

# AN EXEGETICAL WAY *of* SEEING: CONTEMPLATION *and* SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE *in* EVAGRIUS PONTICUS

Fr. Luke Dysinger, OSB, DPhil

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## INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of his treatise, *Praktikos*, Evagrius Ponticus attributes to Antony of Egypt an apophthegm in which the monastic patriarch responds to the suggestion that he is illiterate: "My book, O philosopher, is the nature of beings, and it is there whenever I wish to read the words (*logoi*) of God."<sup>1</sup> Evagrius was familiar with a tradition that regarded the whole of creation as a "Book of God" that can be read by those skilled in the art of *theoria physiké*, the contemplation of nature. His concern, however, was with the inner world of the *nous* or intellect, where the ascetic struggles against temptation and the contemplative strives to discern the presence of God. In this paper we will consider Evagrius' reinterpretation of the "Book of God" as a form of contemplation in which the disciplines of biblical exegesis and spiritual guidance mutually inform one another. His *Letter to Anatolius* (Letter 25) will afford an example of what may be regarded as Evagrius' exegesis of the human heart.

## 1. THE BOOK *of* GOD

### 1.1 *Antecedents in Origen and in the Apocrypha*

The notion that the whole of creation can be "read" as a kind of sacred text appears in the intertestamental literature and pseudepigrapha, most notably in *Enoch* and the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.<sup>2</sup> This concept was taken up and elaborated by Origen in his refutation of astrology. In his commentaries on Genesis and John, Origen cites a tradition from the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* that the patriarch Jacob had "read on the pages of the heavens" the several destinies of his sons.<sup>3</sup> Origen intended to defend the concept of human freedom by refuting the determinism that seemed an unavoidable corollary of astrology. He argued that the fate of human beings is not fixed by the movements of planets and stars, even though the future is, as the *Testament of the Twelve* implies, recorded in the heavens for those who are able to read it: "The entirety of the heavens, like a prophetic text, contains the future, for it is, as it were, God's book."<sup>4</sup> Origen did not regard the stars as instrumental causes of human events, but rather as letters and characters in a sidereal record of the divine purposes. Not only important future events, but all human deeds are mysteriously "written on the heavenly pages".<sup>5</sup>

The art of reading God's will in the pages of heaven is, however, a skill that is normally attainable only by beings far advanced in God's service, "those who are worthy of the entirety of knowledge."<sup>6</sup> Origen believed that the power to read the "signs of God like letters and characters in the heavens" is proper to angels and other heavenly powers, and to the saints who have died and "escaped the bondage of this earthly state".<sup>7</sup> While those who dwell on earth must rely on the sacred scriptures for the revelation of God's will, angels discern the divine intentions and purposes by "reading the Book of

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<sup>1</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 92, SC 170 (Paris, 1971), 694.

<sup>2</sup> *Enoch* 81.2; 93.2; 103.2. *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Asher 7, Levi 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*: Asher (10) 7.5.2; Levi (3) 5.4.3. M. de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Critical Edition of the Greek Text*, ser. *Pseudepigrapha Veteris Testamenti Graece* 1.2. (Leiden, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> ORIGEN, *Comm. on Genesis*, *Philokalia* 23:15.31-33, SC 226 (Paris, 1971), 180.

<sup>5</sup> ORIGEN, *Comm. on John*, 1.11.68.14-16, SC 120 *bis* (Paris, 1996), 92-94.

<sup>6</sup> ORIGEN, *Comm. on John*, 1.11.68.16-17, SC 120 *bis*, 94.

<sup>7</sup> ORIGEN, *Comm. on Genesis*, *Philokalia* 23.20.14-19, SC 226, 200.

God”;<sup>8</sup> for “everything from eternity to the final consummation is inscribed in that worthy Book of God that is the heaven[s].”<sup>9</sup>

## 1.2 Evagrius on the Book of God

Evagrius adopted Origen’s terminology in his own definition of the book of God as the contemplation of nature.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Origen, however, Evagrius did not believe that the ability to read the book of creation is reserved to the denizens of heaven; nor did regard the starry firmament as its principal pages. Rather, Evagrius believed that Ecclesiastes 3:11 attests to the existence of an inner universe, a microcosm within the heart wherein each person may contemplate the divine intentions and purposes (*logoi*):

Eccl. 3.11: “All the things he has made are beautiful in his time: he has also set the ages in their heart...”

The text states that “he has also given them the ages,” that is the *logoi* of the ages; because it is there [in the heart] that we have the “kingdom of heaven within us,” as the Lord has said; (cf. Lk 17.21).<sup>11</sup>

For Evagrius it is the inner world of concepts, temptations, fantasies, and prayers that constitute the principal subject matter for natural contemplation. God has entrusted each human being with responsibility for an inner universe of thoughts and concepts that must be tended and guarded just as a shepherd guards a flock:

The concepts (*noemata*) of this present world - these the Lord gave to man, like sheep to a good shepherd: for it is written, *He has placed the ages (ton aiona) in his heart*; (Eccl. 3:11) yoking to him indignation (*thumos*) and desire (*epithumia*) as helpmates, so that with the first he may drive away the wolf-like concepts, while with desire he may lovingly tend the sheep, assailed as he often is by the rain and winds... 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, (cf. 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 (cf. Exod. 3:1-6) and grant us the *logoi* of the signs and the wonders. (cf. Exod. 7:9, 11:9-10)<sup>12</sup>

In this metaphor of shepherd and flock Evagrius portrays his model of spiritual progress: namely, an alternating rhythm of ascetical practice (*praktiké*) and contemplation (*theoria*). Following Plato and the later Aristotelian tradition,<sup>13</sup> he depicts the soul as tripartite, ruled by the “shepherd”, the *logistikon* or reasoning faculty that is chiefly responsible for developing the virtues of prudence, understanding and wisdom.<sup>14</sup> The “shepherd” makes use of the *pathetikon*, the passionate portion of the soul and source of the powers of *thumos* (indignation) and *epithumia* (desire). These powers or energies, “yoked to [the soul] as helpmates”, are intended by God to be used “according to nature”; but they will overwhelm the soul as passions if misused or present in excess. When exercised according to nature the *epithumetikon* contributes the virtues of temperance, love, and continence,<sup>15</sup> while the *thumikon* provides courage and patient endurance.<sup>16</sup> Through the practice of *diakrisis* (discernment) the *praktikos* learns to employ these “helpmates” in the contexts of interpersonal relationships, dreams, and thoughts, especially thoughts that occur during prayer.<sup>17</sup> The Christian ascetic or *praktikos* learns the nature of the different *noemata* (concepts, ideas) with which the mind is filled, and is able to

<sup>8</sup> ORIGEN, *Comm. on Genesis, Philokalia* 23.21.22, SC 226, 202.

<sup>9</sup> ORIGEN, *Comm. on Genesis, Philokalia* 23.20.28, SC 226, 200.

<sup>10</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 8 on *Psalms* 138:16 (cf PG 12.1662), cited below.

<sup>11</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 15 On *Ecclesiastes* 3:11 (18-21), SC 397 (Paris, 1993), 82.

<sup>12</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Peri Logismon* 17: 1-8, 32-39, SC 438 (Paris, 1998), 208-212.

<sup>13</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>14</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 89; SC 171, 680-4.

<sup>15</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 89; SC 171, 680.

<sup>16</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 89; SC 171, 680.

<sup>17</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 25; *De oratione* 12, 13, 24, 25.

distinguish between *logismoi*, demonic tempting-thoughts, of gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride;<sup>18</sup> as well as to “tend” the beneficial *noemata* that come from angels or from neutral sense-perception.<sup>19</sup> The labors of the *praktiké* are rewarded by God with the birth of love and the gift of *apatheia*, “dispassion” or “freedom from compulsion”.<sup>20</sup>

The ascent of the shepherd onto the “rock of knowledge” reflects Evagrius’ hope that the Christian *praktikos* will, over time, mature into a *gnostikos*, a biblical exegete and teacher able to contemplate the divine *logoi*, the inner meanings and purposes of God that are concealed beneath surface appearances. For Evagrius’ *gnostikos* learning to read the “Book of God” has less to do with a heavenly record of events than with the divine intentions that inexorably lead all fallen beings towards eventual reunion with God. It is this “book” that can be read in both the macrocosm of biblical salvation history and in the microcosm of the human heart:

138.16<sup>[2]</sup> *And in your book all shall be written.*

8. The book of God is the contemplation of corporeal and incorporeal beings, in which the pur[ified] *nous* comes to be written through knowledge. For in this book are written the *logoi* of providence and judgment, through which book God is known as [1] creator, [2] wise, [3] provident, and [4] judging:

- [1] creator through the things that have come from non-being into being;
- [2] wise through his *logoi*, concealed within them
- [3] provident, through what is accomplished for our virtue and knowledge;
- [4] and furthermore judge, through the variety of bodies of the reasoning beings, and through the multiform worlds and the ages they contain.<sup>21</sup>

16<sup>[2]</sup>. καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ βιβλίον σου πάντες γραφήσονται

8. Βιβλίον Θεοῦ ἐστὶν ἡ θεωρία σωμάτων καὶ ἀσωμάτων ἐν ᾧ πέφυκε διὰ τῆς γνώσεως γράφεσθαι νοῦς καθαρὸς· ἐν δὲ τούτῳ τῷ βιβλίῳ εἰσι γεγραμμένοι καὶ οἱ περὶ προνοίας καὶ κρίσεως λόγοι, δι’ οὓ βιβλίου γινώσκεται ὁ Θεὸς ὡς δημιουργὸς καὶ σοφὸς καὶ προνοητῆς καὶ κριτῆς·

δημιουργὸς μὲν διὰ τὰ γεγονότα ἀπὸ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι  
σοφὸς δὲ διὰ τοὺς ἀποκειμένους λόγους ἐν αὐτοῖς·  
προνοητῆς δὲ διὰ τὰ συντελοῦντα πρὸς ἀρετὴν ἡμῶν καὶ γνῶσιν  
κριτῆς δὲ πάλιν διὰ τὰ διάφορα σώματα τῶν λογικῶν καὶ τοὺς ποικίλους κόσμους καὶ τούτους περιέχοντας τοὺς αἰῶνας.

In this scholion Evagrius identifies the “Book of God” with natural contemplation (*theoria physiké*), “the contemplation of bodies and incorporeal [beings];” however his emphasis is not on angels or those in heaven, but rather on “the purified *nous*”, that is the inner world of the contemplative, that “has come to be written”, and can thus be read in the Book of God. A preceding scholion (Scholion 6 on *Psalms* 138) links “this same book” with both the saving passion of Christ and the particular needs of the fallen soul. Thus “reading” the Book of God entails contemplation of sacred scripture together with the both macrocosm of salvation history and the microcosm of the individual soul’s unique spiritual journey. He further condenses his definition by emphasizing “the *logoi* of providence and judgment”. This uniquely Evagrian formula<sup>22</sup> recurs throughout his writings, and is found in the *Gnostikos*, in ten passages of the *Kephalaia Gnostica*,<sup>23</sup> in Evagrius’ first, sixth, and seventh *Letters*, and in all the collections of his scholia that have been edited to date, that is, his scholia on *Psalms*, on *Proverbs*, and on *Ecclesiastes*. Since these two *logoi* are keys to interpreting the Book of God it is important to be clear what Evagrius means by them.

<sup>18</sup> These roughly correspond to the divisions of the Platonic tripartite soul, beginning with the *epithumetikon*, moving through the *thumikon* and concluding with intellectual temptations of the *logistikon*.

<sup>19</sup> Evagrius most commonly uses the term *logismoi* to designate the tempting thoughts inspired by demons, and *noemata* 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 *noemata* (*Praktikos* 42; SC 171, 596) and neutral or beneficial *logismoi* (*Praktikos* 30; SC 171, 570. *Eulogios* 8, R. E SINKEWICZ, *Evagrius of Pontus. The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford, 2003), 5, 314f.

<sup>20</sup> *Apatheia* does not mean freedom from temptation, since Evagrius emphasizes that certain temptations will continue until death. (*Praktikos* 36); rather, it refers to freedom from the inner storm of “passions’ irrational drives which in their extreme forms would today be called obsessions, compulsions, or addictions. (*Praktikos* prologue 8 and chapter 81).

<sup>21</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 8 on *Psalms* 138.16, cf PG 12.1662.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Urs VON BALTHASAR considered this formula a reliable indicator of Evagrian authorship, ‘Die Hiera des Evagrius’ *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 63 (1939), 104.

<sup>23</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* I.27; II.59; V.4; V.7; V.16; V.23; V.24; VI.43; VI.59; VI.75.

Evagrius employs the term “providence” (*pronoia*) to highlight both the divine gift of free will<sup>24</sup> and God’s ongoing provision to reasoning beings (*logikoi*) of what each requires in order to return to divine union.<sup>25</sup> God’s providential care is always mediated, transmitted to the different ranks of the *logikoi* chiefly by other (usually higher-ranking) *logikoi*. All the *logikoi*, especially those above the human level, are entrusted with responsibility for mediating divine providence to those beneath them.<sup>26</sup> At the summit of this great cascade of divine compassion is Christ “who keeps watch over all”.<sup>27</sup> The *gnostikos*’ progress in contemplation enables him to share in the providential “angelic practice”<sup>28</sup> of praying for others,<sup>29</sup> aiding them in their spiritual struggle,<sup>30</sup> and curing<sup>31</sup> by teaching them how to increase in virtue and knowledge. The knowledge he communicates carries with it, in turn, an impulse, almost a compulsion, to assist others.<sup>32</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 choice 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.<sup>33</sup>

For Evagrius the *logos* of “judgment” (*krisis*) 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>34</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” that heralds a change leading either to improvement or deterioration in the patient’s condition.<sup>35</sup> Evagrius similarly uses *krisis* to describe a fundamental transformation that 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

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<sup>24</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* VI.43: “The providence of God accompanies free will; but his judgment considers the order of the *logikoi*.” GUILLAUMONT, *Les six Centuries des ‘Kephalaia Gnostica’ d’Évagre le Pontique* Patrologia Orientalis 28.1, N° 134 (Paris, 1958), 235

<sup>25</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* IV 89; Guillaumont, 175.

<sup>26</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* V 4 and V 24.

<sup>27</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 38 on *Ecclesiastes* 5:7-11, SC 397, 128.

<sup>28</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 142; Simon TUGWELL, *Evagrius Ponticus: De oratione* (Oxford, 1981), 26 (= PG 79,1197). There exists as yet no critical edition of Evagrius’ *On Prayer*. The best available version is that of Simon Tugwell: *Evagrius Ponticus, De oratione*, (Oxford Faculty of Theology, 1981); based on six MSS and PG 79.1165-1200; *Philokalia* I, (Athens, 1957), 176-189.

<sup>29</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 40 (9 Tugwell = PG 79,1176).

<sup>30</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* VI 90.

<sup>31</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 100; SC 171, 710. *De oratione* 117-25.

<sup>32</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* VI 76; scholia 5 and 5b on *Psalms* 134.7(3).

<sup>33</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, *Lausiac 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>34</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Scholion* 275 on *Proverbs* 24:22; SC 340 (Paris, 1987), 370.

<sup>35</sup> This doctrine was based in part on the theory of *pepansis*, “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 *pepansis* 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.

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.

### 1.3 The *Gnostikos*: Biblical Exegete and Spiritual Guide

Learning to read the “Book of God” entails the discovery that the external universe of “embodied and incorporeal beings” is mirrored in the unique spiritual journey of each soul. The ascetical struggle against vice that is the *praktiké* comes to be practiced *gnostikoteros*, from an increasingly contemplative perspective<sup>36</sup> As the ascetic or *praktikos* learns the pattern of temptation and spiritual growth within his soul, he discovers that his *nous* is a miniature universe that reflects the whole of creation. In the act of contemplation the *nous* employs “spiritual senses” to apprehend intelligible realities not apparent to the physical senses.<sup>37</sup> This noetic vision is a participation in the realities perceived, and it has the power to effect change within the *nous*: “Just as the senses are changed through being receptive of different qualities, so also the *nous* is changed, through constantly gazing at multiform contemplations.”<sup>38</sup>

Evagrius believed that the mind is stamped, like wax receiving an imprint, by the thoughts or images which it chooses to receive into itself. This is particularly true of *logismoi*, tempting thoughts of demonic origin;<sup>39</sup> but as the preceding text from the *Kephalaia Gnostica* makes clear, it is also true of pure, elevated contemplations. The highest of the *noemata*, the thought of God himself, by its nature leaves the mind unstamped since God is incorporeal.<sup>40</sup> The Christian must exercise care and discernment in choosing subject matter for contemplation, since the change in the *nous* which contemplation effects is of supreme importance for the journey of the *nous* towards God: “Contemplation is spiritual knowledge of the things which have been and will be: it is this which causes the *nous* to ascend to its first rank.<sup>41</sup> Thus in reading that part of the “Book of God” that is one’s own inner world of temptations, fears, hopes and perceptions one must act with discernment and in constant inner dialogue with God, “seek[ing] from Christ the *logoi* of these things.”<sup>42</sup>

Evagrius’ conviction that the *nous* is changed through contemplation has an intriguing parallel in contemporary psychiatric practice. In the mental health sciences a mainstay of modern diagnosis is the “mental status examination”, an increasingly standardized series of questions and observations that have enabled psychiatric diagnosis to attain levels of objectivity and consistency that were uncommon prior to the late twentieth century. Part of this assessment is the presumption that the examiner’s subjective response to a client can provide data that may prove valuable in assessing the presence or absence of psychopathology in the client. For example, if during the interview the therapist finds himself becoming sad or hopeless, this may suggest that the client is depressed. Similarly, a sense that the world is bizarre or hostile may suggest schizophrenia or paranoia.<sup>43</sup> This attention to one’s own

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<sup>36</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 50, SC 171, 614-616.

<sup>37</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* I.34, II.35.

<sup>38</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* II.83; Greek fragment E-7, ed. by HAUSHERR, , ‘Nouveaux fragments grecs d’Evagre le Pontique’, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 5 (1939), 230.

<sup>39</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Peri Logismon* 2, SC 438, 154.

<sup>40</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 1 on *Psalms* 140:2(1) (= PG 12.1665 + cf. *Pitra* 140:2, vol. 3, p. 148). Of thoughts other than the thought of God which do not stamp the *nous*: cf. *Peri Logismon* 8, 15, 16, 25, 28, 41; *Skemmata* 22; scholion 288 on *Proverbs* and scholia 1 and 27 on *Ecclesiastes*. STEWART discusses Evagrius’ teaching on thoughts which ‘shape’ or ‘form’ the *nous* in his description of Evagrius’ epistemology: *Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus*, lecture presented at the August, 1999, International Conference on Patristic Studies in Oxford. Published in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 9, n. 2 (2001), 186-191.

<sup>41</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* III.42, Guillaumont, 115.

<sup>42</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 50, SC 171, 614-616

<sup>43</sup> SADOCK, B.J., KAPLAN, H.I., “A clinician’s sense of discomfort, apprehension, or irritability can be a clue to similar distress in the patient. These feelings, often vague and not ‘immediately evident, can serve as both barometer and alerting device...” Table 1.3: *Three functions of the medical interview; The use of psychological testing for treatment planning and outcomes assessment*, *Kaplan & Sadock’s Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, Seventh Edition; Volume 3,

internal response to the situation of another also plays a role in therapy in some schools of psychotherapy, as, for example in the Freudian doctrine of “countertransference”.

For Evagrius the roles of biblical exegete and spiritual guide are profoundly interconnected. The *gnostikos*' principal textbook is the Bible. For Evagrius biblical exegesis consists chiefly in the search for biblical texts that will be of benefit to the *gnostikos* and those who seek spiritual counsel. The *gnostikos* must be able to “give a word to each, according to his worth.”<sup>44</sup> Thus the frequent plea to the desert *abba*, “give me a word!” should be answered according to the circumstances and needs of the questioner. This necessitates a large store of biblical wisdom and familiarity with the different levels of meaning contained in sacred scripture. For Evagrius these include spiritual “definitions” of biblical terms<sup>45</sup> and familiarity with both the “customary expressions of scripture”<sup>46</sup> and the rules for allegorical exegesis.<sup>47</sup> Evagrius' underlying exegetical method, which he describes in *Gnostikos* 18, is an application to the scriptures of his schema of spiritual progress:<sup>48</sup>

It is necessary to search for allegorical and literal passages pertaining to the *praktiké*, *physiké*, and *theologiké*.

- [1] If the passage concerns the *praktiké* 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*.
- [2] If the passage pertains to the *physiké*, it is necessary to note whether it reveals a doctrine concerning nature, and which one.
- [3] Or if it is an allegorical passage concerning *theologiké* it should be determined as far as possible whether it reveals the doctrine of the Trinity [...].<sup>49</sup>

The *gnostikos* is thus instructed to superimpose Evagrius' spiritual schema on the Bible, employing as an hermeneutical principle the utility of each passage in explicating the different levels of spiritual progress and the practices that correspond to *praktiké*, *physiké*, and *theologiké*. Evagrius' extensive biblical *scholia* and his *Antirrhethikos* (which, taken together comprise the bulk of his literary output) are intended as reference works for *gnostikoi*. They serve as biblical glossaries and sourcebooks in which texts have been assembled and explicated according to: (1) their usefulness in the battle against temptation and the acquisition of virtue (*praktiké*); (2) what they reveal of the inner purposes of God in history and creation (*physiké*); and (3) whether they hint at the ineffable mystery of the divine nature or the transcendent experience of pure prayer (*theologiké*).

The attitude the *gnostikos* is to have in regard to those who seek spiritual advice is well-illustrated in a series of *makarisms*, or beatitudes, that depict the ascent from preoccupation with one's own spiritual growth into awareness that spiritual insights are intended to benefit others. These appear toward the end of the *Chapters on Prayer*. “Blessed”, Evagrius writes: “is the monk who regards every human being as God, after God;”<sup>50</sup> who, “sees the salvation and progress of all with perfect joy, as if it were his own.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, he concludes by defining the monk as: one “who is both separated from all and yet united with all;”<sup>52</sup> who, “thinks of himself as one with all, because he unceasingly recognizes himself while beholding the other.”<sup>53</sup>

This perception of the self in the other again highlights Evagrius' conviction that contemplation establishes a transforming relationship between the contemplative and the object or person who is contemplated. The one who seeks counsel and advice perceives the spiritual elder as a mediator of

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(Lippincott, Williams, & Wilkins 2000) 270-274. See also TESAR, George E., “Psychiatric Emergencies”, *Current Clinical Medicine*, 2nd ed. Series. *Cleveland Clinic* (2010 Saunders/ Elsevier ), 981. 984:

<sup>44</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 44; SC 356 (Paris, 1989), 174.

<sup>45</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 17; SC 356, 114-16.

<sup>46</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 19; SC 356, 118f.

<sup>47</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 20-1; SC 356, 118-21.

<sup>48</sup> Evagrius' approach is based on the exegetical methods of Clement of Alexandria and Origen: CLEMENT *Stromateis* I.28.179, 3-4, Stählin, GCS 15, v. 2 (Berlin, 1960), 108; ORIGEN *Com. in Cant.* Prol. 3.6; SC 375 (Paris, 1970), 132.

<sup>49</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 18; SC 356 (1989), 116-18.

<sup>50</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 122.

<sup>51</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 123.

<sup>52</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 124.

<sup>53</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 125.

God's grace and compassion, as one who shares in the work of the angels Thus Evagrius calls Abba Serapion "the angel of the Church of Thmuis,"<sup>54</sup> for: 'we are to revere the elders as the angels.'<sup>55</sup> And by regarding the needful other "as God after God", and thus offering the other aid, the "the one who heals others through the Lord is himself healed."<sup>56</sup>

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## 2. THE EXEGESIS OF "ANATOLIUS"<sup>57</sup>

The close interrelationship between biblical exegesis and the art of reading that part of the "Book of God" that is the soul of another person is readily apparent in Evagrius' letters. Letter 25 is particularly illustrative and has the good fortune of being one of the few letters for which a significant portion of the original Greek has survived.<sup>58</sup> Evagrius' 64 letters have been translated into German and extensively commented by Gabriel Bunge, whose numbering of paragraphs is employed here.<sup>59</sup>

### 2.1. Letter 25:1: A Reproving Response to Arrogant (or ignorant) Exegesis

*Letter 25:1.* It was always my preference that with the Lord's help you would lead the monastic life, wherein you may "destroy every [tempting-]thought and every obstacle that arises against the knowledge of Christ," (2 Cor 10:4-5) But you imagine that having fled the Praetorians - if, indeed, you really have fled them - you have fulfilled the works of righteousness and even advanced so far as to say, "graciously receive, O Lord, the voluntary offering of my mouth," (Ps. 118:108) as if you had fulfilled everything in the law. (cf. Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:14).

The recipient of Letter 25 was evidently a monk living in Jerusalem who had formerly been a high-ranking imperial official. Gabriel Bunge believes the recipient was the same "Anatolius" mentioned in the Coptic version of Palladius' *Lausiac History*, to whom Evagrius dedicated his trilogy of *Praktikos*, *Gnostikos*, and *Kephalaia Gnostica*.<sup>60</sup> And although this identification is far from certain,<sup>61</sup> it will help avoid unnecessary periphrasis in the following discussion to refer to the recipient of this letter as "Anatolius". He had written to Evagrius, exulting in the spiritual freedom afforded by monastic life and expressing his joy in the words of Psalm 118:108: "graciously receive, O Lord, the voluntary offering of my mouth." Evagrius responded to his enthusiasm with a rebuke that reflects a diagnosis of Anatolius' spiritual state, based in part on an exegesis of the psalm verse Anatolius employed. The rebuke is only comprehensible in light of Evagrius' exegesis of this verse in his *Scholia on Psalms*:  
118:108. *Accept the freewill-offerings of my mouth, O Lord..*

47. The *freewill-offerings of our mouth* are virginity, abstinence from food and drink, and the life of withdrawal into the desert. The law constrains us to perform the commandments: thus one

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<sup>54</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 47, SC 356, 184

<sup>55</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 100, SC 171, p. 710

<sup>56</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 33.

<sup>57</sup> The following discussion of *Letter 25* is adapted from my essay, "Evagrius Ponticus, Exegete of the Soul" in *The Controversial Legacy of Evagrius Ponticus*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), forthcoming.

<sup>58</sup> A fragment amounting to the last fourth of the *Letter 25* has been published by Claire GUILLAUMONT: "Fragments grecs inédits d'Évagre le Pontique" *Texte und Untersuchungen* 133 (1987): 209-221. Of the remaining letters, with the exception of *Letter 63*, the *Epistula Fidei* (a theological treatise on the Trinity), only a few fragments of the original Greek survive. The corpus of 64 letters is available in Syriac with a Greek retroversion published in 1912: W. FRANKENBERG *Evagrius Ponticus, Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Neue Folge*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Berlin, 1912), 564-611. An English translation of Evagrius' letters is currently being prepared by Robin DARLING-YOUNG at the University Notre Dame.

<sup>59</sup> G. BUNGE, *Evagrius Ponticos: Briefe aus der Wüste* (Trier, 1986), 211-283.

<sup>60</sup> G. BUNGE, *Briefe aus der Wüste*, 33-36.

<sup>61</sup> Bunge gives as his reasons for this identification inferences in the letter that the recipient was: (1) formerly an important government official; (2) rich; and (3) living in Jerusalem. *Briefe aus der Wüste*, 347-348.

who performs all the commandments can furthermore say publicly, “Accept, the freewill-offerings of my mouth, O Lord”. But one who offends against the law lacks the necessary freedom of speech (*parrhesia*) to say this.<sup>62</sup>

Evagrius considered it inappropriate for Anatolius to have applied this verse to himself. It can only be employed boldly (“with *parrhesia*”) by one who has made great progress in monastic asceticism, who has studied and “fulfilled the works of righteousness”. This rebuke is intended to induce Anatolius to undertake a more profound exegesis of his own soul by reminding him of the centrality of the struggle against *logismoi*.

## 2.2. Letter 25.2: The Value of Antirrhesis

*Letter 25: 2.* But in regard to the other [tempting-] thoughts you fail to understand that they *proceed from the heart* (Mt 15:19) and soil the *nous*; and if it mentally consents to them, it draws near to sin. And there is a spiritual contradiction (*antirrhesis*) to use against them in regard to both sins of intention and of action. For consenting to sin, even in thought, is accounted as sin: and see how Moses teaches you, saying “Do not agree with them!” (cf. Ex 23:32, Dt 23:6) And in the Gospel the Lord condemns the *nous* as adulterer that only looks passionately on a woman, (Mt 5:28) as well as one that mentally angers a brother (Mt 5:22).

Evagrius provides an exegesis of texts from the Sermon on the Mount in order to remind Anatolius of the moral significance of the interior landscape of thoughts and temptations. He recalls Jesus’ insistence on the importance of the heart and the thoughts that arise from it (Mt 15:19). Then he explicates these thoughts at the level of ascetical practice, encouraging Anatolius to properly employ the energies of *epithumia* and *thumos*, and reminding him of the foundational monastic practice of *antirrhesis*, the “contradiction” of harmful thoughts, a subject on which Evagrius had written extensively.<sup>63</sup>

## 2.3. Letter 25.3: Diakrisis, The Various Species of Temptations

*Letter 25:3.* These commandments uproot from the heart consent to lawlessness, and “prepare” in the *nous* “the way for the Lord” (cf. Mk 1:3). But the ignorant consider it foolish to undertake this path and imagine they fulfill the apostolic path in a single moment, as if keeping the commandments were hindered only by the passions of the body: for the [tempting-] thoughts that arise from these are transitory, while jealousy and resentment endure into old age.

Evagrius invites Anatolius to investigate his temptations at a deeper level by searching out the nature and qualities of his thoughts. Elsewhere in his writings Evagrius calls this the art of discernment (*diakrisis*) and careful observation (*parateresis*).<sup>64</sup> Here Evagrius encourages Anatolius to discern or distinguish between the “passions of the body” that originate in the *epithumetikon* and those “of the soul” that arise from the *thumikon*. Evagrius treats this subject in some detail in *Praktikos* 35-38. Temptations that invite the misuse of *epithumia* are generally rooted in human physiology, arising from such physical needs as hunger, thirst, and sexual desire.<sup>65</sup> They are the subjects of the virtues of

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<sup>62</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 47 *On Psalm* 118:108 (cf. Pitra III, 118:108.1).

<sup>63</sup> See D. BRAKKE, *Evagrius of Pontus, Talking Back, Antirrhethikos, A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons* (Collegeville, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> Evagrius often employs *parateresis* as a synonym for *diakrisis*. Evagrius’ flexible use of this terminology as contrasted with that of his successors is discussed by A. RICH, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers* (Milton Keynes, 2007), 39-68.

<sup>65</sup> An exception to this is the *logismos* of avarice (*phylargia*) which Evagrius, following Aristotelian/Stoic tradition also assigns to the *epithumetikon*. That there is no instinctive “physiological” desire for precious metals or money until one has learned to desire it was a subject of much discussion by early monastic theorists of the passions. Cassian noted that it arises “outside of our nature”, (*extra naturam*), *Institutes* VII.1.



temperance (*sophrosune*) and chastity (*enkratia*), attained through fasting and abstinence. Evagrius believed these virtues can become firmly established so that the “passions of the body” need not persist into old age. In contrast, resentment and jealousy, “passions of the soul,” arise from the *thumikon* and chiefly afflict interpersonal relationships. They can “endure into old age” and remain active even “up to the moment of death.”<sup>66</sup> Their remedy is spiritual love, *agape*. And there are also passions that afflict the highest powers of the *nous*, and it to one of these that Evagrius now directs Anatolius’ attention.

#### 2.4. Letter 25.4: Natural Contemplation, Encoding, Decoding, and Replacement

*Letter 25:4.* Perhaps the [tempting-] thoughts of the praetorium do not afflict you; but is it not possible that you are afflicted by [tempting-] thoughts of vainglory? Take care that although physically in “Jerusalem” your spirit is distant from “Bethany” through which your tempting thoughts of avarice (cf. John 12:4-8) and its associated failings incline towards shopping, buying and selling (cf. Mt 21:12) salt, vinegar, and bread, while there are starving thousands deserving of daily bread (cf. Mk. 14:7; Mt. 6:11)

Anatolius is invited to consider the higher intellectual temptations, especially vainglory, which Evagrius defines as satisfaction with one’s accomplishments together with a yearning for human approval and respect.<sup>67</sup> Anatolius’ awareness of having attained virtue or success in monastic observance can stimulate vainglory.<sup>68</sup>

Of particular interest here is that Evagrius offers a remedy in the form of biblical symbolism and allegory. Columba Stewart has described Evagrius’ technique as “encoding” biblical words and phrases with specific allegorical definitions that can then be “decoded” by those familiar with his teachings.<sup>69</sup> In this instance Evagrius reminds Anatolius of his emphasis on “Jerusalem” and suggests that he should, instead, consider the significance of “Bethany.” While the term “Jerusalem” can have a very elevated symbolic significance for Evagrius,<sup>70</sup> it is more probable that he intends it here chiefly in the literal sense of Jerusalem as the site of Anatolius’ monastery. The encouragement to shift his attention from contentment with “Jerusalem” to “Bethany” is an example of Evagrius’ practice of “replacement,” the substitution of lower thoughts with higher ones, a form of meditation that redirects one’s contemplative focus towards more worthy concepts and biblical images. At its lowest (and most controversial<sup>71</sup>) level this consists of replacing particularly vicious temptations with less malignant ones: Evagrius calls this “driving out a nail with a nail.”<sup>72</sup> A more elevated application, the one he recommends here, holds the potential for transforming demonic *logismoi* into *noemata* of the human or even angelic type.

Thus Anatolius’ enthusiasm for living in the Holy City Jerusalem should be tempered with meditation on the complex metaphor of “Bethany”, the village associated both with the house of Mary and Martha where Martha was chided for her concern over food (Lk. 10.39-42), and with the house of Simon the Leper where Judas’ vaunted concern for the poor kept him from appreciating the importance of spending everything to anoint the Lord’s feet (Mk. 14.3-7). Evagrius’ pejorative reference to “buying and selling” may suggest that Anatolius was *oikonomos* (steward) of his monastery, and that his labors prevented him from attending, like Mary of Bethany, solely to the Lord. However

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<sup>66</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 36; SC 171, 582.

<sup>67</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* Prol.; 13, & 30.

<sup>68</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* Prol.; 30, & 31.

<sup>69</sup> STEWART, *Imageless Prayer*, 173-204.

<sup>70</sup> In the *Kephalaia Gnostica* “Jerusalem” is a “symbol of natural contemplation” (V.88) and “contemplation of incorporeal beings” (VI.49). Guillaumont, 213, 237.

<sup>71</sup> He particularly recommends this as a means of replacing lustful fantasies with vainglorious contempt for lust: EVAGRIUS, *Eulogios* 21; R. E. SINKIEWICZ, *Evagrius of Pontus. The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford, 2003) 48f. 324f. Later spiritual authors, such as Barsanuphius of Gaza, strongly disapproved of this approach and considered it dangerous.

<sup>72</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 58; SC 171, 636.

Bethany is also associated with the themes of resurrection (Jn. 11) and ascension (Lk. 24:50), two images towards which Evagrius now guides Anatolius.

## 2.5. Letter 25.5a: Vision of the Self in the Approach to God

In paragraph five Evagrius undertakes an exegesis of Anatolius' spiritual journey. He invites Anatolius to progress further, first by contemplating his own *nous* as the dwelling place of God, then by reflecting on the cosmic drama of eschatological reunion with God.

*Letter 25:5(a)*. But forgive me, I beg you. I answered your letter because you wrote me that you dwell in a place receptive of God, "who made heaven and earth" (Ps113:23). Know, too, that he dwells "in your midst" as John the Baptist testified (Jn 1:26). And he awaits you as you progress through your works towards "Bethlehem": through the spiritual vision of your purified nature you become "resurrection"...

Anatolius had apparently described Jerusalem as a "place receptive of God," probably in the sense of a locale where one is vividly aware of the God's presence. Evagrius now draws on Anatolius' description of Jerusalem and uses it to highlight Anatolius' lofty dignity as one who bears God's image. Evagrius invites him to shift his gaze from the physical "Jerusalem" understood as God's historical dwelling, to that place where God dwells "in your midst;" that is, within the *nous*, the deepest self and the center of personal identity. Anatolius can symbolically progress towards "Bethlehem," Christ's birthplace, by discovering that he is himself the place where Christ is born and seen "through the spiritual vision of your purified nature." In many texts Evagrius describes this "spiritual vision" of "purified nature" as the light or radiance of the *nous*,<sup>73</sup> most clearly in *Peri Logismon* 39, the well-known text in which he describes the *nous*' vision of itself at prayer: "like a sapphire or the color of heaven, which Scripture calls the place of God that was seen by the elders under Mount Sinai (cf. Exod. 24:20)."<sup>74</sup> This vision of the *nous* as the place of God is for Evagrius a kind of "resurrection". In the *Kephalaia Gnostica* he describes a threefold resurrection: from vice to virtue, ("resurrection of the body"); from subjection by the passions to *apatheia*, ("resurrection of the soul") and from ignorance to the state of spiritual knowledge ("resurrection of the *nous*").<sup>75</sup>

## 2.6. Letter 25.5(b): Understanding the Logoi – Becoming "Ascension"

*Letter 25:5(b)*. [...through the spiritual vision of your purified nature you become "resurrection";] and through understanding the divine *logoi* you become what is called "ascension" and "Mount of Olives".

Anatolius' vision of one's own *nous* as the "place of God" points towards the final destiny of all created beings: reunion with the God from whom all reasoning beings fell away in the primordial "movement". Evagrius calls the understanding of this eschatological goal "ascension", and associates it with "understanding of the divine *logoi*", the inner purposes, or designs of God that the contemplative can begin to perceive once freed from preoccupation with the inner struggle against temptation. Evagrius understands Christ's "ascension" as the fulfillment of his salvific work, the sign

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<sup>73</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 64, SC 171, 648. *Gnostikos* 45, SC 356, 178. *Antirrhetikos* 6.16. *Skemmata* 2, MUYLDERMANS, "Evagriana," *Le Muséon* 44, 38. *De oratione*, 75, PG 79,1183. See also STEWART, *Imageless Prayer*, 194-202.

<sup>74</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Peri Logismon* 39, SC 438, (Paris, 1998) 286-288 (cf. *Skemmata* 2).

<sup>75</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* V.19, 22, 25. It is noteworthy that within this eschatological chain, *KG* V.21 describes vision of the worlds of Jerusalem and Mount Zion, while V.23-24 concern the *logoi* of providence, judgment and the primordial fall ("movement"). Guillaumont, 185, 187.

of God's eternal providence and the impulse for all spiritual help and guidance<sup>76</sup> For the Christian believer "ascension" is both knowledge and contemplation of "the things which have been and will be" as well as restoration of the *nous* to union with God. In *Kephalaia Gnostica* III.42 Evagrius describes *theoria physiké* as an important means of this "ascension: "Contemplation is spiritual knowledge of the things which have been and will be: it is this which causes the *nous* to ascend to its first rank."<sup>77</sup>

Meditation on "ascension" and "the divine *logoi*" will enable Anatolius to discover that the journey towards God is actually a return of the *nous* back to the God from whom it has fallen away. Such contemplation is itself part of the *nous*' gradual re-ascent to its original *taxis*, its "first rank". However, this return of the *nous* to its primordial state is possible only through Christ. Apart from God's grace the *nous* cannot rise above the world of sin and death to which it is subject. Re-ascent to its first rank is only possible because of what God accomplished through the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, the descent of God into death and Christ's ascension to the Father is what makes possible Anatolius' spiritual "ascension."<sup>79</sup> The grace of Christ that makes "ascension" possible is directly experienced in prayer, the exalted subject to which Evagrius now guides Anatolius.

## 2.7. Letter 25.6: Spiritual Guidance in the Place of Prayer

*Letter 25.6.* But if you wish to comprehend the state of your heart, whether it careful is or inattentive, then observe yourself at the time of prayer. With which fantasies is your *nous* confused and distracted; which comes first, impassioned or dispassionate [thoughts]? If it is besieged by the first, then it is inattentive to the commandments of God; and the passions bloom setting in motion indignation and desire, together with a whole crowd of sufferings. But if it finds itself disturbed by the second, then it is not observant in reading and prayer: rather, it is being utterly ruined through [preoccupation with] various events and new stories, constantly wishing "to say or hear something new." (Acts 17:21)

By introducing the subject of the state of the soul during prayer Evagrius now points beyond the realm of *theoria physiké* towards the exalted realm of *theologiké*. As Columba Stewart has shown, Evagrius' treatises on prayer are among his most advanced works, intended for those who have made considerable spiritual progress.<sup>80</sup> Prayer, "conversation of the *nous* with God" can be an even higher spiritual activity than perception of the divine light within the soul. Having glimpsed a reflection of the divine activity in its own "purified nature," the *nous* that turns to prayer has lifted its gaze from reflected light to the source of light. In prayer the *nous* not only perceives its creator and redeemer but engages in intimate dialogue with God "as with a father"<sup>81</sup> without the need for any intermediary.<sup>82</sup> This conversation (*sunhomilia*) or intercourse (*sunousia*) may initially entail the use of words;

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<sup>76</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* VI.76: If "He who has ascended above all the heavens" has "accomplished everything" (Eph 4:10), it is evident that each of the ranks of celestial powers has truly learned the *logoi* concerning providence, by which they rapidly impel towards virtue and the knowledge of God those who are beneath them." Guillaumont, 249.

<sup>77</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Kephalaia Gnostica* III.42: Guillaumont, 115.

<sup>78</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Letter to Melania* 57, "But because of his love for us, God was born of a woman [...] in order to give us a second birth - a birth to which blessing and justice belong." G. VITESTAM "Seconde partie du Traité, qui passe sous le nom de 'La grande lettre d'Évagre le Pontique à Mélanie l' Ancienne'", *Scripta Minora Regiae Societatis Humaniorum Litterarum Lundensis 1963-1964*, no. 3 (Lund, 1964), 23; BUNGE, *Briefe*, 324:

<sup>79</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Letter to Melania* 56 and 58, "(56) he descended and endured all that we had acquired since we stepped out of our nature: that is, everything from conception to death [...] (58) Since we have corrupted our nature by our free will, we have come to our present conception and birth which are subject to the curse. But he, remaining what he is, by his grace has taken upon himself with birth all that follows birth until death [...] He frees us from them in that he who had not sinned took these things voluntarily upon himself; for we are unable to ascend above them by ourselves [...] But not only did he not remain in [things subject to the curse], but he also enables us to ascend out of them; because he, as we said, descended to them in his love - not because of [his] sin." VITESTAM, 22-24; BUNGE, *Briefe*, 323-325.

<sup>80</sup> STEWART, "Imageless Prayer", 181-186.

<sup>81</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 55.

<sup>82</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 2.

however in the presences of the One who transcends all words and concepts<sup>83</sup> it is natural to lay aside all thoughts and images. While Evagrius regarded contemplation as the proper activity of the *nous*, the experience of undistracted prayer towards which he now guides Anatolius is higher still. It is “the highest noetic activity of the *nous*”.<sup>84</sup> As Evagrius asks in his treatise *On Prayer*, “What can be higher than conversing with God (*proshomilein*) and being occupied in intercourse (*sunousia*) with him?”<sup>85</sup>

## 2.8. Letter 25.6(b): Ascent to Vision of the Bridegroom

In a final sequence of biblical citations Evagrius concludes his letter by joining the military and competitive imagery of *praktiké* to the contemplative vision of “Christ the bridegroom.”

*Letter 25:6.b.* Nevertheless, “fight the good fight” (1Tim 6:12), in order to be “crowned with the wreath of justice” (2 Tim 4:8) and to behold Christ the bridegroom, (Mt 25:1) whom you now seek through good works, which is in actuality the search for the Lord.

This brief catena of three texts, which he repeats verbatim with the same explanation in *Letter 20* is a coded reiteration of Evagrius’ threefold ordering of both spiritual progress and biblical exegesis: *praktiké*; *physiké*; *theologiké*. The “good fight” of 1 Tim. 6:12 describes *praktiké*, the “fight” against tempting thoughts to attain *apatheia*. The “crown of justice” is a metaphor Evagrius associates with *theoria fisiké*: he frequently employs as a symbol of contemplation and spiritual knowledge.<sup>86</sup> Since Origen’s third-century commentary and homilies on the Song of Songs “Christ the bridegroom” had become a widely-used means of describing the soul’s union with of God.<sup>87</sup> However, despite the increasing popularity of nuptial metaphor Evagrius is surprisingly sparing in his own use of spousal imagery, even in his descriptions of *theologia*: it is only here and in three other places that he deliberately invokes the image of Christ as bridegroom.<sup>88</sup> Of these, a close parallel to his use here is *Peri Logismon* 42, where Evagrius describes the allegorical “eye” of the *nous* that is able at the time of prayer to “contemplate the blessed light of the holy Trinity” and thus “ravish the heart of the bridegroom.”<sup>89</sup>

## 3. CONCLUSION

Letter 25 not only illustrates Evagrius’ love of encoding advice in the form of biblical symbols and texts, it highlights that the methodology he employs in interpreting the life and situation of Anatolius is analogous to, if not identical with, his method of biblical exegesis. In *Gnostikos* 18, cited above, Evagrius states that biblical texts are to be collected and interpreted according to the three categories of *praktiké*, *physiké*, and *theologiké*. Evagrius’ analysis of Anatolius circumstances follows this pattern, even to the extent of reiterating it in coded scriptural form at the end of the letter. Anatolius’ circumstances are thus part of the “Book of God” that can be read and interpreted by the *gnostikos* who has learned the art of spiritual exegesis. The importance he assigns to learning to “read

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<sup>83</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 3.

<sup>84</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 35.

<sup>85</sup> EVAGRIUS, *De oratione* 34.

<sup>86</sup> EVAGRIUS, Scholion 12 *On Psalm* 5:13 “And the knowledge of God is divided into two parts, practice and contemplation. To practice belongs the *shield of favor*, while of contemplation is *the crown*,” cf. PG 1173.8. Scholion 7 *On Prov.* 1:9 “here *crown* and *necklace* signify knowledge”. Scholion 44 *On Prov.* 4:9 “The *crown of graces* and the *crown of delights* are the knowledge of God.” *Ad Monachos* 27: “An ornament for the head: a crown; an ornament for the heart: knowledge of God.” *Kephalaia Gnostica* III,49: “The *nous* will not be crowned with the crown of essential knowledge, if it has not cast far from it ignorance of the two struggles.” Guillaumont, 117.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Gregory of Nyssa’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, and the frequent use of texts from the *Song* by Ambrose and Cyril of Jerusalem in their catechetical homilies.

<sup>88</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Sentences for Virgins*, 11, 43, 52, 55; *Peri Logismon* 42; *Letter* 20,1; scholion 256 *On Proverbs* 23:18.

<sup>89</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Peri Logismon* 42, SC 432, 296-297.

the other” as part of the Book of God is highlighted in the conclusion to Evagrius’ *Gnostikos*, where he asserts that the whole purpose of his study and writing are to restore those who have “fallen away”<sup>90</sup>

The image of the soul and the whole of creation constituting a “divine book” would enjoy a long and fruitful history in the later history of Christian spirituality, and would become a commonplace among medieval authors and their later admirers. It needs to be emphasized in concluding in concluding that for Evagrius, unlike many later authors, the concept of a “Book of God” that contains both the external creation and the interior cosmos of *noemata*, is not simply an attractive metaphor; rather it indicate both Evagrius’ pastoral methodology and his conviction that the arts of biblical exegesis and spiritual guidance are profoundly interrelated. Evagrius’ approach to both biblical exegesis and spiritual guidance may be summarized as an attempt to perceive and describe everything *sub specie aeternitatis*, in the light of a divine origin and an eternal destiny; or as Columba Stewart has described it, within a “unified vision of everything”.<sup>91</sup> As a biblical exegete Evagrius’ *gnostikos* discovers in the scriptures symbols and allegories of the great cosmic drama of fall, Incarnation, and eschatological reunion of all reasoning beings with God. As spiritual guide the *gnostikos* looks up, as it were, from the Bible, to perceive the movements and experiences of each soul as part of the “Book of God”, a miniature iteration and reflection of the universal cosmic journey towards reunion. Thus the drama of each soul’s inner struggle is illuminated by the sweeping movements of biblical salvation history.

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<sup>90</sup> EVAGRIUS *Gnostikos* 50.

<sup>91</sup> STEWART, “Imageless Prayer”, 173-182.