphius writes in *Letter* 844.5-8 (SC 468.326): ‘It is fitting for Your Holiness to suffer to the utmost with the afflicted. For this is the work of a spiritual father and teacher. And the good shepherd concerns himself for and watches over the sheep’.

<sup>147</sup> But not, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the univocal key term for understanding the teaching of the correspondence. For more on this concept, see Perrone (2004), and below, p. 221.

<sup>148</sup> *Letter* 113.5-8 (SC 427.440).

<sup>149</sup> *Letter* 111.10-2 (SC 427.436). Cf. *Letter* 57.55-6 (SC 426.282): ‘I gladly give my life to the death for you, my brother’; *Letter* 353.17-9 (SC 450.374): ‘remember this brother, that, as you know, I gladly give my life for you, and my prayer for you is unceasing’.

Supremely, the act of Christ-like repentance embraces and sustains not simply the saint's local disciples and area, but the whole world. These saints 'stand in the breach (cf. Ps 105.23), preventing the complete and sudden annihilation of the whole world; and by their prayers [God] will chastise with mercy'.<sup>150</sup> Barsanuphius identifies three such saints: one in Corinth, one in Rome, and one in the region of Jerusalem.<sup>151</sup> These, in having reached the summit of personal repentance, are engaged in another form of repentance, a struggle before God for the continuity and preservation of the world. This position is reminiscent of Mark's, who saw in the act of merciful repentance for the other the cause of the world's continued existence: 'Since, therefore, the merciful will be shown mercy, through repentance, in my opinion, the whole world holds together, one finding mercy through another according to the divine will'.<sup>152</sup> By including this element of Christ-like repentance in our assessment of Barsanuphius and John's ascetic theology, we find a window onto the scope of repentance in their thought, and through them, more broadly, in the solidifying expression of Eastern Christian ascetic theology.

#### *Repentance in Barsanuphius and John: conclusion*

As Claudia Rapp has pointed out, 'neither Barsanuphius nor John qualify as saints by the prevailing criteria of current scholarship'.<sup>153</sup> By this she tacitly indicates the great amount of work required for a better understanding of sanctity, and one could add of monastic and ascetic theology generally, in Christian late antiquity. Through assessing the letters of Barsanuphius and John from the perspective of repentance, the beginnings of a fresh understanding of these themes has been attempted. It has been argued that the threefold framework elaborated in the chapter on Mark the Monk can equally apply in the very

<sup>150</sup> Letter 569.27-9 (SC 451.734): *στήκουσιν ἐν τῇ θραύσει τοῦ μὴ ὑφὲν ἐξολοθρεῦσαι ὅλον τὸν κόσμον, καὶ διὰ τῶν εὐχῶν αὐτῶν μετ' ἐλέους παιδεύει.*

<sup>151</sup> Letter 569.36-8 (SC 451.734).

<sup>152</sup> *Paen* 11.30-2 (SC 445.250).

<sup>153</sup> Rapp (1999), p. 77.

different setting of the *Letters*. While certain elements and tropes are emphasized variously, such as Mark's frequent recourse to the concepts of the commandments (*ἐντολαί*) and baptism, and Barsanuphius and John's detailed focus on virtues such as thanksgiving, mourning, and humility, the framework still proves useful. Beginning with an initial or cognisant repentance, which soon coalesces with an idea of permanent or existential repentance, the Christian enters his or her calling proper, a calling which finds its end in Christ-like repentance for his or her neighbour and the world.

This framework is not simply useful for understanding the dynamic of repentance in Christian late antiquity. Because of the wide-reaching implication of the concept, it touches on much broader issues, particularly that of early Christian self-identity and self-formation.<sup>154</sup> Rarely, if at all, is repentance seen as a fundamental theme to the early Christian mind beyond the question of institutional forms of penance, as shown in chapter one. But in opening up the theme as it was received from Scriptural texts and expressed in the early church, and elaborating the theme in detail in two major and under-appreciated source texts of Christian late antique monasticism, it has become clear that the concept of repentance is of greater and wider relevance than has hitherto been acknowledged. It allows us to see at least part of the development of Christian self-identity, and particularly of Christian ascetic theology and practice, in a new way, from the perspective of building a science or school of repentance, rich in its variety, but relatively stable in its broad outline as relevant to the beginning, the living out, and the end or goal of Christian life.

In the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John, this school of repentance was the crucible into which all the various tensions, disappointments, hopes, fears, and concerns of the interlocutors were thrown. Repentance was the place of resolution for matters of personal failure, to be sure, but also for matters of theological debate and community concern. It was

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<sup>154</sup> Some key recent studies of the formation of Christian self-identity through asceticism include the relevant chapters in Wimbush and Valantasis (eds.) (1995), Assmann and Stroumsa (eds.) (1999), and Shulman and Stroumsa (eds.) (2002). See also Valantasis (2008).

in entering the continuum of repentance (whether expressed through thanksgiving, humility, obedience, compassion, and so on) that Barsanuphius and John saw the surest passage to proper Christian formation, a formation directed towards personal sanctity in the likeness of the sanctity (which meant the compassion) of Christ. In the concluding chapter that follows, the abiding presence of this approach to repentance in the Christian East will be looked at, with a special emphasis on the work of John of Sinai, or John Climacus, whose work in many ways crystallized the achievements of ascetic theology in Christian late antiquity, guaranteeing its perpetuation, not least with regard to its ideas concerning repentance, in the Eastern Christian world that would follow.

## *Chapter Six*

### *Repentance in the oeuvre of John of the Ladder*

In order to bring the subject of repentance in the early church forward, an introductory re-setting of the scene has been provided, followed by a sustained analysis of repentance in three of the most prominent ascetic writers in Christian late antiquity, at least in terms of their reception and promotion by future generations. The tenor of their ascetic theology, however, was by no means limited to them, and was largely a shared heritage based in Scripture and ecclesiastical, especially monastic, tradition. This heritage, which of course is one of various hues and emphases, was what nurtured the pinnacle of late antique Christian asceticism in the East, a monk who would attain ‘first place among the doctors of spirituality and asceticism’<sup>1</sup> in the Byzantine Church: John Climacus, or John of the Ladder. His *Ladder of Divine Ascent* (along with his *Letter to the Shepherd*) was considered and is still considered by this tradition as the summit of mature ascetical theology, being offered as spiritual nourishment every year during Lent at *trapeza* (meal-times) in most monasteries throughout the Eastern Orthodox Christian world.<sup>2</sup> It is thus fitting to turn our attention, if only briefly, to his *oeuvre*. Again, the proposed framework of initial, existential, and Christ-like repentance will be tested and seen to corroborate with John Climacus’ approach. From here, the findings of the thesis can be summarized, and preliminary conclusions drawn.

#### *John Climacus*

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<sup>1</sup> Meyendorff (1959), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> On the popularity of John in the Byzantine liturgical calendar and rubrics, and in contemporary Eastern Orthodox Christian practice, see Chryssavgis (2004), p. 233.

Not only is John Climacus' popularity in later tradition a good incentive to present his views, but so is the comparative scarcity of studies about him or his work.<sup>3</sup> Little is certain about his dates, though tentative suggestions are beginning to converge around c. 579 – c. 659.<sup>4</sup> It is clear both from his *Life* by Daniel of Raithou (found as a preface to most manuscripts of the *Ladder*) and from the *Ladder* itself that John spent a lifetime as a monastic, both as a cenobite and later a hermit, before he began his ascetical writing (at the behest of his friend John, abbot of the nearby monastery of Raithou). His work is based on his experience, but an experience steeped in the monastic and ecclesiastical traditions of Egypt, Palestine, Cappadocia, and of course the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>5</sup>

The structure and literary quality of the *Ladder* have been discussed in several places, particularly in the recent book by Johnsen.<sup>6</sup> Although the format of the *Ladder* is such as to suggest a step-by-step instruction manual to perfection, the contents often subvert such a notion. While some steps consciously lead from one to the other in John's mind, there is so much intermingling of terminology and ideas between steps, combined with a sense in which each step contains all the others (particularly the steps of obedience, discernment, humility, and love), that the idea of the ladder cannot be pushed too rigidly.<sup>7</sup> As Luibheid puts it in his preface to his translation of the *Ladder*, countering the notion that the text should be conceived 'in terms of a solid progression up from one firm level to that above it': 'A more

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<sup>3</sup> The major ones include Nau (1902); Martin (1954); Völker (1969); Yannaras (1969, 1971); Hunt (2004), pp. 41-96; Chryssavgis (2004); Müller (2006); Johnsen (2007); and the various introductions to translations of *The Ladder*, by Heppell (1959), Deseille (1978), and Ware (1982). Of these, the only book-length studies are Völker (1969), Yannaras (1971), Chryssavgis (2004), Müller (2006), and Johnsen (2007) (Martin [1954] is a book-length study, but of the illuminations in the manuscript tradition of the *Ladder*). There is as yet no critical edition of the *Ladder*, due in large part to the vast plethora of manuscripts: for convenience, Migne (PG 88) is followed here.

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of the views on this issue (which vary from placing John's death in 603 to 679), see Chryssavgis (2004), pp. 42-4 and Hunt (2004), pp. 53-4. As in the case of Mark, the problem is not helped by the popularity of the name *Ἰωάννης*.

<sup>5</sup> For an assessment of some of the sources underlying the *Ladder*, see Chryssavgis (2004), pp. 31-41. John certainly knew the work of Mark the Monk, at least Mark's analysis of the process of temptation and sin (cf. *Ladder* 15.41-3 [PG 88.896-7CC]), but while he often writes with the same tenor as Barsanuphius and John, they are not directly cited (although Barsanuphius is cited a few times in the ample *scholia*).

<sup>6</sup> Johnsen (2007).

<sup>7</sup> The *Ladder* itself is in fact called *πλάκες πνευματικάί* (spiritual tablets) in the earliest manuscripts, on which see Chryssavgis (1983), p. 17.

appropriate metaphor would be the text of a play or the notations of a musical composition whose internal patterns and consistencies may well be described and established, but which really come to true being only in a living enactment'.<sup>8</sup> And as Ware expresses the structure of the work, in terms particularly relevant for this study: 'In our beginning is our end. In one sense, the supreme aim of the spiritual path is indeed 'theology', the contemplation or vision of God. But in another and perhaps more vital sense, our end-point is our starting-point: penitence'.<sup>9</sup> The concept of repentance, in other words, is found not just in step five, 'on repentance', but in every step, from the beginning 'on renunciation' to the end 'on faith, hope, and love'. With this in mind we can turn to John's *oeuvre*, seeing and assessing it in light of the proposed threefold framework.

*Repentance in John Climacus: initial or cognisant repentance*

Unlike Barsanuphius and John, who tailor their responses to each person, and unlike Mark's treatises, which are generally prompted, it seems, by a specific need and target a specific error, John Climacus' *Ladder* is a treatise directed at a cenobitic community under apparently irenic conditions, and always has cenobitic monasticism in mind (together with its offspring: the eremitic life). But like Barsanuphius, John, and Mark, the Christian life, from its inception, can be seen as contained in the idea of repentance. As a beginning, 'repentance is the renewal of baptism; repentance is a contract with God for a second life'.<sup>10</sup> Repentance is born in the Christian when evil is lessened and gradually extirpated, which is the herald of salvation: 'the lessening of evil gives birth to abstinence from evil; and abstinence from evil is the beginning of repentance; and the beginning of repentance is the beginning of salvation'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Luibheid (1982), p. xxvii.

<sup>9</sup> Ware (1982), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Step 5.1 (PG 88.764B).

<sup>11</sup> Step 26.iii.12-3 (PG 88.1092B).

The monk's initial repentance or conversion should be as focussed and concentrated as possible: 'Let us make a firm beginning, so that when we later slacken this beginning might help us'.<sup>12</sup> Such a beginning can involve confession, even public confession, as in the case of a thief laden with a particularly bad past who comes to a monastery near Alexandria that John was visiting. The abbot, 'that true physician' in the eyes of John, instigates a confession in the middle of the church, which brought about a dramatic tearful conversion in the thief: 'he did not rise from the floor until he had obtained forgiveness for all'.<sup>13</sup> The abbot did this not only for the thief's benefit, 'that from present shame he might escape future shame', but for the benefit of his other monks: 'because there are others in the community with unconfessed transgressions, and I want to encourage them to confess too; for without this no one will obtain forgiveness'.<sup>14</sup> Thus more than in Mark or Barsanuphius and John (though it is clearly present in Barsanuphius and John), a sense of confession as marking the beginning of the repentant process is emphasized by Climacus. Its function is to firmly prick the person's hard heart and bring him to a measure of shame before God at having strayed, to make him cognisant of his fall, bearing his wounds that the healing touch of forgiveness might descend on the soul. It is not envisioned, in other words, as a device for the entrapment of the monk in a state of inward-looking dejection, but rather as a gateway to freedom from the entrapment of his previous life.

That said, John is not advocating a universal 'public penance' rite by any means. He sees it as a useful tool in some cases, but not as a necessary one for all. He gives, for instance, an example of secret repentance: 'I have known a man who sinned openly but repented secretly. I condemned him as a profligate, but he was chaste before God, having propitiated him by a genuine conversion'.<sup>15</sup> This does not exclude the possibility that the

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<sup>12</sup> Step 1.15 (PG 88.636D).

<sup>13</sup> Step 4.22 (PG 88.684C).

<sup>14</sup> Step 4.22 (PG 88.684CD).

<sup>15</sup> Step 10.2 (PG 88.845D-848A).

person may have confessed or sought guidance privately with an elder, but regardless, it shows John's recognition of an initial conversion that was so hidden from view that even he admits to having wrongly judged the sinner.

If the Christian's conscience is not actively awakening the mind to recognition of its fall, this is, according to John, a very bad sign: 'We should be attentive lest our conscience ceases to reproach us, in case this comes not from it being clean, but from our being immersed in wickedness'.<sup>16</sup> The refusal of repentance begets the fear of death, John explains, but a more serious rejection of repentance can lead to the invocation of death out of despair.<sup>17</sup> Death is meant as a spur for repentance, particularly its unknown date. If we knew the day of our death, John tells us, we would wait until that day to hasten to repentance through baptism and the monastic profession, living the rest of our days in iniquity. But because of those days of iniquity, we would be confirmed in the habit of evil, and so, by implication, would not in fact find repentance on the day of our death.<sup>18</sup> Like death, dangers are likewise an incentive to repentance: 'as water in a strait rises up, so the soul that is straitened by many dangers ascends to God through repentance'.<sup>19</sup>

The hope of repentance is always real for John, yet in several places he speaks with trepidation about failed attempts at finding this initial repentance. He relates the story found in the sayings of Anthony in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, about a promising and wonder-working youth who fell into sin, but whose repentance was judged inadequate: 'and what is most astonishing', John tells us, 'even after his repentance, our founder Anthony, grieving bitterly, said of him: 'A great pillar has fallen''.<sup>20</sup> He gives another example elsewhere: 'I have seen one learning a bad habit from another, and although he who taught the bad habit

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<sup>16</sup> Step 5.27-8 (PG 88.780B).

<sup>17</sup> See Step 6.1; 2 (PG 88.793CD).

<sup>18</sup> Step 6.2 (PG 88.794D-796A).

<sup>19</sup> Step 26.iii.5 (PG 88.1086D-1088A). It is perhaps worth noting that both the surety of death and the advent of tribulations were seen as incentives for a person's initial/cognisant repentance in Mark as well as Barsanuphius and John.

<sup>20</sup> Step 15.17 (PG 88.885C). See *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Anthony 14 (PG 65.80BC).

came to his senses, and began to repent, and gave up doing wrong, his repentance was to no effect on account of what his disciple was doing'.<sup>21</sup> Thus John underscores the aspect of personal interrelatedness bound up with repentance: one does not repent as a mere private individual, but as a collaborator in the falls and errors of others.

John gave such examples not to encourage despair in his readers and listeners, but in an effort to evoke a more sincere and conscious repentance in them, a firmer resolve in the seizing of that 'contract with God for a second life'. Being the source of the person's deliverance, the genesis of repentance had to be treated with the utmost seriousness. At the same time, John saw in a clean and sharp about-turn the testimony of hope against the tyranny of despair: 'repentance is the daughter of hope, and the renunciation of despair'.<sup>22</sup>

But such repentance was only a beginning, or a new beginning, and did not exhaust the idea for John. To his mind, repentance in beginners had to lead somewhere; alone it was simply yeast in search of flour, and so bread: 'painstaking repentance, mourning cleansed of all impurity, and all-holy humility in beginners are as distinct and different from each other as yeast and flour from bread'.<sup>23</sup> He explains this 'yeast form' of repentance as 'visible repentance which breaks and refines the soul'.<sup>24</sup> It continues, however, through mourning, and ultimately through humility. This continuation of repentance is what concerns us next, being the second aspect of the proposed framework: existential repentance.

### *Repentance in John Climacus: existential repentance*

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<sup>21</sup> Step 26.6 (PG 88.1061A).

<sup>22</sup> Step 5.1 (PG 88.764B).

<sup>23</sup> Step 25.4 (PG 88.989D).

<sup>24</sup> Step 25.4 (PG 88.989D).

The risk built into John's composition of the *Ladder* is that the language of steps could easily be misunderstood and applied in a spirit of pride and vainglory. There is a current throughout the text that tries to undermine this way of thinking, seeing in pride the monk's utter ruin, no matter what 'step' he thinks he has attained.<sup>25</sup> Thus John warns: 'even if you have climbed the whole ladder of the virtues, keep praying for the forgiveness of sins, listening to Paul's call regarding sinners, 'of whom I am first' (1 Tim 1.15)'.<sup>26</sup> The need for a repentant spirit thus becomes constant in Christian life, always informing the monk's activity and self-perception: 'he who truly keeps record of his actions will consider as lost every day in which he did not mourn, whatever good he may have done in it'.<sup>27</sup>

As in the *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John, the imperative of repentance and mourning always trumps the need for theological sophistication, or wonderworking: 'when we die, we will not be criticized for having failed to work miracles. We will not be accused of having failed to be theologians or contemplatives. But we will certainly have some explanation to offer to God for not having mourned unceasingly'.<sup>28</sup> One kind of theological speculation John especially condemns for its near certain detrimental effect on the repentance of the Christian is 'the disease of the atheist Origen', namely the idea that all would eventually find salvation.<sup>29</sup> It was evident for John that orthodox doctrine should be upheld if true existential repentance could take place. This is not simply because he clearly upholds the orthodox faith as part of his ascetic programme.<sup>30</sup> It is a subtle issue in the *Ladder*, but deserves attention. It can only be properly addressed, however, when something of the nature of this 'lived repentance' is outlined.

At the conclusion of the section on initial repentance in John above, it was shown that repentance in beginners went together with mourning and humility to produce spiritual

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<sup>25</sup> See in particular Step 23 (on pride): PG 88.965B-971B.

<sup>26</sup> Step 28.2 (PG 88.1132BC).

<sup>27</sup> Step 5.25 (PG 88.780A).

<sup>28</sup> Step 7.25 (PG 88.816D).

<sup>29</sup> See Step 5.31 (PG 88.780D).

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Step 6.1 (PG 88.793B), where he speaks of Christ's two natures.

‘bread’. Once this happens, John continues, ‘when this holy three-fold cord or, rather, heavenly rainbow, unites into one power and energy, it acquires its own effects and properties. And whatever you name as an indication of one of them, is a token also of another’.<sup>31</sup> This is explicitly Trinitarian language, and John even names his threefold combination ‘this excellent and admirable trinity’.<sup>32</sup> Repentance, in this case, takes on a different dimension in such a state, being commingled and undividedly united with mourning and humility. Understanding or practising repentance automatically means, for John, understanding and practising mourning and humility: ‘repentance raises the fallen, mourning knocks at the gate of Heaven, and holy humility opens it. This I say, and I worship a Trinity in Unity and a Unity in Trinity’.<sup>33</sup> Already we see that the practice of ascetic life was intimately connected in John’s mind with right belief, a correct dogmatic consciousness. But probing further, it becomes more apparent that for John, existential or lived repentance was inaccessible to the unbelievers and heterodox; it was the exclusive preserve of those in the orthodox faith.

This is made clearer once we consider that in the *Ladder*, humility is the sure sign of true repentance: ‘blessed, truly blessed, is humility, for it makes repentance safe and effective for young and old alike’.<sup>34</sup> And again: ‘God judges our repentance not by our labours, but by our humility’.<sup>35</sup> Humility, in other words, is the gauge by which lived repentance is measured. This is significant in light of the following statement regarding heretics: ‘snow cannot burst into flames; still more difficult is it for humility to abide in a heretic’.<sup>36</sup> The implication is that pursuit of the way of repentance traced by John in the *Ladder* is closed off to all outside the faith, those ‘estranged from God’ as he says elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> This is an

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<sup>31</sup> Step 25.5 (PG 88.992A).

<sup>32</sup> Step 25.5 (PG 88.992A).

<sup>33</sup> Step 25.8 (PG 88.992-3DA).

<sup>34</sup> Step 26.ii.25 (PG 88.1073B).

<sup>35</sup> Step 26.ii.5 (PG 88.1060C).

<sup>36</sup> Literally ‘a heterodox person’: Step 25.17 (PG 88.996B).

<sup>37</sup> Step 1.2 (PG 88.632B).

important point to make for two reasons. Firstly, it places John's theology of repentance firmly within an established ecclesiastical structure: his *Ladder* was not designed for those wanting to repent for the cause of 'perfection' in an abstract sense, but for those repenting before Christ as he was proclaimed by the tradition of the Church.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, it marks a crucial aspect of this kind of ascetic theology's understanding of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Orthodoxy was not important simply for intellectual reasons, and likewise heterodoxy was not detrimental simply because it involved a different theological view on things. Heterodoxy, as a distortion of doctrine brought about by a wilful rejection of (or disobedience before) the Church's teachings, implied for John a fundamental distortion in man's capacity to repent, since it already pointed to a prideful self-assertion which could admit no true repentance, and so no true humility.<sup>39</sup> Contrariwise, the benefit of orthodoxy was its ability, in John's eyes, to bring about genuine repentance and herald the acquisition of that singularly vital virtue: humility.<sup>40</sup>

This is not to say that John conceived the Christian's existential repentance as always coming part and parcel with intellectual adherence to correct doctrine (even if he may have felt it ought to). In the same passage which declares the impossibility for a heretic of finding true humility, he elaborates: 'this belongs to the faithful and pious, and then only once they have been purified'.<sup>41</sup> Abiding in orthodox belief was prerequisite, but it had to be acted upon through a purifying repentance. It may not have been possible according to John for a heretic to find true repentance, but it was also quite possible for a right-believing monk to fall short of a genuine conversion if he did not continually exercise himself in the virtues.

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<sup>38</sup> This tacit but firm recognition of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy in the *Ladder* perhaps contributes more than most other factors to its subsequent widespread popularity in the Byzantine and later Slav Church.

<sup>39</sup> Such an understanding of orthodoxy vis-à-vis heterodoxy has not been considered in treatments of 'the making of orthodoxy' in the early church. At a later date, I would be interested in seeing and showing how this understanding introduces a fresh dynamic to the discussion. For an overview of current approaches to the subject of the formation of orthodoxy, see Williams (ed.) (1989) and now Edwards (2009).

<sup>40</sup> Like Barsanuphius and John, John Climacus could speak of the possibility of salvation with humility alone: 'an angel fell from heaven without any other passion except pride, and so we may ask whether it is possible to ascend to heaven by humility alone, without any other of the virtues', Step 23.6-7 (PG 88.968A).

<sup>41</sup> Step 25.17-8 (PG 88.996B).

Succumbing to guile, for instance, led to a ‘pretence of repentance’.<sup>42</sup> Likewise keeping vigil, fasts, and stillness with irritability expressed merely an appearance of repentance, not its true presence: ‘If we are observant, we shall see that many irritable people practise vigils, fasts, and stillness. For the aim of the demons is to suggest to them, under the pretext of repentance and mourning, just what is likely to increase their passion’.<sup>43</sup>

Living out repentance, then, is certainly a trickier business for John than simply outwardly subscribing to the teachings of the Church. It expresses many, if not all, the struggles of living according to the Gospel precepts:

Repentance is a buyer of humility. Repentance is constant distrust of bodily comfort. Repentance is self-condemning reflection, and carefree self-care...A repentant person is an undisgraced convict. Repentance is reconciliation to the Lord by the practise of good deeds contrary to the falls. Repentance is the purification of conscience. Repentance is the voluntary endurance of all affliction...Repentance is the striking of the soul into vigorous awareness.<sup>44</sup>

It is, in short, ‘the renewal of baptism’,<sup>45</sup> as highlighted in the section on initial repentance above, but a renewal which goes beyond new beginnings to become a continuous effort and discipline.

The expression of such renewal is at its most tangible in the experience of tears. Indeed, John goes so far as to say, ‘greater than baptism is the fountain of tears brought about after baptism, though it might be audacious to say so’.<sup>46</sup> His reasoning, however, is not that tears somehow supplant baptism because of an inherent superiority (which would pit him firmly against Mark the Monk), but that we have a God who is so merciful as to grant that sins committed after the pure gift of baptism (‘which we have all defiled’) be washed away by tears.<sup>47</sup> In his characteristic manner, John is quick to add nuance to this picture of repentance through tears, however. He realizes that not all are prone to shedding tears to the

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<sup>42</sup> Or ‘hypocritical repentance’ (*μετανοίας ὑπόκρισις*): Step 24.4b (PG 88.981C).

<sup>43</sup> Step 8.9 (PG 88.832.CD).

<sup>44</sup> Step 5.1-2 (PG 88.764BC).

<sup>45</sup> Step 5.1 (PG 88.764B).

<sup>46</sup> Step 7.3 (PG 88.804AB). For a treatment of ‘the gift of tears’ in Climacus, see Yannaras (1971), pp. 188-202.

<sup>47</sup> See Step 7.3 (PG 88.804AB): ‘if God, in his love for mankind, had not given us tears, those being saved would be few indeed and hard to find’. The apparent tension with Mark the Monk’s theology here is not all that substantial. John is not arguing that tears replace baptism, but that they renew/ cleanse it, which is not far from Mark’s conception of realizing the secret gift of baptism actively through a lived repentance.

same extent: ‘I have seen small teardrops shed with difficulty like drops of blood, and I have also seen fountains of tears poured forth without difficulty. And I judged those toilers more by their toil than by their tears, and I think God does also’.<sup>48</sup>

The exercise of mourning should remain as a constant backdrop in the monk’s life: ‘it is not to a wedding feast that we have been called here, certainly not: but he who has called us here has assuredly called us to mourn over ourselves’.<sup>49</sup> To the monk who begins to punctuate his mourning with a tendency toward high living, John issues a warning in the form of a pithy simile (a device of which he is extremely fond): ‘he who sometimes mourns, and sometimes indulges in luxury and laughter is like a man who pelts the dog of sensuality with bread’.<sup>50</sup> Mourning, when properly practised, ‘is the conditioned sorrow of a repentant soul which adds sorrow to sorrow, as a woman sorrows in travail’.<sup>51</sup> As a facet of repentance, mourning is not to be performed with an exclusively depressive melancholy, however. It is described in the title of the step as ‘joy-making’ (*χαροποιός*),<sup>52</sup> and while it may not allow for worldly wedding feasts, its continual presence nevertheless brings about ‘daily feasting’ in the heart.<sup>53</sup>

As in Mark and Barsanuphius and John, acquiring existential repentance involves a variety of spiritual pursuits, and those particularly emphasized by John Climacus should be underscored. Firstly, the monk’s repentant struggle should include the spirit and practice of confession: ‘confession is like a bridle that keeps the soul which reflects on it from committing sin, but anything left unconfessed we continue to do fearlessly as if in the

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<sup>48</sup> Step 7.9 (PG 88.805C). He similarly warns against having confidence in one’s tears: ‘the man who takes pride in his tears and who secretly condemns those who do not weep, is like a man who asks the king for a weapon against the enemy, and then uses it to commit suicide’, Step 7.14 (PG 88.809BC).

<sup>49</sup> Step 7.7 (PG 88.805A). Cf. Barsanuphius’ statements to the same effect, cited above, p. 155.

<sup>50</sup> Step 7.5 (PG 88.804-5DA).

<sup>51</sup> Step 7.20 (PG 88.813D).

<sup>52</sup> This is, as far as we know, a neologism of Climacus’ devising, although the begetting of joy through mourning was a common trope in ascetic literature, as already seen in Mark and Barsanuphius and John (and intimated by the beatitude ‘blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted’ [Mt 5.4], as it would be read in the monastic context). It inspires the title and content of Hunt’s monograph on this topic: Hunt (2004).

<sup>53</sup> Step 7.12-3 (PG 88.808D).

dark'.<sup>54</sup> Without this spirit of confession, a willingness to open one's wounds to God and one's spiritual father, repentance is stifled, and the wounds simply grow worse.

Together with such a spirit of confession, which is essentially a spirit of self-blame, repentance is proved through the acknowledgment that all the troubles we face are warranted: 'a sign of true repentance is the admission that all our afflictions, and more besides, whether visible or not, were richly deserved'.<sup>55</sup> This also applies to sickness, which when gratefully received as physic from the hand of God, paradoxically brings about healing: 'I saw men freed from their souls' passion by grave sickness, as though it were a kind of penance, and I glorified him who cleanses clay with clay'.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, forgetting the wrongs done to us 'is a sign of true repentance. But he who dwells on them and thinks that he is repenting is like a man who thinks he is running while he is really asleep'.<sup>57</sup> To remember wrongs is to judge the perpetrator of those wrongs, which is another deadly foe of repentance: 'fire and water cannot mix, so also judgment of others cannot mix with one who wants to repent'.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, any form of anger at another chases repentance away: 'nothing is so inappropriate to those repenting as a spirit agitated by anger, because conversion requires great humility, and anger is a sign of every kind of presumption'.<sup>59</sup> In short, humble endurance of indignity, and beyond that, the joyful acceptance of it as a medicine for one's own shortcomings, is the chief characteristic of a lived repentance:

the first and paramount property of this excellent and admirable trinity [repentance, mourning, and humility] is the acceptance of indignity with the greatest pleasure, when the soul receives it with outstretched hands and welcomes it as something that relieves and cauterizes diseases of the soul and great sins.<sup>60</sup>

In his exhortation towards the implementation of this kind of life, John paints a picture of a monastic 'prison' near Alexandria, filled with those repenting with particular

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<sup>54</sup> Step 4.58 (PG 88.705CD).

<sup>55</sup> Step 5.29 (PG 88.780BC).

<sup>56</sup> Step 26.i.5 (PG 88.1017D-1020A).

<sup>57</sup> Step 9.17 (PG 88.844A).

<sup>58</sup> Step 10.3 (PG 88.848A).

<sup>59</sup> Step 8.3 (PG 88.829B).

<sup>60</sup> Step 25.5 (PG 88.992A).

ardour. This section, which comprises much of the material in step five ('On painstaking and true repentance which constitutes the life of the holy convicts; and about the prison'), is a difficult read in light of modern sensibilities (and perhaps in light of most sensibilities at any time), but it provides us with a vivid portrait of the central and abiding place held by repentance in the mind of John and his ascetic milieu.<sup>61</sup>

It is not intended here to provide an exhaustive assessment of the complex portrayal of this prison, a place filled with monks exercising themselves in extreme and at times frightening feats of asceticism. It is John Climacus' perception of this place as the measure of what existential repentance ought to be that is of more immediate relevance. To begin with, it is clear that for John, these monks were not practising their extreme repentance in an affected manner. The fervour of their repentance arose not from a twisted desire for self-harm, he explains, but because these men had received great grace but fallen from it. It was the memory of that grace, that 'consolation', 'dispassion', 'chastity', and 'former confidence', that compelled them to offer such repentance, one fuelled by the desire for a treasure that not many receive, but which they once had, and lost.<sup>62</sup> As Ware puts it in exegeting John, 'only after receiving a glimpse of this heavenly Kingdom can we begin to repent as we should. Otherwise penitence becomes a form of grumbling, an expression of bitterness or self-loathing rather than hope'.<sup>63</sup>

John was so impressed by the attitude and exertions of these men that he declares them 'more blessed than those who have not fallen...because through their fall, they have raised themselves up by a surer resurrection'.<sup>64</sup> He uses their example with enthusiasm to promote the idea of acquiring an existential repentance, or dwelling in 'the land of

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<sup>61</sup> For some contemporary discussion of the 'prison', see Ware (1982), p. 22, and Chryssavgis (2004), pp. 121-2, 138-9.

<sup>62</sup> Step 5.14 (PG 88.773BC).

<sup>63</sup> Ware (1982), p. 44.

<sup>64</sup> Step 15.18 (PG 88.776B).

repentance'.<sup>65</sup> His hope is that 'the holy convicts mentioned above provide you with a rule, a type, a model, and an icon of repentance'.<sup>66</sup> If this is done, 'throughout your life you will need no book at all until Christ the Son of God and God enlightens you in the resurrection of true repentance'.<sup>67</sup> Of note is the reference to books here. In John's vision, the Christian way was not a religion of books or 'the Book', even if Scripture is vital for his ascetic framework.<sup>68</sup> It was rather, on his reckoning, a religion of repentance before Christ who, as 'Son of God and God', enlightens and raises man in his repentance. If this basic principle was adhered to, he maintains, there would be no need for books.

Thus we see John Climacus' strong sense that repentance was applicable to the beginning of Christian life, but likewise to the living out of that life in its totality. So far, his concept of repentance fits well into the proposed framework. It remains to be seen whether he held to an idea of repenting for others, and for an answer, we can begin by remaining with John's experience at the monastery to which the 'prison' was attached, and then move on from his *Ladder* to his treatise *To the Shepherd*.

#### *Repentance in John Climacus: Christ-like repentance*

The monastery in the environs of Alexandria provided Climacus with inspiration and exemplars not only for his approach to an initial repentance (the thief who confessed publicly in church) and an existential form (the 'prison'), but likewise it supplied him with a vision of repenting for one's neighbour, or Christ-like repentance. He tells us: 'if one of them [the monks] committed a fault, he would receive many requests from the brothers to allow them to take the case to the shepherd and bear the responsibility and the punishment'.<sup>69</sup> And again, 'if one of them began a disputation with his neighbour, then another passing by would repent

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<sup>65</sup> Step 5.11 (PG 88.772B).

<sup>66</sup> Step 5.31 (PG 88.780D).

<sup>67</sup> Step 5.31 (PG 88.780D).

<sup>68</sup> On John's use and dependence on Scripture, see Chryssavgis (2004), p. 33.

<sup>69</sup> Step 4.23 (PG 88.685D).

for it and cause the anger to dissipate'.<sup>70</sup> Such repentance was essentially an expression of love, which united with one's brother in his falls and joys: 'a man will recognize his brotherly kindness and genuine love when he sees that he mourns for his brother's sins, and when he rejoices at his progress and gifts'.<sup>71</sup>

This expression of repentance applies not simply to faults committed in the case of our close brethren, according to John, but to those who offend us directly: 'a true sign of having completely mastered this putrefaction [of malice] will not come when you pray for the man who offended you...but only when, on hearing of some catastrophe that has afflicted him in body or in soul, you lament and weep for him as if for yourself'.<sup>72</sup> Becoming a possessor of such Christ-like repentance was inevitably (but not exclusively) bound up in John's mind with the ministry of spiritual fatherhood.<sup>73</sup> A monk's pain, which he would inescapably feel in his efforts to abide in the 'land of repentance', could be dramatically assuaged by this capacity of another to plead for and bear the brunt of his falls and misfortunes. This is tenderly brought out in a story John relates about a monk afflicted with blasphemous thoughts who, try as he might, could not shake them. In desperation, and with great shame, he writes his thoughts on a tablet and presents it to an elder. The elder smiles and tells him to lay his hand on his neck, and declares, 'on my neck, brother, be this sin', and the monk left in peace.<sup>74</sup>

The monk's struggles may have been highly personal ones, but they were not to be engaged with single-handedly. Climacus insists in his first step that the battle of the monk cannot be fought and won alone: 'we need some Moses to be our mediator with God and

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<sup>70</sup> Step 4.23 (PG 88.688A).

<sup>71</sup> Step 4.54-5 (PG 88.705A).

<sup>72</sup> Step 9.5 (PG 88.841CD).

<sup>73</sup> This is the case too for Barsanuphius and John. For more on spiritual direction in the early church, see Hausherr (1991) and Demacopoulos (2007). For this particular aspect, see K.T. Ware's introduction to the English translation of Hausherr's book: Hausherr (1991), pp. vii-xxxiii, and also Ware (1982), pp. 40-3. The concept of spiritual obedience in John has been insightfully assessed in Müller (2006), esp. pp. 205-95.

<sup>74</sup> Step 23.ii (PG 88.980AB). For other instances of this phenomenon of 'le répendant du péché' in hagiography, including the request for the sinner to place his or her hand on the elder's neck, see Gouillard (1974-5), and Barringer (1980), pp. 138-62.

from God, to stand between action and contemplation with his hands stretched out to God in prayer for us, guiding us across the sea of sin and routing the Amalek of the passions'.<sup>75</sup> The role and characteristics of such intercessory love, of what this 'Moses' should be like, is not explained in much detail in the *Ladder* itself, but it is the central concern of Climacus' other work, *To the Shepherd*.

Addressed to a monastery abbot (in all likelihood John of Raithou again), this letter describes in some detail the responsibilities of a shepherd, and how the ministry should be exercised. The true shepherd is a pilot who has 'received spiritual [or 'noetic'] strength from God and from his own toils, and so is able to draw up his ship, not merely from out of the billows, but also from out of the abyss itself'.<sup>76</sup> The context in which shepherding souls can take place is the spiritual father's own inner health which his repentance has brought about. As in John's exhortation to seize upon the 'icon of repentance' presented by the mourners in the 'prison' and so have no need of any books for salvation, the spiritual elder is one who similarly has 'no need of other books', since through his submission to the path of his own repentance 'the tablet of spiritual knowledge is inscribed by the Divine finger' in his heart.<sup>77</sup> If he reaches the measure of no longer needing to weep and lament for himself (though John seems to wonder if this is possible), then he can avail of such activity to intercede for others: 'who is the man that is such a steward of God that he himself no longer stands in need of tears, sighs, and labours, but makes generous use of these before God for the purification of others?'<sup>78</sup>

As in Mark the Monk, such a person becomes a sponsor or guarantor (*ἀνάδοχος*) for his disciples, whose sacrifice, when recognized by each disciple, will move the latter to love

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<sup>75</sup> Step 1.11 (PG 88.633D-636A); cf. *Shepherd* 15 (PG 88.1204B). As in the letters of Barsanuphius and John, Moses serves as the ideal type of Christ-like repentance for John, even more so given his location at Sinai.

<sup>76</sup> *Shepherd* 1 (PG 88.1165B).

<sup>77</sup> *Shepherd* 1 (PG 88.1165B).

<sup>78</sup> *Shepherd* 13 (PG 88.1193A). Cf. Mark the Monk's statement that the dispassionate are under a liability to repent, if not for themselves, then for their neighbour: *Justif* 123 (SC 445.166).

him.<sup>79</sup> This process of sponsorship (*ἀναδοχή*) is ‘properly speaking a laying down of one’s soul on behalf of the soul of one’s neighbour in all things’, although there are lesser levels, such as ‘only bearing responsibility for sins committed in the past, or only for sins committed afterwards’ and finally ‘the kind which accepts [responsibility] on the burden of one’s own commands, because of a lack of spiritual strength and an absence of dispassion’.<sup>80</sup> However, John reminds his reader that in the perfect kind of ‘sponsorship’, the burdens are only borne ‘according to the degree that those received by us cut off their will’.<sup>81</sup> In other words, the efficacy of such a ministry depends on the willingness and obedience of the one for whom it is offered.

Although it might seem unwise in John’s estimation to jump unseasonably towards the kind of bearing of burdens which belongs to the perfect, he is much more sympathetic to doing that than, once having acquired a measure of dispassion, refusing such a task:

There are some men who, beyond their strength, take upon themselves the burden of others by reason of their spiritual love, recalling him who said, ‘Greater love has no man’ and the rest (Jn 13.15). But there are others who have perhaps even received from God the power to act as sponsor for others, yet who do not readily submit themselves to burdens for the sake of the salvation of their brethren. The latter, as ones who do not possess love, I called wretched; but concerning the former, I quoted that which is said somewhere: ‘He that brings forth the precious from the worthless shall be as my mouth’ (cf. Jer 15.19) and again, ‘As you have done, so shall it be to you’ (Ob 1.15).<sup>82</sup>

Attempting this kind of love unprepared is risky, however. To be effective and profitable, it must be done in a spirit of humility, since it can also be done deceitfully, from pride:

I have seen one that was infirm who through faith cleansed the infirmity of another that was infirm by employing praiseworthy shamelessness before God for his sake, in humility laying down his soul for that brother’s soul; and through the healing of the latter, the former healed his own soul too. But I have also seen a man who acted in the same manner, but out of pride, and heard these words of censure, ‘Physician, heal yourself’ (Lk 4.23).<sup>83</sup>

John’s high view of the spiritual physician’s capacity to bring about, through his repentant labours for others, their own repentance and restoration, leads him to describe it as the highest offering one can make to God. This is rooted in his view of the integrity and great

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<sup>79</sup> *Shepherd* 10 (PG 88.1185B). For Mark, see above, p. 119.

<sup>80</sup> *Shepherd* 12 (PG 88.1189B).

<sup>81</sup> *Shepherd* 12 (PG 88.1189B).

<sup>82</sup> *Shepherd* 12 (PG 88.1189C).

<sup>83</sup> *Shepherd* 13 (PG 88.1193B).

potential of every human being. The offering is not some perishable thing, but a living person, healed and restored to Christ: ‘we can offer no gift to God so acceptable as to bring him rational souls through repentance. The whole world is not worth so much as a soul’.<sup>84</sup> This is the content, in John, of Christ-like repentance, expressed *par excellence* in the ministry of spiritual paternity. The spiritual father’s function as co-sufferer and bearer of another’s pains and falls is essentially a Christ-like act, making it of little surprise that in the *Ladder*, a compassionate abbot is portrayed as ‘the image of Christ’.<sup>85</sup>

#### *Repentance in John Climacus: conclusion*

The intention above was by no means to provide an exhaustive treatment of John’s ascetic theology, but rather to test the framework proposed and developed in the chapters on Mark the Monk and Barsanuphius and John of Gaza in the case of the highly influential and summative work of Climacus, who marks the pinnacle and end of the period under examination. The framework, it has been argued, still holds with John, and provides a means of seeing into the kind of ascetic mentality undergirding the *Ladder*’s as well as the *Shepherd*’s composition. It allows insight into John’s conception of the spiritual life as one of abiding repentance, a conception which flows through all the steps of the *Ladder*, and provides a malleable yet stable structure through which his approach to repentance, and the Christian life generally, can be better understood. It remains now to give a brief summary of the findings of this thesis, and in doing so, to address the question of continuity.

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<sup>84</sup> *Shepherd* 13 (PG 88.1196D).

<sup>85</sup> Step 4.33 (PG 88.692B); cf. Step 4.59 (PG 88.709A).

### *Conclusion: Repentance in Christian Late Antiquity and the Question of Continuity*

This study began with a survey of scholarly literature on the theme of repentance, revealing the overarching tendency, particularly in the field of church history, to focus exclusively on the question of the development of ecclesiastical discipline and confession. While biblical studies does not generally suffer from this one-sided approach, the biblical scholar rarely ventures to apply his or her findings to the history of the early church. The chapters that followed aim to contribute a fresh approach to the question, both through a broad re-examination of repentance in Scriptural and some extra-canonical texts, in Classical sources, and in the early church generally, and particularly through a deeper examination of several representative but understudied ascetic theologians of the Christian East.

Chapter two showed how the kind of thinking dominant in these later theologians could be based in a certain hermeneutic of the Septuagint and the New Testament. The raw material for what was to come, it was argued, was present in these as well in extra-canonical but widely respected texts.<sup>86</sup> The Classical use was highlighted at the end of chapter two as important and relevant, but not of governing value, given its differing goals and objectives to what is found in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Chapter three was an attempt to open up the topic of repentance in the early church, challenging the dominant narrative as too myopic in its scope, which has in the process left potentially important if not vital source material untouched or misconstrued. Five points were made in an effort to bring the topic forward. They were offered as a preliminary, rather than as an impregnable or definitive, way of achieving a more reliable picture of the concept of repentance in the early church. We are now, however, in a position to revisit these five

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<sup>86</sup> Much of it is likewise present, I argue below in Appendix I, in texts of more dubious respectability for the later church, namely in the genre of apocalyptic.

points, if only briefly, to see how they might integrate with the ascetic theology of Mark, Barsanuphius and John, and John Climacus.

The first was the multi-layeredness and fluidity of the concept in the New Testament (building on the study in chapter two) and early Christian communities. It is clear that this is borne out in the ascetic theologies examined. Repentance was not singularly definable (as the plethora of definitions given in all the sources attest), and while its goal was stable (likeness to Christ), its expressions could vary widely.

The second point, which dealt with the question of a single or unrepeatable repentance, is not directly treated by the texts (from a chronological perspective, one could hardly expect it), although the emphasis on monasticism as a permanent path of repentance (the profession of which was single and unrepeatable) is clear.

The third point, on rigour and compassion in the early church's approach to repentance is again supported by the monastic sources examined. Novatianism is, for instance, the only named heresy in the *oeuvre* of Mark the Monk.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the goal of Christ-like repentance in the texts reveals a strong partiality to the exercise of compassion towards the fallen, and a constant affirmation of the possibility of repentance (even if the opportunity for false repentance is on occasion highlighted).

The fourth point, on the pivotal role of monasticism in the subsequent interpretation and development of the concept, is inevitably upheld by these influential ascetic theologians, an influence which reached beyond the borders of the monastic polity.<sup>88</sup>

With regard to the last point, on integrating ecclesiastical and monastic repentance, Barsanuphius and John in particular show clear interaction with non-monastics on the living

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<sup>87</sup> It is not clear whether Mark has in mind a living heresy when he refers to the Novatians. It seems likely that he heard such a group was active, but did not know details about them beyond a caricatured portrait of their denial of the possibility and efficacy of post-baptismal repentance.

<sup>88</sup> This is especially clear in the case of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza (who addressed non-monastics in their letters), but is also clear in the afterlife of Mark's and John Climacus' works, the former of which found a prominent place in the popular *Synagoge* of Paul of Evergetis, and the latter of which was essential reading for many devout laymen, including royalty (on which see Chryssavgis [2004], pp. 233-8 and Müller [2006], pp. 400-27).

out of repentance. In a different way, John Climacus also supports this point, seeing as he makes an uncompromising connection between maintaining ecclesiastical orthodoxy and practising repentance. Finally, Mark the Monk likewise presents an integrated view, given his stress on baptism and on the privilege of repentance as the product of the baptismal font.<sup>89</sup>

From the broad strokes of chapter three, attention turned to a more sustained and close analysis of repentance in the chosen ascetic authors.<sup>90</sup> Beginning with Mark the Monk, the proposed framework (of initial/cognisant, existential, and Christ-like repentance) for better understanding the concept was put forward in more detail, and was used to structure the chapter, once the relatively unknown figure of Mark the Monk had been introduced. The various statements and comments made by Mark related to repentance were fitted to this framework, a major emphasis being Mark's stress on the idea of the commandments, which 'bear Christ', and which are summed up in the command to repent.

Next in chapter five, the same framework was applied to a very different set of texts, the *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza. While differences of approach to Mark are clear, such as a much more fervent attachment to the notion of tears and thanksgiving as pathways of repentance, it was seen that the framework nevertheless functioned well as a hermeneutical lens to understand not simply repentance in the correspondence, but the whole approach to Christian life found there. It was suggested that this might well provide an alternative to the various attempts at defining the *παιδεία* evoked by the *Letters*, or the 'school of Christianity' they engender. In this case, it can be argued that for Barsanuphius

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<sup>89</sup> On the key role of John Chrysostom discussed in this section of chapter three, little can be added from these texts, except to restate the association made by later authors between Mark and Chrysostom, and to point out the evident devotion for Chrysostom held by Barsanuphius and John and their surrounding communities: see *Letter* 464 (SC 451.560-4).

<sup>90</sup> The need for more sustained and close readings of patristic texts was highlighted in chapter one, but can be re-emphasized here. To my mind, it has rightly been pointed out by Driscoll and Hunt that the study of repentance and mourning in the early church is best served not by compendia of patristic quotations, but by more engaged readings of specific authors, in Driscoll's case Evagrius, and in Hunt's Ephraim the Syrian, Isaac the Syrian, John Climacus, and Symeon the New Theologian: see Driscoll (1994); Hunt (2004), esp. pp. 36-7.

and John, living out the Christian way was a question of learning the art of repentance, which culminated in the act of burden-bearing (or Christ-like repentance): in short, Christianity was for them a school of repentance.

A final test of the proposed framework's viability was made at the beginning of this chapter with John Climacus. Since his work (most likely written some time in the first half of the seventh century) crystallizes for his own time and future generations much of the Christian ascetic theology that had gone before him, it was deemed suitable to end with his *Ladder* and *To the Shepherd*. Here again, while certain strands vary from Mark and Barsanuphius and John, such as his more frequent and explicit mention of auricular confession,<sup>91</sup> and his more graphic treatments of the dramatic ascetic feats performed by some penitents, the framework still proves useful for arranging and understanding the material.

The essential thesis proposed in this dissertation is that the threefold framework of initial/cognisant repentance, existential repentance, and Christ-like repentance provides an effective tool for appreciating the varied approaches to both repentance and Christian self-identity more broadly in Eastern Christian ascetic literature. Moreover, care has been taken to show that such a framework should not be divorced from the interpretation of Scripture or the traditions, practices, and ideals of the early church. The idea that all of Christian life—from its beginnings in coming to one's senses, to its greatest fulfilment in laying down one's life for others and the benefit of the world—could be contained within this one concept of repentance, has been relatively unexplored, and while good studies exist, they tend to be brief.<sup>92</sup> In addition, the proposed framework challenges the assumptions and tendencies of most scholarship in the field of early church repentance, since it takes the topic out of a one-sided preoccupation with confession and ecclesiastical discipline, and places it in the context

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<sup>91</sup> Mark does not mention confession, but Hausherr argues that it comes across as a presupposition: Hausherr (1990), pp. 156-7; cf. the elder-disciple motif in *Causid* and *Nic*.

<sup>92</sup> I have in mind Ware (1980), Chryssavgis (1990), Rapp (2005), pp. 71-99, and Hunt (2004), esp. pp. 3-48.

of the richly varied approaches to repentance found in the sources themselves (where, of course, the questions of ecclesiastical discipline and confession find their proper place).

To conclude, however, the case for continuity can hardly be closed simply on the basis of the study set forth here. What has been offered is a guide for the interpretation of the way in which many Christians, particularly ascetic Christians, identified themselves in late antiquity, and how they conceptualized their life's journey: as one of growing in likeness to Christ, which was always to be cultivated through the art of repentance.

## *Epilogue*

### *Research Implications*

The claims of this study have centred on the concept of repentance as perhaps the most basic conditioning factor of Christian life in late antiquity, particularly as expressed in Greek monastic sources of the fifth to seventh centuries. The findings of the thesis, because they point to a pervasive way of thinking and acting in this period, raise important questions beyond their immediate context which call for further study. In this epilogue, some of these questions will be raised, before a general conclusion is offered. Such questions include: the formation of Christian self-identity, the impact of monastic ideas of repentance on the day-to-day life of the Byzantine empire, and their relationship to Eastern Christian mysticism.

### *1. Repentance and the formation of Christian self-identity*

The study of Christian identity/identities and the processes and ways in which they were formed in the early decades and centuries of our era has occupied an important place in recent scholarship.<sup>1</sup> New avenues, moreover, are being explored to facilitate such study of the emergence and distinctiveness of Christianity. These are not necessarily confined to the methods, valuable as they are, of previous scholarship, methods well summarized by Judith Lieu:

A classic way [of approaching the question of the emergence of Christians and Christianity], exemplified in numerous Histories of the Church, was to trace the development of distinctive structures—namely forms of ministry, of membership and discipline, of collective decision-making, and of worship and ritual—and also of distinctive patterns of belief, particularly as articulated through but not limited to creeds, as each of these evolved in dynamic relationship with the creative interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures and with the authority accorded to a growing new body of texts and tradition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Among the most significant recent contributions are: Cameron (1994), Young (1997), Lieu (2004), Leemans (ed.) (2005), and Stroumsa (2009). See also the analyses of the formation of the ascetic self in Flood (2004), esp. pp. 144-74 and Valantasis (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Lieu (2004), p. 2.

By exploring repentance in this thesis less with reference to the rise of a distinctive structure (penitential discipline) than to the nuances and various applications of the concept in the sources, a new avenue has emerged for the study of early Christian identity. While most recent studies have homed in on the concepts of martyrdom, rhetoric, asceticism, and texts, a place could likewise be made for the concept of repentance, for which this study would serve as an initial contribution. In particular, the suggested threefold framework gives a definite shape to repentance in the early church, and so a definite shape to the self-understanding of Christians in the period, exemplified by but not limited to, the monastic movement.

## *2. The impact of monastic ideals of repentance on the broader life of the empire*

A second, and related, question for further study is that of the influence of monastic concepts of repentance on the general populace of the empire. The suggestion was made in a preliminary way that monastic and institutional ideals of repentance were being integrated and presented to the empire at an early stage, particularly through the popular preaching of John Chrysostom. But how these ideals played out beyond monastic and homiletic texts is more difficult to determine, yet deserves further scrutiny. A taste of what might be found was given in the chapter on Barsanuphius and John, where the influence of these ascetics and their concept of repentance extended throughout the surrounding desert, towns, and cities.

Other sources, however, deserve investigation. For instance, the place of repentance in the abundant Egyptian papyri and ostraca collections found from this period would merit analysis in this context.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, a detailed analysis of the role of ecclesiastical canons on the ordering of society would shed much light on this issue, as would the role of repentance

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. the arguments of C. Rapp from these sources regarding the intercessory and Christ-like perception of the holy man at this time: Rapp (2005), esp. pp. 68-71.

in Byzantine apocalyptic.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the penitential dimension of ecclesiastical art could profitably be approached for answers.<sup>5</sup> An especially striking instance of the latter is found in the narthex mosaic of Hagia Sophia. A careful study by Oikonomides links the mosaic—which portrays Christ seated, flanked by medallions of the Virgin Mary and the Archangel Michael, and an emperor prostrate in repentance at Christ’s feet—to the episode of Leo VI’s (866-912) fourth marriage, for which he was severely reprimanded by the ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>6</sup> The image, which fixes the idea of a permanent repentance from the moment the church is entered, seems to have been commissioned by Leo VI himself.

Pursuing the study of repentance in the daily life of the empire as it compares with the monastic ideology set out in this study could well show that the concept of structuring Christian life around striving in repentance reached far beyond the monastic polity, even if it was, as a rule, the monks who were generally considered masters of the art.

### *3. Repentance and the mysticism of the Christian East*

The monastic movement of Eastern Christendom is popularly known for its stress on the mystical union of man with God.<sup>7</sup> The names of Origen, Evagrius, and Pseudo-Dionysius are especially prominent in assessments of mysticism in Eastern Christianity, since their work, it is argued, paves the way for the (more characteristically Western) idea of three stages or ways of mystical ascent: purgative, illuminative, and unitive. The texts examined here, however, have seemingly little to contribute to the topic of Eastern Christian mysticism. And

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<sup>4</sup> For the influence of apocalyptic on the life of the Byzantine Empire, see Baun (2007). An assessment of repentance in early apocalyptic, though without a detailed investigation of its repercussions on the broader life of the empire, can be found in Appendix I below.

<sup>5</sup> Dassmann (1973) provides a study of penitence in early Christian art. See also Maguire (1977).

<sup>6</sup> See Oikonomides (1976). Cf. the Western parallel of Louis the Pious’ penance, discussed in de Jong (2009).

<sup>7</sup> The association of Eastern Christianity with mysticism was most forcefully made by V. Lossky: Lossky (1957). For the early development of the Christian mystical tradition, see Louth (2007). For the topic of Christian mysticism and mystics generally, see McGinn (2006), Harmless (2008), and Nelstrop, Magill, and Onishi (eds.) (2009).

yet, their popularity and centrality to the wider tradition would normally imply, for a tradition seemingly steeped in mysticism, a clear mystical bent.

The problem, in a sense, has to do with the various meanings ascribed to ‘mysticism’. But if one takes a common denominator along the lines of ‘the way of union with or knowledge of God’, the question of mysticism in the texts studied does indeed become a live issue. It is not, however, an issue easily solved using popular categories of mystical ascent (such as purification, illumination, and union/deification), or a theoretical framework of the ‘practical’ and ‘contemplative’ life. Rather, if mysticism in these and arguably many other late antique Christian texts is to be understood, it should be approached from the perspective of repentance. The threefold framework of initial, existential, and Christ-like repentance fits more naturally, it seems, the ethos and mysticism of these ascetics. This need to underscore repentance was at least tacitly acknowledged in Lossky’s *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, where he describes the concept in ascetical theology as ‘not a stage but a condition which must continue permanently, the constant attitude of those who truly aspire to union with God’.<sup>8</sup> Showing the three broad ways in which this idea of a permanent repentance was understood in the sources could in turn contribute to our understanding of mysticism in the early church, particularly among the monastics, as a way of ascent constantly conditioned by one kind of repentance or another.

### *General Conclusion*

In concluding this study of repentance in Christian late antiquity, it might be well to return to the basic pastoral concern for humility of heart underlying exhortations and analyses of repentance in the early church. The simple maxim of the penitential psalmist, that ‘a contrite and humble heart God will not despise’ (Ps 51.17), which could be supplemented with the call to learn and imitate the humble-heartedness of Christ (Mt 11.29), lay at the root of talk

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<sup>8</sup> Lossky (1957), p. 204.

about repentance. *Μετάνοια* was expressed through all sorts of gestures and virtues—sighing, regret, thanksgiving, endurance, confession, tears, mourning, obedience, humility, compassion, love—but at the same time, it was always a matter of the heart, and of the correct ‘disposition of soul’ (*διαθέσις ψυχῆς*) in the exercise of such gestures and virtues. As such, repentance was always a concrete yet elusive category in early church and ascetic discourse. It could be seen by its fruits, but it could be truly known only in the experience of the softening of the heart before God. Such softening was directed towards the assimilation of the humility of the ascetic’s master, Christ (whether directly or through ‘the image of Christ’, being the ascetic’s elder or abbot), a humility which laid its life for the other.

Thus the threefold framework of initial/cognisant repentance, existential repentance, and Christ-like repentance, while intended to be a useful and helpful tool for gauging the work of these ascetic theologians, in a sense breaks down on its own terms: the first merging with the second, and the second leading naturally and imperceptibly to the third. Nevertheless, without providing some means by which scholars might logically structure the thought of the ascetics, the concept risks the fate of being either impenetrable, or badly misunderstood. With this in mind, the framework of initial to existential to Christ-like repentance has been offered and defended, with the hope that further study will either vindicate such a model for the study of early church repentance and the development of Christian self-identity, or adjust it in light of further evidence that has yet to be considered.

## *Appendix I: Apocalyptic repentance in the early church*<sup>1</sup>

To students of early church history, the genre of apocalyptic often presents itself as both a mine and a minefield. While in many cases apocalyptic material undoubtedly conceals a great deal of rich and fascinating detail about specific people, communities, and contexts, the reconstruction of this detail is notoriously difficult.<sup>2</sup> One of the ways in which apocalyptic can be somewhat contextualized and more fully appreciated as a vibrant expression of early Christian reflection is in the examination of the various theological motifs that run through apocalyptic texts.<sup>3</sup> Here the intention is to bring out the crucial theme of repentance in popular Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature (excluding Gnostic apocalyptic),<sup>4</sup> discussing the various forms it takes, and how it interacts with non-apocalyptic approaches. Throughout, the common approach to apocalyptic as a kind of peripheral and unintegrated form of Jewish and Christian piety within the early church will be challenged, as it emerges that when it comes to the Judaeo-Christian master theme of repentance, apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic share a good deal of ground.

Apocalyptic repentance will be seen firstly as linked with a widespread and common repentance, usually heralded by the coming day of judgment. In the second case, repentance will be seen expressed as an individual responsibility which must be exercised before physical death or the day of the Lord. This provides the gateway to knowledge and virtue even in this life, and was embraced by all the great patriarchs (to whom long penitential sequences and/or prayers are often ascribed). Thirdly, there is an idea in some texts of the ‘usurpation’ of repentance by the protagonist, usually in the context of the repentance of the dead, wherein repentance on behalf of the condemned dead proves, to varying degrees,

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Peter Brown for suggesting and advising me on this topic.

<sup>2</sup> Impressive and rewarding examples of work on apocalyptic from the perspective of the early church historian are Carozzi (1994) and VanderKam and Adler (eds.) (1996).

<sup>3</sup> The dominant motif looked at in this regard is, of course, eschatology, for which see Daley (1991) and Hill (2001).

<sup>4</sup> For some treatment of repentance in Gnosticism, see Dubois (1998).

effective. It will be shown that these three concerns, far from supporting the scholarly tendency to marginalize apocalyptic in the context of early church history, point to the integrality of these texts within the narrative of early Christian development, mainstream or otherwise.

In a short but concentrated work on ‘Spirit and Tradition in the Bible’, Benedict Englezakis grapples with the rise of the phenomenon of apocalyptic thus: ‘apocalyptic is not a literature...but an attitude of mind and soul, and a special feeling born out of the great contrast between the ideal and reality’.<sup>5</sup> What inspires the apocalypticist is not, Englezakis argues, primarily a desire to create or conform to a specific kind of sensationalist or extravagant literary form. The inspiration springs instead from an acute sense of the catastrophic disparity between this world and the heavenly world, a disparity which is then expressed in dramatic language suitable to its perceived cosmic importance.

The bringing to naught of the tragic conflict between the rule of this world and the rule of God is in most apocalyptic the task, to be sure, of a specific messiah-figure (in Christian apocalyptic invariably Jesus Christ). And yet, it is also just as emphatically the task of human repentance, something perhaps recognized implicitly in scholarship, but not generally explored. This repentance, moreover, is outlined in a variety of ways and given several forms and faces that deserve some attention for their frequent comparability to the forms and faces of repentance in non-apocalyptic texts.

#### *Repentance as widespread return to the Lord*

In broaching the topic of the end of days, but also when speaking of contemporary situations, apocalyptic texts quite often betray a sense of great soteriological possibility. We hear, for instance, about ‘the Day of Repentance’ which seems to act synonymously with what would

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<sup>5</sup> Englezakis (1982), p. 43.

more usually be referred to as ‘the Day of Judgment’.<sup>6</sup> It is associated, in any case, with the ‘final consummation’,<sup>7</sup> and with drawing down the favour of the Lord. In liturgical life, it could well be this apocalyptic topos that lies behind the introduction of the otherwise obscure ‘day of repentance’ into the liturgical calendar in Egypt for October 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>8</sup>

Once this eschatological day occurs, however, there is no more repentance for humanity. As the Syriac *Apocalypse of Baruch* puts it:

When the Most High brings all these things to pass, there will be there no further opportunity for repentance, no set times nor appointed seasons, no possible change in ways of life, no place for prayer nor offering of petitions, no acquiring of knowledge nor giving of love, no place of repentance for the soul nor supplication for offences, no intercession by the fathers nor prayer by the prophets nor help from the righteous.<sup>9</sup>

This idea is put slightly differently by Hermas, whose efforts were directed towards maintaining “‘singleness of heart” in a sophisticated urban community’.<sup>10</sup> For him, the days of repentance are open to all ‘even to the last day’ except for the saints, who should really have no need of repentance henceforth, and should cast the idea of repenting again far from their minds.<sup>11</sup> In the *Apocalypse*, while a widespread repentance is not explicitly associated with the end of the world, it is required of the seven churches who now face that end imminently (cf. Rev 2-3).

The great show of repentance desired by the apocalypticist is not conceived as occurring spontaneously, without external persuasion. This external persuasion is provided first and foremost by the apocalyptic text itself, which serves to judge and rouse the reader with its dramatic revelations, but frequently the text will also promote the cause with mention of famous exemplars and/or preachers of repentance. Thus we find in apocalyptically-charged texts such as the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* an emphasis on the repentance of the individual patriarchs and the consequent example this provides; we hear of Adam and

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<sup>6</sup> *Assumption of Moses* 1.18; cf. Syriac *Apocalypse of Baruch* 85.2. Most of the apocalyptic material cited here can conveniently be found translated in Sparks (ed.) (1984) or Elliott, J.K. (trans.) (1993).

<sup>7</sup> *Assumption of Moses* 1.18.

<sup>8</sup> Mentioned in *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 1357.4.

<sup>9</sup> Syriac *Apocalypse of Baruch* 85.12-3.

<sup>10</sup> See Brown (1989), p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Shepherd of Hermas* Vis.2.2 (SC 53.90).

Eve's repentant life in the *Life of Adam and Eve*; of Noah's message of repentance,<sup>12</sup> and of Enoch who announces the possibilities of repentance,<sup>13</sup> and is sent with Elijah as a preacher of turning to the Lord at the end of the world.<sup>14</sup> The function of making 'penitents of all the great figures of Jewish history' noted by Dirksen,<sup>15</sup> and of emphasizing their role as preachers of such penitence, is to the apocalyptic mindset a means for evoking a similar repentance in the audience as the dread and final day approaches. Yet this idea of preaching a definitive repentance to the people is by no means a monopoly of apocalyptic texts. Thus the emphasis on Noah as a preacher of repentance found in Book 1 of the *Sibylline Oracles* surfaces also in *I Clement*;<sup>16</sup> Enoch acts in the Wisdom of Sirach as an 'example of repentance to all generations' (Wis 44.16);<sup>17</sup> the 'place of repentance' mentioned in the apocalypses of Ezra and Baruch,<sup>18</sup> figures in Wis 12.10, Heb 12.17, and *I Clement* 7; and so on.

Where the apocalyptic desire for an extensive if not universal reconciliation with the Lord appears, it should perhaps first of all be seen in the context of similar sentiments in Scripture. The Hebrew prophetic literature as a whole, to begin with, has as a chief aim to convey a message of national repentance.<sup>19</sup> The theme of a returning prophet who will preach repentance is rooted in Mal 4.5 and from there in the narratives of John the Baptist in the New Testament. The turning of the nations is a prevalent theme in Third Isaiah (55-66) and is clearly seen in Ps 22.27: 'all the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD'. Finally, the idea that the arrival of the day of judgment will coincide with a day of

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<sup>12</sup> *Sibylline Oracles* 1.129.

<sup>13</sup> *I Enoch* 39, 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Apocalypse of Peter* 2.

<sup>15</sup> See Dirksen (1932), p. 132.

<sup>16</sup> *I Clement* 7 (SC 167.112).

<sup>17</sup> For a summary of scholarship on the relationship between Sirach and apocalyptic, see Coggins (1998), pp. 73-5.

<sup>18</sup> *2 Esdras* 9.11; *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* 85.12

<sup>19</sup> See Raitt (1971).

repentance is perhaps nascent in Matt 24.30, in which the second coming of Christ will be accompanied by mourning from ‘all the tribes of the earth’.

All this brings up the frustrating question of how we are to define apocalyptic, and also raises the issue of how independent the apocalyptic genre is from other Scriptural and patristic literature. Von Rad’s famous proposal that apocalyptic (at least Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic) has its roots firmly in the wisdom tradition has not gained wide acceptance, and it has been recognized that one can find proto-apocalyptic material throughout the Hebrew Bible.<sup>20</sup> Repentance is a rich theme for probing these questions since so much of all Judaeo-Christian literature is concerned at some point with the concept. By seeing in what ways many so-called apocalyptic texts ally themselves with other non-apocalyptic texts when dealing with repentance, we can appreciate more fully the frequent coinherence of the apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic worlds, and begin to treat apocalyptic more boldly as a key component in the fabric of mainstream Christian society, rather than as simply a marginal and somewhat bizarre phenomenon. To further this analysis, the concept of repentance as it applies to the individual in apocalyptic will be treated followed by an appraisal of repentance for the dead in apocalyptic, paying particular attention to the *Visio Pauli*.

#### *Repentance as individual responsibility*

Perhaps surprisingly, more attention is paid to individual repentance in apocalyptic texts than to widespread and/or universal repentance. This only comes as a surprise, however, if apocalyptic is pre-conceived as necessarily concerned primarily with dramatic eschatology. As delineated by Aune and others, the term apocalyptic is used in predominantly three ways:

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<sup>20</sup> On which see Hanson (1979). For von Rad’s argument, see von Rad (1972). The presence of much apocalyptic as well as non-apocalyptic material at Qumran likewise suggests less hard-and-fast divisions between religious genres at the time.

as a literary genre; as an eschatological stance; and as a type of collective behaviour.<sup>21</sup> These should not be confused, and here we are dealing with the first use, which in some instances may entail an apocalyptic eschatology and/or a certain apocalyptic group, but in many does not. As revelation, apocalyptic can come in any number of shapes and sizes, being bound only by the confines of the author's own 'heavenly vision' or in some cases the biblical narratives associated with the text's alleged protagonist (Enoch, Adam, etc.).

The vision that comprises the *Visio Pauli* or *Apocalypse of Paul* (written, or at least substantially completed, around 388, probably in Egypt) has more than any other apocalypse a resounding message of repentance. It begins with Paul hearing the word of the Lord in the third heaven commissioning him to preach repentance to the people, all the while reproaching their ungodliness. Great emphasis (the length depending on the translation and recension of the text) is placed on the longsuffering of God towards humanity and the repugnancy of human sinfulness in the eyes of the rest of creation. We hear complaints from the sun, the moon, the stars, the sea, the waters, and the angels, all of whom can no longer bear the debauchery of man, yet who submit to God's decision to continue ministering to the people, a decision concluded with the refrain 'until they turn and repent; but if they do not return, I will judge them'.<sup>22</sup>

The ensuing revelation of heaven and hell, and of souls leaving the earth to go to one or the other, while it seems in some ways to abandon this initial summons to repentance, in fact functions to reinforce the message. The details of how and why certain people with certain virtues, shortcomings, or sins are rewarded or punished in particular ways and degrees is not an exercise in celestial curiosity for its own sake. It is designed to drive home to the audience that one day they will be assigned one or other of these positions in the afterlife. This serves to motivate repentance not only in the grievously sinful, but also in the

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<sup>21</sup> See Aune (2006), p. 1 and VanderKam and Adler (eds.) (1996), p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Visio Pauli* 4-10.

less sinful, who can always strain to be admitted to a higher bliss in the kingdom. No more chilling a reminder of the need for this-worldly repentance comes with the narration of the judgment of a certain soul, who implores weeping for mercy of the Lord but will not confess that he has sinned. Knowing the lie, God condemns him, though with the note that ‘if [the soul] had repented five years before it died, even for one year, all the evil which it committed before would be forgotten, and it would have pardon and remission of sins: but now let it perish’.<sup>23</sup> While repentance appears to be offered to the soul after the individual’s bodily demise, its earthly unrepentant attitude has carried over as a permanent mark in the afterlife, and thus even apparently genuine attempts at repentance are discovered to be fatefully empty. One is reminded of the passage in Heb 12.17 regarding Esau who, ‘when he would have inherited the blessing, was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears’.

As Carrozi observes from this and other passages in the *Visio Pauli*, the idea of repentance is bound up with the concept of oblivion.<sup>24</sup> While a person’s evil is forgotten through repentance on earth, in the absence of repentance the person as a whole finds himself forgotten from the presence of God. It is crucial then that the audience does not lose its precious time for repentance. They must bring their faults to remembrance in a spirit of contrition, thereby pleasing their angelic ministers and delivering their souls. The burden of expectation in the *Visio Pauli* is thus on each individual soul, pointing to his or her unique responsibility to secure at least some form of salvation through the medium of repentance. The text, via its detailed description of the fate of discrete souls, goes beyond much other apocalyptic material related to repentance in that it conveys much more than a generic call to widespread repentance. Without insisting on the point, it is tempting to see some kind of catalogue of ecclesiastical penances for different sins encoded in the text. It seems to

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<sup>23</sup> *Visio Pauli* 17.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Carozzi (1994), pp. 167-8.

demonstrate, that is, a keen interest in the categorizing of different sins and their various punishments for a specific reason, and while this is done from a post-mortem perspective, it is evidently meant to reflect on the conduct and reaction of Christians towards sin *ici-bas*.

Repentance as the lot more clearly of the individual rather than the group is brought out in a number of other apocalyptic texts. *I Enoch* speaks of four ministering angels, the fourth of which (Phaniel) has as his task the coaxing of the chosen towards repentance that they might attain eternal life.<sup>25</sup> In the *Vision of Esdras*, we hear that ‘the elect will go to eternal rest by virtue of confession and penance and the abundance of their works of mercy’.<sup>26</sup> This picture of angelic ministry and individual confession/repentance ‘from the whole heart’ is of course what we find in the *Shepherd of Hermas*. And the text’s assessment of repentance as ‘great understanding’<sup>27</sup> finds its elaboration in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, where Gad explains the concept thus: ‘true repentance, as God understands it, destroys ignorance, drives out darkness, enlightens the eyes, gives knowledge to the soul, and leads the mind to salvation. And what it has not learned from men, it comes to know through repentance’.<sup>28</sup> The function of repentance here is clearly akin to that of wisdom in wisdom literature, and this passage has a strong wisdom flavour. A more pragmatic approach to what repentance entails is discussed in *The Life of Adam and Eve*, a text which, though not often categorized as apocalyptic (even if it was by Tischendorf), nevertheless is essentially a revelation of the original fallen human lives and their outcome, a disclosure of heaven (Paradise with God) and hell (this world without God) through the eyes of the first-created.

In the *Life* we read:

Eve said to Adam, What is repentance? Tell me, my lord, what sort of penitence should I do? Let us not impose on ourselves too great a strain so that we cannot bear it, with the result that the Lord will not listen to our prayers, and turn his face away from us because we have not done what we promised. My lord, how much penitence do you have in mind? I have indeed brought trouble and tribulation on you. And Adam said to Eve, You cannot do as much as I can, so do only as much as you have strength

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<sup>25</sup> *I Enoch* 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Vision of Esdras* 64.

<sup>27</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas* Man.4.2 (SC 53.156).

<sup>28</sup> *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* 5.

for. I will spend forty days fasting. as for you, get up and go to the River Tigris and take a stone and stand on it in the water up to your neck in the deep part of the river.<sup>29</sup>

These deliberations are striking, and are altogether tailored to the individual. Adam will repent in such-and-such a way according to his strength, and Eve in another because of her weakness. As the story pans out, it becomes clear that repenting according to one's measure is the pathway to peace with God (Eve's failure in this regard has to be compensated by Adam's intercessions on her behalf). Outside apocalyptic, of course, this idea of repenting in a form and manner suitable to one's own needs fast develops in Christian pastoral and monastic theology, something which in a sense ties these apocalyptic texts closely to mainstream theological thought. In advocating a deeply personal repentance, certain apocalyptic texts thereby prove their 'orthodoxy', as it were.

The question of their canonicity is not the sole criterion for acceptability. It is only when we understand how their content was theologically and inherently acceptable rather than how the texts were canonically rejected that we can begin to come a step closer to understanding how and why this genre was as popular and relatively unsuppressed throughout the Christian world as the proliferation of extant manuscripts of apocalyptic (and especially of the *Visio Pauli*) indicates. The concept of repentance was one such theological *idée maîtresse* whose strong presence in much apocalyptic in a form, moreover, consonant with the NT call to repent for the sake of the kingdom, accounts at least to some degree for this unsuppressed popularity.

### *Repentance for the dead*

The presence in widely circulating apocalyptic texts of more-or-less acceptable anthropological and theological premises surely accounts to some extent for their vibrant survival in varying contexts. At the same time, there is of course a more obvious reason for

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<sup>29</sup> *Life of Adam and Eve* 5-6.

their popularity throughout the Christian world. This is bound up with the inevitable appeal of a genre bent on disclosing secrets, whether through revealing the biography and sayings of some otherwise mysterious yet compelling figure (Adam, Enoch, Noah, Moses, Isaiah, Melchizedek, etc.); unfolding the geography and contents of the afterlife; detailing future and particularly eschatological events; and so on. Part of this appeal includes the broaching of topics that more conventional genres would normally dismiss, ignore, or discuss too briefly, inconclusively, and so unsatisfactorily. One of these issues of which the curious Christian was surely cognisant is the question of repentance for the dead.

The horror that the souls of close ones departed, or one's own soul, might be in a state of irredeemable chastisement in the afterlife was a source of sincere reflection for the apocalypticist. Under the cover of his or her pseudonymity, he or she could, with a measure of safety (and, for those who read the work as genuine, with a measure of authority), elaborate on this theme. The *Visio Pauli*, for instance, approaches the problem on several occasions. At first we are left without hope. Paul is brought to 'a place of sundry and diverse torments, full of men and women', who are there for not having put their trust in the Lord, that he could be their helper. They weep and groan and cry for mercy to the Lord, 'and no man had mercy on them'. Having taken the scene in, Paul himself begins to mourn and lament 'for the race of men'. The accompanying angel then says to him: 'Why do you mourn? Are you more merciful than God? For although God is good and knows that there are torments, he patiently bears with the human race, leaving each one to do his own will for the time that he dwells upon earth'.<sup>30</sup>

Things change, however, when Paul is faced with those who deny the resurrection. This time he initiates the weeping and lamentation, exclaiming, 'it were better for us if we had not been born, all we that are sinners'. On seeing this, those in torment 'also cried out

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<sup>30</sup> *Visio Pauli* 32.

and wept, saying: Lord God, have mercy upon us'.<sup>31</sup> Instead of falling on deaf ears, their supplication meets with results. Michael descends from heaven with all the host of angels. Borrowing from and elaborating on Gabriel's solemn pronouncement in Lk 1.19, he declares: 'I am he that stands in the presence of God always. As the Lord lives, in whose presence I stand, I do not cease one day or one night from praying unceasingly for the human race'. He explains that his prayers are for those living on the earth, and that these in torment have now lost their time for repentance. However, he continues,

now weep and I will weep with you and the angels who are with me with the well-beloved Paul, if perchance the merciful God will have pity and give you refreshment. And hearing these words they cried out and wept greatly, and all said with one voice: Have pity on us, Son of God! And I, Paul, sighed and said: O Lord God! have pity on your creature, have pity on the sons of men, have pity on your image.<sup>32</sup>

Then follows an appearance of Christ, who for the sake of the prayers of the angels and Paul, will grant a single day and night of respite to the tormented souls each year, at Easter.<sup>33</sup>

This relatively lenient attitude can be contrasted with a similar episode in the *Apocalypse of Peter*, where those in torment

will say with one voice: have mercy upon us, for now know we the judgment of God, which he declared unto us aforetime, and we believed not. And the angel Tartaruchus will come and chastise them with yet greater torment, and say unto them: now you repent, when it is no longer time for repentance, and nothing of life remains.<sup>34</sup>

It should be noted, however, that the vital ingredient for leniency present in the *Visio Pauli*, namely the intercessions of the righteous, is absent in this passage. Furthermore, if M.R. James' reading of the Rainer fragment of the *Apocalypse of Peter* is to be followed, we find the sentiment that the righteous have the capacity to intercede fruitfully for sinners of their choosing, who will thereby find baptism in the Acherusian lake and share in the solace of the Elysian Fields.<sup>35</sup> This is again found in the *Sibylline Oracles*,<sup>36</sup> and in a different form

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<sup>31</sup> *Visio Pauli* 42.

<sup>32</sup> *Visio Pauli* 43.

<sup>33</sup> *Visio Pauli* 44.

<sup>34</sup> *Apocalypse of Peter* 3.

<sup>35</sup> See James (1931).

in *Apocalypse of Esdras*. In the latter, Esdras attempts to boldly sacrifice his own soul to hell so that the world (or at least the race of Christians) might be saved: ‘have mercy on the works of your hands, you who are full of compassion and mercy: pass sentence on me rather than on the souls of the sinners; for it is better to punish one soul than to bring the whole world to destruction’.<sup>37</sup> His prayer meets with a rebuttal from God, who argues that he cannot see how he can have mercy on sinners, who have brought his wrath upon themselves. The apocalypse continues with more of the same: Esdras pleading, and God refusing to show mercy. In the end, God summons Esdras’ soul, but he refuses to give it up, saying that without him remaining alive, no one will be left to plead for the world. He also complains that his pleading has not met with any acceptance. Finally, God gives in, ‘and there came to him a voice saying, Esdras, my beloved, whatever you have asked I will grant to each one. And immediately he surrendered his precious soul with much honour’.<sup>38</sup>

The key, it seems, to a hopeful repentance of the lost is not any intention or action on their part. Even when they appear to be repenting in the flames, their prayer in itself is consistently futile. Rather what is required is a sponsored repentance on their behalf by the righteous. Only this can overcome ‘the great gulf fixed’ between hell and the bosom of Abraham. But this was of itself a controversial stance, since the Scriptures seem to have little to intimate such a position.

That said, the subtlety of this idea navigates to some extent around the danger of an Origenistic *apokatastasis*, which would always be viewed with deep suspicion until its outright conciliar condemnation in 553. It does not imply, that is, that the condemned can somehow ‘change their mind’ in hell and be saved, but it approaches their potential for deliverance from a different angle by introducing a new constant: the prayer of the righteous. By virtue of these fervent and self-sacrificial prayers, certain souls can be refreshed or even

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<sup>36</sup> *Sibylline Oracles* 2.330-38.

<sup>37</sup> *Apocalypse of Esdras* 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Apocalypse of Esdras* 7.

rescued from their plight. What is nascent in these apocalyptic texts, in other words, is ecclesiastical prayer for the dead, with a view to avoiding any implication that all are necessarily to be ultimately saved (though in positing the salvation of some, the salvation of all is never clearly ruled out). Mainstream sermons, letters, and treatises would prefer not to approach such a delicate topic head on. While there is certainly, especially within the monastic movement, a growing sense of a sponsored repentance for one's fallen neighbour still living, it is rarely clearly applied to the dead.<sup>39</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In examining three facets of repentance in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic no pretence has been made to completeness. However, an attempt at delineating the main contours of repentance in apocalyptic has been made, and in doing so, the connectedness rather than the strangeness of this genre to the larger church has hopefully been evoked. Whether dealing with a far-reaching 'day of repentance', each individual's burden of repentance, or the more speculative ideas related to repentance for the dead, the wider traditions of the church are being respected. Even when controversial themes are raised such as the fate of the dead, and innovative solutions suggested, the texts are at pains to keep in mind the tradition, in this case that the dead can of themselves no longer find repentance. This in turn invested the texts with a certain respectability and thus popularity, ensuring their continued appreciation within every kind of Christian context, even if the possibility of their canonization was, on the whole, not really an option (with the exceptions of the *Apocalypse* or *Revelation*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*).

In a modest way, this brief appendix has tried to show how Jewish and Christian apocalyptic fits as theologically viable and appealing material in the context of the early church. While it should not be claimed that apocalyptic is univocal on the topic of

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<sup>39</sup> For more on this issue, see Trumbower (2001).

repentance, its recurring exploration of the theme is reflective of mainstream ecclesiastical and monastic concerns. This raises questions firstly about how marginal we should assume apocalyptic was, and also about the basis for the broad appeal of apocalyptic. To be sure, the idea of revealing hidden mysteries of any kind is of itself a justification for their popularity, but this does not account for the particular widespread popularity of some apocalyptic texts over others. Turning to content and theology seems to be the first step in answering this question more satisfactorily, something attempted here with the Judaeo-Christian concept of repentance. Behind the popular texts discussed here, the apocalyptists we find are not wild fanatical sectarians or introverted loners with too much imagination. We are rather faced with Jews and Christians who found in their Scriptures, in their traditions, and no doubt in their own lives, a parched thirst for a better world, one unattainable in purely human terms, yet attainable through the God-given hope of repentance.

## *Appendix II: The saints in the letters of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza*<sup>1</sup>

In this article an attempt is made to approach the concept of the saint in late antiquity from a theological rather than a socio-historical perspective. Using the abundant correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, their conception of the saints will be looked at, together with the unmistakable importance they attached to the saints' prayers and intercessions, and how the saints fit into Barsanuphius and John's broader Christian framework. It will be emphasized that the importance of the *ἄγιοι* is not constrained to their locality, and that their role for the two Gaza ascetics is not at all bound up with projects of self-promotion.

'Above everything, the holy man is a man of power'.<sup>2</sup> Brown's claim has been instrumental in shaping current approaches to the historical and socio-economic place of holy figures in late antiquity. They acted with both compassion and authority, were 'professionals' in a world of amateurs, 'allayers of anxiety', and consequently the '*décisionnaires universel*' of their localities.<sup>3</sup> Brown's presentation is certainly a helpful tool for discovering the use and 'power' of the Late Antique *ἄγιοι* in their socio-historical context, but the argument proposed here works from an alternative angle, namely, the *theological* significance and justification of 'the saints', explored here in the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza.<sup>4</sup> This process has tentatively begun with articles by Rapp and Bitton-Ashkelony on the saint as prayerful intercessor and burden-bearer respectively (with special reference to Barsanuphius and John).<sup>5</sup> Here these beginnings will be built upon with a more direct emphasis on the precise meaning of the saints as it surfaces in the letters.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published as 'Standing in the Breach: the Significance and Function of the Saints in the Letters of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17.3, pp. 459-73: Torrance (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Brown (1971), reprinted in Brown, (1982), pp. 103-52 (this citation at p. 121). See also Brown (1998).

<sup>3</sup> See Brown (1982), pp. 143-49.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, the contribution of Barsanuphius and John to the theme of the 'holy man' figures little in Brown's work.

<sup>5</sup> Rapp (1999) and Bitton-Ashkelony (2006).

<sup>6</sup> A critical edition of the 853 extant letters of Barsanuphius and John has recently been published in five volumes of the *Sources Chrétiennes* series, SC 426 (*Letters* 1-71, 'To Solitaries'), SC 427 (*Letters* 72-223, 'To Solitaries'), SC 450 (*Letters* 224-398, 'To Cenobitics'), SC 451 (*Letters* 399-616, 'To Cenobitics'), and SC 468 (*Letters* 617-848, 'To Laypeople and Bishops'): references and translations here are made from this edition.

Barsanuphius and John were fellow ascetics attached to the monastery of Thavatha under the direction of the abbot Seridos in sixth-century Palestine.<sup>7</sup> Next to nothing is known about their early years. Barsanuphius was of Egyptian origin and had come to the Gaza monastery already, it seems, a seasoned monastic. He was given a cell not far from the monastery, in which he lived in extreme seclusion. He allowed entry to the abbot alone, to whom he dictated his answers to the many and various questions addressed to him. He moved to a new cell some time between 525-27, giving up his old one to his close disciple John,<sup>8</sup> who began to live in much the same way as his master: receiving virtually no one, but counseling by letter those who sought his advice. Both, as a general rule, never left their cells. Neither, as far as we can tell, were members of the clergy, though this is only certain in the case of John.

Their fame grew widely, something indicated by the diversity of the enquirers: from hermits and cenobitic monks to bishops and laypeople. While their spiritual authority was received and perceived as similar, Barsanuphius seems in the main to have been regarded as in some sense ‘greater’: his usual epithet in the letters is ‘the Great Old Man’, and that of John is ‘the Other Old Man’. In the areas of doctrine and teaching, they can safely be regarded as of one mind, though the stylistic and other peculiarities of each have not gone unnoticed.<sup>9</sup> John died in about 543, shortly after the death of the abbot Seridos.

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<sup>7</sup> Information on what is known about Barsanuphius and John (and their milieu) can be found in various places, including: Hausherr (1937); Chitty (1966), pp. 132-40; the introduction to the SC edition of their letters by Neyt and de Angelis-Noah in SC 426:11-46; Chryssavgis’ introduction in Barsanuphius and John, *Letters from the Desert: A Selection of Questions and Responses*, trans. John Chryssavgis (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 7-54; and Hevelone-Harper (2005). Thavatha (about five miles south-west of Gaza) was already noted amongst Christians as the birthplace of the great Palestinian ascetic Hilarion. For more on Palestinian monasticism generally, see Chitty (1966), and Binns (1994).

<sup>8</sup> The identity of John has been the subject of some measure of speculation. For the argument that he should be identified with John of Beersheba, one of the correspondents in the epistolary collection, see Hevelone-Harper (2005), pp. 38-44; Chitty was against this identification: see Chitty (1966), p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> In this regard, see the comments by Neyt and de Angelis-Noah in SC 426:53-61; others have remarked on their difference of approach, as Chitty (1966), p. 133 and Chryssavgis in Barsanuphius and John, *Letters from the Desert*, p. 13. In tendency, Barsanuphius is seen as more ‘inspirational’ and John more ‘practical’ or ‘institutional’.

Barsanuphius, it can only be assumed, died shortly thereafter: with the death of Seridos and then John, his closest earthly companions, he severed all contact with the outside world.

There have been several in-depth studies of these important figures and their letters, particularly with respect to the large and clear window the latter provide onto the monastic as well as social life of the Gaza region in the first half of the sixth-century.<sup>10</sup> Very little, however, has been said concerning their constant recourse to the concept of the prayers, power, and efficacy of the saints. Here this preoccupation and the thought processes behind it will be brought out. Firstly, it will be shown where and when Barsanuphius and John refer to the saints. Next the definition of sainthood in the correspondence will be dealt with, beginning with the question of whether it denotes people living and/or dead, followed by an attempt to outline Barsanuphius and John's theology of sainthood, emphasizing the saints' power of intercession, and including an analysis of the delineation within the correspondence of Christ's authority vis-à-vis the authority of the saint. The essence of what the *Letters* present in their concept of the saints is as follows: a potent image of persons (both living and departed) whose earthly struggle for perfection in the ascetic culture of prayer and repentance fashions them, by grace, as bearers of Christ-like humble love, a love which goes so far as to struggle before God for its neighbors and the world, even to death, and beyond death.

#### *Barsanuphius and John's references to the saints: context and significance*

In an analysis of Barsanuphius and John's ascetic teaching, Chryssavgis outlines its twelve 'fundamental principles': continual vigilance; violence in all things; the gift of discernment; the way of humility; gratitude in all circumstances; heavenly joy; the labour of love; obedience and spiritual direction; not reckoning oneself as anything; the rejection of any 'pretence to rights' (*δικαίωμα*); and finally, as well as pre-eminently, both learning to pray

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<sup>10</sup> The main contributions are: the introductions to SC 426 and 450 (particularly the latter) by Neyt and de Angelis-Noah; Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (eds.) (2004); Hevelone-Harper (2005); and Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006).

and learning to weep.<sup>11</sup> These are indeed all prominent themes in the *Letters*, and both Barsanuphius and John unreservedly emphasize the acquisition of such virtues for progress in the Christian life. At the same time, a great deal of the correspondence comforts and encourages those on this path, not through stressing the need for individual effort alone, but through pointing out the support of the prayers of the *ἄγιοι*. In the following, the extent to which the idea of such support permeates the correspondence will be highlighted, and three key themes underlying its use will be outlined: encouragement, humility, and ecclesial communion.

It remains surprising that the sheer frequency of references to ‘the prayers of the saints’ throughout the correspondence has remained virtually unacknowledged in studies of Barsanuphius and John. It occurs as a phrase (*εὐχὴ /εὐχαὶ /δέησις τῶν ἁγίων* and similar) well over 80 times and is developed as a theme on numerous occasions.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, Lampe makes no mention of Barsanuphius and John in his entry on intercessory prayer, whether that of the living or the ‘saints in heaven’, though he comes close with a mention of Dorotheos of Gaza (a disciple of John).<sup>13</sup> John Chrysostom figures most in this entry, which is interesting in light of the fact that Chrysostom is among the only bishop-theologians revered by name (moreover, as *ἅγιος*) in the correspondence (*Letter* 464).<sup>14</sup> He indeed refers

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<sup>11</sup> See Barsanuphius and John, *Letters from the Desert*, pp. 27-39.

<sup>12</sup> For an idea of the extent to which Barsanuphius and John are preoccupied with the theme of the prayers of the saints, letters mentioning and/or dealing with the topic include: *Letters* 48, 55, 78, 81, 91, 94, 102, 104-5, 125, 186-87, 191, 198, 200, 202-3, 210, 218, 223, 229, 233-35, 237, 249, 255, 257-60, 264-65, 269, 286, 305, 327, 333, 341, 360, 369-70, 372, 374, 385, 388, 390, 434, 449, 461, 482, 493, 498-99, 523, 553, 559, 567-69, 576, 582-83, 598, 601, 604, 613-14, 616, 666, 683, 690, 704-6, 718, 769, 824, 826, 832, 837, 840; the same concept is found in the prologue to the epistolary collection. To my knowledge, no other patristic or Byzantine theologian comes anywhere near such frequency.

<sup>13</sup> Lampe (1961) s.v. *εὐχὴ* (I); it will be shown below that Barsanuphius and John’s references to the saints can designate the living and/or the dead.

<sup>14</sup> Barsanuphius also shows reverence for the Cappadocian Fathers in *Letter* 604, but does not name them (they are named by the inquirer). Chrysostom is twice named by John in *Letter* 464, and is simply known (by both John and the inquirer) as ‘Saint John’.

quite often, relatively speaking, to the prayers of the saints, but even he pales in comparison with Barsanuphius and John.<sup>15</sup>

Thus in terms of historical development, the two ascetics may not be doing something radically new. After all, the ‘prayers of the saints’ themselves, let alone the concept of intercessory prayer, are mentioned already in the New Testament (Rev 5.8; 8.3-4). But the consistent emphasis on these prayers is a development not seen previously. Whether it is ridding oneself of bad dreams (*Letter* 78), the healing of bodily sickness (*Letter* 81), the blessing of food (*Letter* 718), protection from enemies (*Letters* 187, 569, etc.), understanding how to act (*Letter* 257), even the remission of sins (*Letters* 125, 218, etc.), the obtaining of mercy (*Letters* 91, 94, etc.), salvation (*Letter* 200), the kingdom (*Letter* 203), and in short every good thing (*Letters* 186, 223, etc.), all this is done ‘by the prayers of the saints’. Not, of course, by their prayers *alone* (this will be addressed below), but certainly to the extent that their efforts, when compared with the labour of those for whom they pray, can be likened to the value of 10,000 talents over against 100 denarii (*Letters* 234, 237). This persistent, almost formulaic, claim of benefits through the *εὐχὰς ἁγίων* seems to be an original enlargement on a present but less developed way of thinking in the Christian East.<sup>16</sup>

Within the letters themselves, emphasis on the prayers and help of the saints has, in almost every case, three functions. The first is to comfort and encourage the interlocutor on the path of individual sanctification, as a corrective to all forms of despair. This is especially evident in *Letter* 200, to a ‘lazy brother’. Here Barsanuphius attempts to strengthen the monk’s spirits by referring to intercessory prayers. He first mentions his own, which will help the brother if the latter puts no obstacles in the way. Next he says, ‘if you want, you will

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance, *To Theodore* 2.6 (SC 117.78); *Homilies on 1 Thessalonians* 1.1 (PG 62.398); *Homilies on 2 Thessalonians* 5.1 (PG 62.491); *Commentary on Matthew* 5.4 (PG 57.59), etc.

<sup>16</sup> Though a full account of its origins and progeny lies outside the scope of this essay, a notable figure who both held the *Letters* in high regard and in turn appealed with some frequency to the prayers of the saints, is Theodore the Studite. See his *Catechetical Sermons* 4.10.25, 17.48.43, 34.97.12 (ed. Cozza-Luzi); and *Epistle* 105.18 (ed. Fatouros); though again, he is not nearly as devoted to the topic as the two Gaza ascetics.

receive much help by the prayers of the saints'.<sup>17</sup> Finally, so as to reinforce this point and preserve the brother from an irremediable despondency on account of his laziness (he was evidently extremely lax in Barsanuphius's eyes), he writes: 'As regards the rigour of the way of God, there is no need to speak about it yet, in case it brings you to despair. But believe that God will save you freely by the prayers of the saints. For they are able to trouble him for this'.<sup>18</sup>

The second aspect of the prayers of the saints seen throughout the correspondence is the furtherance in the lives of those questioning of that master virtue in the eyes of Barsanuphius and John: humility.<sup>19</sup> The prayers of the saints are not only mentioned in order to comfort, but also to eradicate from the inquirer confidence in his own capacities for Christian progress. Growth in the ascetic life of self-abasement is nourished by the insistence that the saints do almost all the work for the salvation of the faithful; the believer's input, while necessary, is minimal.<sup>20</sup>

The third function lying behind recourse to the prayers of the saints is the sense of ecclesial communion it engenders. As far as we can tell, Barsanuphius and John kept out of the post-Chalcedonian debates of the time as best they could. Their monastery, Thavatha, was Chalcedonian, although their heritage (particularly that of Barsanuphius) was in some ways non-Chalcedonian.<sup>21</sup> But while the politico-theological groupings of the day were of little interest to them (the main thing was to mourn for one's own sins—cf. *Letters* 699-701), they by no means lost sight of the concept of church unity. It is their constant affirmation of

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<sup>17</sup> *Letter* 200 (SC 427.634).

<sup>18</sup> *Letter* 200 (SC 427.634).

<sup>19</sup> On humility, see for instance *Letters* 100, 277, and 455.

<sup>20</sup> See especially *Letters* 202, 234, 237, and 616.

<sup>21</sup> Inasmuch as Barsanuphius is linked with Isaiah of Scetis (though the measure of the latter's monophysitism is debatable): on the link, see the introduction to volume 2.1 of the *Letters*, SC 450.111-17. On Abba Isaiah himself see Chitty (1971) and Horn (2006a), pp. 152-64, 334, 342-47. For more on Barsanuphius' Christology, see Hevelone-Harper (2005), pp. 24-30, 110-11.

the support of the saints that most prominently evokes the notion of ecclesial alliance and communion in the letters.<sup>22</sup>

These three broad concerns—encouragement, humility, and the *ἐκκλησία*—run as an undercurrent to the references to the prayers and help of the saints. We can now turn to how the saints are defined, and where they fit in the overall framework of Barsanuphius and John’s soteriology.

### *Identifying the nameless saints*

An obvious concern in attempting to discuss Barsanuphius and John’s frequent invocation of the saints is the fact that these *ἄγιοι* might appear on the whole as obscure, perhaps even hypothetical figures. Here, what the fairly loose use of the term ‘saints’ in the correspondence designates will be analysed, showing how it is applied both to the holy living and the holy dead.

There is a definite and dominant sense in which the ‘saints’ are living spiritual fathers through whom the way of Christ is exemplified, whose intercessions cover and erase the sins of those who heed them. This is most clearly illustrated by *Letters* 361-4, in which John is questioned about the need to consult with the elders regarding one’s thoughts, and whether this should be done with more than one elder. John replies by referring to those who are consulted about thoughts as ‘saints’ (*ἄγιοι*), who should be approached with the confidence that God speaks through them (and thus there is no need to ask more than one).<sup>23</sup> The saints here are clearly living abbas. On the whole, this interpretation consistently underlies to at least some degree, it seems to me, what Barsanuphius and John mean when they say ‘by the prayers of the saints’ at the conclusion of so many of their letters. From the perspective of the

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<sup>22</sup> I would thus distance myself from the contention found in Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006), pp. 101, 222, that Barsanuphius and John’s avoidance of politico-theological issues was ‘quietistic’. There is little that is quietistic about their strong dependence on the theme of the saints. It points instead, I submit, to a concept of radical ecclesial interconnection, encompassing heaven and earth (see below on the identity of the saints).

<sup>23</sup> For a different take on a similar question, see *Letter* 504.

living, it refers *par excellence* to those local abbas who devote themselves to prayer for others, and who guide them on the Christian way.<sup>24</sup>

However, there is good reason to believe that it is not only the fathers in and around Thavatha that are ‘saints’ for Barsanuphius and John. As to living saints, Barsanuphius mentions a certain ‘John in Rome’ and ‘Elias in Corinth’.<sup>25</sup> But there are likewise clear signs that the category of saints extends beyond those living in the world. Thus on being asked whether we should approach the saints directly for forgiveness, John explains that ‘when calling on those who have gone to the Lord we must say ‘forgive me.’ But when it concerns those who are still among us, we must say: ‘pray for us, that we might receive forgiveness’’.<sup>26</sup> In the following letter, John points to forgiveness through the saints departed: when praying we should say, ‘have mercy on me, Master, by your holy martyrs and holy fathers, and forgive me my sins by their intercessions’.<sup>27</sup>

The identity of the saints in Barsanuphius and John should be seen broadly rather than narrowly, as the body of those living in Christ, regardless of their biological status, whether dead or alive. This comes out most strikingly in Barsanuphius’ interpretation of Mt 24.16 (‘then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains’), which moreover, because of its novelty, points again to the unusual preoccupation of these two ascetics with the concept of the saints: ‘As for the mountains ... understand that these have to do with holy Mary, the

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<sup>24</sup> Barsanuphius is thus able to allude to the saints as specific members of the monastery, who can move God on behalf of myriads of people (*Letter* 187), as well as preserve the abbot from sickness by their prayer (*Letter* 189).

<sup>25</sup> Together with, in all probability, himself: ‘another in the region of Jerusalem’—*Letter* 569 (SC 451.734).

<sup>26</sup> *Letter* 705 (SC 468.150).

<sup>27</sup> *Letter* 706 (SC 468.150). Although John’s use of ‘holy fathers’ could be restricted here to those still living, its combination with ‘holy martyrs’ makes this unlikely. The association of the ‘saints’ with the holy departed is re-inforced by the general respect shown by Barsanuphius and John for relics: see *Letters* 433 and 742. Cf. also John’s letter of encouragement sent shortly before his death to the new abbot Aelianos (*Letter* 598), who requests the continuing support of the old man once he has died. The letter ends: ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, who for our salvation descended from the paternal throne, himself will save, restore, and protect from evil, with our cooperation, by the prayers of the saints’, *Letter* 598 (SC 451.798). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this passage.

Mother of God, the other saints, and those who will be found at that time having the seal of the Son of God.<sup>28</sup> By them, he himself will save many, for to him is the glory forever'.<sup>29</sup>

Barsanuphius is arguing that 'fleeing to the mountains' implies recourse to the saints for their help and intercession. It illustrates, in addition, that for Barsanuphius himself, the question of who the saints in fact are is a somewhat open one: they include the saints already generally recognized as such<sup>30</sup> but also 'those who will be found at that time having the seal of the Son of God', which appears to imply both hidden and future saints. That Barsanuphius and John have future saints in mind when they say 'by the prayers of the saints' is perhaps unlikely. But that they meant, at least in some cases, all the saints from the first to the latest, regardless of whether they were living or departed, known or unknown, is highly plausible.<sup>31</sup> That said, the burden of emphasis should probably remain on the prayers of living local abbas, especially given the monastic context of the letters.

Having seen to some extent with whom Barsanuphius and John identify the 'saints', we can proceed to analyze the content of sainthood for the two, and how it relates to their wider soteriological vision.

### *What makes a saint?*

Above the twelve traits of the ascetic teaching of Barsanuphius and John as delineated by Chryssavgis were pointed out. These virtues, seen prominently throughout the letters, are presented by Barsanuphius and John as the way of sanctification, of *ἀγιασμός*. But the hallmark of sanctity lies, through these twelve traits, in godlike love for one's neighbour.

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<sup>28</sup> The 'seal of the Son of God' (*τὴν τοῦ Υἱοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ σφραγίδα*) is an interesting and rare expression. It occurs in *Shepherd of Hermas* Sim.9.16 (SC 53.328), where it refers to baptism. It could thus point here to those found with an untarnished 'seal', i.e. those who preserve or regain the purity bestowed through baptism.

<sup>29</sup> *Letter* 61 (SC 426.306-8).

<sup>30</sup> There was no established procedure of canonization at this time.

<sup>31</sup> Another reasonably clear instance of 'the saints' denoting more than simply living monks from the monastery and surrounding region is found in Barsanuphius' prayer in *Letter* 604, in the context of explaining why some saintly theologians of the Church occasionally wrote erroneously on points of doctrine. Wishing for aid in dealing with the matter, he invokes them and every saint: 'May all the fathers (*πάντες οἱ πατέρες*), well-pleasing to God, saints, righteous ones, and true servants of God, pray for me' (SC 451.820).

This is set out in *Letter* 484 by Barsanuphius. The children of God, he says, are inheritors of God's own goodness, longsuffering, patience, *φιλανθρωπία* and *ἀγάπη*. This is a state of deification: 'if they are children of God, they find themselves gods, and if gods, also lords. And if God is light, they also are illuminators'.<sup>32</sup> The content of this godlike life is then linked with God's love and care for human beings. The saints, the perfect, give their lives for the other, 'just as the Perfect and Son of the Perfect gave his life for us (cf. 1 Jn 3.16)'.<sup>33</sup> In typical fashion, Barsanuphius then distances himself from such people, though with the hope that through the prayers of others he will be placed among them, and assuring his addressee that he will supplicate God for him.<sup>34</sup>

It is the acquisition of the 'greater love' of Christ that is quintessentially constitutive of sainthood in the letters. This is expressed through 'bearing one another's burdens' (cf. Gal 6.2), as Bitton-Ashkelony has argued.<sup>35</sup> Its function is not simply to relieve feelings of guilt but, through a total sacrifice of the self for the other, to realize their eternal unity in God; the prayer and love of the saints mimics the prayer and love of the Son. In a daring passage, Barsanuphius applies to the saints verses used by the New Testament of the Son, and declares

<sup>32</sup> *Εἰ γὰρ τέκνα Θεοῦ, θεοὶ τυγχάνουσι, εἰ θεοί, καὶ κύριοι. Καὶ εἰ φῶς ὁ Θεός, καὶ αὐτοὶ φωστῆρες*, *Letter* 484 (SC 451.592). Deification is also mentioned elsewhere, e.g. *Letter* 199 and 207.

<sup>33</sup> *Letter* 484 (SC 451.594). The topos of giving one's life for another is, of course, rooted in the example of Christ, and is found at various points in the New Testament (see, in particular, Jn 15.13; Rom 9.3; and 1 Jn 3.16). But perhaps worth highlighting is an early extra-scriptural expression of it which, as will become apparent, is quite close to the sentiments of Barsanuphius and John. This is found in the story of John the Apostle and the robber, related by Clement of Alexandria in *Quis Dives Salvetur?* 42 (ed. Früchtel 187-91), and retold by Eusebius of Caesarea in *Ecclesiastical History* 3.23 (ed. Schwartz 236-44); cf. John Chrysostom, *To Theodore* 2.19 (SC 117.202). In the climactic scene, John says to the Christian-turned-vagabond: 'Do not fear, you still have hope of life: I will give an account for you to Christ. If necessary, I will willingly endure your death, as the Lord did for us. I will give up my life for you (*ὑπὲρ σοῦ τὴν ψυχὴν ἀντιδώσω τὴν ἐμήν*)' (*Quis Dives Salvetur* 42 [ed. Früchtel 190.7] and *Ecclesiastical History* 3.23.17 [ed. Schwartz 242.17]).

<sup>34</sup> This is an approach frequently found in the letters. While Barsanuphius and John can intimate a recognition of their power and attribute to themselves the love which belongs, in their framework, to the saints (cf. *Letters* 32, 57, 111, 234, 353, 553, 567, 614, 790), they never identify themselves as saints (though Barsanuphius comes close in *Letter* 117). They often ask for the prayers of others (*Letters* 6, 55, 200, 202-3, 205-6, 219, 604, etc.) and forgiveness (e.g. *Letters* 211-12), whilst also explicitly distancing themselves from sainthood and perfection: 'I have said what I know concerning others, the saints' (*Letter* 186 [SC 427:596]; cf. *Letter* 90, 125). This against the reading of Barsanuphius in Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006), pp. 114-25, that presents him, based mainly on assumptions as to the motivation behind his composition of a treatise on the alphabet (of which only one part survives in *Letter* 137b), as attempting to 'divinize himself as a spiritual guide and render his own teachings divine' (p. 123), apparently even perceiving himself as Jesus (p. 125). More on why this is an inadequate conclusion will emerge below where I argue that while the saints (including here Barsanuphius) are figures of immense capacity in the letters, they are by no means set up as an alternative to Christ.

<sup>35</sup> See Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (2006), pp. 63-81.

with regard to the end time: ‘Each of the saints, bringing before God his sons whom he has saved, will say with a loud voice, with great assurance ... ‘Here I am, I and the children that God has given me’ (Is 8.18; Heb 2.13). And not only will he hand them over to God, but himself also, and then God will be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15.28)’.<sup>36</sup>

This ministry of the saints is an imitation of the ministry of Christ. However, it is not meant in the correspondence as a *replacement* of his ministry. Barsanuphius is clear in the same set of letters (to a certain monk Andrew) that while he agrees to carry half (and then the whole of) the weight of Andrew’s sins, their forgiveness is effected by the ‘great mediator, Jesus’.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, in the letter quoted above (*Letter* 117) the presentation (*παράθεσις*) of the children of the saints is to *the Trinity* (not the Father alone), and takes place in the context of Christ’s acceptance of them (citing Mt 25.34).

The struggle for such authentically compassionate love is a universal Christian duty, John explains, and prayers for others are necessary regardless of whether we are ‘worthy’ to offer them or not (*Letter* 178). When such love is truly present, however, its effects are of tremendous consequence. Barsanuphius and John’s recurring claim is that the love of the saints pleads and argues with God for those they know, and the world at large. In *Letter* 187, Barsanuphius supports this proposition citing, among others, three Scriptural texts: Ex 32.32 (‘now if you will forgive their sin, forgive it; and if not, blot me out of your book, which you have written’—cf. *Letter* 790); Is 8.18/Heb 2.13 (cited above—cf. *Letters* 117 and 607); and a paraphrase of Jn 17.24 (‘Father, grant that where I will be, my children be also, in the life ineffable’).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Letter* 117 (SC 427.448).

<sup>37</sup> *Letter* 115 (SC 427.442).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. also the use of Rom 12.15 (‘rejoice with those that rejoice, and weep with those that weep’—*Letters* 57, 675); 1 Cor 12.26 (‘if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it’—*Letters* 57, 122, 315, 339, 374); 2 Cor 11.29 (‘who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?’—*Letters* 57, 316).

This fatherly love of the saints embraces first their disciples, with whom they become ‘one soul’ [*ὁμόψυχος*]<sup>39</sup>—cf. *Letters* 5, 7, 35, 68, 99, 188, 305. But it ideally reaches out to all others as well. Thus Barsanuphius speaks of the living examples of perfection who ‘stand in the breach (cf. Ps 105.23), preventing the complete and sudden annihilation of the whole world; and by their prayers [God] will chastise with mercy’.<sup>40</sup> This concern for the reality of the perfect who support the world, maintaining in themselves unceasing remembrance and prayer for others (*Letters* 113, 249), who abandon their ‘own dead’ and weep for ‘the dead of another’ (*Letter* 341, cf. *Letter* 600), bear the whole of their neighbour’s sin (*Letter* 73), and ‘sacrifice’ themselves to the death on behalf of their fellows (*Letters* 57, 111),<sup>41</sup> is fundamental to Barsanuphius and John’s whole cosmological and soteriological vision. Effectively, the world *requires* the saints for its survival, and not simply saints in heaven, but explicitly saints below as well. In Barsanuphius and John’s thought, without active saints on earth keeping it from ‘complete and sudden annihilation’, the world would cease to exist.<sup>42</sup>

### *The limitations of the saints*

From the above, it might be tempting to infer that the saints are the commanding feature of Barsanuphius and John’s soteriology. Two important considerations that inform their theology of sainthood, however, must be borne in mind. The first is the necessary contribution of the one for whom the saint intercedes. This contribution is generally seen as minimal (cf. the image of 100 denarii compared to 10,000 talents referred to above—*Letters*

<sup>39</sup> For more on *ὁμόψυχος* in the correspondence, see Perrone (2004). This concept is most boldly presented in *Letter* 188, where Barsanuphius applies the words of Jesus in Jn 14.9 (‘The one who has seen me has seen the Father’) to the relationship between John and himself; i.e. he likens his closeness to John to the unity of the Son with the Father.

<sup>40</sup> *στήκουσιν ἐν τῇ θραύσει τοῦ μὴ ὑφὲν ἐξολοθρεῦσαι ὅλον τὸν κόσμον, καὶ διὰ τῶν εὐχῶν αὐτῶν μετ’ ἐλέους παιδεύει*, *Letter* 569 (SC 451.734).

<sup>41</sup> As in the story of John the Apostle.

<sup>42</sup> This idea was not new in itself, though rarely plainly expressed. According to the author of the Prologue to the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, it was a common thought among the people of Egypt: ‘it is clear to all who live there that through them [the Egyptian monks] the world continues to stand (*ἔστηκεν ὁ κόσμος*) and through them also human life is preserved and honoured by God’: prol.9 (ed. Festugière 9.58-60 and ed. Schulz-Flügel 246.55-7).

234, 237), but without it the saints simply cannot help. Such a position is put forward in *Letter* 616, in which Barsanuphius responds to the question of whether the prayers of the saints help an impenitent sinner: ‘if a person does not do whatever he can, and join this effort with the prayer of the saints, then the prayer of the saints is of no benefit to him’.<sup>43</sup> If the saints were indeed capable of saving the impenitent by their prayer, Barsanuphius goes on, ‘nothing would prevent them from doing the same for all the sinners of the world’.<sup>44</sup> He then introduces Jas 5.16 and an interpretation of it found throughout the correspondence. Instead of taking the verse to mean something close to ‘the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects’ (as it is usually translated), he insists that it means ‘the prayer of a righteous man *which is supported* [*ἐνεργούμενος*] has great power’.<sup>45</sup> Without ‘supporting’ the prayers of the saints by the pursuit of inner reform and virtue, the quest for salvation remains fruitless.

The second consideration to remember with regard to the saints in the correspondence is the ultimate primacy not of them within the process of salvation, but of God. This was touched on above when illustrating Barsanuphius’ concern to avoid asserting that the role of the saints is a substitute for the role of Christ, but other evidence includes: it is not a function of the saints to give the kingdom, since this belongs to God (*Letter* 203); the intercessions of the saints are not made so that they save, but so that Christ saves those for whom they pray (cf. *Letters* 16, 210, 219, etc.); they might worry more for their spiritual children than the children themselves, but God worries more than either (*Letter* 39). Moreover John, in attempting to explain Jesus’ healing ministry, differentiates it from that of the saints (*Letter* 388). Using the argument common with Barsanuphius that ‘the prayer *supported* by the righteous can obtain much’, he maintains that while their prayers need our ancillary struggle

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<sup>43</sup> *Letter* 616 (SC 451.866). A similar sentiment is seen in numerous other letters: 91, 199, 203, 387, 655, etc.

<sup>44</sup> *Letter* 616 (SC 451.868).

<sup>45</sup> For other references to Jas 5.16, see especially *Letters* 191, 824, and also (showing again the extent of their enthusiasm for the work of the saints): *Letters* 55, 94, 136, 144, 171, 178, 198, 229, 234, 256, 284, 374, 383, 387-88, 509, 544, 573, 582, 666.

in order to be effective, ‘for the Saviour it was not so: whoever received him was saved and healed, and those who did not, pushing him away, perished’.<sup>46</sup>

These fundamental distinctions between Christ and the saints are crucial if we are to understand the place of the saints in the theology of Barsanuphius and John. While the idea of sainthood is an *idée maîtresse* of their soteriology, the power of the saints does not break with or usurp the power of Christ. It fulfils itself not in effecting salvation, but in *effective presentation*. Thus we can put something of a damper on an overly ‘maximal’ reading of the saints in the *Letters*. The saints intercede, but the efficacy of their intercession depends both on the action of those for whom they pray, and above all on the action of the grace of Christ, in whom and to whom the saints commend their objects of prayer. Nevertheless, having become ‘brothers’ of Jesus (*Letters* 73, 90) and ‘gods’ (*Letters* 199, 207, 484), a certain kind of ‘maximal’ reading of the saints remains. The content of the saint’s life according to the correspondence is an assimilation of Christ’s *way of being*, which is supremely expressed in a love at once humble and full of *παρρησία* (boldness). Acquiring such a mode of existence comes across in the letters as the most precious goal of the Christian, in which a thoroughly creative meaning is given to humanity’s earthly journey and beyond: collaborating in the salvation, wrought by Christ, of the human race. But again, to reiterate the qualification already made, such incorporation into Christ’s way of being is never confused with *being Christ*.

#### *The significance and function of the saints: concluding remarks*

To return to Brown’s outline of the late antique holy man, some further proposals can be made. Firstly, this essay challenges Brown’s argument that the phenomenon of the late antique saint as ‘powerful’ is to be considered ‘an attempt of men to rule men under a distant

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<sup>46</sup> Letter 388 (SC 450.440).

high God'.<sup>47</sup> Such a claim is antithetical to the theology of sainthood in the correspondence. The saints do indeed emerge as 'men of power', but this power is constantly subjected to and dependent on the person of Christ and his revealed life of sacrificial love. The entire structure of a person's *ἀγιασμός* is geared towards bridging the existential gap between the otherwise distant high God and that person's fellow human beings, a structure imaging and established in Christ's loving *οἰκονομία*. In doing this, walking the path of 'the Perfect and Son of the Perfect',<sup>48</sup> the saint finds the fulfillment of his own vocation. The holy man is indeed, above everything and all others, a man of power according to Barsanuphius and John. His power is not in and for himself, however, but can only be defined by and in Christ, who alone is the 'unsupported' power of God.

Secondly, and to conclude, in Rapp's article on the saint as intercessor, she successfully argues that Brown's model is excessively based on hagiographical material, and that through an analysis of epistolographical sources (such as the *oeuvre* of Barsanuphius and John), we are presented with a different picture. Instead of revealing holiness as 'thaumato-centric', she shows that the non-literary sources of the time point more to a 'supplicatory' model, in which the holy man is distinguished by his power of intercession on behalf of his disciples. Building on Rapp's insights, the function of the prayers of the saints within the letters has been assessed, together with an exploration of who these saints are, and how they are linked with a broader soteriological vision. Furthermore, while Rapp correctly sees her model of 'the holy man as intercessor' as intersecting 'with the Brownian *patronus* and exemplar',<sup>49</sup> this is an insufficient estimate from the standpoint of the model suggested by the letters themselves. The saints are seen not merely as *local* heroes, but as inheritors of a way of life (the life of Christ) that is universal in its significance. In other words, the loving

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<sup>47</sup> Brown (1982), p. 152.

<sup>48</sup> *Letter* 484 (SC 451.594).

<sup>49</sup> See Rapp (1999), p. 66.

and ardent intercessions of the saints, in heaven and on earth, demonstrate a way on which not only the immediate locality of the saint, but the whole world, depends.

## ***Bibliography***

### ***Abbreviations***

ACCS:NT	<i>Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament</i>
BBTT	<i>Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations</i>
CS	<i>Cistercian Studies</i>
CSCO	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i>
CWS	<i>Classics of Western Spirituality Series</i>
<i>DSp</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de Spiritualité</i>
<i>ECR</i>	<i>Eastern Churches Review</i>
FCS	<i>The Fathers of the Church Series</i>
GCS	<i>Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller</i>
GNO	<i>Gregorii Nysseni Opera</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
NPB	<i>Nova Patrum Bibliotheca</i>
NPNF	<i>Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers series</i>
NTA	<i>Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen</i>
PG	<i>Migne, Patrologia Graeca</i>
PL	<i>Migne, Patrologia Latina</i>
PTA	<i>Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen</i>
PO	<i>Patrologia Orientalis</i>
SBL	<i>Society of Biblical Literature</i>
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>
SH	<i>Subsidia Hagiographica</i>
SO	<i>Spiritualité Orientale</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>

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