

Barsanuphius and John: The Old Men of Gaza

An Introduction to their *Letters*, Teaching and World

“I regard myself as a *slave on a mission*”
(*Letter* 139)

With the above statement, the Great Old Man (or Elder), Barsanuphius, responds to a request for prayers. He considers himself as a “slave” with a particular mission or commission. Indeed, in another response, he calls the Other Old Man, John, his “fellow-slave” (*Letter* 186). This phrase is a definition of his identity as marked by a sense of enslavement to the inspiration of God and a sense of obligation to the tradition of the past. At the same time, however, the phrase defines his own embodiment of that tradition in all that he is and does, as well as his articulation and communication of the same tradition in conversation with and counsel toward his disciples.

This is the conviction with which these elders offer a “spiritual word of counsel” with the assurance that their disciples are in fact receiving “the healing medicine of the word of the Spirit” (*Letter* 570c). In their minds and in their words, the authority of God is at stake as they advise their disciples on practical and spiritual matters. Throughout this correspondence, the elders are affirming and defending the authority of the divine Word.

INTRODUCTION

Christian Palestine enjoyed centuries of prominence in Hellenistic and Roman times, owing to its privileged status and strategic situation—in terms of geography, climate, and history. A major commercial area from biblical times, this southern coastal region was always coveted territory throughout history. For the adherents of the Christian Scriptures, the Apostle Philip evangelized the Ethiopian enunuch on the way to Gaza (Acts 8.26).

The Ethiopian was not the only person to be touched, even converted, by the region. The Gaza region proved a remarkable place of welcome and continuity for Christian monasticism toward the end of the fourth century. Its accessibility by sea and road, its proximity to Egypt and Syria as well as to the Holy Land itself, rendered Gaza a critical haven for particular expressions that offered fresh perspectives in the spiritual and intellectual tradition of the monastic phenomenon.

Christian emperors, numerous pilgrims, and monastic developments; the deserts, rivers, and sand dunes; the roads, the literature, as well as the renowned produce of spices and wines—all of these were to play a critical role in the formation of this unique area. Travelers journeyed from Palestine to Egypt in order to visit the elders of the Egyptian desert.¹ From as early as the mid-fourth century, some of the better-known pilgrims included Jerome and Rufinus, Palladius and Evagrius, as well as John Cassian, who later translated the desert tradition of Egypt to the West.

At the end of the same century, another movement began in the opposite direction, namely from Egypt to Palestine. Monastics fled the renowned wilderness, bringing with them their practices and teachings. The primary causes of this emigration included *internal*

¹Letters 30–31 of our correspondence, exchanged between Barsanuphius and John of Beersheba, recall a journey by boat made by the latter to Egypt. I am grateful to Dr Jennifer Hevelone Harper for her insightful and invaluable comments on this introduction and the translation that follows.

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factors, such as the condemnation of Origenism by Theophilus of Alexandria in 400, as well as *external* fears, such as the threat of raiding desert tribes. Three hundred monks—many of these educated and cultivated—left Egypt definitively for Sinai, Jerusalem, and the region around the Dead Sea, some of them even traveling as far as Asia Minor.

PALESTINIAN MONASTICISM

Palestine is divided into two distinct monastic regions. The first of these is centered around the Holy City, also including the territory around Jerusalem and as far as the Dead Sea; the second lies in the southern region around Gaza. It is in the latter region that our two elders, Barsanuphius and John, flourished in the early part of the sixth century.

Monastics in Palestine were generally well aware of their *biblical* roots. Barsanuphius is convinced that “God revealed the way of life through the prophets and the apostles” (Letter 605). This was, after all, the land where the prophets once wandered, the desert where Jesus had prayed and fasted, the soil where the seeds of the Church were first planted.

Furthermore, monastics of Palestine were also characterized by a keen memory of the *martyrs and confessors*. Barsanuphius would draw connections between the monk and the martyr: “To renounce one’s proper will is a sacrifice of blood. It means that one has reached the point of laboring unto death and of ignoring one’s own will” (Letter 254).

Finally, monks in the surrounding areas of Gaza were abundantly familiar with *earlier ascetic figures*, with monastic developments and particular lifestyles that had preceded them, especially admitting their indebtedness to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt. One will, for instance, frequently read in the *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John the following kind of references to these fathers:

We have also seen in the ancient fathers such an example (Letter 60)

The fathers have said (Letter 86)

This is the way of the fathers (Letter 212)

Let us speak those things, which contribute to edification, from the *Sayings of the Fathers* (Letter 469).

The history of the region is rich in monastic figures and founders. Hilarion (c. 292–c. 372) lived for almost twenty of his earlier years in this region. Born in Thavatha, some five miles south of Gaza, he was schooled in Alexandria. During his time there, he also met Antony the Great, the Father of Monasticism. Upon returning to his native Palestine, Hilarion assumed a small cell near the port of Matouma, where he also received numerous visitors for counsel.

Another well-known monk and monastic author in this region was Abba Isaiah of Scetis. A later emigrant from Egypt, Isaiah had spent many years in a monastery as well as in the desert of Scetis. He moved to Palestine, fleeing fame, between 431 and 451. He first settled near Eleftheropolis, moving finally to Beit Daltia near Gaza, only some four miles from Thavatha, which was already known as the birthplace of Hilarion and which later was to become familiar as the site of the monastery of Abba Seridos.² Indeed, Gaza and its environs will be indelibly marked by the presence of the two remarkable elders of the next century, Barsanuphius and John.

BARSANUPHIUS AND JOHN

We do not know exactly when Barsanuphius, himself an Egyptian monk, entered the hilly region of Thavatha (Letter 61) and chose to

²More on Abba Isaiah in J. Chryssavgis and P.R. Penkett, *Abba Isaiah of Scetis: Ascetic Discourses* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2002).

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lead the enclosed life of a recluse in a nearby cell. From this position, he offered counsel to a number of ascetics who were gradually attracted around the Old Man as he developed a reputation for discernment and compassion.

One of these monks, Abba Seridos, who also attended to Barsanuphius, was presumably appointed Abbot of a monastic community created precisely in order to organize the increasing number of monks that gradually gathered around Barsanuphius. This Seridos was the only person permitted to communicate with Barsanuphius, acting as a mediator for those who wished to submit questions in writing and who expected to receive a similar response through the same avenue.

This monastery became the center of attraction for many monastics and visitors during the sixth century, largely due to the presence in the region of the two Old Men, but partly also due to its activities, which included various workshops (Letters 553–554), two guest-houses (Letters 570, 595–596), a hospital (Letters 327 and 548), and a large church (Letter 570).

Barsanuphius, himself a Copt, explains how, as an ascetic rule, he had determined that he should not write by his own hand, but only and always by way of Seridos:

Question (no. 55). A certain elderly Egyptian man . . . asked whether it would be possible to be allowed to meet him.

The holy Old Man wrote his response in Greek, as follows:

Since I have promised myself not to write to anyone directly, but only to respond through the Abbot, this is why I have not written to you in Egyptian as you wrote to me, but was compelled to tell him to write to you in Greek. For, he does not know Egyptian. . . .

If I open to you, then I open to all; and if I do not open to you, nor do I have to open to anyone else.

Since Seridos did not know Coptic, he would write in Greek. He was probably Greek, although he may also possibly have been Syrian. The correspondence in fact offers more information about the Abbot Seridos than about the two main elders (see especially *Letter* 570).

Some time between 525 and 527, another hermit, named John, came to live beside Barsanuphius, who surrendered his own cell to him, while he moved to a nearby new cell that he constructed. It is at this point that Barsanuphius becomes known—in the correspondence itself and in posterity—as “the holy Old Man” or “the Great Old Man,” Coptic phrases that were familiar among Egyptian circles, and ascribed also by Palladius to Antony. John is called “the Prophet” (*Letters* 785–789) or simply known as “the Other Old Man.” The two shared the same way of life and supported one another’s ministry (*Letters* 224–225 and 571–572). John assumed another monk—Dorotheus of Gaza—as a disciple, attendant and mouthpiece, for at least part of the next eighteen years that John was the colleague of Barsanuphius.

We know very little about the early years of Barsanuphius. *Letters* 74 and 512 reveal that he was often ill, while *Letters* 13 and 258 admit his temptations of the flesh in his youth. He ate three loaves of bread a week (*Letters* 72 and 97), but we are also told that perhaps he did not have to eat at all (*Letter* 78). He was recognized for his humility (*Letter* 192), discernment (*Letter* 170), foresight (*Letters* 1, 27, 31, 54, 163, and 800), love (*Letters* 110 and 17), illumination (*Letter* 10), and the sharing of his gifts with others (*Letters* 10, 11, and 212). He forgave sins (for example, *Letters* 10, 145, 147, 212, 235, and 166) and even assumed upon himself the sins of others (*Letters* 59 and 235).³ He was even known for certain miracles worked through his prayers (*Letters* 1, 43, 47, 171, 174, 227, 510, and 581). Generosity and graciousness are characteristic features of Barsanuphius. He offers of his own and of himself. To those who approach him,

³Barsanuphius forgives sins, although we are unaware of whether he was ordained. John is clearly not ordained (*Letters* 44 and 138).

he conveys a word of advice, he gladly gives a word of prayer, he grants some bread or a piece of clothing (see *Letters* 1, 63, 166, 173, and others).

We know still less about the life of the Other Old Man, John. What we do know is that, while John stayed for the most part in the shadow of Barsanuphius, as his disciple (*Letter* 130), the latter nonetheless claimed that John held the same authority as his master (*Letter* 188).

The authority of John may be described as *more institutional*, responding as he does to problems of a practical nature; the authority of Barsanuphius is *more inspirational*, responding to principles of a spiritual nature. Yet, they do not compete against one another; rather, they appear to complement each other’s work. Together, they maintain the integrity of an authority-in-charity. In this respect, the authority that they share is derived from the fact that they also share the same God (*Letter* 20) and the same virtue (*Letter* 780). Consequently, they support one another’s ministry.

Response (no. 305). If all of us are one (In 17.21)—the Old Man in God and I in the Old Man—then I dare to say that, if he gave you his word, I too give you mine through him. I know that I am weak and the least; yet, I cannot separate myself from the Old Man. For he is compassionate on me so that the two of us are one. . . .

The authority exercised by these elders is truly remarkable and nothing less than refreshing. At a time when monastic life in the West appeared increasingly to become regulated and even codified, in accordance to Roman legal norms and forms, Palestinian monasticism still preserved the flexibility and fluidity of the earlier Egyptian lifestyles. The emphasis in Western monasticism was gradually being focused on discipline; yet, Eastern monasticism always seemed to retain an emphasis on discernment. Spiritual direction in the Christian East was always more personal, significantly less institutional.

In the West, at least increasingly so, one became attached to a community or, in later centuries, selected an Order; in the East, one sought out an elder, an Old Man (*geron* in the Greek; or *abba*, the Coptic word). Indeed, the chief social role of monastic centers in the East through the centuries was to provide spiritual directors; the deeper expectation when one entered a monastery was that one would discover men or women of prayer, not learned scholars or committed missionaries.⁴

Curiously, then, the “invisibility” of Barsanuphius and John became the very reasons for their accessibility and eminence. These elders acted as an alternative source of authority, independent of and beyond the civic and ecclesiastical leadership of their time. The relationship between bishops and monks was never straightforward in history.⁵ Yet, inasmuch as never formally resolved, it often proved to be a creative tension in the Christian Church. In fact, Barsanuphius even grants John the specific responsibility and role of directing bishops (*Letters* 788–789). The connection, then, between monks and hierarchs existed, albeit strained. Bishops submitted to the counsel of holy elders (see *Letters* 794–801)—although not always, and not always willingly. Elders refrained from publicly challenging Church hierarchy (*Letter* 792)—although not always, and not always happily.

As already mentioned, the Other Old Man bears the additional title of “Prophet,” a reflection and recognition of his spiritual discernment.⁶ Before him, Abba Zeno had also been called “the Prophet,” while Abba Isaiah of Scetis was described as “the third

⁴On aspects of spiritual direction, see J. Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Boston: Holy Cross Press, 2000). On the unique relationship between the two elders and their disciples, see also the unpublished doctoral dissertation by J.L. Hevelone-Harper, *Letters to the Great Old Man: monks, laity, and spiritual authority in sixth-century Gaza* (Princeton University, 2000), especially 139–157.

⁵Cf. P. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* (University of Wisconsin Press: 1992). Also see H. Chadwick, “Bishops and Monks,” in *Studia Patristica* 24 (1993): 45–61, and J. Meyendorff, “St Basil, Messalianism and Byzantine Christianity,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 24, 4 (1980): 219–234.

⁶See the *Life of Dositheus*, who was the disciple of Dorotheus, ch. I, 6–8, p. 122 in P. M. Brun, *La Vie de Saint Dositheé*, in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 26 (Rome,

Prophet Isaiah.” The Other Old Man foretold but delayed his death, as we are informed in *Letter* 224, at the request of Aelianos, the successor of Seridos as Abbot of the community, in order to respond to questions by Aelianos relating to the administration of the monastery. The Other Old Man also had the gifts of foresight (*Letter* 777) and tears (*Letter* 565), of discernment (*Letter* 805) and miracles (*Letter* 781).

Nonetheless, sensational miracles and exceptional charisma are neither the most striking nor the most appealing feature of these elders. They did not provide wisdom on request; nor did they attempt to solve all problems presented before them. Their purpose was to inspire rather than to impress; their aim was to exhort rather than to excite. Most of the time, their counsel is practical: one should simply do one’s best (*Letter* 302). Their advice is balanced: in everything that one does, one should never hurt one’s neighbor (*Letter* 26). They sought to encourage and enable their spiritual directees by gently guiding them on the way that they had already undertaken, rather than discouraging them by austere correcting or abruptly diverting them from that path.

In his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Evagrius dedicates an entire chapter to Barsanuphius, noting that, at the time of his own writing, namely around 593, some fifty years after Barsanuphius’ death, the Great Old Man was still believed to be living. Although no one had ever seen the Old Man or brought him food, yet the popular belief was that he had not died. The Patriarch of Jerusalem ordered that the door of the cell be opened and a consuming fire is said to have flashed out of the cell, causing all those present to flee!⁷ Whether in life or in death, Barsanuphius sought to remain unseen. His way and teaching, however, would not remain concealed. Barsanuphius and John are remembered on February 6 in the Eastern calendar.

1932) and reviewed by F. Halkin in *Analecta Bollandiana* 52 (1935): 413–15. Also appeared in *Sources Chrétiennes* 92 (Paris: Cerf, 1952), 122–45.

⁷See Evagrius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV, 33 in PG 87: iii: 2764 and S. Vailhé, “Saint Barsanuphe,” *Echos d’Orient* 8 (1905): 16.

DISCIPLES OF THE ELDERS: JOHN OF BEERSHEBA,
DOROTHEUS OF GAZA, SERIDOS THE ABBOT AND
AELIANOS

The opening letters of the correspondence are from John of Beersheba and reveal a pious monk hailing from Beersheba. Were it not for *Letter 3*, addressed by the "Other Old Man" to John of Beersheba, and for a reference in *Letter 9* wherein Barsanuphius forwards greetings from himself, Seridos, and "our brother John," it would be very easy—and surely very tempting—to identify the Other Old Man with the John of Beersheba who is the recipient of the early letters of the correspondence. In addition, *Letter 13* indicates that Seridos is acquainted with "three [presumably distinct] persons," namely Barsanuphius, John the Prophet, and John of Beersheba.

It is generally assumed that John was well known as an anchorite in Beersheba but later chose to live in the community of Seridos under the spiritual guidance of Barsanuphius. Perhaps he was attracted by the fluidity of the monastic brotherhood administered by Seridos. Barsanuphius, after all, sometimes communicated individually—albeit always through Seridos—with several monks of the monastery itself (*Letters 250* and *503*). That John was not originally a member of the Seridos community is quite apparent from the opening question of the correspondence. Yet, at the same time, Barsanuphius speaks to John with a tone of familiarity from the outset of his epistolary relationship with him. Barsanuphius permits John to assume a semi-eremitic life within the confines of the monastery (*Letter 32*). With time, however, Barsanuphius accepts John to adopt the solitary life (*Letter 36*), even allowing him to assume the responsibility of directing others spiritually (*Letters 37–43*).

The type of paternal direction promoted by Barsanuphius in his letters and fostered among the monks of his nearby community could not but reveal tensions and problems. There are revealing letters dealing with problems that arose between elders and their disciples (*Letters 489–491* and *503–504*). Presented here for posterity

are the practical results of *an open structure of spiritual authority and personal guidance*. Yet, this formation is more aptly described as a dynamic process rather than as an established system. It is a tentative and delicate structure, still very much in ongoing development. Barsanuphius and John thought and acted in terms of process and progress. Both elders sought constantly to encourage the freedom of the brothers; if he chastised the deacon who rebelled against his Abbot (*Letter 239*), this surely indicates the spiritual space enjoyed by the brothers as well as the possibility to do precisely that.

Perhaps the best known among the disciples of the two elders is Dorotheus of Gaza. Dorotheus was intimately associated with all three key figures of the community in Thavatha: Barsanuphius, John, and Seridos. An aristocrat, intelligent and well educated, Dorotheus is characterized by a sensitivity in regard to his brothers.

Several letters between *Letters 570* and *599* present us with information about the lives of John, Seridos, and Aelianos—the successor to Seridos as Abbot of the monastery. At some point in time, however, between *543* and *544*, the monastery underwent several significant changes: Abbot Seridos died, and the Other Old Man, John, followed suit very soon after (*Letter 576*); Barsanuphius entered a life of complete seclusion, thereafter practicing total silence in a sealed cell; and Dorotheus decided to leave that community.

Around one hundred questions are addressed by Dorotheus (*Letters 252–338*, and certain others), taking readers through an entire biographical and spiritual exposition of the inner life of this exceptional novice and then monk, later possibly also Abbot of his own monastery and himself author of influential teachings. Dorotheus of Gaza is perhaps even better known to more recent readers than his own spiritual masters. This is possibly due to the fact that the Jesuits, and the West in general, early discovered his writings, which also appear—at length, though not in full—in *Patrologia Graeca* volume 88 (cols. 1611–1844). The first generations of Jesuits were considerably influenced by Dorotheus, recommending his

teaching to their novices as preparation for entry into the Society of Jesus.⁸

A series of twenty-nine letters (571–598) describes the dramatic adjustments as spiritual authority changed hands in the monastery. For several decades, Barsanuphius and John had directed the illustrious community at Thavatha. Seridos had left behind a will, which included a list of monks who might replace him. We are informed that all other candidates declined out of humility (*Letter* 574). Finally, a layman (*Letter* 574), Aelianos, was appointed to lead the monastery, after first being tonsured monk, ordained priest, and installed as Abbot (*Letter* 575). Aelianos was a wealthy man (*Letter* 571), himself also previously in correspondence and contact with the two elders of Gaza about the possibility of retirement to the community.

THE LETTERS: "QUESTIONS" AND "ANSWERS"

The correspondence begins with fifty-four questions to and responses by Barsanuphius, with the exception of one letter written by the Other Old Man (*Letter* 3). These opening letters are a series of queries addressed by John of Beersheba, inquiring anxiously about his gradual transition to the eremitic life in Thavatha.

Toward the end of the first letter, Abba Seridos expresses concern about whether he could remember all that Barsanuphius told him in response to the opening question by John of Beersheba. He regrets not having recorded the words of the Old Man in dictation. Barsanuphius comforts him, assuring him that the Holy Spirit would enable him to remember what was said. Indeed, the correspondence continues, with Seridos now prepared for what was to come.

In all, there are—depending on the division adopted for some of the longer documents—approximately eight hundred and fifty

⁸See the articles on Dorotheus of Gaza by L. Regnault in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* and, at greater length, in *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 130 (April–June 1957): 141–49.

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letters, dictated by both of our elders, in response to a variety of issues presented by a diverse group of questioners. Almost four hundred letters—including most of the longer ones—are dictated by Barsanuphius; around four hundred and fifty letters are attributed to John. Some letters are not clearly attributed to either of the elders. Moreover, the collection does not contain the entire correspondence.

While the study, and indeed the literature, of spiritual direction has traditionally focused on monastic development, the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John redresses a balance in this regard, concentrating much of its attention on the concerns of laypersons as well. The recipients of these letters include monks from the monastery of Abba Seridos and simple laypersons⁹ from the surrounding community, through to high-ranking political officials and even ecclesiastical leaders.

Every question, and indeed every detail of every question, is considered as important and deserving of a response. John reassures a disciple: "Brother, in his responses to you, the Old Man left no question unanswered" (*Letter* 306). The *written means* of communication favored such a *more comprehensive* answer, while the *dual ministry* of the elders provided a *more complete* response to the questions and requests made through the scribe (*Letter* 783). Sometimes, the disciple would be advised to search for a second opinion (*Letters* 361 and 504) or even—on one occasion—to search for the answers within himself, rather than depending on another person outside of himself: "Do not seek answers from anyone in regard to yourself, but create the answers for yourself" (*Letter* 347b). On other occasions, the silence of the elders appears to be the only fitting and healing response (*Letter* 148).

The letters are wide-ranging not only in terms of their recipients, but equally so in regard to their requests. People ask about ordinary circumstances of everyday life. The letters touch on such subjects as

⁹While there are no letters from women in the correspondence, Barsanuphius is not exclusive in his attitude toward women (*Letter* 61). Moreover, the community at Thavatha welcomed female visitors (*Letter* 595) for instruction.

the interpretation of dreams, conduct toward slaves, social relations with non-Christians, Jews and pagans alike (*Letters* 686, 732–735, 776–777, 836, and 821–822), as well as coping with illness (*Letters* 637–646, 753–755, and 778–781). They reveal a diverse community around sixth-century Gaza, with Christians seeking direction about relations with Jews, pagans, and heretics.¹⁰

The counsel of the elders is always moderate and mild (*Letter* 26). Laypeople inquire about illness and healing; the elders encourage them to consider the importance of spiritual health (*Letters* 637–644, 753–755, and 778–781; see also *Letters* 72–123 to a monk in illness). Other questions relate to legal and economic matters (*Letters* 667–672, and 749–756), to family relations and chores (*Letters* 764–768), to marriage and death (*Letters* 646 and 676), to property and charity (*Letters* 617–620, 623, 625–626, 629–635, 649), to the proper interaction and appropriate boundaries between monks and laity (*Letters* 636, 681–682, 712–718, 727–729, 736–742, and 751), to the practice of ascetic ways in city life (*Letters* 764–774), and to the importance of superstitions and visions (*Letters* 44 and 414–419).

A monk of the nearby community originally compiled and edited these letters. The editor recorded the correspondence, introducing each letter, occasionally naming the correspondent, and briefly describing the context or defining the purpose of the question addressed to the elders. Sometimes the question is quoted in full; at other times, it is summarized in brief. We are not illumined about the identity of the editor. He does, however, inform readers that he was present, on one occasion, when one visitor wondered whether Barsanuphius was a real person at all; the Great Old Man came out and washed the feet of the doubting visitor in order to allay his suspicions, returning to his cell without speaking a word (*Letter* 125).

These letters are not, and were never intended, to constitute any kind of monastic “rule.” The letters of Barsanuphius and John are

¹⁰After Justinian’s decree against pagans in 528–529, for instance, relations between Christians and pagans grew tense and confused, sometimes even violent.

very personal in both style and content. The *Prologue* that opens the text, clearly authored by the editor of the correspondence, states clearly:

The same teachings are not suited to all alike. . . . Therefore, we must not receive as a general rule the words spoken in a loving way to particular people for the sake of their weakness; rather, we should immediately discern that the response was surely addressed by the saints to the questioner in a personal way.

The letters, indeed, refer not to monastic rules¹¹ but to spiritual stages. They describe the entire spectrum of the spiritual life, all of the shades and “stages” of the ascetic way (see *Letter* 1). These stages are not random, but developmental; and the “two elders” are able to recognize the various gradations within each stage, as well as the integration of them all.

Although the letters are not organized into any definite order, with the first efforts to do so occurring as late as the fourteenth century, a general summary or division of the letters may be presented in the following scheme:

1. *Letters* 1–224: responses predominantly to hermits about the way of silence.
2. *Letters* 225–616: responses mostly to various brothers of the monastic community headed by Seridos, and especially to questions addressed by Dorotheus.
3. *Letters* 617–850: responses primarily to laypeople and other leaders in the Church and society.

¹¹The letters (571–598) addressed to Aelianos, the future Abbot of the monastery of Abba Seridos, present some insights into how a monastery should be constituted and administered. However, even in this case, the letters offer general spiritual direction, not practical managerial prescriptions or precise administrative directives.

The letters themselves are sometimes very brief (for example, *Letter* 437), while at other times much longer (for instance, *Letter* 256), to the point of even constituting entire educational treatises (such as *Letter* 604).

Nevertheless, perhaps the most immediate and striking feature of the letters is their spontaneity and freshness, as well as their monastic shrewdness and even their inimitable sense of humor. Not only are the "authors" themselves characterized by a sense of authenticity and originality, but their correspondence is neither a systematic treatise on the spiritual life, nor a document carefully prepared for publication. The correspondence is a *text of a particular time*, albeit with far-reaching influence on spiritual readers through the centuries on account of its wit and wisdom.

It is, moreover, a *text of a particular place*, albeit with far-reaching impact on a variety of cultures on account of its spiritual and pastoral depth. Most of the questions are addressed by visitors, who come to the monastery from the region of Gaza, from the town of Thavatha, or the city of Gaza specifically, and from Palestine generally: hermits, monks in communities, deacons, priests, bishops, lay people, soldiers, teachers, officials, and spouses. They explore the daily life and problems encountered in their particular vocations, in their families, in their communities, in their neighborhoods, in their churches, in their society.

The style of the language adopted in the correspondence is also deeply personal, and for this reason very powerful. While the correspondence comprises around 850 letters, in actual fact we should envisage these letters in the context of personal visitations to the two Old Men. Therefore, in the opening sections of the correspondence, some of the letters will begin with the phrase: "*Write to [so and so]* . . ." (for instance, *Letters* 1, 4, 6, 8-9, 16, 22, 27, and 31). Nevertheless, at the same time, others will replace the word "write" with the word "*say* [or, *tell*] *so and so*" and thus begin: "Tell brother [so and so] . . ." (for instance, *Letters* 2-3, 7, 12-15, 19, 26-30, 39, 42, 47, and 54).

The context of the letters is clearly one of familiarity between master and disciple (see *Letters* 56, 62, 68-69, 72-74, 86, 90-93, 96-98, and 126). Moreover, it is reminiscent of the relationship between father/mother and child that forms the basis of monastic life in fourth-century Egypt. The words frequently opening a conversation in the desert of Egypt were: "Abba, speak a word; how are we to be saved" or "Pray for me."¹² The same approach is transferred to Gaza in Palestine, as witnessed in the same *Letter* 55 quoted above and addressed to Barsanuphius by a fellow Copt monk:

A certain elderly Egyptian man . . . addressed a letter . . . to the Great Old Man (for he, too, was Egyptian) requesting prayer and counsel for the benefit of his soul.

Response by Barsanuphius

As for what you write to me . . . , namely "Pray for my sins," I also say the same to you, pray for my sins.

THE ASCETIC TEACHING OF THE LETTERS

It may sometimes be tempting to separate *abstract theology* from *ascetic practice*, categorizing under the first heading the theory of the monastic life as expressed by representatives of the more intellectual or contemplative currents, and under the second heading its application as experienced by the saintly yet unscholarly representatives of the more affective or simplistic ways. In this case, Barsanuphius and John would be relegated to the more "practical" and less "theological" representatives of the monastic tradition. Their correspondence, after all, makes only few references to doctrinal issues or to mystical visions.

¹²See, for instance, *Sayings*, Antony 16 and 19.

Nonetheless, it is not clear whether Barsanuphius and John would themselves be very comfortable with any such distinction between theology and asceticism. For them, work is not to be distinguished from prayer; nor is it a distraction from prayer (*Letter* 150). While their correspondence certainly offers balanced and practical advice about the spiritual life, it nevertheless also contains remarkable nuances and profound theological insights. For instance, *Letters* 600–607 deal with doctrinal questions—in relation to Origen of Alexandria, Evagrius of Pontus, and Didymus the Blind—posed by one of the monks in the community. If, however, the elders respond to such questions, it is true to claim that they do so primarily in deference to the queries of their disciples.

God does not demand these things [i.e., questioning doctrinal matters] from us. Rather, God demands sanctification, purification, silence, and humility. Nevertheless, since I do not want to leave your thoughts unanswered, and I have been afflicted in my prayers to God in order that he might assure me in regard to this matter, I have been constrained by this dilemma, but chose rather to assume affliction for myself in order to relieve you of your own affliction. . . .

For, you will not be asked about these matters on that day, as to why you do not understand them or why you have not learned about them. (*Letter* 604)¹³

Furthermore, although in most of their responses, Barsanuphius and John in fact deal with the toilsome journey of the ascetic struggle itself, they do also make certain references to the mystical goal of the spiritual life and to the delight of arriving there.

¹³Doctrinal and other ecclesiastical issues are also treated in certain other sections of the correspondence; for example, one will discover references to general issues (*Letter* 370), the Trinity (*Letters* 169 and 600), the Council of Nicaea (*Letters* 58 and 701), martyrdom (*Letter* 433), the Canons of the Church (*Letter* 170), the teaching of St. John Chrysostom (*Letter* 464), deification (*Letter* 199), and relationships of bishops *vis à vis* heretics (*Letters* 694–702, 733–735, 775 and 792).

Having arrived at this point, they [the saints] attained to that measure where there is no agitation or distraction, becoming all intellect, all eye, all life, all light, all perfect, all gods.

They toiled, they were magnified, they were glorified, they shined, they were perfected. They lived, because first they died. They rejoice, and they make others also rejoice. (*Letter* 207)

Another distinction sometimes drawn is that between *the monastic life* and *the secular life*. Under the former heading are included all of the particular and austere practices identified with renouncing the world, such as assuming the Cross of Christ, and following him in total obedience, even to the point of death; and under the latter heading all of the more general and broader virtues to be acquired and vices to be avoided. The correspondence itself, however, makes it abundantly clear that Barsanuphius and John would not espouse such a distinction between the way of the desert and the way of the world. While most of their correspondence is addressed to a monastic audience, a significant portion is comprised of responses to lay persons asking similar questions and receiving similar responses about the spiritual life.

It must also be remembered, to adopt the words of Basil of Caesarea, that the ascetic life is none other than “the way according to Gospel.”¹⁴ In the spiritual life, there is no sharp demarcation between monastics and non-monastics; the monastic life is simply the Christian life, lived out in a particular way. The circumstances of the response may vary externally, but the path is essentially one. Monks are Christians who have discovered special possibilities of imitating Christ. And those married or in the world face—not so much particular impediments, but—the same invitation to approach God.

Each person is called to do that which one is doing, to be what one is supposed to be, to “follow one’s ways” (*Letter* 840). The

¹⁴Cf. Basil, *Letter* 207.2, PG 32.761.

condition, of course, is that everyone must first "examine one's ways," variously described as "study," "attention," and "search." Indeed, on two occasions in one letter (no. 838), this arduous process is described as "groping in the darkness of one's heart."

Most of what the two Old Men have to state aims at awakening their listeners from despondency and lifting them from despair. In one striking phrase, the Other Old Man remarks: "Awaken the Jesus that lies asleep within" (*Letter* 182). They advise their disciples never to be overwhelmed by, but always to welcome the opportunity of temptations (*Letter* 496). They offer strength and support; this is what they do best, and this is also what they advise others to do (*Letter* 315). These elders are always positive: "Listen, child, for every passion there is a medicine; and for every sin there is proper repentance" (*Letter* 226). They identify with the joys and the sorrows of their spiritual children: "If I could fill these letters with tears and send them to you, since you have afflicted yourself; it would have been of greater benefit to you" (*Letter* 229).

Throughout the correspondence, they constantly stress the need for vigilance and violence in the ascetic struggle, the importance of discernment and humility in the spiritual life, and the place of gratitude and gladness in daily activity. An eloquent summary of their teaching is found in *Letter* 267:

Labor to receive these [gifts] with toil of heart, and God will grant them to you continually; I am referring to warmth and prayer. For forgetfulness makes these vanish, while this forgetfulness is caused by negligence. As for the protection of your senses, every gift is granted with toil of heart. The gift of vigilance does not allow the thoughts to enter; but if they do enter, it does not allow them to cause any damage.

May God grant you to be vigilant and alert. For the words "give thanks in all things" (1 Thess 5:18) constitute a command, especially in the matter that you indicated to me.

Finally, searching your faults in order to seek forgiveness is also very beneficial.

What follows is a brief overview—comprehensive, although by no means exhaustive—of twelve fundamental principles of the ascetic teaching of Barsanuphius and John, as gleaned from the correspondence of these two extraordinary elders.

1. *Continual vigilance*

The Gaza elders underline constant vigilance and alertness in every aspect of one's life. This criterion is fundamental in spiritual progress as well as daily practice:

Pay attention then to yourself with vigilance, that you may set God before you at all times, so that the words of the prophet will be fulfilled: "I foresaw the Lord before my face continually, for the Lord is on my right hand so that I may not be moved" (Ps 15:8).

Stretch out your hands with all your soul to the things that lie before you, and meditate on this continually, that you may hear the voice of God saying to you: "Behold, I am sending my angel before your face, to prepare your way before you" (Mt 11:10). (*Letter* 7)

Vigilance is a critical part of spiritual alertness and awareness. We are always called to "make a new beginning," say Barsanuphius and John.¹⁵ It is, however, a beginning forged in light of an end. The reason for one's vigilance is the certainty of one's impending death, which becomes the focus for a more attentive life.

¹⁵The phrase "make a new beginning" is a Copticism henceforth established in ascetic terminology. See *Letters* 55, 257, 266, 276, 493, 497, 500, 562, 614, and 788. Cf. also *Sayings*, Arsenius 3.

Be vigilant, brother, for you are mortal and ephemeral. Do not consent to lose eternal life for a fleeting moment. (*Letter* 236)

Pay attention to yourself, and expect your impending death. Say to yourself the words of the blessed Arsenius: "Arsenius, why did you leave the world?"¹⁶ (*ibid.*)

2. "Violence in all things"

In light of this end, the struggle against the passions is ongoing. Nevertheless, it is also positive. Barsanuphius will often reply with the proverbial statement: "The untempted is also untested" (*Letter* 248). However, the reality is that this struggle to remain focused through attentiveness is not natural in a world of distraction and dissipation. This reality is highlighted with the concept of "violence," whereby "the kingdom of heaven is taken by force" (Mt 11.12).

Brother, "forcing oneself in all things" and humility brings one to progress. For even the Apostle says this: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed" (2 Cor 4.8). . . . This is why a person should not have one's own will but in everything blame oneself, and then that person shall find the mercy of God.

However, if the devil fools one into proudly thinking that one has done well, then everything that has been achieved is lost. Therefore, as you do whatever you do, humbly say: "Lord, forgive me, for I have burdened the Abbot, by casting on him my burden." The Lord Jesus Christ will save you. Amen. (*Letter* 243)

The monk unceasingly struggles against the "eight passions" (*Letter* 44), or—elsewhere—the "seven nations" (*Letter* 209), in order to

¹⁶See *Sayings*, Arsenius 40.

purify the "five senses" (*Letters* 208 and 612). The correspondence constantly emphasizes the fact that "you shall know them by their works" (Mt 7.16) or fruits (cf. *Letters* 22, 23, 94, 238, 401, 405, 453, 455).

3. *The gift of discernment*

Barsanuphius and John constantly underline the importance of balance and discretion. For instance, a monk who is ill should not also expect to fast because the body is already being strained and restrained by the illness itself (*Letter* 79; see also *Letter* 212). In all things and to all people, Barsanuphius and John recommend the middle, or royal, way in ascetic rigor. Such is the essence of discernment: "This is the way of the fathers: neither to be wasteful nor to be crushed in one's discipline" (*Letter* 212). For Barsanuphius, the virtue of discernment involves a profound awareness of one's attitude or "intention"¹⁷ as well as the clear understanding of one's motivation or "disposition."¹⁸ The two Old Men move beyond a rigid code of ethical prescriptions, with their almost inhumane consequences, into a more compassionate situational or occasional ethics, where there are no established formulas and fewer binding directives, where the individual always assumes responsibility for his or her actions.

Not only do people differ from one another (*Letter* 157); indeed, even circumstances within one and the same person may differ from time to time (*Letter* 842). This is why "conscience" plays an important role in these letters.¹⁹ Conscience implies the integral knowledge of many aspects and factors that are interconnected and interdependent. It is a knowledge that is more intuitive than analytical, a knowledge that invites and involves the subconscious, the conscious and the supraconscious levels.

¹⁷See *Letters* 1, 60, (esp.) 239, 453; (also) 455, 472, 493, 611, 613, 648, and 720.

¹⁸See *Letters* (esp.) 17, 70, 462, and 646.

¹⁹See *Letters* 3, 13, (esp.) 275, 276, 462, 464, 633, 700, and 712.

4. *The way of humility*

Question (no. 100) to the Great Old Man: Tell me, father, what does humility mean? Moreover, pray that the end of my life may be peaceful.

Response by Barsanuphius

Humility means regarding oneself as “earth and ashes” (Gen 18.27) in deeds and not just in words, and saying: “Who am I?” (2 Sam 7.18). “Who counts me as anything?” “I have nothing to do with anyone.”

Humility is a self-emptying that resembles death. In order to learn something new, one needs first to be emptied. Transformation involves dying, although it is always seen in the context of resurrection. Learning becomes living. Humble endurance is also connected to deep calmness (*Letter* 21).

5. *Gratitude in all circumstances*

Barsanuphius is quite clear on the priority and necessity of gratitude. Thanksgiving forms a central part of his teaching and is reflected in numerous letters. “The words ‘give thanks in all circumstances’ (1 Thess 5.18) constitute an order” (*Letter* 267); “Let us never lose our thanksgiving” (*Letter* 366). We are called to offer thanks to God in all circumstances (*Letters* 2, 6, 29, 45, 191, 201, 351, 384, 574 and 682), including adverse situations such as illness (*Letters* 174, 182, 197, 211, and 515). Such an act of gratitude comprises an act of true sacrifice, which even itself constitutes an intercession on our behalf before God. “In all things give thanks to God. For thanksgiving intercedes to God for our weakness!” (*Letter* 214).

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6. *Heavenly joy*

Barsanuphius exclaims throughout his responses: “Rejoice in the Lord; rejoice in the Lord; rejoice in the Lord” (*Letters* 10 and 87). The joy that he is invoking upon his listeners and recipients is a divine joy; while it reaches below, it comes from above:

May the God of our fathers bring you into this joy. For it contains ineffable light, and it is brilliant and sweet.

It does not remember earthly nourishment, but seeks only what is above and mediates only what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. To him be the glory to the ages. Amen. (*Letter* 98, found only in the Athens ms.)

Yet, it is a state to which everyone may aspire. “May one rejoice in the Lord when one has reached the goal, and when one is about to reach it, and when one is still waiting to reach it” (*Letter* 137). One must struggle “to reach” this goal. Therefore, other fundamental principles of the ascetic way, according to Barsanuphius and John’s understanding of the tradition received from their own elders, include continual labor or “toil,” total “obedience” and “submission,” and the concepts—at once difficult to translate and difficult to apply—of acquiring the virtue of not reckoning oneself as anything (*to apsepheston*) and of avoiding the pretense to rights (*to dikaioma*).

7. *Labor for love*

Barsanuphius and John recognize that the entire ascetic effort of the monk is the result of synergy. In this way, the two elders reconcile the age-old dilemma of the ascetic Christian—in regard to the interplay between grace and nature (*Letter* 763).

Labor, however, is not merely laborious; the Greek term that is often adopted by Barsanuphius is “work” or “toil” (*ergon*), which

also implies a sense of creativity. Certainly, the struggle is difficult, because every monk will resist change, pain, passion, and death. Yet, the result is again positive; it is a labor of love and a labor for love. This is evident throughout the correspondence:

Therefore, labor, brother, so that you may find even more love and rest. For before the boat reaches the harbor, it is beaten and tossed by the waves and the storms. However, once it reaches the harbor, it then finds itself in a state of great calm. (*Letter 9*)

Brother, no one can be saved from the passions or please God without labor of heart and contrition. (*Letter 256*)

Pay attention to yourself, brother; for it is impossible to be saved without labor and humility. (*Letter 240*)

The clearest evidence that one is laboring for love lies in the fulfillment of the Apostolic commandment to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6.2), which is nothing less than an imitation of the example set by Christ (cf. Mt 11.28–30). This Pauline text is quoted in numerous *Letters*,²⁰ while the Old Men themselves explicitly bear the burdens of their own disciples—sometimes only half the burden,²¹ at other times two-thirds of the burden,²² while on other occasions even the entire burden!²³

I admire your love, brother, but you do not understand the affairs of love that is according to God. . . . Yet, if I say something to someone beyond my measure, or beyond my power, I speak moved by the love of Christ, knowing—as I said—that I am nothing but a worthless slave. Since then you did

²⁰See, for instance, *Letters* 94, 96, 104, 108, 123, 239, 243, 483, 575a, 579, and 604.

²¹See *Letters* 70 and 72.

²²See *Letter* 73.

²³See *Letters* 73, 553, and 833.

not understand what I told you, namely that I bear half your sins, I have made you a partner with me. For I did not say to you: “I bear one-third,” leaving you to bear more and be burdened more than I. And again, I said what I have said in order to banish self-love; this is why I did not speak to you of bearing two-thirds, showing myself to be stronger than you; for such conduct would be vainglory. And I did not say: “I bear the whole.” This belongs to the perfect, to those who have become brothers of Christ, who laid down his own life for our sake, and who loved those who have loved us with perfect love in order to do this. . . . However, if you wish to cast on me the whole burden, then for the sake of obedience I accept this too. Forgive me that great love leads me to talking nonsense. (*Letter 73*)

8. Obedience and spiritual direction

Obedience is the glue that binds elder and disciple; yet, above and beyond this, it is also the way in which the entire community is held together. “Therefore, doing everything on the order of the Abbot and not according to one’s own will is the sign of communality and equality with the brothers in the monastery” (*Letter 250*). The ascetic struggle is clearly arduous, but the spiritual journey is not supposed to be undertaken alone. Obedience, humility, submission, guidance, seeking counsel, and cutting off one’s own will are all part and parcel of the spiritual way.

Obedience cuts off the will, but without toil no one can acquire obedience. If you are sitting here for the sake of obedience and not for bodily comfort, then this is not the result of your own will; nor again are you sitting passionately but rather you are pleasing God. If, however, you are sitting here in order to receive pleasure from comfort, then you are not pleasing God. (*Letter 249*)

Obedience is perhaps one of the most critical elements of the ascetic way, a crucial aspect of taking up one's cross, and an indispensable characteristic of the genuine monastic. Quite simply put, "a monk should not hold onto his own will *at all in anything*" (*Letter* 288, my emphasis).

In this respect, perhaps one of the most striking elements of the Old Men's teaching is their conviction that, as spiritual guides of their disciples, they dare also to assume responsibility for them before God.

Question (no. 270). Request from the same brother to the same Great Old Man, that he might bear his sins.

Response

Brother, although you are asking of me something that is beyond me, nevertheless I shall show you the limits of love, namely that it forces itself to move even beyond its own limits. Behold, I have admired you as a person, and I assume responsibility for you and bear you. Nevertheless, I do so on this condition, that you also bear the keeping of my words and commandments; for they bring you salvation. In this way, you shall live without reproach.

Barsanuphius and John are constantly careful not to interfere in or impose themselves upon the spiritual development of their correspondents:

Simple advice according to God is one thing, and a command is another. A command has an inviolable bond; but advice is counsel without compulsion, showing a person the straight way in life. (*Letter* 368)

Indeed, it would be more appropriate in their case to say that the spiritual director is spiritually *identified with* rather than externally

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authoritative over the spiritual disciple: "The Lord has bound your soul to mine, saying: 'Do not leave him.' Therefore, it is not for me to teach you, but in fact to learn from you" (*Letter* 164).

9. *Not reckoning oneself as anything (or to apsephesthon)*

This virtue is both difficult to acquire and difficult to apply. Barsanuphius frequently offers the following kind of advice to those who approach him:

Be carefree from all things; then, you will have time for God. Die to all people; for, this is true exile. Moreover, retain the virtue of not reckoning yourself as anything; then, you will find your thought to be undisturbed. In addition, do not consider yourself as having done anything good; thus, your reward will be kept whole. (*Letter* 259)

Therefore, you should keep your tongue from idle talk, your stomach from pleasure, refrain from irritating your neighbor, stay modest, do not reckon yourself as anything, love everyone, and always have God in your intellect, remembering the time when you will appear before God's countenance. Keep these things, and your soil will yield an hundredfold (cf. Mt 4.8) in fruits for God, to whom be the glory to the ages. Amen. (*Letter* 271)

Barsanuphius is specifically asked to explain this complicated notion, which is so central to his teaching.

Question (no. 227) to the Great Old Man: Father, what does it mean not to reckon oneself as anything?²⁴

²⁴Dorotheus of Gaza develops this theme of his master in his *Spiritual Works, Letter* 2.

Response

Brother, not reckoning oneself as anything means not equating oneself with anyone and not saying anything in regard to any good deed that you may also have achieved.

Barsanuphius knows that he is not in any way innovating in this aspect of his teaching, which he attributes to the Desert Fathers of Egypt (*Letter* 604). However, the concept does assume greater significance in his teaching.

10. *The pretense to rights (or to dikaioma)*

Once again, the Great Old Man is asked to explain what this complex virtue implies and to describe its origin. In his responses, he embraces the notions of self-justification, self-trust and self-deceit.

What is the pretense to rights?

Response

The pretense to rights is something that does not contain arrogance, but rather contains the denial of fault, in the manner of Adam and Eve and Cain and others who sinned, but who later denied their sin in order to justify themselves. (*Letter* 477)

Such is the origin of this concept, which nevertheless contains several dimensions that are revealed or discerned in various ways in the spiritual life.

The desire that comes from the demons is what we call pretense to rights and trust in oneself. Through these, one is entirely taken captive. (*Letter* 173)

Nothing that occurs with turmoil is good, but always from the power of the devil through our pretense to rights. (*Letter* 724)

Clearly, Barsanuphius is here drawing on his long experience and spiritual appropriation of the desert tradition, where the monk was never evasively to blame other people or situations but always directly to assume the burden of personal responsibility.

Abba Antony said to Abba Poemen: "This is the great work of a person: always to take the blame for one's own sins before God and to expect temptation to the last breath."²⁵

Finally, if we were to consider the goal itself of the ascetic life in the teaching of Barsanuphius and John, then the magnitude of the correspondence might be condensed into two principal virtues, namely *prayer* (indeed, unceasing prayer) and *tears* (in fact, continual tears).

11. *Learning to pray*

Prayer is the activity of the monk at all times and in all places.

Question (no. 441). When I am sitting down, either reading or doing my handiwork, and want to pray, I am not sure whether I should be sitting. The same happens even if I have my head covered. Moreover, when I am walking about and want to pray, my thought demands that I turn toward the east. What should I do, father?

Response

Whether you are sitting down or walking about, whether you are working or eating, or whatever else you are doing—

²⁵Cf. Antony, *Saying* 4.

even if you are performing your bodily need—whether you happen to be turned toward the east or toward the west, do not hesitate to pray.

For we have been commanded to pray without ceasing (cf. 1 Thess 5:17) and to do so in every place (cf. 1 Tim 2:8). Again, it has been written: "Prepare the way for the one who rides toward the west; his name is the Lord" (Ps 67:5), which shows that God is everywhere. Moreover, when you have your head covered, do not cease praying. Simply make sure that you are not doing this in contempt.

The elders offer specific and detailed advice about how to pray without ceasing, especially in difficult situations, as well as how to respond when it appears that one's prayers are of no benefit (see *Letters* 182 and 710–711).

12. *Learning to weep*

We know that the Other Old Man, John, never took Holy Communion without shedding tears (*Letter* 570), something echoing the earlier Desert Fathers, such as Arsenius of Scetis in the preceding century, but also foreshadowing later monastic writers, such as John Climacus and Abba Isaac the Syrian in the following century, and Symeon the New Theologian as late as the tenth century.

This emphasis on tears is equally shared by both of the elders of Gaza. Indeed, Barsanuphius is quick to distinguish the phenomenon of tears from any negative expression of guilt that looks backward, describing it rather as a positive expression of longing and desire for a grace that was lost, but which yet lies ahead. "One who is conscious of what has been lost will weep for it. Moreover, one who sincerely desires something will endure many travels and afflictions, in the hope of achieving that, which is desired" (*Letter* 400).

John the Prophet is asked to provide a synthesis for the teachings about the inner and outer dispositions of joy and sorrow alike, a

combination that will forever be consolidated in ascetic literature through the teaching of John Climacus (c. 579–c. 659), who will later be inspired to write in a unique fashion about "joyful sorrow" in step seven of his *Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

Question (no. 730). Since the Lord said: "Blessed are they that mourn" (Mt 5:4) and the Apostle says: "Be joyful and cheerful" (Rom 12:8), what should one do in order to appear to be both mournful and cheerful? In addition, how can both of these, mournfulness and cheerfulness, exist in one and the same person?

Response

Mourning is sorrow according to God, which gives rise to repentance. The characteristics of repentance are fasting, psalmody, prayer, and meditation on the words of God. Cheerfulness is gladness according to God, which is revealed through modesty in word and conduct when people encounter one another. Therefore, let your heart have mourning, while your conduct and words should have modest gladness; then, both virtues may coexist.

MONASTICISM AND SACRAMENTS

Many of the early monastic texts are curiously silent about the sacramental life of the hermits and communities. For instance, in his *Life of Antony*, Athanasius, the Archbishop of Alexandria, makes no explicit reference to the question as to whether the Father of the Monks received Holy Communion while in his outer or inner desert. Evagrius of Pontus makes little if any reference to the sacraments in his formative and influential treatises. And in his undisputable masterpiece of monastic literature, *The Ladder of Divine*

Ascent, John Climacus makes no explicit mention at all of the sacrament of Holy Communion, although he does refer to the sacrament of Baptism in his chapter on tears.

Such a reticence about the sacraments neither constitutes the established rule nor implies that these authors undermine the significance or centrality of sacraments in the spiritual and even in the ascetic life. Indeed, even as prominent a Pope of Rome as Gregory the Great does not refer to the sacrament of the Eucharist in his famous *Moralia*. Perhaps certain representatives of monastic literature take the sacraments for granted; or perhaps they do not consider it a part of their task at hand to include them in their writing. Whatever the case may be, there are clearly certain significant exceptions to this "rule" of silence in regard to sacraments among monastic authors. For instance, in the early fifth century, Mark the Monk assumes the sacrament of baptism as the central principle for his teaching. And in the sixth century, Barsanuphius and John undoubtedly stand out as notable exceptions and advocates of the sacramental life.

Several letters refer to the importance of baptism into the faith of the Nicæan Fathers (*Letters* 58 and 694), to salvation that derives from baptism as deliverance from death to life (*Letters* 62 and 211), to the baptism of heretics (*Letters* 820–822). Other letters refer to the forgiveness of sins through the prayer (Jas 5.16) and power (In 20.23) of the saints, who are able to bind and loose (*Letters* 10, 107, 194, 220, 226, 233, 240, 277, 345; 359, 399, 404, 444, and 543), but also through the sacrament of unction (Jas 5.14–15; cf. also *Letter* 211).

Beyond this, however, there are other letters that refer to liturgical customs and gestures (*Letters* 4, 241, and 742), to liturgical cycles and offices (*Letters* 32, 50, 143, 169, 178, 209, 334, 427–428, 519, 739, 751, and 821), as well as to the specific act of participating in the sacred mystery of Holy Communion (*Letters* 241, 334, 404, and 463–464), which Barsanuphius describes as: "Incorruptible sacrifice, offered for the life of the world. The one who truly eats thereof is also sacrificed and not dominated by spiritual corruption" (*Letter* 137b).

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The monk is to approach with fear of God, faith, and love (*Letters* 170, 241, and 244), with humility and without vainglory (*Letters* 742 and 821), in order to participate without condemnation (*Letters* 170 and 570b). Indeed, if the monk is unwell, he may even partake of the sacred mysteries in his own cell (*Letter* 212).

STRUGGLE AND STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPIRITUAL WISDOM

The *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John, and especially those addressed by and to Dorotheus of Gaza (*Letters* 252–338), present another significant development.²⁶ They reveal an element that gradually disappears from the ascetic literature, and especially from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, even as these begin to be collated and edited. For, the original or oral transmission of the wisdom of the Egyptian desert preserved the spontaneity of the profound advice and impressive actions of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

However, during the stage of their transition from an oral culture to a written text, the *Sayings* inevitably and distinctively became a little more static. As a result, readers begin to lose sight of the personal element that originally sparked these living and life-giving words. More especially, later readers misplace the process and struggle that initially shaped these personal and fiery words. Therefore, what is "received" is the intense drop of wisdom, however without the consecutive stages that led to the final product. What is missing is the ongoing process and grueling struggle—all of the contentions, hesitations and limitations of the spiritual aspirant. The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, for instance, often present the spiritual reality in *the way that it should be*, rather than in *the way that it is*—with all the denials, the doubts, and the temptations.

²⁶There are ninety-three letters addressed to Dorotheus of Gaza, seventy-two of these from John and twenty-one of them from Barsanuphius.

Yet, in Barsanuphius and John, we are allowed to witness each of the painful stages unfolding in graduating and slow motion. Their *correspondence* provides a personal and cultural context for the earlier *apophthegmata*. What might normally have taken place on the level of a face-to-face encounter is here recorded in writing, with all of the mutuality or back-and-forth of a personal relationship. Neither the authors of the letters nor the compiler of the correspondence seek to conceal the innate challenges and tensions of the spiritual process itself. As the French translator of this correspondence, Fr Lucien Regnault, has eloquently written: "What the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* allow us to glimpse only in the form of fleeting images, is here played out like a film before our very eyes."²⁷

The following exchange of letters is one of several examples that highlight this progressive development and struggle to understand the subtleties and insights of the spiritual way in an exchange between elder and disciple that betrays also the involvement of divine grace:

Question (no. 293) from the same brother to the same Old Man: If a brother does something insignificant, yet I am afflicted by this act on account of my own will, what should I do? Should I keep silent and not give rest to my heart, or should I speak to him with love and not remain troubled? Moreover, if the matter afflicts others, and not me, should I speak for the sake of the others? Or would this appear as if I have just taken on a cause?

Response by John

If it is a matter that is not sinful but insignificant, and you speak simply in order to give rest to your heart, then it is to your defeat. For you were not able to endure it as a result of your weakness.

Just blame yourself and be silent. However, if the matter afflicts others, tell your Abbot; and whether he speaks or else tells you to speak, you will be carefree.

Question (no. 294) from the same person to the same Old Man: If I speak to the Abbot for the sake of the others, I suspect that the brother will be troubled; so what should I do? And if he afflicts both the others and me, should I speak for the sake of the others, or should I keep silent in order not to satisfy myself? If I suspect that he will not be grieved, should I also speak for myself, or should I force myself against this?

Response by John

As far as the turmoil of the brother is concerned, if you speak to the Abbot, then you have nothing to worry about. When it is necessary to speak for the sake of others, and you are worried about it, then speak for them. As for yourself, always force yourself not to speak.

Question (no. 295). *Question* from the same brother to the same Old Man: But my thought tells me that if my brother is troubled against me, he will become my enemy, thinking that I slandered him to the Abbot.

Response by John

This thought of yours is wicked; for it wants to prevent you from correcting your brother. Therefore, do not prevent yourself from speaking; but rather, speak according to God.

For, indeed, even sick people that are being healed will speak against their doctors; yet, the latter do not care, knowing that the same people will thank them afterward.

²⁷Cf. Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza: *Correspondance* (Abbaye de Solesmes: 1972), 6.

Question (no. 296) from the same person to the same Old Man: If I examine my thought and notice that it is not for the sake of my brother's benefit that I wish to speak to the Abbot, but with the purpose of slandering him, should I speak or keep silent?

Response by John

Advise your thought to speak according to God and not for the sake of slander. And if your thought is conquered by criticism, even so, speak to your Abbot and confess to him your criticism, so that both of you may be healed—the one who was at fault and the one who was critical.

Question (no. 297) from the same to the same: If my thought does not allow me to confess to the Abbot that I am speaking to him with the purpose of slandering the brother, what should I do? Should I speak or not?

Response

Do not say anything to him, and the Lord will take care of the matter. For it is not necessary for you to speak when this harms your soul. God will take care of the brother's correction as God pleases.

The same graduation of argument and maturation of thought is discerned in other letters on matters relating to prayer (*Letters* 427–431 and 438–447), good deeds (*Letters* 401–413 and 679–680), habits (*Letters* 433–437), legal issues (*Letters* 650–651, 667–673, 687, 720–721, 725–726), spiritual thoughts (*Letters* 448–449), the treatment of servants (653–657), conversations with friends (*Letters* 469–476 and 707–709), blessing a meal (*Letters* 716–719), dealing with real estate (*Letters* 486–488 and 648), problems in personal relationships (*Letters* 489–491 and 662), doctrinal issues (*Letters* 602–607 and

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694–704), and almsgiving (*Letters* 617–636). These series reveal the intimate connection between the desert tradition of Egypt and the epistolary tradition of Gaza.²⁸

THE FORMATION AND LEGACY OF BARSANUPHIUS AND JOHN

Barsanuphius and John certainly seem to display characteristics both *in common* with as well as *in contrast* to their predecessors, the desert dwellers of Egypt. For instance, each of the prominent elders of Gaza is balanced and unpolemical in their nature and in their counsel, much like the disposition of the Egyptian monastics, whose sayings are preserved in their collections. The correspondence of Barsanuphius and John does not in general reveal the confessional rifts that affected so much of Christendom during this period, preferring to remain deliberately reticent on the divisive and complex doctrinal debates of the sixth century.

The Old Men are far less militant and far more moderate than other representatives of both the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian circles. Nowhere, for example, in the vast epistolary collection of Barsanuphius and John is there any clear or explicit condemnation or defense of the Chalcedonian definition. Their disciples were advised to abstain from such debates as well as from condemning those who chose to take sides. Other contemporary ascetics, such as Sabas (d. 532), while compassionate and non-judgmental in their outlook, are nevertheless deliberately and defensively concerned with confessional doctrine. Earlier, Peter the Iberian (c. 409–c. 488) is actively involved in the Christological controversy and

²⁸In the present selection, I have maintained a capital letter for “Fathers” or “Elders,” where this refers to the spiritual or even literary tradition of the Egyptian monastics found in such texts as *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. The regional and textual influence and relationship between the Egyptian elders and their Gaza successors is developed below.

openly opposed to the Chalcedonian supporters. It is no wonder, then, that an icon of the Great Old Man graces the frescoes depicting altar-cloths in the Great Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople, beside those of Antony of Egypt and Ephraim the Syrian. This is perhaps why Theodore the Studite (759–826) was anxious to defend and affirm the orthodoxy of Barsanuphius, John, and Dorotheus, as well as of Isaiah of Scetis before them.²⁹

Yet, at the same time, the Gaza elders differ from their Egyptian counterparts inasmuch as they are overall more educated and widely read. This feature may not be unknown among the Desert Fathers, but it is rather exceptional. In general, it appears to be a characteristic of Palestinian monasticism.³⁰ Monks in the community of Seridos were familiar with the writings of Origen of Alexandria, Didymus the Blind, and Evagrius of Pontus (*Letter* 600). Barsanuphius' responses to questions about Origenist tendencies among certain representatives of the monastic tradition, together with John's explanations of the Great Old Man's words (*Letters* 601–607), reveal two elders who appreciate fine intellectual distinctions and discussions without at the same time being absorbed by these to the detriment of their prayer life or spiritual relationships. Thus, in another set of thirteen questions (between *Letters* 151 and 167), commanding responses to a certain Euthymius whose mind is almost obsessed with allegorical interpretations and details, Barsanuphius will recommend humility and silence!

²⁹Barsanuphius chose to adopt the rhetoric of the non-Chalcedonian party, while urging his disciples to follow a Chalcedonian bishop. See the *Testament of Theodore the Studite* in PG 88, 483–486 and PG 99, 1028. These three had been anathematized by Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem in a synodical letter to Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople in 654: cf. PG 87, iii: 3192–3193. The orthodoxy of Barsanuphius was in question because of his reference in *Letter* 701 only to the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea (325), without however making any mention of the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon (451). The iconographic tradition, however, is also particularly interesting in light of the fact that the two Old Men permitted so few people to meet them in person.

³⁰In the *Life of Cyriacs* (ch. 14) and the *Life of Sabas* (ch. 83), Cyril of Scythopolis refers to the monks of Palestine as "more lettered" than others. Cf. transl. R. Price, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990).

The Old Men Barsanuphius and John, and particularly their gifted disciple Dorotheus of Gaza, sense that they are a *part of a new tradition*, closely linked to the past and yet at the same time clearly looking to a different age and a different environment. Barsanuphius and John are forward-looking to the diverse monastic population that they serve and the diverse monastic culture that they confront. They are conscious of the need for greater tolerance and openness in communal (monastic) and social (secular) relations. In fact, the presence of these two elders in the region of Gaza, that intersection and cross-section of so many peoples and pilgrims, brought together so many pieces from the worlds of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine, Asia Minor, Syria, and as far east as Persia. The same region also numbered Arabs, Greeks, Latins, Armenians, Georgians, and others.

It is no wonder that the monks of this region were deeply influenced by Barsanuphius' openness toward foreigners imposed by a dynamic of positive interaction.³¹ Indeed, Barsanuphius was quite clear about the role of his contemporaries; it was, as he determines in *Letter* 569, to pray for the salvation of the whole world, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, pious and pagan alike:

There are three men, perfect in God, who have exceeded the measure of humanity and received the authority to loose and bind, to forgive and hold sins. These three stand before the shattered world, keeping the whole world from complete and sudden annihilation.

Through their prayers, God combines his chastisement with his mercy. Moreover, it has been told to them, that God's wrath will last a little longer. . . .

These three are John in Rome and Elias in Corinth, and another in the region of Jerusalem. I believe that they will

³¹See *Letters* 686, 733 and 777. Cf. also I.A. Voulgarakis, "Missionsangaben in den Briefen der Asketen Barsanuphius und Johannes," in A. Kallis, ed., *Philoxenia* (Münster, 1980).

achieve God's great mercy. Yes, they will undoubtedly achieve it. Amen.

It is quite possible that Barsanuphius possessed the discerning boldness and humble conviction before God and humanity to claim within his heart that he was the third of these ascetics.³²

THE LETTERS THROUGH THE TRADITION: SOURCES AND INFLUENCES

In spite of the fact that there are almost no proper names contained in the *Letters* themselves, the sources with which Barsanuphius and John are clearly familiar include the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers of Egypt* (and especially Evagrius of Pontus), *The Lives of the Fathers* (and especially that of Pachomius), as well as earlier monastic fathers and writers, such as Basil the Great and Isaiah of Scetis. In this respect, the basic insights of the correspondence are drawn from the spirituality of the early Egyptian desert. They are essentially letters from the desert. They comprise more than mere anecdotes in the light of and in the likeness of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. They present profound analyses of the fundamental concepts of that lifestyle and spirituality.

The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, in both their alphabetical and anonymous or systematic collections, are already found in seminal texts of the time. Such texts include the *Praktikos* as well as the *Chapters on Prayer* by Evagrius (d. 399); the *Institutes* of John Cassian (d. c. 430); the *Life of Saint Melanie the Younger* (d. 439), attributed to her confidant and chaplain Gerontius and dating to the middle of the fifth century; the *Ascetic Discourses* of Isaiah of Scetis (d. c. 489); the *Life of Saint Euthymius* (d. 473), written by Cyril of Scythopolis in the latter half of the sixth century; and the *Reflections* of Zosimas

³²This is the estimation of Nikodemus of Mount Athos in his foreword to the Volos edition of the *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John, published by S. Schoinas.

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(d.c. 530), who founded a community in the first half of the sixth century.

Abba Isaiah of Scetis inserts numerous *Sayings*, both recognizable and original, in his *Ascetic Discourses*, possibly regarding himself as responsible for preserving and promoting the words of the elders with whom he was personally acquainted in Egypt.

In content and style, Zosimas' *Reflections* very much resemble the *Ascetic Discourses* of Abba Isaiah of Scetis. Zosimas' treatise makes numerous citations to the *Sayings*, implying perhaps that the latter may have borrowed these from existing written texts. Euthymius and Zosimas reveal having heard from others various sayings, which attests to the fact that these were widely known and, possibly, even accessible more or less everywhere in monastic circles of lower Palestine by the middle of the sixth century.

Indeed, Zosimas' reference to "the *Apophthegmata* of the Holy Elders" is perhaps the earliest such characterization of the *Sayings* with this specific title. Like the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* themselves, the "reflections" were "spoken" and not written down by Zosimas. In fact, the *Reflections* indicate that: "The blessed Zosimas loved to read these *Sayings* all the time; they were almost like the air that he breathed. It is from these *Sayings* that he came to receive the fruit of every virtue."³³

Zosimas flourished between 475 and 525, from the period just after the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451) until around the time of the great Gaza elders, Barsanuphius, John, and Dorotheus. He is mentioned several times by Dorotheus of Gaza, who knew him personally and visited him as his younger contemporary and compatriot. Dorotheus may in fact be the compiler of the *Reflections* themselves. Fr Lucien Regnault especially highlights the influential role of the monasteries of Seridos and of Dorotheus in the Gaza region, and the *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John as well as the *Works*

³³Zosimas, *Reflections*, ch.12b (Avgoustinos edition, Jerusalem, 1913), 17. Translation and introduction by J. Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (World Wisdom Publications, 2003). Also found in John Moschus, *Spiritual Meadow*, ch. 212 PG 87:3104-3105.

of their disciple Dorotheus, all of which offer the richest documentation in this regard.³⁴

The *Letters* of Barsanuphius and John frequently quote or evoke the *Sayings*. There are at least eighty direct references to the *Apophthegmata* themselves, while numerous phrases recommend them as a basis for spiritual practice and progress, sometimes by name (sixteen times) but mostly by implication (thirty-four times). On other occasions, the Old Men adopt alternative phrases:

The fathers have said (fourteen times)

It is written in the fathers (once)

It is written in the elders (once)

It is written in the *Sayings of the Elders* (twice)

The *Lives of the Fathers* (twice)

The *Sayings of the Fathers* (once)

The *Sayings of the Fathers* and their *Lives* (twice)

The *Life of the Fathers* and the responses (once)

The books of the elders (once)

The *Gerontika* (once).

There are at least fifty-five direct references to the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* in the writings of Dorotheus alone. He also seems to be the first writer to designate the *Apophthegmata* as *The Gerontikon* (or *The Book of the Old Men*).³⁵ Might, therefore, this Dorotheus also be one of those responsible for the collection of the *Sayings* themselves? Certainly, Dorotheus is the only ancient witness to the single saying attributed to Basil in the alphabetical collection of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*,³⁶ while both Barsanuphius and Dorotheus refer to the *Rules of St Basil*.

³⁴L. Regnault, "Les Apophthegmes des Pères en Palestine aux Ve et VIe siècles," *Irénikon* 54 (1981): 320–30.

³⁵See his *Teachings* I, 13 PG 88.1633C, and *Sources Chrétiennes* 92 (Paris: Cerf, 1952). G.W.H. Lampe's *Patristic Lexikon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 313, refers, for this word, to a letter by Nilus; however, this is not an authentic letter of Nilus.

³⁶See L. Regnault, "Les Apophthegmes des Pères," 328; and Dorotheus, *Teachings* 24, in *Sources Chrétiennes* 92 (Paris: Cerf, 1952), 182–84.

The influence of the two Old Men, while limited owing to their moderate appeal to the Council of Chalcedon (451) and their conservative criticism of its opponents, is especially evident in their gifted and renowned disciple, Dorotheus of Gaza, and on the discipline of their disciple, Dositheus the Younger.³⁷ It is also apparent in later monastic authorities, such as John Climacus,³⁸ Theodore the Studite,³⁹ Symeon the New Theologian, and Kallistos/Ignatios Xanthopoulos.⁴⁰

The surviving manuscripts attest to the fact that the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John was early appreciated and disseminated. Although the Moslem invasions of Palestine left little or nothing in that region to remind one of the monastic or Byzantine presence and influence,⁴¹ yet the correspondence was certainly known in late eighth- and early ninth-century Constantinople, particularly in the work of Patriarch Tarasius and the writings of Theodore the Studite. The late tenth- and early eleventh-century anthology on prayer, the *Synagoge* of Paulos Evergetinos,⁴² cites almost a third of the *Letters*, seventy from John and thirteen from Barsanuphius. The emphasis (some forty-seven *Letters*) is on the correspondence between the elders and Dorotheus of Gaza.

The oldest extant manuscripts originate on Mt Sinai and date from the tenth century. These are Georgian translations, but only contain around seventy-nine letters of the correspondence.⁴³ One of these is entitled: "Teachings of the Blessed Barsanuphius and John" (cf. Sinai 34), while the other (cf. Sinai 35) is dated 907 and entitled:

³⁷See the edition of *The Life of Dositheus the Younger in Orientalia Christiana* 26:78 (Rome, 1932), 850–124.

³⁸See especially *Step 26 of the Ladder of Divine Ascent*, in PG 88.1093.

³⁹See his *Testament* in PG 99.1816.

⁴⁰Indeed, the fourteenth-century Hesychasts appear to espouse Barsanuphius and John as their patrons in their doctrine on silence and prayer.

⁴¹J. Pargoire, *L'Église Byzantine de 527 à 847* (Paris, 1905), 274f.

⁴²Published in Venice (1783) and reissued in Constantinople (1861) and Athens (fifth edition between 1957–1966).

⁴³The 1971 translation of the Abbaye Saint Pierre de Solesmes also includes the letters translated from the Georgian by B. Outtier.

"Questions and Responses."⁴⁴ Several manuscripts are preserved on Mt Athos from the eleventh century through the fourteenth century, but also in Paris, Oxford, Athens, Moscow, Munich, Jerusalem, and Patmos. Some manuscripts have only certain letters; others only contain fragments. While there are no manuscripts from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, there are several manuscripts from the eighteenth century alone.

J. Grinaeus first published nine of the letters by John the Prophet in Basel, 1569, together with the works of Abba Dorotheus. In Paris, 1715, B. Montfaucon published the letters relating to Origenism. In volume 86 (columns 892–901) of the *Patrologia Graeca*, published in Paris during the mid- to late-nineteenth century, J.-P. Migne included *Letters* 600–604 of Barsanuphius and John, which deal with Origen, Evagrius, and Didymus, while volume 88 (columns 1812–1820) contains the letters of the correspondence addressed to Dorotheus of Gaza. From the late eighteenth century, several translations appeared in Moldavian, Slavonic,⁴⁵ and even in Russian, albeit sometimes partial to begin with, but complete by the end of the nineteenth century.

In the present translation, I have consulted both manuscript and contemporary sources, consulting the Bodleian Cromwell 18 (B) from Oxford as well as the Vátopedi 2 from Mt Athos. I have also relied on the text adopted by the most recent French edition, which is both critical and careful in its scholarship, being the result of a team of scholars over a number of years.⁴⁶

Moreover, I have also considered the partial English edition and translation of Derwas Chitty⁴⁷ as well as those of the modern Greek

⁴⁴Cf. G. Garitte, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 165, Subsidia 9 (Louvain, 1956), 97 and 116–17. Also see E. Metreveli, *Collection sinaitique de l'Institut des manuscrits* (Tiflis, 1978), 94 and 126–27.

⁴⁵The Moldavian and early Slavonic translations were directed by Paissy Velichkovsky on the basis of an Athonite manuscript as early as 1794.

⁴⁶See *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza: Correspondance*, volumes I–III, in *Sources Chrétiennes* 426–27, 450–51, and 468 (Paris, 1997–2002), critical text, notes, and index by E. Neyt and P. de Angelis-Noah.

⁴⁷Rev. D. Chitty translated and published 124 letters in 1966, not long prior to his

publication by the Monastery of St John the Forerunner in Kareas, Athens.⁴⁸ Finally, I have referred to the edition by Nikodemus of Mount Athos, the first complete edition of Barsanuphius and John, based on several Athonite monasteries and originally published in Venice in 1816; this work was reprinted by S. Schoinas in Volos in 1960.⁴⁹

Any translation will inevitably and almost naturally respond to the vibrant conversational style of these occasional and personal letters of the Old Men. This personal element is perhaps the most appealing to a contemporary reader. I have endeavored to remain as faithful to the original text as possible, however, without losing the spontaneous flavor of the letters themselves. For instance, where the Greek will sometimes simply say: "From the same to the same," I have elaborated depending on the context to say: "Letter from the same person (or brother) to the same Old Man."

The letters chosen for this selection are mostly from the briefer ones, which are of general interest to readers for purposes of information or inspiration. Therefore, I have not included longer letters or letters that presume deeper knowledge of monastic theology and spirituality or the historical context of the manuscript and its teaching. Altogether, there are—beyond the title and prologue of the work—one hundred and sixty-six letters that have been included. The selection embraces letters of advice from the elders to a variety of disciples—monks, clergy of all ranks (deacons, priests, and bishops), as well as laity—on a variety of subjects. I have also included a number of letters that are connected in the form of a series⁵⁰ on such topics as temptation and thoughts, as well as almsgiving and death in 1971. Chitty compared Coislianus 12.4, Vátopedi 2, Nikodemus and Sinaiticus 415S for his critical edition. However, he has also prepared the translation of *Letters* 125–249. A copy of this text exists in the library of St Gregory's House in Oxford, England.

⁴⁸Another Greek translation has been published in Thessalonika by Byzantion Editions in 1988–1989.

⁴⁹Nikodemus' text contains certain repetitions as well as certain errors and lacunas, partly corrected by Schoinas. See bibliography below for details.

⁵⁰See above, pp. 44–45.

conversation. The introduction includes numerous and large excerpts of letters not otherwise included in the selection itself in order to provide a clearer and fuller picture of the complete document.⁵¹

Inasmuch as this book comprises a selection, I have chosen to add the name of the responding elder, where this was missing or unclear in the text itself, in order for readers to know whether the response is from Barsanuphius or else from John. Nevertheless, I have also added notes denoting the provenance of the questions themselves—who is actually writing to the Old Men, including the occasions when it is laymen who are addressing the questions—since any selection inevitably conceals this point of clarification through omission. The same notes also explain whether the response is part of a series of letters addressed to a particular individual. This is important inasmuch as much of the correspondence and its content build upon and are completed in preceding or subsequent letters. Moreover, I have also created a brief title for each letter, often a summary of or else even an excerpt from the letter itself.

Finally, I have avoided the use of foreign or technical terms, no matter how established. Therefore, I have translated κοινότητα as “monastic community” rather than leaving it as *coenobium*, in order also to distinguish it from μοναστήριον (*Letter* 390) and μονή (*Letter* 582), which I have translated as “monastery.” The latter terms normally refer to the monastery as a site, as a collection of buildings or grounds, whereas the former term usually relates to the common life shared by the monks of the establishment. Either term may be adopted to include also the entire monastic complex or loose community of monks living either within or around the monastery proper, although the former term is more often used in this manner.

Dates of the Desert Fathers

Agathon	d. 370
Ammoun	d. 350
Anthony	251–356
Arsenius	c.360–c.449
Athanasius of Alexandria	c.296–373
Augustine of Hippo	354–430
Barsanuphius	d.c. 543
Basil of Caesarea	330–379
Cyril of Scythopolis	fl.c. 524–558
Dorotheus of Gaza	c. 506–c. 570
Ephraim the Syrian	d. 373
Euthymius	376–473
Evagrius	c. 345–399
Hilarion	c. 291–c.371
Isaiah of Scetis	d.c. 489
Jerome	c. 341–420
John Cassian	360–435
John Chrysostom	347–407
John the Dwarf	c. 339–c. 407
John of Lycopolis	d. 395
John Moschos	7th century
John, the “Other Old Man”	d.c. 543
Macarius of Alexandria	293–393
Macarius of Egypt	c. 300–c. 390
Mark the Monk	5th century
Melanie the Elder	342–411

⁵¹The complete text will be published by Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo MI.

Melanie the Younger	380—c. 439
Moses the Ethiopian	d.c. 375
Nilus of Ancyra	5th century
Origen of Alexandria	185—c. 254
Pachomius	292—346
Palladius of Helenopolis	5th century
Pambo	304—373
Paul of Thebes	c. 235—c. 341
Paula the Elder	347—404
Paula the Younger	b.c. 397
Peter the Iberian	c. 409—c. 488
Poemen	d.c. 450
Porphyry of Gaza	d. 420
Sabas	439—532
Serapion of Thmuis	d.c. 370
Seridos	d.c. 543
Silvanus	d.c. 412
Sisoës	d. 429
Symeon the Stylite	d. 459
Synecletica	380—c. 460
Theodore the Studite	759—826
Zeno, of Silvanus	d. 451
Zosimas (<i>Reflections</i>)	fl. 475—530

The Letters

TITLE

Letters and Responses of two spiritual elders, named Barsanuphius and John, who were living in silence near a monastic community called that of Abba Seridos in the region of Gaza, conveyed through that Abbot,¹ namely the same Abba Seridos who also ministered to them.

SUBTITLE

Edifying teachings of St Barsanuphius and of John his disciple and fellow-ascetic, which they conveyed through letters to the brethren who inquired by way of Abba Seridos who ministered to them and was the Abbot of the monastic community in Gaza, where these holy elders lived in silence.

PROLOGUE

How to read this book of letters

We entreat those who read this book to receive whatever is written here with gratitude, reverence, and faith, and to endeavor especially to arrive by the grace of God to the point of imitating the life and

¹Throughout this selection, references to "Abbot" (with capitalized A) are to this Seridos, by whose name the monastery became known in the region.