

# EXEGESIS *and* SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE *in* EVAGRIUS PONTICUS

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## 1. Introduction: *The Gnostikos as spiritual guide*

In exploring the interrelationship between biblical exegesis and spiritual guidance in the writings of Evagrius Ponticus it is appropriate to focus on Evagrius' concept of the *gnostikos*, the mature Christian contemplative and teacher. However, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that Evagrius did not expect that what would today be called 'spiritual directors' be recruited exclusively from adepts in that great craft of contemplation he calls θεωρητική and γνωστική/. Indeed, Evagrius frequently cites the example and teaching of great abbas who were certainly not *gnostikoi*, but whose insights he treasured and whom he regarded as his spiritual teachers. This is well-illustrated in an apophthegm which the Latin Systematic Collection depicts as a dialogue between Evagrius and Arsenius:

Once Abba Evagrius said to Abba Arsenius: 'How is it that we who are stimulated by education and learning have attained no virtue [thereby], while these rustic Egyptians possess these very virtues?' Abba Arsenius answered: 'We who are intent on worldly education have [achieved] nothing; while these rustic Egyptians have acquired virtues by their own hard work.'<sup>1</sup>

'These rustic Copts' include such famous monks as Macarius the Great, whom Evagrius revered as a teacher and spiritual master. They were able to serve as spiritual guides and experts in ascetical virtue and the art of διάκρισις (discernment) through what Arsenius broadly characterizes as 'their own hard work', (*propriis laboribus*, πόνος) and which Evagrius more specifically describes as 'attentiveness' and 'careful observation'. In Evagrius' schema of spiritual progress such *abbas* could be effective guides in the πρακτική/, the struggle to expel vice and acquire virtue. But the spiritually-mature Christian contemplative whom Evagrius designates as *gnostikos* would bring more extensive insights and skills to the task of spiritual guidance.

The term *gnostikos*, which Evagrius inherits principally from Clement of Alexandria, is notoriously difficult to translate. 'Teacher', 'sage', 'elder', and perhaps least satisfying of all the overly-literal 'knower', have all been tried; and each hints at part of what Evagrius means. For the purposes of this paper the attainments of Evagrius' *gnostikos* can be best appreciated in light of an observations made by Peter Brown in his study of early Christian asceticism, *The Body and Society*:

[...] The desert became the powerhouse of a new culture. For all his interest in such matters, Origen's spirituality had remained the spirituality of an urban study-group. The greatest powers of spiritual discernment were not directed to the heart: they were deployed in the long labor with which Origen and his disciples searched out the meaning of the sacred text. It was the precise meaning of Scripture, pondered by highly literate men and women, that caused the heart of the Christian 'to burn.' The discipline of meditation on the holy text often assumed philological resources that could be found only in upper-class circles, in close proximity to great cities. In the *Life of Anthony*, and in successive layers of monastic spiritual guidance, we can detect the emergence of an alternative. The monk's own heart was the new book. What required infinitely skilled exegesis and long spiritual experience were the 'movements of the heart,' and the strategies and snares that the Devil laid within it.

[...] The shift from a culture of the book to a *cultura Dei*, based largely on the nonliterate, verbal interchange of a monastic ‘art of thought,’ was rightly hailed as the greatest and the most peculiar achievement of the Old Men of Egypt: it amounted to nothing less than the discovery of a new alphabet of the heart.<sup>2</sup>

Here Brown describes a shift from one spiritual pole to another: on the one hand, the urban practice of Origenist biblical exegesis by the learned; and on the other an exegesis of the soul, or ‘alphabet of the human heart’, that represents the unique contribution of the desert fathers and mothers. However, what Brown portrays as a shift from biblical exegesis to exegesis of the heart is held together as a unity by Evagrius’ *gnostikos*. For Evagrius the ‘spiritual director’ who is also *gnostikos* is an accomplished exegete of both the biblical text and the human νοῦς (‘mind’ or ‘intellect’, the innermost self and the image of God), as well as a contemplative who can perceive the hidden λόγοι, (purposes and meanings of God) within human experiences and in the ‘ages of creation’.

## 2. Evagrius’ model of spiritual progress

Although Evagrius often emphasizes the distinction between the roles of *praktikos* and *gnostikos*, between ascetic practitioner and contemplative teacher, a clearer understanding of his schema of spiritual progress emerges when note is taken of the mutually-enhancing interrelationship between these two roles. Jeremy Driscoll has succinctly summarized Evagrius’ understanding of the spiritual life as ‘the mind’s long journey to the Holy Trinity’;<sup>3</sup> and it may be helpful to imagine this journey as a helix, a geometrical form which combines both linear direction and circular movement. The linear motion consists of ‘progress’ (προκοπή) or ‘ascent’ (ἀνάβασις) towards God which is at the same time characterized by a ‘circular’ movement between the poles of πρακτική/ and θεωρητική: that is, between the ethical, ‘practical’ work of asceticism and the enjoyment of spiritual vision, contemplation.

Following Plato and the later Aristotelian tradition,<sup>4</sup> Evagrius considers the soul to be tripartite, ruled (when all goes well) by the λογιστικόν or reasoning faculty, which is chiefly responsible for developing the virtues of prudence, understanding and wisdom.<sup>5</sup> It rules over the παθητικόν, the portion of the soul subject to passion and source of the powers of ἐπιθυμία (desire) and θυμός (indignation).<sup>6</sup> These powers or energies, ‘yoked to [the soul] as helpmates’,<sup>7</sup> are intended by God to be used ‘according to nature’; but they will overwhelm the soul as passions if they are misused or present in excess. When exercised according to nature the ἐπιθυμητικόν contributes the virtues of temperance, love, and continence,<sup>8</sup> while the θυμικόν provides courage and patient endurance.<sup>9</sup> Through the practice of διάκρισις (discernment) the *praktikos* learns to employ these ‘helpmates’ as they are experienced in interpersonal relationships, in dreams, and above all in thoughts. The *praktikos* learns the nature of the different νοήματα (concepts, ideas) with which the mind is filled, and is able to distinguish between λογισμοί, demonic tempting-thoughts, of gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride;<sup>10</sup> as well as to appreciate the beneficial *noemata* which come from angels or from neutral sense-perception.<sup>11</sup>

Evagrius holds out the hope and even describes to some extent the process by which a Christian *praktikos* can mature into a *gnostikos*, a contemplative and teacher who has learned to perceive the divine *logoi*, the inner meanings and purposes of God within creation and history. The *gnostikos* learns to appreciate and to make use of an inner, oscillating movement between the poles of φυσική, the perception of God’s presence and purpose within creation, and θεωλογική, contemplation of the divine nature, which ultimately transcends all words and concepts.

Although Evagrius thus describes what has often been interpreted as sequential levels or stages of spiritual progress, it is important to note that he does not thereby imply that it is ever possible to completely rise above the *praktike* and somehow ‘graduate’ from the quest for virtue. On the contrary: as the *praktikos* makes spiritual progress he learns to perceive the ongoing (and indeed, never-ending) work of asceticism γνωστικώτερος, that is, from an increasingly contemplative perspective.<sup>12</sup> And since the struggle against certain passions continues until the moment of death, the mature *gnostikos* must always advance in virtue, continuously practicing ascetical vigilance.<sup>13</sup> Thus the journey towards God is not a simply a movement beyond *praktike* into θεωρητική: rather, spiritual progress entails a gentle oscillation between these two poles in such a way that continuing attention to the changing demands of *praktike* yields ever-greater contemplative refreshment.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Biblical exegesis

The principal textbook of the *gnostikos* is the Bible. Chief among his skills is expertise in biblical exegesis enabling him to search the Scriptures for insights that will benefit both himself and those who seek his counsel. He must be able to ‘give a word to each, according to his worth.’<sup>15</sup> In other words, the constant request made of the desert *abba*, ‘give me a word!’ should be answered according to the unique circumstances and specific needs of the questioner. This necessitates both a large store of biblical wisdom and familiarity with the different levels of meaning contained in sacred scripture. For Evagrius these include spiritual ‘definitions’<sup>16</sup> and the ‘customary expressions of scripture’<sup>17</sup>, as well as rules for allegorical exegesis.<sup>18</sup> Evagrius’ underlying exegetical method, which he describes in *Gnostikos* 18, is based on his schema of spiritual progress:<sup>19</sup>

It is necessary to search for allegorical and literal passages pertaining to the *praktike*, *physike*, and *theologike*. If the passage concerns the *praktike* it is necessary to determine whether it concerns *thumos* and its effects, or *epithumia* and its consequences, or whether it concerns the movements of the *nous*. If the passage pertains to the *physike*, it is necessary to note whether it reveals a doctrine concerning nature, and which one. Or if it is an allegorical passage concerning *theologike* it should be determined as far as possible whether it reveals the doctrine of the Trinity [...].

Thus Evagrius employs the same methodology in interpreting the scriptures as he does in analyzing the spiritual life. Furthermore, the *gnostikos*’ study of the Bible is strongly oriented towards the discovery of texts that may be used in spiritual guidance. Evagrius’ extensive biblical *scholia* and his *Antirrhetikos* (which, taken together comprise the bulk of his literary output) clearly exemplify this. These works provide biblical glossaries and sourcebooks in which texts are explicated and recommended for use according to: (1) their usefulness in the battle against temptation and the acquisition of virtue (*praktike*); (2) what they reveal of the inner purposes of God in history and creation (*physike*); and (3) whether they hint at the ineffable mystery of the divine nature (*theologike*).

### 4. Exegesis of the heart

#### 4.1 Diakrisis

Corresponding to his three-fold schemata of biblical exegesis and spiritual progress is Evagrius’ approach to exegesis of the heart, or *nous*. The foundation of this inward-directed contemplation is the art of *diakrisis* (discernment) the ability to determine the origin and significance of thoughts and dreams. This skill must be practiced throughout life, since

temptation endures until the moment of death.<sup>20</sup> The ascetic develops προσοχή (attentiveness) to the inner world of thoughts, desires, and fantasies, and learns through παρατήρησις (careful observation)<sup>21</sup> to distinguish the origins of these experiences. Here, too, Evagrius employs a threefold approach, distinguishing between: (1) angelic *noemata* that educate and console the *nous*, leading it to God; (2) neutral thoughts that arise from memory and sense-perception; and (3) demonic *logismoi*, tempting thoughts and fantasies that pervert the natural powers of the *nous* and lead it into error.<sup>22</sup> Thus angelic *noemata* are characterized by feelings of peace<sup>23</sup> and ‘are concerned with the inner nature of things and with searching out their spiritual principles.’ Human thoughts are characterized by simple images, unclouded by passion.<sup>24</sup> Demonic *logismoi*, on the other hand, are disturbing or terrifying<sup>25</sup> and incline the soul towards passion and vice.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4.2 Antirrhesis

In the case of demonic *logismoi* Evagrius recommends a second, more probing interior exegesis according to which the tempting-thoughts are classified: first, according to the eight principal *logismoi*; and, second, according to the specific characteristics of the temptation. This ‘second-level’ interior exegesis reflects the structure of the *Antirrhethikos*, Evagrius’ great sourcebook for use in the struggle against tempting-thoughts. The *Antirrhethikos* is unique among Evagrius’ writings and was of particular interest to his biographers.<sup>27</sup> It bears a superficial resemblance to his biblical *scholia* insofar as it cites and to some extent interprets successive biblical texts; but the purpose of this sourcebook is very different from the *scholia*. The *Antirrhethikos* is a collection of bible verses intended for use by those undergoing specific temptations. It contains 486 brief texts from the scriptures, usually consisting of only one or two verses, intended to serve as ἀντίρρησις (response) to the experience of temptation by the *logismoi* of gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. The *Antirrhethikos* consists of eight books, each concerned with a different temptation: each book begins anew at *Genesis* and offers verses from successive books of the bible. Evagrius’ painstaking and systematic correlation of successive biblical texts with specific *logismoi* affords a unique example of his understanding of the interrelationship between exegesis of the biblical text and the tempted heart.

Evagrius’ art of *antirrhesis* enables the offending thought to be transformed and healed through the application of a specific biblical word or phrase, intended to be memorized, recited, and prayerfully pondered. The word *antirrhesis* is often translated as ‘contradiction’, but for Evagrius this spiritual practice is more than a method of simply counteracting or contradicting the demons. Evagrius does, indeed, describe such ‘contradiction’ of demons and their operations in his definitions of *antirrhesis* in the Prologue to the *Antirrhethikos* and in *Letter 4*; however, careful examination of the *Antirrhethikos* and of Evagrius’ antirrhetic *scholia* reveals a wide array of different uses. The range of different spiritual functions these verses are meant to serve may be conceived as a spectrum, consisting at one end of what might be termed ‘direct *antirrhesis*’, a kind of exorcism which specifically negates or repels the offending demon or *logismos*.<sup>28</sup> At the other end of this spectrum are brief prayers which are not directed against the demons, but are offered, rather, to God.<sup>29</sup> Evagrius believed that temptation and physical affliction have a unique power to galvanize the soul into a type of prayer characterized by παρρησία, frankness or ‘freedom of speech’.<sup>30</sup> However, the struggling soul often finds itself mute; thus these antirrhetic prayers provide the stunned soul with words which may be addressed to God.<sup>31</sup> Between these two extremes, antirrhetic exorcism-verses on the one hand and antirrhetic prayers on the other, lie the majority of texts in the *Antirrhethikos* which are neither directed against the demons nor offered to God, but are rather intended for the tempted soul.<sup>32</sup> These verses serve a variety of functions: to exhort; to evoke compunction and repentance; to console; to inform; and often to encourage practice of the virtue opposed to the temptation being endured.<sup>33</sup>

### 4.3 Replacement

A second method of dealing with both *logismoi* and more elevated *noemata* is the technique of ‘replacement’ in which inferior thoughts are replaced with better ones. At its lowest (and most controversial<sup>34</sup>) level this consists of replacing particularly vicious temptations with less malignant ones, as Evagrius puts it ‘driving out a nail with a nail’.<sup>35</sup> He particularly recommends this as a means of replacing lustful fantasies with vainglorious contempt for lust.<sup>36</sup> A more elevated application of this method holds the potential for transforming demonic *logismoi* into *noemata* of the human or even angelic type. In *Peri Logismon* 19 Evagrius recommends beginning with another ‘second-level’ exegesis: ‘Within yourself distinguish (διέλε) the hurled tempting-thought into its parts: what it is; of what [external] concerns (πράγματα) is it composed; and what in it especially afflicts the intellect.’ Thus, for example, when one is tempted by desire for gold one learns to ‘distinguish between: the intellect which has received the thought; the *noema* of gold; the gold itself; and the passion of avarice.’ Turning its spiritual gaze upwards from the experience and exegesis of temptation, the soul now asks wherein the sin consists: it concludes that sin lies neither in the *nous*, which is God’s image, nor in the *noema* of physical gold, but rather in ‘a pleasure which hates humankind, born of free will, forcing the intellect to misuse God’s creatures. It is this pleasure that the law of God commands us to cut off’.<sup>37</sup>

By asking questions concerning the nature and inner purpose of gold it becomes possible for the contemplative to rise still higher, ascending by means of ‘replacement’ from the realm of temptation and *praktike* into angelic *theoria physike*.

Why was gold created? Why is it granular and cast into the deepest parts of the earth, to be discovered only with great labor and toil? How is it that when found [gold] is committed to the fire, then washed and placed the hands of artisans who make the lampstand of the tabernacle, the incense-altar, the censers, and the vessels (*Ex.* 25:29-31; 27:1-3) from which, by the Savior’s grace the King of Babylon no longer drinks? (*Daniel* 5:1-30) One like Cleopas can bring a heart burning with these mysteries (*Luke* 24:32).

Here Evagrius demonstrates how to ascend from temptation to contemplation of the natural world, then to discover in allegorical interpretation of biblical images the inner meanings of both temptation and one’s spiritual striving. His analysis of temptations, exegesis of the heart, leads to contemplation of creation and to allegorical meditation on *Exodus* 25, *Daniel* 5, and *Luke* 24. The hidden gold, purified, washed, and transformed, represents the *nous* striving to free itself from the demonic ‘King of Babylon’ and to discover with Cleopas the presence of Christ, companion and guide on the spiritual journey.

### 4.4 The Landscape of temptation and vision

The technique of ‘replacement’ is based on Evagrius’ conviction that the *nous* is capable of contemplating (or being afflicted by) only one *logismos* or *noema* at a time.<sup>38</sup> While extremely useful, this method, focusing as it does on a single thought or concept at a time, is insufficient to cope with the dynamic, ever-changing landscape of the *nous* on which the battles of the *praktike* are waged. Evagrius believed that with time and experience the Christian ascetic can develop the capacity for a third approach to thoughts and dreams, by which it becomes possible to contemplate the whole interior battlefield of the soul.<sup>39</sup> Evagrius particularly associates this dynamic, complex contemplation with the virtues of φρόνησις (prudence) and σύνεσις (understanding).<sup>40</sup> It requires redoubled attentiveness and a willingness to reflect carefully on the inner meaning of what is contemplated in the arena of the heart. The monk must:

[...] observe his tempting-thoughts and note down their intensification and diminution, and their interconnectedness, and their timing, and which demons produce what, and which demon comes after another, and which does not follow after which; and he should seek from Christ the *logoi* (inner meanings) of these things.

It is not only the landscape of battle that opens up to the dedicated contemplative: the succession and interrelationship between human and angelic *noemata* is experienced in a vista of ‘ages and worlds’ that renews and heartens the *gnostikos*. Evagrius employs the metaphor of the soul as shepherd to depict the refreshment and relief such contemplation can provide:

The concepts of this present age – these the Lord gave to human beings, like sheep to a good shepherd: for it is written, *He has placed the world in his heart* (*Eccl.* 3:11). [...] And if, weary from our toil, a certain *acedia* overtakes us we should climb up a little onto the rock of knowledge and converse with the psalter (see *Ps.* 48:5), plucking with the virtues the strings of knowledge: let us again tend our sheep as they pasture below Mount Sinai, so that the God of our fathers may also call to us out of the bush (see *Ex.* 3:1-6) and grant us the *logoi* of the signs and the wonders (see *Ex.* 7:9; 11:9-10).<sup>41</sup>

Here Evagrius depicts the landscape on which the succession of human and angelic *noemata* appears. The *nous* contains within itself a miniature reflection of ‘the concepts of the present age’, the complex tapestry of human history in which, just as in the scriptures, the *gnostikos* can learn to behold the ‘*logoi* of signs and wonders’, the inner meanings and purposes of God. Throughout his writings Evagrius particularly emphasizes two *logoi*, providence and judgment, in his hierarchy of contemplative objects which the *gnostikos* must learn to perceive. He believed that they offer a key to perceiving the purposes of God in creation, and it is to these two *logoi* that we now turn.

## 5. Exegesis of the spiritual journey

### 5.1 The Logoi of providence and judgment

Evagrius intends that the *gnostikos* ultimately perceives himself, his own and others’ spiritual journeys, and the whole of the cosmos from the perspective of a divine origin and destiny. The rich tapestry of creation, the whole of salvation history as revealed in the scriptures, and the unique stories of each pilgrim or disciple to whom the *gnostikos* ministers mutually illuminate a ‘richly diverse wisdom’ that has its meaning in God. As spiritual guide the *gnostikos* discovers that each soul’s journey towards God is a miniature reflection of the cosmic journey towards reunion. All multiplicity may be comprehended as pointing either back in time to the primordial unity from which it fell, or ahead into that restored union towards which all things are moving. Thus the drama of each soul’s struggle is illuminated by the sweeping movements of (allegorically-interpreted) biblical salvation history.

His conviction that all human experience reflects an ultimate, eschatological meaning underlies two fundamental ‘hermeneutic principles’ of Evagrius’ exegesis of both *nous* and scripture: the *logoi* of providence and judgment. Evagrius urges the *gnostikos* to ‘meditate continuously’ on these *logoi*,<sup>42</sup> and he refers to them throughout his writings.<sup>43</sup> The reason for this emphasis is that for Evagrius, meditation on these two principles forces the *gnostikos* to keep constantly in mind both the movement of each human being towards God and the ultimate purpose and end of the cosmos. These *logoi* are a means of probing beneath the often-bewildering diversity of creation so as to perceive all created things as active participants in the ongoing spectacle of creation, fall, and restoration.

## 5.2 The *logos* of providence

Evagrius uses the term ‘providence’ to describe God’s ongoing provision of what each reasoning being requires in order to return to divine union.<sup>44</sup> God’s providential care is always mediated, transmitted to the different ranks of the *logikoi* chiefly by other (usually higher-ranking) *logikoi*. Every order of intelligence, especially those above the human level is entrusted with responsibility for mediating divine providence to those beneath them. Angels are thus entrusted with responsibility for human beings; archangels are responsible for angels;<sup>45</sup> and so on into ‘ages and worlds’ of which human beings know nothing. At the summit of this great cascade of divine compassion is Christ ‘who keeps watch over all’.<sup>46</sup> The *gnostikos*’ capacity for contemplation enables him to share in the ‘angelic practice’<sup>47</sup> of praying for others,<sup>48</sup> aiding them in their spiritual struggle,<sup>49</sup> and curing<sup>50</sup> by teaching them how to increase in virtue and knowledge. This knowledge he communicates carries with it, in turn, an impulse, almost a compulsion, to assist others.<sup>51</sup>

The *logos* of providence also teaches the *gnostikos* to retain trust in God even when all awareness of providential assistance vanishes. Evagrius explains that God sometimes appears to abandon a soul, not in condemnation but rather out of mercy. The apparent withdrawal of providence should be interpreted as an act of God intended to lead the soul to repentance.<sup>52</sup>

Evagrius’ most radical illustration of providential abandonment is his own admittedly-unique exegesis of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in chapter sixteen of *St. Luke’s gospel*. Evagrius maintains that even in the ‘place of torment’ where the rich man laments it is still possible to learn about mercy and even to grow in previously-unknown compassion for others.<sup>53</sup> Thus Evagrius suggests that it is possible for the sufferings of hell to bring to fruition the imperishable ‘seeds of virtue’ which were originally implanted within the soul at its creation.<sup>54</sup> Thus the *logos* of providence enables the *gnostikos* both to bear in mind God’s constant ministering presence in all human circumstances and to recall that grace is mediated, often by friends, acquaintances, *abbas* and *ammās* and even angels who facilitate those acts of free choices that enable reasoning beings to make spiritual progress. In serving as a spiritual guide the *gnostikos* always proceeds from the conviction that God’s providential guidance is somehow perceptible, however obscurely, in all human circumstances, even in what is perceived as abandonment by God.

## 5.3 The *Logos* of Judgment

For Evagrius the *logos* of judgment does not refer to punishment or condemnation: it describes, instead, God’s gift to all reasoning beings of the bodies and environments (‘worlds’) they require in order to make spiritual progress.<sup>55</sup> ‘Judgment’ describes a series of progressive transformations. The first ‘judgment’ was God’s original, providential creation of the material universe in response to the *kinesis* or fall of the reasoning beings he had brought into being. Subsequent to this first judgment all reasoning beings undergo a series of transformations at which each receives a new body and environment suited to its changed spiritual state. The final ‘judgment’ designates that complete transformation which will restore all things to union with God. Evagrius’ use of the term judgment, *krisis*, may reflect ancient medical vocabulary, where Hippocrates and Galen used it as a technical term to describe a ‘critical period’ which precedes or accompanies a significant turning point in an illness. The *krisis* heralds a change leading either to improvement or deterioration in the patient’s condition.<sup>56</sup> Evagrius similarly employs the term *krisis* to describe a fundamental transformation which facilitates movement either upwards towards virtue and knowledge or downwards into vice and ignorance. Meditation on the *logos* of judgment thus enables the *gnostikos* to interpret the rich diversity of the cosmos, including the unique qualities and circumstances of each person, as God’s gracious gift of a specific environment and body that

will best facilitate the return of each reasoning being to that divine unity from which all have fallen. The complexity and variety of creation and of human experience thus should serve as a constant reminder to the *gnostikos* of the diverse paths and circumstances that lead to God.

## 6. *Spiritual guidance in the light of eternity*

In this paper similarities have been described between Evagrius' method of biblical exegesis and his approach to spiritual guidance, or as Brown calls it, the 'alphabet of the heart'. Evagrius' overall approach to both biblical exegesis and spiritual guidance may be summarized as an attempt to perceive and to describe everything *sub specie aeternitatis*, in the light of a divine origin and an eternal destiny. As biblical exegete Evagrius' *gnostikos* discovers in the scriptures symbols and allegories of the great cosmic drama of fall, Incarnation, and the eschatological reunion of all reasoning beings with God. As spiritual guide the *gnostikos* looks up, as it were, from the Bible and perceives in the movements and experiences of each soul a miniature reflection of that cosmic journey towards reunion. Thus the drama of each soul's struggle is illuminated by the sweeping movements of salvation history: both the methods and the findings of biblical exegesis inform spiritual guidance, often providing specific remedies for spiritual ailments.

But the 'other' who seeks spiritual counsel is not only a reflection, a microcosm, of salvation history; Evagrius believed that the 'other' can and should be contemplated as 'God-bearer', one in whom the image of God shines. One of Evagrius' most advanced spiritual texts is also one of his best-known, the *De oratione*. Near the end of this work he summarizes his teaching in a series of beatitudes and definitions that include the following: '(122) Blessed is the monk who regards every human being ὡς Θεὸν μετὰ Θεόν (as God, after God)'.<sup>57</sup> The 'others' whom the *gnostikos* tries to help are themselves worthy objects of contemplation: Evagrius expects that the advanced contemplative will be able to see in them something of the presence of God. The next three verses in this chain highlight the interconnectedness of all who make spiritual progress:

123. Blessed is the monk who sees the salvation and progress of all with perfect joy, as if it were his own.

124. A monk is one who is both separated from all and yet united with all.

125. A monk is one who thinks of himself as one with all, because he unceasingly thinks he sees himself in everyone.

Contemplation of God in the 'other' is not static. The contemplative rejoices in the spiritual progress of others because he knows that he is both unique ('separated') and yet in union with all. His own spiritual progress illuminates the experience of others, and as *gnostikos* he learns to share with others from the rich treasury of biblical and personal wisdom he has acquired. Thus for Evagrius the 'contemplative life' is by its nature ordered towards an oscillation between biblical exegesis and the provision of spiritual guidance, between the discovery of God in the sacred text and the perception of God in the unique spiritual journey of the other. To use later terminology from the Western monastic tradition, Evagrius encourages a biblical *lectio divina* which teaches the contemplative how to practice *lectio divina* on his own inner life and on the life and experiences of his neighbor.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Latin Systematic Collection (*Verba Seniorum*) this is found in 'Discretion' 5. In the Greek Alphabetical Collection it is found (without Evagrius' name) as 'Arsenius' 5.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brown. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia, 1988), Chapter 11: 'The Desert Fathers: Anthony to John Climacus', 229.

<sup>3</sup> This is the title of Jeremy Driscoll's English translation of Evagrius' *Ad monachos: The mind's long journey to the Holy Trinity* (Collegeville, 1994).



- <sup>4</sup> The beginning of chapter 89 of Evagrius' *Praktikos* is modeled closely on an anonymous first-century peripatetic treatise, *On Virtues and Vices*, ed. Bekker, *Aristotelis opera*, v. 2 (Berlin, 1891), 1249a 26 - 1251b 37.
- <sup>5</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 89; SC 171 (Paris, 1971), 680-4.
- <sup>6</sup> Evagrius, scholion 2 *On Psalm* 107:3(1).
- <sup>7</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 17; SC 438 (Paris, 1998), 210.
- <sup>8</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 89; SC 171 (1971), 680.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 682.
- <sup>10</sup> These roughly correspond to the divisions of the Platonic tripartite soul, beginning with the ἐπιθυμητικόν, moving through the θυμικόν and concluding with intellectual temptations.
- <sup>11</sup> Evagrius most commonly uses the term λογισμοί to designate the tempting thoughts inspired by demons, and νοήματα to describe thoughts which are benign or angelic in origin. However, this distinction does not always apply; and the terms are occasionally used in the opposite sense: *i.e.*, malignant νοήματα (*Praktikos* 42; SC 171, 1971, 596) and neutral or beneficial λογισμοί (*Praktikos* 30; SC 171, 570. *Eulogios* 8, R. E Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus. The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, [Oxford, 2003], 5, 314f.).
- <sup>12</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 50, 79, 83; SC 171 (1971), 614. 666. 672.
- <sup>13</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 36; SC 171 (1971), 582. On the persistence of anger in those who have made considerable spiritual progress: *Gnostikos* 10, 31, and 32; SC 356 (Paris, 1989), 102, 146, 148.
- <sup>14</sup> A vivid depiction of the mutually-enhancing interrelationship between πρακτική and θεωρητική is found in Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 17; SC 438 (1998), 208-14.
- <sup>15</sup> Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 44; SC 356 (1989), 174.
- <sup>16</sup> Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 17; SC 356 (1989), 114f.
- <sup>17</sup> Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 19; SC 356 (1989), 118f.
- <sup>18</sup> Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 20-1; SC 356 (1989), 118-21.
- <sup>19</sup> Evagrius' approach is clearly based on the exegetical methods of Clement of Alexandria, (*Stromateis* I 28.179, 3-4, Stählin, GCS 15, v. 2 [Berlin, 1960], 108) and Origen, *Com. in Cant.* Prol. 3.6; SC 375 [Paris, 1970], 132).
- <sup>20</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 36; SC 171 (1971), 582.
- <sup>21</sup> Evagrius often employs as παρατήρησις as a synonym for διάκρισις. Evagrius' flexible use of this terminology as contrasted with his successors is discussed by Antony Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes, 2007), 39-68.
- <sup>22</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 8; SC 438 (1998), 176-9.
- <sup>23</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 80; SC 171 (1971), 668.
- <sup>24</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 8; SC 438 (1998), 176.
- <sup>25</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 80; SC 171 (1971), 668.
- <sup>26</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 51 and 80; SC 171 (1971), 616 and 668; *Peri Logismon* 8; SC 438 (1998), 176.
- <sup>27</sup> Palladius (*Lausiac History* 38.10), Gennadius (*On Illustrious Men* 11) and Socrates (*Ecclesiastical History* IV 23) all mention it; and Gennadius translated the *Antirrhetikos* into Latin.
- <sup>28</sup> Evagrius often alerts the reader that a verse is of this type by introducing it with the phrase: 'For the demon [...].' Thirty-two verses of the *Antirrhetikos* are of this type. He evidently regards these ejaculatory prayers as 'indirectly' antirrhetic in the sense that they invite the soul to turn towards God and away from the demons, thus 'contradicting' not so much the temptation itself as the demonic goal of preventing prayer.
- <sup>29</sup> Most of these are introduced with the phrase: 'For the Lord [...].' Forty-four verses of the *Antirrhetikos* are of this type.
- <sup>30</sup> Evagrius, *Letter* 1.2, W. Frankenberg *Evagrius Ponticus*, Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Neue Folge, v. 13, o. 2 (Berlin, 1912) 564-7, (160 ba). Gabriel Bunge, *Briefe aus der Wüste* (Trier, 1986), 211
- <sup>31</sup> Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos*, VIII 28 (540f. Frankenberg).
- <sup>32</sup> The majority of verses (301 of 492) begin with the phrase: 'For the tempting-thought of [...].' Less than a quarter (116 verses) begin: 'For a soul [...]', or 'For a mind [...].'
- <sup>33</sup> Evagrius alternately describes these different categories of verses as intended: 'For the soul (or 'mind') [...]' (116 verses), or: 'For the tempting thought [...](301 verses)'. These two introductory phrases appear to serve a stylistic rather than a taxonomic purpose; their alternate use avoids an endlessly-repetitive introductory formula rather than signaling a change in content.
- <sup>34</sup> Later spiritual authors, such as Barsanuphius of Gaza, strongly disapproved of this technique.
- <sup>35</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 58; SC 171 (1971), 636.
- <sup>36</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 21; R. E Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus. The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford, 2003) 48f. 324f.
- <sup>37</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 8; SC 438 (1998), 216-22.
- <sup>38</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 24-5; SC 438 (1998), 236-44.
- <sup>39</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 36, 83; SC 171 (1971), 582, 672.
- <sup>40</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 89; SC 171 (1971), 680-8.
- <sup>41</sup> Evagrius, *Peri Logismon* 17; SC 438 (1998), 212-4.

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<sup>42</sup> Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 48; SC 356 (1989), 186.

<sup>43</sup> The phrase ‘the *logoi* of providence and judgment’ occurs in the following: *Gnostikos* 48, where he urges continuous meditation on these *logoi*, in ten passages of the *Kephalaia Gnostica* (I 27; II 59; V 4; V 7; V 16; V 23; V 24; VI 43; VI 59; VI 75), in his first, sixth, and seventh *Letters*, and in all the collections of his *scholia* which have been edited to date (*On Psalms*, *On Proverbs*, and *On Ecclesiastes*).

<sup>44</sup> Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostica* IV 89; Guillaumont, PO 28/1, n. 134 (Paris, 1958), 175.

<sup>45</sup> Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostica* V 4 and V 24.

<sup>46</sup> Evagrius, scholion 38 on *Ecclesiastes* 5:7-11, SC 397 (Paris, 1993), 128.

<sup>47</sup> Evagrius, *De oratione* 142; Simon Tugwell, *Evagrius Ponticus: De oratione* (Oxford, 1981), 26 (= PG 79,1197).

<sup>48</sup> Evagrius, *De oratione* 40 (9 Tugwell = PG 79,1176).

<sup>49</sup> Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostica* VI 90 (249 Guillaumont).

<sup>50</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 100; SC 171, 710. *De oratione* 117-25.

<sup>51</sup> Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostica* VI 76; scholion 5 and 5b on *Psalms* 134.7(3).

<sup>52</sup> Evagrius, scholion 8 on *Psalms* 93:18 (= PG 12,1553). Palladius writes that he and ‘the blessed Evagrius’ received this and other teachings concerning God’s providential abandonment from the reclusive Abba Paphnutius. Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 47. J. Driscoll provides a detailed discussion of Evagrius’ teaching on providential abandonment in: ‘Evagrius and Paphnutius on the Causes for Abandonment by God’: *Studia Monastica* 39 (1997) 259-86.

<sup>53</sup> Evagrius, Scholion 62 on *Proverbs* 5:14; SC 340 (Paris, 1987), 152-4.

<sup>54</sup> Although aware that this optimistic interpretation would be regarded with suspicion, Evagrius was deeply committed to this view, which he repeats with only minor variations in five different places in his writings: Evagrius, Scholion 62 on *Proverbs* 5:14, *Kephalaia Gnostica* I 40, *Malignis Cogitationibus* 31, *Letters* 43.3 and 59.3. As regards the *apokatastasis*, the doctrine that all fallen beings will ultimately accept the salvation offered by Christ and thus be restored to union with God, Evagrius appears to have avoided ever stating openly that ‘all will be saved’. Instead, this teaching is implicit in his eschatological vision of the *logikoi* returning to their ‘original state’: Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostica* II 4; *Letter to Melania* 29-30, 6 (618f. Frankenberg; G. Bunge, *Briefe*, 313f. 326).

<sup>55</sup> Evagrius, *Scholion* 275 on *Proverbs* 24:22; SC 340, 370.

<sup>56</sup> This doctrine was based in part on the theory of πέπανσις, ‘coction’ or digestion (literally ‘ripening’) of ingested substances, which when incomplete or unsuccessful was believed to be responsible for many diseases. The successful calculation and prediction of critical days seems to have depended on the time thought to be required for πέπανσις as well as classical numerology, including musical theories of harmonic intervals: V. Langholf, *Medical Theories in Hippocrates: Early Texts and the Epidemics* (New York, 1990), 79-103.

<sup>57</sup> Evagrius, *De oratione* 122 (6 Tugwell = PG 79,1171).