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Standing in the Breach: The Significance and Function of the Saints in the Letters of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza

ALEXIS TORRANCE

In this article I attempt 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, I look at how they conceived of the saints, the unmistakable importance they attached to their prayers and intercessions, and how the saints fit into Barsanuphius and John's broader Christian framework. I emphasize that the importance of the ἄγιοι is not constrained to their locality, and that their role for the two Gazan ascetics is not at all bound up with projects of self-promotion.

"Above everything, the holy man is a man of power."¹ 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 universels*" of their localities.² 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 my concern here works from an alternative angle, namely,

My thanks to M. C. Steenberg for commenting on an earlier draft of this article, and to K. T. Ware, for initially pointing me in the direction of Barsanuphius and John.

1. P. R. L. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *JRS* 61 (1971): 80–101, reprinted in P. R. L. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 103–52 (here 121). See also P. R. L. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971–1997," *J ECS* 6 (1998): 353–76.

2. See Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 143–49.

the *theological* significance and justification of “the saints,” explored here in the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza.³ 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).⁴ Here I will build on these beginnings with a more direct emphasis on the precise meaning of the saints as it surfaces in the letters.⁵

Barsanuphius and John were fellow ascetics attached to the monastery of Thavatha under the direction of the abbot Seridos in sixth-century Palestine.⁶ Next to nothing is known about their early years. Barsanuphius was of Egyptian origin and had come to the Gazan monastery already, it seems, a seasoned monastic. He was given a cell not far from the mon-

3. Incidentally, the contribution of Barsanuphius and John to the theme of the “holy man” figures little in Brown’s work.

4. C. Rapp, “‘For Next to God, You Are My Salvation’: Reflections on the Rise of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. J. D. Howard-Johnston and P. A. Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 63–81; B. Bitton-Ashkelony, “The Necessity of Penitence, ‘Bear One Another’s Burdens’ (Gal. 6:2),” in B. Bitton-Ashkelony and A. Kofsky, *The Monastic School of Gaza, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae* 78 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 145–56.

5. A critical edition of the 857 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”): Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza, *Correspondance*, ed. F. Neyt and P. de Angelis-Noah, 5 vols. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1997–2002); references (usually simply the letter number, unless the letter is quoted) and translations here are made from this edition. A complete English translation of the letters is now available, translated by J. Chryssavgis in *The Fathers of the Church* series (vols. 113–14): Barsanuphius and John, *Letters*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006–7).

6. Information on what is known about Barsanuphius and John (and their milieu) can be found in various places, including I. Hausherr’s article on “Barsanuphe” in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* vol. 1, ed. M. Viller (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1937), 1255–62; D. Chitty’s overview in his *The Desert a City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 132–40; the introduction to the SC edition of their letters by Neyt and de Angelis-Noah in SC 426:11–46; J. Chryssavgis’s introduction in Barsanuphius and John, *Letters from the Desert: A Selection of Questions and Responses*, trans. John Chryssavgis (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 7–54; and J. L. Hevelone-Harper, *Disciples of the Desert: Monks, Laity, and Spiritual Authority in the Sixth-Century* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 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, *Desert a City*, and J. Binns, *Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ: The Monasteries of Palestine*, 314–631 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

astery, 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 525–527, giving up his old one to his close disciple John,⁷ 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 inquirers: from hermits and coenobitic 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.⁸ John died in about 543, shortly after the death of the abbot Seridos. 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.⁹ Very little, however, has been said concerning their constant recourse to the concept of the prayers, power, and efficacy of the saints. Here I aim to bring out this preoccupation and the thought processes behind it. Firstly, I will concentrate on where and when Barsanuphius and John refer to the saints. Next I will deal with the definition of sainthood in the correspondence, beginning with the question

7. 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, *Disciples of the Desert*, 38–44; Chitty was against this identification (*Desert a City*, 133).

8. 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, *Desert a City*, 133, and Chrysavgis, *Letters from the Desert*, 13. In tendency, Barsanuphius is seen as more “inspirational” and John more “practical” or “institutional.”

9. The main contributions are the introductions to SC 426 and 450 (particularly the latter) by Neyt and de Angelis-Noah; Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *Monastic School of Gaza*; Hevelone-Harper, *Disciples of the Desert*; and articles in *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity*, ed. B. Bitton-Ashkelony and A. Kofsky, Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

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, Chrysavgis outlines its twelve "fundamental principles": continual vigilance, exertion in all things, the gift of discernment, the way of humility, gratitude in all circumstances, heavenly joy, the labor 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 and learning to weep.¹⁰ 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 ἅγιοι. In the following I will highlight the extent to which the idea of such support permeates the correspondence, as well as pointing out three key themes underlying its use: 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 (εὐχή / εὐχαὶ / δέησις τῶν ἁγίων and similar) well over eighty times and is developed as a theme on numerous occasions.¹¹ Despite this, Lampe

10. See Barsanuphius and John, *Letters from the Desert*, 27–39.

11. 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: 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 pro-

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).¹² 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 ἄγιος) in the correspondence (464).¹³ He indeed refers quite often, relatively speaking, to the prayers of the saints, but even he pales in comparison with Barsanuphius and John.¹⁴

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 (78), the healing of bodily sickness (81), the blessing of food (718), protection from enemies (187, 569, etc.), understanding how to act (257), even the remission of sins (125, 218, etc.), the obtaining of mercy (91, 94, etc.), salvation (200), the kingdom (203), and in short every good thing (186, 223, etc.), all this is done “by the prayers of the saints.” Not, of course, by their prayers *alone* (I will return to this 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 (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.¹⁵

logue to the epistolary collection. To my knowledge, no other patristic or Byzantine theologian comes anywhere near such frequency.

12. G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961) s.v. εὐχή (I); it will be shown below that Barsanuphius and John’s references to the saints can designate the living and/or the dead.

13. 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.”

14. See for instance, *Thdr.* 2.6.19 (ed. J. Dumortier, SC 117:78); *hom. 1 Thess.* (PG 62.398.49); *hom. 2 Thess.* (PG 62.491.60); *hom. in Mt.* (PG 57.59.48), etc.

15. 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 (citations follow *Sermones Catecheticeos Magnae*, ed. J. Cozza-Luzi, *Nova Patrum Bibliotheca* 9.2 [Rome: Bibliotheca Vaticana et Typi Vaticani, 1888]); and *Epistle* 105.18 (following *Theodori Studitae Epistulae*, ed. G. Fatouros, 2 vols. [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1992]); though again, he is not nearly as devoted to the topic as the two Gazan ascetics.

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 receive much help by the prayers of the saints” (SC 427:634). 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 rigor 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” (SC 427:634).

The second aspect of the prayers of the saints seen throughout the correspondence is the furtherance in the lives of those questioning of what is for Barsanuphius and John a master virtue: humility.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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. 699–701), they by no means lost sight of the concept of Church unity. It is their constant affirmation of the support of the

16. On humility, see for instance Letters 100, 277, and 455.

17. See especially Letters 202, 234, 237, and 616.

18. 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 D. J. Chitty, “Abba Isaiah,” JTS 22 (1971): 47–72, and C. B. Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: The Career of Peter the Iberian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 152–64, 334, 342–47. For more on Barsanuphius’s Christology, see Hevelone-Harper, *Disciples of the Desert*, 24–30, 110–11.

saints that most prominently evokes the notion of ecclesial alliance and communion in the letters.¹⁹

These three broad concerns—encouragement, humility, and the ἐκκλησία—run as an undercurrent to the references to the prayers and help of the saints. I will now look at 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 I want to outline what the fairly loose use of the term "saints" in the correspondence designates, and 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 a series of letters (361–64) 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).²⁰ 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 living, it refers *par excellence* to those local abbas who devote themselves to prayer for others, and who guide them on the Christian way.²¹

However, there is good reason to believe that it is not only the fathers

19. I would thus distance myself from the contention found in Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *Monastic School of Gaza*, 101, 222, that Barsanuphius and John's avoidance of politico-theological issues was "quietistic." There is nothing 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).

20. For a different take on a similar question, see Letter 504.

21. 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 (187), as well as preserve the abbot from sickness by their prayer (189).

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” (569).²² 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’” (705 [SC 468:150]). 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” (706 [SC 468:150]).²³

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’s interpretation of Matt 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 Mother of God, the other saints, and those who will be found at that time having the seal of the Son of God.²⁴ By them, he himself will save many, for to him is the glory forever” (61 [SC 426:306–8]).

Barsanuphius is arguing that “fleeing to the mountains” implies recourse to the saints for their help and intercession. It illustrates, in addition, that

22. Together with, in all probability, himself (“another in the region of Jerusalem”—SC 451:734).

23. 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 reinforced 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 (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” (SC 451:798). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this passage.

24. 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* 93.3.1 (ed. M. Whittaker, GCS 48:89–90) 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.

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 such²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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 I pointed out the twelve traits of the ascetic teaching of Barsanuphius and John as delineated by Chrysavgis. 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 neighbor. 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.”²⁷ 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 John 3.16)” (SC 451:594).²⁸ In typical fashion, Barsanuphius then distances

25. There was no established procedure of canonization at this time.

26. Another reasonably clear instance of “the saints” denoting more than simply living monks from the monastery and surrounding region is found in Barsanuphius’s 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).

27. *Εἰ γὰρ τέκνα Θεοῦ, θεοὶ τυγχάνουσι, εἰ θεοὶ, καὶ κύριοι. Καὶ εἰ φῶς ὁ Θεός, καὶ αὐτοὶ φωστῆρες* (SC 451:592). Deification is also mentioned elsewhere, e.g. 199 and 207.

28. 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,

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.²⁹

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.³⁰ 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 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’ (Isa 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)” (117 [SC 427:448]).

John 15.13, Rom 9.3, and 1 John 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* 42.1–16 (ed. L. Früchtel et al., GCS 17:187–90), and retold by Eusebius of Caesarea in *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.23.5–19 (ed. G. Bardy, SC 31:126–29). 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 (ὕπερ σοῦ τὴν ψυχὴν ἀντιδώσω τὴν ἐμὴν)” (*Quis dives salvetur* 42.13 [GCS 17:190] and *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.23.17 [SC 31:128]).

29. 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. 32, 57, 111, 234, 353, 553, 567, 614, 790), they never identify themselves as saints (though Barsanuphius comes close in 117). They often ask for the prayers of others (6, 55, 200, 202–3, 205–6, 219, 604, etc.) and forgiveness (e.g. 211–12), while also explicitly distancing themselves from sainthood and perfection: “I have said what I know concerning others, the saints” (186 [SC 427:596]; cf. 90, 125). This against the reading of Barsanuphius in Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *Monastic School of Gaza*, 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 137b), as attempting to “divinize himself as a spiritual guide and render his own teachings divine” (123), apparently even perceiving himself as Jesus (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.

30. See Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *Monastic School of Gaza*, 63–81.

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" (115 [SC 427:442]). Moreover, in the letter quoted above (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 Matt 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 (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: Exod 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. 790), Isa 8.18/Heb 2.13 (cited above—cf. 117 and 607), and a paraphrase of John 17.24 ("Father, grant that where I will be, my children be also, in the life ineffable").³¹

This fatherly love of the saints embraces first their disciples, with whom they become "one soul" [ὁμόψυχος]—cf. 5, 7, 35, 68, 99, 188, 305.³² 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" (569).³³ This concern for the reality of the perfect who support the world, maintaining in

31. Cf. also the use of Rom 12.15 ("Rejoice with those that rejoice, and weep with those that weep"—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"—57, 122, 315, 339, 374), and 2 Cor 11.29 ("Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?"—57, 316).

32. For more on ὁμόψυχος in the correspondence, see L. Perrone, "The Necessity of Advice: Spiritual Direction as a School of Christianity in the Correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza," in *Christian Gaza*, ed. Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, 131–49. This concept is most boldly presented in Letter 188, where Barsanuphius applies the words of Jesus in John 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.

33. στήκουσιν ἐν τῇ θραύσει τοῦ μὴ ὑφὲν ἐξολοθρεῦσαι ὅλον τὸν κόσμον, καὶ διὰ τῶν εὐχῶν αὐτῶν μετ' ἐλέους παιδεύει (SC 451:734).

themselves unceasing remembrance and prayer for others (113, 249), who abandon their “own dead” and weep for “the dead of another” (341, cf. 600), bear the whole of their neighbor’s sin (73), and “sacrifice” themselves to the death on behalf of their fellows (57, 111),³⁴ 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.³⁵

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 kept 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—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” (SC 451:866).³⁶ 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” (SC 451:868). 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

34. As in the story of John the Apostle (see note 28 above).

35. 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 honored by God” (prol. 58–60). Citation follows the critical edition by A.-J. Festugière (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971). An English translation of the *Historia Monachorum* can be found in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, intro. B. Ward and trans. N. Russell, Cistercian Studies series, vol. 34 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 49–155 (here, prol. 9, p. 50). One of the introductory essays deals to some extent with this topic: *Lives*, intro. Ward and trans. Russell, 12–19.

36. A similar sentiment is seen in numerous other letters: 91, 199, 203, 387, 655, etc.

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."³⁷ 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's 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 (203); the intercessions of the saints are not made so that they save, but so that Christ saves those for whom they pray (cf. 16, 210, 219, etc.); they might worry more for their spiritual children than the children themselves, but God worries more than either (39). Moreover John, in attempting to explain Jesus' healing ministry, differentiates it from that of the saints (388). Using the argument common with Barsanuphius that "the prayer of the righteous, *which is supported*, can obtain much," he maintains that while their prayers need our ancillary struggle in order to be effective, "for the Savior it was not so: whoever received him was saved and healed, and those who did not, pushing him away, perished" (SC 450:440).

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 (73, 90) and "gods" (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

37. 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) 55, 94, 136, 144, 171, 178, 198, 229, 234, 256, 284, 374, 383, 387–88, 509, 544, 573, 582, 666.

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*.

CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE AND FUNCTION OF THE SAINTS

To return to Brown's outline of the late antique holy man, some further proposals can be made. Firstly, this essay takes issue with 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 high God."³⁸ 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 *ἁγιασμός* 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" (484 [SC 451:594]), 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 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 see 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. She does not, however, treat of the theology behind such a model, nor consider it beyond the spiritual father/child relationship. Here I have attempted to focus more fully on the function of the prayers of the saints within the letters, as well as identifying 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

38. Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 152.

“with the Brownian *patronus* and exemplar,”³⁹ 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 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.

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39. Rapp, “Reflections on the Rise of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” 66.