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SYNECDOCHE: A GOSPEL STORY

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SYNECDOCHE:
A GOSPEL STORY

MASTER THESIS

PRESENTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
IN THE BARNETT COLLEGE OF MINISTRY AND THEOLOGY
AT SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

BY

LEVI LARSON, B.A.

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THESIS COMMITTEE SIGNATURE PAGE

This thesis, written by

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under the direction of the candidate's Thesis Committee and approved by all members of the Committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the Barnett College of Ministry and Theology of Southeastern University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.

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PREFACE

My wife and I recently took a trip to Disney World, and while we marveled at the attractions I began to hear languages that I was not used to hearing. It was the sound of diversity. Disney World has a magic that attracts people from a diversity of places, religions, ages, genders, and sexual orientation. So, the question is: What makes so many different kinds of people stand in line to meet a man in a mouse costume in Florida? I believe, the answer is story.

Stories bring us together, bridging social gaps and allowing us to not only see things from a different point of view, but experience life from a new perspective. Stories invite us to share our hopes, our fears, and our struggles with people totally different than us. During my time seeking my Master of Arts in Theological Studies I became fascinated by this idea. I began my degree seeking to learn enough theological theories and hermeneutical perspectives that I would be able to easily express what is compelling about the Christian faith. I learned a great deal, largely thanks to hardworking professors and inspiring peers. However, as I tried to think of my thesis topic I was frustrated to find a topic that was compelling, something that could take what I had learned throughout my studies and make it accessible to anyone. I decided to write a story.

Telling stories to convey a deeper meaning is not abnormal in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Genesis begins with a poetic telling of the creation of the universe and continues with another creative re-telling of the creation of the universe. Nathan used a story to tell David of his sins. Jesus used parables to teach the masses of the truths of the Kingdom of God. John used a fantastical story to tell of his Revelation. So I decided to write a story to share some of the important lessons that I learned during my journey. The lesson of diversity, of synecdoche, that the Gospel is more than a sum of its parts.

I found a great deal of inspiration from *The Shadow of the Galilean* by Gerd Theissen and *The Lost Letters of Pergamum: A Story from the New Testament World* by Bruce W. Longenecker, both of which use the genre of historical fiction as an important story telling device. I believe historical fiction is a particularly valuable genre for those who have a familiarity with the academy because it allows the story to be filled with details from history and theory.

I have used my footnotes throughout the text to offer more in depth theological reflection as well as a kind of map should the reader find a certain thought or story interesting. It is my prayer that this story inspires a deeper love for God and for one another to anyone who reads it.

For Nicole

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INTRODUCTION

A LETTER FROM ADAM TO FATHER CRAIG

Father Craig,

Sorry, it took me so long to send you a postcard. The last several months have pulled my attention in ways that I did not expect. When we first moved here to settle my grandfather's estate I was less than thrilled. While my mother loved the peace and quiet of my grandfather's cabin, I feared that the lack of internet and television would cause me to lose my mind. My mother reminded me, that while her father was not one who approved of screens, his library would provide plenty of entertainment should I find myself bored. She insisted if nothing else, the silence of the cabin would force me to focus on my studies and wasn't I always complaining about too many distractions while I was trying to translate.

That much was true. Even though I recently finished my post graduate degree in Linguistics I was still awaiting news on acceptance for my Ph.D. program. In all honesty, I was beginning to give up hope that any program would accept me. All I could do now was keep up with my studies on my own time while I waited. The academic limbo is actually what made a trip to grandfather's cabin possible.

Waiting for acceptance into a program was not entirely uncommon, and instead of working at some coffee shop to pay the bills, I decided to move back in with mom until I heard back from a school regarding my acceptance. It was only a week after moving in that we got news of grandfather's passing, and seeing as we were his only kin we had to make plans to spend the summer in Oregon and settle his estate. We notified the post office of our forwarding address, in case schools sent me acceptance letters, loaded up the car and hit the road.

While the cabin is technically within the city limits of Klamath Falls, Oregon, the dirt road and sheltering pine trees make it as isolated as an island. Mom says this was a trend in grandfather's life ever since grandma died. It was just him and his books. Eventually this isolation extended to my mother and caused a divide in our family preventing a grandfather figure from ever being present in my life. However, while I was growing up mother used to tell me (a blossoming bibliophile as you may remember) stories about grandfather's library and the volumes of books that lined the walls of his cabin, smelling of dust and pipe tobacco. Before we set foot into the cabin, I did my best to lower my expectations as I was sure that whatever was behind these logs could not possibly measure up to a life of imagination. It didn't measure up. It exceeded all expectations.

Library, for most people, means a room that houses a few shelves of books, however my grandfather was clearly not one of these people. In fact, I was hard-pressed to find a wall that did not have a bookshelf on it. To the left of the front door stood a wooden coat rack and a card catalogue box, each card listing books by author, title, genre, and location. For example: Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Fiction, Living Room 5th case Top Shelf. This catalogue was a remnant of organization, unfortunately it was the only remnant. The cancer at the end of his life seemed to leave him content with stacking books on top of each other, whether it be on his desk, by his couch, or surrounding his bed.

I didn't mind the mess. It gave me an excuse to go through every card in the catalogue, placing books back on their respective shelves. I noticed that on each of the cards there was a red check mark in the bottom right hand corner. Some cards only had one, while others had multiple. The card with the most checks on it was *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, a book that I found was permanently designated to his night stand. It seemed to me that each of the checks indicated the

amount of times the book had been read, and it seemed as though my grandfather had read every book in his cabin. Except for one.

After going through all of the books, placing each volume back where it belonged, I noticed that there was still one card left. It read: N/A, *Synecdoche*, N/A, Safe. My curiosity raised like sails, I asked my mother if she knew anything about a safe. Her eyes grew big as if she had left the oven on. She had completely forgotten about the safe. Apparently, grandpa mentioned that he left a few things in the safe, nothing valuable just a few things he thought we should have. Somehow in the craziness of trying to get the cabin all organized and situated, mom completely forgot about the safe and its contents. We rushed to my grandfather's closet and opened the old safe sitting at the bottom using the combination he had given us. There was a box of gun shells, \$1000 cash, and two wrapped packages, one addressed to mom and the other addressed to me.

They were both books of course, my mother saw hers and immediately began to cry. It was a well-worn paperback copy of *The Hobbit*, apparently my mother's childhood copy of the book. They used to read it together before bed. Between the pages of the book were sealed and stamped letters that he had never sent my mother. He had started writing them the day after their falling out but never had the courage to send them to mom. On the back cover was a piece a paper with a poem written on it:

*Roads go ever, ever on,
Over rock and under tree,
By caves where never sun has shone,
By streams that never find the sea;
Over snow by winter sown,
And through the merry flowers of June,
Over grass and over stone,
And under mountains in the moon.*

Roads go ever, ever on,

*Under cloud and under star.
 Yet feet that wandering have gone
 Turn at last to home afar.
 Eyes that fire and sword have seen,
 And horror in the halls of stone
 Look at last on meadows green,
 And trees and hills they long have known.*

*The Road goes ever on and on
 Down from the door where it began.
 Now far ahead the Road has gone,
 And I must follow, if I can,
 Pursuing it with eager feet,
 Until it joins some larger way,
 Where many paths and errands meet.*

*The Road goes ever on and on
 Down from the door where it began.
 Now far ahead the Road has gone,
 And I must follow, if I can,
 Pursuing it with weary feet,
 Until it joins some larger way,
 Where many paths and errands meet.
 And whither then? I cannot say.*

*The Road goes ever on and on
 Out from the door where it began.
 Now far ahead the Road has gone.
 Let others follow, if they can!
 Let them a journey new begin.
 But I at last with weary feet
 Will turn towards the lighted inn,
 My evening-rest and sleep to meet.*

*Still 'round the corner there may wait
 A new road or secret gate;
 And though I oft have passed them by,
 A day will come at last when I
 Shall take the hidden paths that run
 West of the Moon, East of the Sun.¹*

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012) 302.

It was my mother's favorite poem, written by Bilbo Baggins at the end of the book. As mom dried her tears I became incredibly interested in the contents of my package. It was also a book, but nothing I recognized. It was clearly very old, the leather binding deteriorating in a way that only really old books do. I opened the leather cover and found an envelope that read, "READ ME FIRST". I opened the envelope and found a letter that read:

Dear Adam,

I know that we've never met but believe me when I say that missing out on knowing you as you've grown up is one of my biggest regrets. When your mom and I first reconnected, I was hopeful that I could know you as an adult, but with the recent diagnosis it would seem that the cancer had different plans. The doctors say I probably won't make it long enough for me to meet you, nevertheless I want you to have this book. As you've probably noticed from looking around my home, I have a great deal of books that range across a breadth of different topics. What you may not have noticed, or from what your mother has said, you probably have noticed, is the monolithic language across my library. I, like too many other Americans, am monolingual. In fact this is the only book in my collection that is not written in English and it just so happens is the only book in my library I have not read. I have tried to find a translation but cannot seem to find a translation or record of this book. All I know is that I bought it from an old merchant while I was in Rome for the War. I bought it as a keepsake, thinking it was an old hand written Italian book. I guess in a way it was, but more like ancient Italian. Latin. Needless to say an old Latin book was not what I expected but it was a good keepsake. However the mystery of what is inside the book has racked my brain throughout my life. I guess I'm saying all of this to ask you for a favor. Could you read my last book? I know I've never met you, but I have this feeling that if you can translate this book for me, I'll rest in peace. Be good to your mom, I wasn't always and it's my greatest failure.

*Love,
Grandpa*

P.S. All the books are yours.

I stood in shock, then looked down at the book. The only word on the center of the first page was "Synecdoche" meaning, as you know, one part representing the whole. I started translating the next day, and what I came across really interested me. It appears to be some sort of historical text regarding St. Benedict of Nursia. As you know I am not a theologian, and my church history is very rusty, so I had to research some names and places as I translated just to make sense of what was being said (thankfully grandpa left me some books on church history and theology). I know

you're probably thinking a few things by now: How long is this letter? What are all these papers included? Why is Adam sending all of this to me? I'm including a copy of my translation of the book grandfather gave me. While I certainly enjoyed translating this, I am admittedly out of my element and would love to hear some thoughts about it from someone I trust and who knows what they are talking about. Could you read this and tell me what you think? You can send your reply to the return P.O. box. Thanks for your help.

Warmest greetings,

Adam

CHAPTER 1

THE ABBOT OF MONTE CASSINO

Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master and turn your heart to hear commandments of the Lord.¹ For He has granted life and salvation to those who obey his ways and listen for His soft whisper.

To thee, Dear Abbot, let my words be directed, for while time may pass between my time on Earth and yours, the testimony of the flock of Monte Cassino² ought to be told. This story ought not be the sort that brings pride to a brother but rather the sort that encourages praise and worship of the Most High, for while the words of my testimony may return void, His words will not return void. For this reason, I've separated this account from the Rule, however, the Rule as you have read it has not always been in the state it is in now, indeed what you have read is the second draft. This testimony is the story behind the second draft. I did not change much throughout but felt it was important for me to add Chapter LXXIII. The testimony of why I was led to add this chapter is important for you to know, for you Brother Abbot, have a responsibility to keep this flock living in obedience, and as such you are privy to some knowledge that others in the community and world are not aware of.³ This is not that the knowledge is evil, but rather that the knowledge may lead a young monk from a simple and obedient life as instructed in the

¹ Benedict, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.). Benedict carries a running theme and style throughout his writing. It recognizes the rule as important and holds reverence for holy living

² Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*, The Crossroad Spiritual Legacy Series. (New York: Crossroad, 1992). While Benedict was called Benedict of Nursia, he dwelt and wrote his rule in a monastic community in Monte Cassino. It's located in Italy, South-East of Rome.

³ Benedict, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*. The Abbot was an elected position within the monastery, one that required a great deal of responsibility and knowledge of the Rule. The role of the Abbot was a shepherd of the flock and it was their belief that the Abbot would have to give an account for his stewardship of his brethren. Chapter LXIV closes with this quote: "Above all. Let him take heed that he keep this Rule in all its details; that when he hath served well he may hear from the Lord what the good servant heard who gave his fellow-servants bread in season: 'Amen, I say to you,' He saith, 'he shall set him over all his goods.'"

Rule and instead cause him to meditate on the history of the Rule and Monte Cassino instead of Christ.

In writing this, I believe that you will be better prepared to interact with those who are a part of your flock, for this experience that I recount is true and has been an event that the Holy Spirit has constantly brought back to my mind in the evening as well as in my times of personal prayer and meditation. May this account be beneficial to your heart, soul, and mind and cause your thoughts to constantly turn towards the life of Christ, instead of your own life.

See here, though the experience itself was not of extensive length it holds eternal value, in the same way that the disciples received great enlightenment on the road to Emmaus. And while the interaction was not a divine vision, I am now able to see a fuller picture of the Kingdom of Heaven.

This whole event began while I was tending to a sick man named Asim here at Monte Cassino.⁴ He was a shepherd who was obviously a foreigner of some kind and a spirit had plagued him with a fever. He stayed in the hospital cell for weeks resting, and every morning when I brought him water to drink and bread to eat he would ask me to bless him. Of course I agreed, for the scriptures speak of Christ being present with the sick and the poor.⁵ I prayed for him and after I muttered a prayer he muttered a prayer to himself in his native tongue.

On the third week, he began to regain his strength and lifted his head to speak. “Why do you treat me with such kindness?”

⁴ Benedict, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*. Tending to the sick is discussed in Chapter XXVI of the Rule. It is taken seriously by Benedict because of his interpretation of Matthew 25:36, truly seeing care for the sick as an opportunity to serve Christ directly. Many aspects of the rule embrace a Christocentric drive, finding Christ as the meaning for actions that could otherwise go overlooked.

⁵ Manlio Simonetti, *Matthew 14-28*, vol. 1b, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 228-232. As mentioned above, Matthew 25 is an inspiration throughout the Rule, giving a tangible way to minister to one another while worshipping Christ. While some interpret the earlier parts of the passage, it is clear that the latter section of Matthew 25 is meant to be not just read and studied but lived out and practiced.

Of course, I answered him simply, so his mind could understand the life on the monk.

“It is Christ’s commandment for us to take care of the sick. All who dwell here have dedicated their life to the pursuit of holy living and so we care for the sick. In this way, we hope to become more like Christ.” I said.

“We have men in my home country of Egypt who also strive for holy living with God. They are said to treat the sick, but I always thought their stories too farfetched to be real. Experiencing your kindness and hospitality has given me faith and though I am not sure if their community is as large as this dwelling God must be at work in these places too. That is, if the stories are true.” he said.

My interest was piqued, for the workings of Christ elsewhere in the world had always interested me. Unfortunately I had other matters to attend to that day.

“I would love to hear some of these testimonies,⁶ for the ways of God can be best seen through His relationship with others. I am afraid I have some other matters I must attend to, could we speak more of this tomorrow?” I said.

“Of course. I will do my best to remember as many stories as I can, so I am prepared to share with you the tales of the men of God from my homeland.”

As it turned out, although the shepherd was unable to read or write his mind was far from simple, and he had learned much from his travels. He spoke of Athanasius and of Pachomius.⁷

⁶ Kenneth J. Archer, *The Gospel Revisited: Towards a Pentecostal Theology of Worship and Witness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2011), 18-25. I agree with Archer placing importance on “community story”, 18-25 and how he later expresses, 65-68 when sharing his own testimony. Sharing of testimony acts as a spiritual outline, tethering the Spirit’s activity in the biblical narrative as well the greater meta narrative that spans both before and beyond our own time. When the Spirit is at work, narrative has power to ground and connect us despite difference.

⁷ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 8-15. Athanasius and Pachomius were important in the development of monasticism, especially in Egypt. On, 13 Dunn explains the important impact Athanasius had on the monastic movement by telling the life of Antony (8-10, 13-15) whom is held as a moral example for all monks. Throughout his book *Life of Antony*, Athanasius highlights theological themes present in the story of Antony’s life. Pachomius, made a mark by

He told of a group of monks who claimed to trace their history to the teachings of Antony of Egypt.⁸ I recalled this name and was interested to hear of the lives of his disciples and the ways in which they order themselves for the edification of the soul. As the days went by and he continued to regain his strength, he would recount more and more stories of this community. These stories included tales of miracles as well as rumors of the founding of the communities. I was interested in this community and seeing my interest Asim tried to remember as many details as he could about the monks of Egypt.

When Asim had fully recovered, I prayed with him one last time and when he had finished praying in his own tongue, he told me that he wanted to repay me for helping him ward off the evil spirits of disease and for nursing him back to health. I told him that he owed us no silver or gold for his healing but just asked that he would continue to live a life obedient to God and His commandments. He promised that he would but asked if he might also do something for me. After I explained, again, that I was in no need of any worldly possessions for all my treasures were being stored in heaven, he told me of the journey he planned to make.

Recounting how he had told me stories about Egypt and the holy men who lived there, he claimed that he felt called to return to his country. It was his plan then, should I give my blessing, to sell his flock of sheep so that he could afford a trip back to Egypt and find the monastic community that he had heard so many stories about. Upon finding the community, he would observe their way of life and ask for them to send one person from their community to

implementing community of monks living in an intentional and structured way. Assuming Benedict knew of any monks in the deserts of Egypt, these are names that he would have been familiar with.

⁸ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*. Antony was a legend of monastic living, largely thanks to Athanasius and his book *Life of Antony* he is raised to legendary heights by the dramatic stories of faith and dedication to the monastic way of life.

visit me in Monte Cassino. This way I could hear a real testimony of these monks from their own mouth.

I was apprehensive, for this seemed a great price to pay for a testimony, but I was curious. I told him that I would fast for seven days, praying to see what the Lord's will might be. After the seventh day, I felt that the Spirit was indeed at work in this instance and that should it be the will of the Father that he would be at work in the travels of the young shepherd.

I gave him my blessing and he left, promising that he would return with a monk from his home land. The first year I thought of him often, remembering to include him in my prayers and dreaming about the day that he would return with a monk from his homeland, one who knew well of the teachings of Antony, Athanasius,⁹ and other monastic fathers from Egypt. The second year, I remembered him fondly, but began to worry that some misfortune had seized my friend. This turned to prayers for his soul, that he might find favor in the eyes of God and would not face harsh judgement. After the second year passed, I began to question the truth behind his stories altogether, for how could a community of saints truly trace their origin to Antony? Antony lived in isolation.¹⁰ Perhaps all monks in Egypt claimed to be disciples of Antony?¹¹ Perhaps he hadn't returned because he was on a hunt for an imaginary community, or worse he had imagined the whole thing himself and fooled me. This last thought saddened me, but I continued to pray for him, praying for the will of God to be done in his life. It was almost 3 years

⁹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, 2nd edition (New York: HarperOne, 2010). Gonzales, again mentions the importance of Athanasius is in his authorship of *Life of Antony*.

¹⁰ Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, Ancient Christian Writers; the Works of the Fathers in Translation, No. 10; Ancient Christian Writers ; No. 10. (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1950), 23-37. Antony lived a monastic life but in solitude, for up to 20 years at a time. There were moments when people came to visit him in the desert, but he would not allow others to sway him in his devotions.

¹¹ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 9. A good deal of recent scholarship points to Antony as the first major figure and pioneer of Christian Monasticism. Especially in reference to monasticism in Egypt, Antony is the pioneer and exemplar monk.

exactly when I heard news that a group of five travelers had arrived and had asked to see me. When I met them in the courtyard, one of them spoke to me in a tongue that seemed both foreign and familiar. It was Asim.

Surprised, and repentant for thinking ill of my brother, I said a prayer to welcome the guests. I accepted the gift and welcomed him in, asking of his health and his travels. He apologized for the time it took him to return but finding the holy man that he had told stories about proved more difficult than he anticipated.

“All is well! I am just happy to see your face, for I worried some ill fate had prevented your return. I would love to hear of your journey, after your feet have been washed¹².” I said.

We moved to have their feet washed, and after they prayed, receiving the mercy of God, I asked Asim to tell of his journey.

“Of course! I spent the first three months just trying to find the man who had first told me of the holy men who lived in the desert. When he finally tracked him down I learned that there were four communities that fit the description he was giving, each of them similar in origin but very different in life and practice. Hearing this, I set out to find which of these communities was the true place that I was seeking, so that he might bring a monk back with me. But visiting all four communities proved to take a long time, which caused me to be late in my return.”

I smiled warmly, making eye contact with Asim. He looked, tired but content, like a man who had climbed a mountain.

¹² Benedict, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, 60. This was a major emphasis for Benedict. Every guest is to have their feet washed. After their feet had been washed, the guests would have all been instructed to pray “We have received your mercy, O God, in the midst of your temple.” It is expressed in the rule the Christ is received more specially in the receiving of the poor and travelers.

“Time is of no concern to me! I am merely eager to meet the holy man that has come with you.” I said, seeking to be introduced. “Which of these men is the monk you have told me of.”

He looked nervously at me and then at the four.

“I visited each of the communities and all of the places seemed to fit the description I had given you. So instead of risking bringing back the wrong monk, I brought back one from each community, for it seemed to him that the testimony I sought was more than a sum of its parts.”

I smiled and instructed some young monks to show our five guests to their quarters.¹³

“We can discuss this more at dinner, once you have dropped off your packs. Because you are friends and monks you will be welcomed at my table. It is separate from the other brothers so we don’t disturb them.”¹⁴ I said.

He agreed that this was a good idea, then spoke to the travelers in their native tongue. They gathered their belongings and went to their quarters.

The next time I saw them was at dinner. I could tell they were all from foreign places but also that they regarded our way of life as foreign and strange. In the following pages, I will do my best to recount each of their testimonies as I tell of all that happened during their stay. It is my hope and belief that you will heed these words well, dearest abbot, and that you will indeed allow for the Spirit to speak to you through this testimony.

¹³ Benedict, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, 69. Hospitality was valued so high, that they always had rooms for travelers. “Moreover, let also a God-fearing brother have assigned to him the apartment of the guests, where there should be sufficient number of beds made up.”

¹⁴ Benedict, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, 60. “Let the Abbot’s table always be with guests and travelers.”

CHAPTER 2

A SHARED MEAL

Before we ate, I prayed for the meal: “May God Bless you. May your hunger and thirst for righteousness be satisfied. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever and ever. Amen.”

It was then that the meal was served. To our table, several portions of roasted chicken, a jar of olives, grapes, bread, and wine. To my surprise, the guests did not eat like men who had traveled far, instead they seemed to lack appetite, eating only olives and grapes and not drinking any wine.¹

“My brothers, I should like to once again welcome you to Monte Cassino. I apologize if any of our customs seem strange or offensive to you. We have a Rule in place that guides us in our pursuit of holy living. In fact, I was in the process of writing this Rule last I saw our mutual friend.” I smiled at Asim, who seemed to be the only traveler eating chicken. “Finding a lack of order distracting for meditation, we have found that the Rule helps guide our lives so that we may focus on worshipping the Almighty.” I said.

“I’ve told them about your Rule Father. Have you completed writing it? I am afraid that I am too late in my return. I offer my deepest apologies and again ask that you would forgive my tardiness.” Asim said looking ashamed of his perceived failure.

¹ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 14-17. A strict diet was one of the markers of the Egyptian desert monasticism. While some monks permitted themselves to drink wine, most did not. When it came to diet, most beliefs were based on the theory of the body being made of four humours: black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. Phlegm was trusted the least because it in turn produced bodily fluids such as semen. In order to eliminate moisture, and therefore sinful bodily temptation, a diet of heavily salted or dried food was adopted and very little liquid was consumed. This is an interesting example in church history of a time when the church adapted common belief in physiology to their own spiritual practice. Some streams of the Christian faith continue in this mindset of physiology, while others have found other sources such as modern medicine.

Desiring to reassure both Asim and my guests that I truly enjoyed their company I said, “Fear not Asim. While I have completed writing my Rule there may be things that need be added (indeed there were!). Even when I first completed my Rule I thought to myself that should your journey prove successful, I may need to return to the writing so as to share this experience with future brothers of the order.” (What you are reading now is in fact this work that I spoke of that night). This statement put a smile on Asim’s face as he said “I hope our time together proves worth the wait.”

“Oh I am certain that it will be, just being able to fellowship with fellow brothers of the faith. In fact if everyone has been refreshed, I am very interested to hear from each of you. Perhaps we could start with each of your testimonies?” I said.

Each of them looked at each other nodding. Although I was unsure if they were nodding yes in regard to being refreshed or being willing to share their testimonies. A silence sat in the air, almost as if they all knew what to say but did not want to go through the effort of speaking.² Worried I had offended them, I was about to apologize and share that, should they be too tired we could surely wait until breakfast to converse, when one of the travelers broke the silence. He had a bald head, but not one that had been shaven for there remained some small patches of hair around the back of his neck. He did not look naked in his baldness for he had a long grey beard that he stroked often as he listened to my words.

“Thank you again for your kindness and your hospitality. It is a great joy to meet you and see the ways that the Son of David has chosen to work in this part of the world. My name is

² Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 18-21. Pride was an enemy of a monk and many were dedicated to combat against it. This included fighting against subversive was that pride may take root in a monks heart. One way that this was practiced was by restricting words and even sending monks away to find an answer from someone else. A famous example of this is in a story of Apa Poemen who, if asked a question first would send them to Apa Anoub, because Anoub was older and wiser. However, when Anoub was asked a question he would send them to Poemen because “he has the gift of the word.”

Malak. This is ‘Asada, this is Kerauno, and this is Junah,” he said as he pointed at the other monks around the table. They nodded when their names were called.

“We are all willing to share our testimonies for the glory of the Almighty. However, I believe that some of our history needs to be shared in order to provide context to each of our stories.” Malak said.

“I would love such an insight. Are you not all from different cells?” I said.

“We are, but our communities each share a common origin. It does not seem a coincidence to me that the Lord should have us all here, for our story is more than a sum of its parts. If you wish to know our testimony, I should think you need to hear the tale of our history.” he said.

“I would be delighted to,” I said, raising my voice in excitement and anticipation.

“Our history dates back many years, and while I was not there in the beginning I have been instructed in the history so that we may better serve our Lord. For, as I am sure you are aware, to boast in the sunlight of the past does not produce fruit today. Only by seeking out the sunlight today can we hope to bear good fruit,” he said and then ate one grape as if to signify the importance of good fruit.

“Our origin finds roots in Alexandria, where there lived four scribes who had devoted their lives to the study of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, after studying the text for many years, they found a great amount of discontentment within themselves, feeling as though their experiences with the faith were so different than the faith they studied in the scriptures. This was around the time when Maximin began to persecute Christians,³ striking fear into the hearts of many, including the fathers of our Orders. This fear

³ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. I*. Roman persecution under Maximin was very brief and mostly stayed in Rome. Much of the conflict was a result of disagreements between bishops and other Christians. Still this

was challenged by the example of a monk, who hearing that trials for martyrdom were taking place in the city of Alexandria traveled to encourage those who were being persecuted.⁴ The fear of this monk was not losing his life, but rather refusing to act and therefore ignoring his calling. His name was Antony, or as many have come to know him, Antony of Egypt.” Malak said.

“Indeed! I have read of his life, as recorded by Athanasius!⁵ Are all the stories of him real?” I inquired.

“Many of them are real, others that are not real are certainly true,⁶ and still others have been made to serve as a pulpit for the lies of the enemy,” Malak said. While I pondered this saying he continued his story, “After seeing this man exemplify profound courage, the four scribes set out to speak to this man so that they too may find the same hope that Antony displayed in Alexandria. They heard from some monks that knew Antony that his cell was located near the base of a mountain in the desert. The journey was long, but they persevered finding strength in the Lord. When they finally arrived at Antony’s cell they knocked on the door, asking for council from the wise monk. ‘Abba, we are scribes and scholars of the Scriptures and yet none of us has seen courage of Christ in action like how we saw you act in

remained a time of uncertainty regarding the relationship between the Church and Empire. While some emperors were Christian, others were synchronistic and included images of Christ and Abraham on altars with other religions of the Roman Empire.

⁴ Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, 62. The persecution of Maximin is accounted for in *The Life of Saint Antony* as well. It is interesting because this is one of the first times that Antony returns to society. Athanasius describes the reasoning of Antony was that he wanted to be martyred so that he could be with Christ.

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, vol. 3, 8 vols. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2006), 158-166. Antony belonged to the early tradition of the anchorites, essentially meaning that they dwelt in the desert alone more than in community. Typically, monks did not even have scripture with them and were therefore reliant on strict physical constraints and prayer. Many monks ended up going crazy and committing suicide because of the lack of community and deprivation of food and water. This caused the monks who did succeed in living a monastic life to be regarded with respect and held in high esteem.

⁶ Jared Byas, *Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*, The Bible for Normal People, accessed February 4, 2018, <https://peteenns.com/podcast/>. In this podcast, a story is shared about a young boy being confused about the biblical account of the serpent tempting Eve in the garden. The boy exclaimed “But snakes don’t talk, is this real?” His mother said “You’re right snakes don’t talk, but even if it isn’t real, it’s still true.” This is an important distinction to make in the process of discerning and discussing Scripture as well as literature, testimonies, and works of art.

Alexandria! What have we missed?’ they said, but received no reply, hearing only the sound of Antony praying.⁷ Again, they called out, ‘Abba, we have studied the words of Christ and yet after seeing your peace in the face of perseverance we felt as though we saw the face of an angel! Please, teach us!’, but still heard nothing but the steps of a man pacing back in forth in his cell. Once more, they cried ‘Abba, we want to be like Christ but have failed, please, help us find our way again.’ After this they heard a deep breathe, as if a great amount of effort was put into gathering the breath before speaking for these words carried wisdom with them, ‘All your lives, you have studied but never have you meditated. Christ is not found in merely the known, but also in the unknown.⁸ If you truly wish to find our Lord, seek him not in the library but in the desert. Meditate on the words you have studied. You are scholars, have you a copy of the Scriptures?’ he said. ‘We each have copies we made for ourselves when the church was persecuted in Alexandria, should we sell these to?’ they asked, nervous for all of their lives had been spent studying these texts.

No. I think it is indeed according to the will of God that you have sought me out. Take your text with you when you retreat, for a manuscript ought to give better insight in your meditation.⁹ But do not lean on one another’s community for comfort, for your strength must be found in Christ alone and in dwelling with him in each of your own cells. Go back to Alexandria and gather your text, food, and clothing but nothing else, then go your separate ways and each of you find your own place to pray and meditate on the scriptures.

⁷ Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, 66. A similar encounter is described by Athanasius. Although Antony was living in solitude, many visitors came to him, seeking prayer or advice. Antony was hospitable but did not allow others to keep him from his convictions.

⁸ Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006), 10-14. This is an important lesson to keep in mind when it comes to theology, biblical studies, and Christian practice. While many things can be known about God, a finite human can never understand an infinite God. It is like trying to put the ocean in a bucket. Instead of giving into pride and claiming that we can fully understand God, the Christian must humble them self to rest in the mystery of the Almighty.

⁹ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony of Egypt*, Classics in Spiritual Formation (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2012), 26. Meditation was an important practice in Antony’s spirituality. While he did not have his own text, he knew the scripture and valued them as a guide in his walk with Christ.

The scribes did as instructed and returned to Alexandria, gathered the texts and some supplies, and separated. At this point our common origin ends, for the rest of our histories now differ.” he said, clearly glad to have finished his lengthy tale.

“Thanks be to God for such an incredible work of the Holy Spirit that scribes become monks who find love in Christ surpassing their love of text. May our hope be found in God who speaks in both scripture and in deserts! Is this then the first time that your orders have been reunited?” I said.

“It is not a first for our orders, although it is the first time we have all met. It is only under unique circumstances that we leave our cells, for a monk outside of his cell is like a fish outside of water, life cannot be sustained.¹⁰ If we had not all been urged by the Spirit to follow Asim, we would not be here today,” he answered.

“It is truly a blessing that you are here then and I pray the Lord would continue to anoint our words and be present in the remainder of our time together. Which reminds me, how long might we expect your stay? And before you respond, know that you are all welcome to stay here until the Lord returns, should you wish.” I said.

To this they all looked at each other until once again Malak responded.

“Two nights, we must leave on the third day.” He said.

“Two nights? But brothers this is surely too short a stay for such a long journey, can you not stay longer so as to fully rest from your travels?” I said.

“We cannot, for monks must return to their cell no matter the pleasure of such friendly company,” he said, and smiled at me.

¹⁰ Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, Penguin Classics. (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 8. Antony said “Fish die if they stay on dry land and in the same way monks who stay outside their cell or remain with secular people fall away from their vow of quiet. As a fish must return to the sea, so must we to our cell, in case by staying outside, we forget to watch inside.”

This smile was indeed a great gift, for I too knew the responsibilities of holy living (although compared to these men our Rule does not seem so heavy a burden).

“Well then there is no sense in trying to convince you, instead let us dismiss so that you may find rest in your rooms. If you need anything, ask any of the monks and they will assist you. I should like to continue our discussion tomorrow, and hear each of your own testimonies now that I know more about your shared history.”

They all agreed, and with that we went to bed.

CHAPTER 3

ACCORDING TO MALAK

The next morning, I did not send for the guests until breakfast time, and while I was somewhat confused that they did not attend the morning mass,¹ I was sure that they were tired from their long day of travels and therefore needed to rest and find comfort in the ministry of their beds. When the monk that I sent to retrieve them returned to me, only one of them came with him. He was an older man, with dark grey hair and deep wrinkles that seemed to be formed not by the stress of life or toil of labor but by flow of wisdom that only many years can bring. His eyes were a light grey and did not seem to focus on anything in the room. It was only when he spoke to me and our eyes did not meet that I realized why. He was blind.

“I apologize, as I am sure you are eager to speak with us all. You have indeed waited patiently already, and for that I thank you” he said, pausing to listen as if by listening closely he could somehow see my face. He continued, “My name is ‘Asada. As you know, we are all monks and are therefore committed to the pursuit of a holy life. Our concern in sharing our testimonies with you is that by speaking too much of ourselves will allow the enemy to attack, so that we might become full of pride.² While we do want to speak to you of all the Lord has done within us, being so far away from our cells has forced us to take extra precautions, so that in the pursuit of doing what is good we do not give any footing for the attacks of the enemy. Therefore, each of us will take turns meeting and speaking with you. The rest of our time will be spent in our rooms, in prayer and meditation. This way each of us will be able to make certain that our

¹ Benedict, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, 4. So much of the Benedictine order involved scheduled times for spiritual formation. This highlights one of the distinctions between cenobites (monks who live under a Rule and abbot, such as Benedictine monks) and anchorites (monks who have already trained and ready to face the trials of life in isolation).

² Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 18. This is another example of avoiding pride at all costs, even in who is elected to speak or teach.

souls are properly safe guarded against the attacks of the evil one. Does this sound acceptable to you?”

“Of course, my dear brother. If my desire for knowledge caused any of you to be subdued by the enemy, I believe I would have eternal punishment. But this way seems a good one, and so I believe we should move forward on it” I responded.

The old monk smiled, “Good. It is my suggestion then that you begin with a familiar voice, for while I am the oldest of the four of us, Malak the monk of Matthew’s Gospel, is the best at speaking and therefore better suited to begin this endeavor. I will ask him to join you here before I return to my room for prayer.”

With that he bowed, turned, and walked back toward his room. I did not wait long, and when Malak returned I found myself smiling for he was indeed a true man of faith and, after the story that he shared last night, I felt as though we were not just fellow monks but indeed friends. He smiled in return and bowed before taking a seat across from me.

“I thank you, my brother, for dealing with our somewhat unorthodox ways of living and communicating. I assure you it is not with the intention of confusing you. It was ‘Asada’s desire for me to come and explain to you our wish to remain in prayer, while each of us speak to you one on one. However, I thought it important for him to speak with you, seeing as he is the oldest and wisest in our group, and while I am not the youngest, it has not been a long time since I began this journey, and even I am just a piece in the greater story that God has planned for the world,³” He said.

³ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 1992), 26-29. The story of Christ, is seen as being a part of the greater story of salvation. The same story that was told in Hebrew tradition finds its fulfillment in Christ. This is displayed in greater narrative points, such as Jesus’ baptism fulfilling “all righteousness”, as well as in details such as Jesus being called “Son of David”. Matthew’s narrative acts like a bridge connecting Jewish tradition with the story of Jesus Christ, the answer to prophecies.

“Will you tell me your story nonetheless?” I asked.

“In a way, for I feel our cell’s history is a more important piece of the story. And my story is not the best place to begin, and seeing as I have already told you how the four met with Antony and separated, I should now like to tell you the history of the founder of my cell.⁴ After the founder of my cell gathered supplies and scripture, he decided to sleep before setting out to find a place to pray and meditate on the scriptures. That night he had a dream that an angel came to him,⁵ and lighting a candle he said ‘Do not be afraid, for our Lord Jesus Christ is with you. When you wake, leave immediately to the place I am about to show you, for this will be the place that you will dwell in prayer and holy living.’ Then the angel cupped the flame of the candle and showed him a vision of a cave in the side of a mountain. Outside of the cave, there was a large tree and on the tree was a beehive that dripped of honey.”

“After seeing the vision, he awoke and looking to his right, found the candle ablaze exactly where the angel had set it in his dream. Immediately, he gathered his things and took the candle with him. He found that as he walked, the candles flame bent in a direction, regardless of the direction the wind was blowing. It seemed to him that the Lord might indeed be using the candle to guide him to the location of the mountain he had seen in his vision. After walking all night, with only the candle for light and warmth, he was discouraged, thinking he may indeed be on a fool’s errand prompted by a bad dream. Yet just as the sun showed first light across the

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15*, The New Testament for Everyone (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 2-4. Talking about what has already come is important for Matthew, as well as many other Jews. This is not completely uncommon for ancient society, where family and bloodline determined just about everything. Judaism, which marked its community not only by belief but also (sometimes more-so) by blood. Jewish tradition often speaks of the work of God in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but Matthew includes others, including David, Solomon, and even Jews taken into Babylonian exile. For Matthew, Christ is connected to and finds origin in the entire Jewish story, all the way back to Abraham.

⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 57-60. Dreams hold a unique significance in Matthew, especially when seeking God for direction. For example, Joseph had two dreams accounted in Matthew, the first was of an angel telling Joseph to marry Mary and the second was of an angel instructing them to flee from Herod.

horizon of the desert, he saw a familiar outline. It was the mountain he had seen in his vision. All was present, exactly how he saw it in his vision including the old tree and the cave. Within the cave, there was a small spring that provided enough water to drink and bathe. This place is still where my cell is now.”

“Incredible! So, you dwell in this mountain alone?” I asked.

“I can see that your curiosity for the ways of God flows like water following a strong current. For a time the cell was occupied by only one, until one day I arrived at the mouth of the cave. ‘Abba! I have traveled far to find you, for stories of your quest for holiness and devotion to Christ have come to my ears across the desert. I only ask that you teach me so that I too may follow on the path of the Lord.’ I said. ‘My brother be blessed, but I am afraid I am only just learning the path of devotion to Christ, go visit Antony he will be able to guide you,’⁶ the monk said. ‘Teacher, it is indeed Antony who sent me to you, for like you I was once a scribe and yet felt as though there was more to the Scriptures than study and living in comfort while Christ suffered and died for my sins on the cross!’ At these words the heart of the monk softened, and he had compassion for the young traveler, ‘I have meditated on the words and actions of Christ day and night for years, and yet it seems to me that in this moment the great Teacher has another lesson for me. I will teach you all that I can teach you, but some things I have learned cannot be taught in a lesson but only through a way a living. Therefore, if you want to understand you must stay here and learn the way of life, for while I aim to teach you how to live Christ will teach your soul to breathe. Where I may teach you how to study Christ will teach your mind to pray. Where I may teach you how to work Christ will teach your heart to love.’ he said. It is then that he began to teach me our rule of life.”

⁶ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 18.

Then looking to heaven, as if praying for strength to speak, Malak took a deep breath. I realized that the next part of the story was very meaningful to Malak and resolved in my heart to listen intently to the words that he would share with me. It is my prayer that as I recount them now, I do so in a way that is pleasing unto God, so that the Holy Spirit will speak to you anew.

“That night, we ate olives and bread and drank water from the mountain spring, but there was no more conversation, for while the old monk was happy to teach me he knew that every part of life ought to teach a lesson of Christ, and it was not his place to speak over the silent words of God.⁷ The next morning, we awoke before dawn and prayed Christ’s prayer⁸, ‘Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.’⁹ They prayed separate from one another, to refrain from making a spectacle of their prayer. Then the old monk led me up the side of the mountain, silently walking and praying for the world around us as the sun dawned and bathed the mountain in orange light. When we reached the top of the mountain, the sun had reached a high enough point that we could look out and see far across the desert. Then he opened his mouth to teach me, ‘To be poor in spirit we must give up not just our physical possessions

⁷ Brian D. McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*, Ancient Practices Series (Nashville, Tenn: Nelson, Thomas, Inc., 2008) Ch.16. God is able to speak in the midst of silence, although it often takes time and practice for one to silence the noise within their soul. Practicing silence is a practice that trains one to conquer pride.

⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 118-120. There are a few differences between the two accounts of the Lord’s Prayer, presented in Mathew 6 and Luke 11. While Luke uses a more specific Greek word for sin or trespasses, Matthew’s use of ὀφειλήματα is often translated here as “debts” while later παραπτώματα is translated “sins” in Matthew 6:14-15 and Luke 11. Matthew makes a theological point, displaying our need to ask for forgiveness of our spiritual debts on a regular basis. This may refer, again to Jewish culture, emphasizing the need to take time and ask for forgiveness. Often, this passage is used to continue a mindset of humility, for the Christ follower is forever in debt to Christ and Christ teaches that this debt should instill in one the desire to forgive others.

⁹ N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15*, 57-59. Matthew’s prayer is longer, but contains the same basic framework as the prayer in Luke. Wright makes the case that this prayer is meant to be seen as a scaffolding that helps guide our spiritual walk and journey.

but our possessions of mind and of heart. It is only in selling our whole selves that we may gain Christ.’¹⁰ After saying this, he turned his face to look toward the horizon and he stared out in silence. This continued until the sun was at its highest point. He then took out a small piece of bread blessed it and broke it in half, handing one half to me. We descended down the side of the mountain and entered the cave. Here the old monk taught me how to weave baskets while praying.¹¹ The baskets we weaved could be sold to support their humble life, and the act of weaving allowed our bodies to work while they prayed without ceasing. When the sun set, we ate and went to bed, thanking God for the day they had spent in God’s will. This routine continued for several days, but each day on the mountain the old monk would teach a new lesson. On the second day he opened his mouth and said, ‘To mourn is not to mourn the dead, but the life that is lost to sin, to mourn is to repent for the time we choose death instead of life in Christ.’¹² On the third day he opened his mouth and said, ‘To be meek is to imitate the gentleness of God, finding life in God’s life instead of seeking life in the death of vanity. All vanity of earth is vanity in dust.’¹³ On the fourth day he opened his mouth and said ‘To hunger and thirst for righteousness is for the righteousness of God to be what fills us, that our souls would crave the work of God

¹⁰ Manlio Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, vol. 1a, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 73-76. The Sermon on the Mount is often considered the most famous sermon of all time and finds a more detailed account in the Gospel of Matthew. Many scholars from the early church viewed the mountain as not just a place where Jesus preached, but a motif for obtaining the higher truths of God. The first lesson, of being poor in Spirit finds resonance in this point. Whereas Luke recalls Jesus saying “blessed are the poor,” Matthew makes the distinction of “poor in spirit”. Having a humble spirit allows for God to use a Christ follower in whatever way God sees fit.

¹¹ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 14-15. Weaving baskets was a common practice for many early monks. Apa Lucius said “By working and praying all day long, I can complete around 16 baskets. I give away two of these to any beggar who comes to my door. I make my living from the rest. And the man who receives the gift of two baskets prays for me... That is how, by God’s grace, I manage to pray without ceasing.”

¹² Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, 80. Jerome mentions that there is a distinction between mourning death and mourning our holistic death when we give into sin. It is yet another way for us to humble ourselves and find comfort in Christ. Death is still real and present, but those who mourn need not mourn forever.

¹³ Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, 81. Meekness is not always considered a good characteristic, but it does find a history of value throughout the biblical narrative. Chromatius was keen to point out that meekness is valuable trait used to describe both Moses (Num 12:3) and David (Ps 132:1). Meekness is not weakness, but gentle, humble, and unassuming.

with passion that compels us to only be satisfied by God's justice.' On the fifth day he opened his mouth and said 'Being merciful is more than taking pity on the less fortunate, but having mercy for those who don't deserve mercy, mercy extends to those who do evil against us.¹⁴' On the sixth day he opened his mouth and said 'To be pure in heart is to see with the eyes of God. For a heart without sin, sees only the work of God around.¹⁵' On the seventh day he opened his mouth and said, 'Make peace within yourself. For it is in the heart that sin starts and with Christ, the Son of God, that sin can end.¹⁶' On the eighth day he opened his mouth and said 'Christ prepares our place when we join him in persecution for righteousness.¹⁷' After the eighth day, he said 'I have taught you the rules that will guide us in our quest for Christ and for holiness. What remains for you to learn I cannot teach, for you must learn perseverance against the traps of the enemy and desire for the ways of God.' They repeated this routine every day, each day meditating on a different rule and how to apply that truth to a monk's own life."

I will admit, my spirit was challenged by the dedication of the two monks Malak told me about. Each of the rules that they set for their lives were based on a point that Christ made in his sermon on the mount. Indeed, it was as though they truly viewed their life as a sermon for which Christ might teach the hearts of those who follow him. The cell that they chose to dwell in,

¹⁴ Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, 85. Mercy and compassion are taught throughout the Old and New Testament; however, mercy takes on an interesting role for the Christian. Mercy is something that can often only be given by someone in power, so granting mercy to someone displays the power of Christ within one's own life. This mercy is found by having mercy on all people, specifically one's enemies. Mercy is unique in that it displays power and submission.

¹⁵ Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, 86. A pure heart is a discipline that was valued highly in monastic culture, for when one has a pure heart, it can see the goodness of God reflected in almost everything. The desert becomes a place of unbelievable beauty when looked upon with a pure heart.

¹⁶ Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, 87. The act of peacemaking is a discipline, like other beatitudes, that can be practiced outside of oneself and within. "The peacemaker is the one who demonstrates the harmony of the Scriptures, where others see only a contradiction: the Old with the New, the law with the prophets, Gospel with Gospel." Cyril of Alexandria.

¹⁷ Simonetti, *Matthew 1-13*, 89. To be persecuted for the sake of righteousness shows another outward expression of internal conviction. The criminal and the martyr often receive the same punishment, but the martyr remains firm in their convictions and commitments to God.

which was buried in the mountain, was very much a representation of their choice to build their lives on the teachings of Christ.¹⁸ To them, these teachings were not new teachings but were the ways of God at work long before their time. For these monks the teachings of Christ seemed to be the natural completion of the sermon of God spoken when God said, “Let there be light!” Still, I was curious.

“My brother you are indeed my teacher for you have been kind enough to share with me the secrets of your heart that have been passed down for many wise teachers. I am truly blessed hearing the words of the testimony of the Lord for no doubt the Holy Spirit is at work in your life and at your cell! If I may, I would like to ask one final question. When do you study the actual text in your community?” I said.

“You my brother are indeed an author, for your heart follows the way of the Spirit while your interest follows words. This was also my question, after spending one year at the cell I began to think about Antony’s purpose of sending me to a place where prayer, meditation and weaving was all that was emphasized, not one’s ability to read. After I had been there for two years, I had a dream. In the dream I saw the cell in the mountain, the sun was setting but just when it had gotten dark another sun rose. This sun was much more magnificent and seemed to stretch across the entire sky. When I woke up I asked the elder monk what this dream meant. ‘Truly the Lord is at work, for I had the same dream after two years at the cell. I prayed many days for what the Lord meant to tell me in the dream. It was made clear to me that prayer was meant for while the sun was overhead but reading and studying scripture is meant for evening. I tell you the truth, I believe it is now time for you to begin to read and study the scripture at night.

¹⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message Bible Remix* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006). Jesus as teacher is a very important theme in Matthew’s gospel. Jesus teaches those who would listen, about the workings of God. The lessons taught throughout Matthew’s Gospel help embody the truth of God and promises of the Old Testament.

For while the world sleeps, we may study the teachings of Christ!’ That very night our way of studying scripture came to be, when darkness covers the land, the candle (indeed the very same the angel lit for the found monk) is to be lit, and the eldest monk is to read the scripture aloud while the younger monk sleeps, so that even in sleep one may meditate on the words of the Christ. At the darkest time of the night, the youngest monk is to be awoken to take over reading the text, while the elder sleeps. In this way the sun rises in the morning with prayer and the sun rises in the evening with the words and teachings of Christ,” Malak said.

“This is truly astounding. Thank you again for sharing your way of life with me, so that I may adjust my life to be more pleasing unto God. Should our time be longer, I would like to continue to talk with you, but I know you must return for prayer and I must send for the next monk,” I said.

“Thank you again for listening. I pray that Christ would continue to teach you his way,” Malak said.

With that, he stood, bowed towards me, went back to his room, and sent the next monk to speak with me.

CHAPTER 4

ACCORDING TO KERAUNO

It was not long before the next monk came into the room to speak with me, although by this point mealtime had long since passed and I was in fact growing somewhat restless. The monk had long brown hair but a beardless face. His skin was tanned as if he was a hired hand working during a great harvest. His face was stoic, as if he was deep in thought or trying to remember why he had entered the room in the first place.

“Greetings brother and thank you again for being willing to meet with me. I know that you have been in prayer and meditation for much of the morning. Would you like anything to eat to help you regain your strength?” I said.

He politely shook his head no.

“Very well. If I may, I was wondering if perhaps you would be interested in changing location for our discussion? We have a lovely courtyard, and I believe that it is important to see the light of day while the sun is above our heads. We could walk as we speak of the work of Christ in our lives,” I said, praying silently that he would agree so that I may have a break from the room that I was now very familiar with.

Nodding his head, he stood up, as if to indicate that he was ready to follow my lead.

Together we walked out the door of the dining hall, down the corridor and out to the courtyard.¹

As we walked around, I noticed that he was looking up at the clouds, as if they were performing

¹ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 1st ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 25. In his novel, *The Name of the Rose* Eco offers the description of a Benedictine monastery that can help inform one’s imagination. “After the gate (which was the only opening in the outer walls) a tree-lined avenue led to the abbatial church. To the left of the avenue there stretched a vast area of vegetable gardens and, as I later learned, the botanical garden, around the two buildings of the balneary and the infirmary and herbarium, following the curve of the walls.” It is clear for just a section of the description that every aspect of the monastery was planned. Eco continues, “...for architecture. Among all the arts, is the one that most boldly tries to reproduce in its rhythm the order of the universe, which the ancients called the “kosmos,” that is to say ornate, since it is like a great animal on whom there shine the perfection and the proportion of all its members.”

a great dance or singing a song familiar to him from his childhood. We continued to walk in silence for some time. Only the wind and occasional sounds from other monks in the abbey broke the silence, but it was quickly mended by our lack of conversation. Seeing that the monk had no intention of initiating the conversation with me, I decided I would begin.

“If I may, brother, I would still like to hear your testimony,” I said.

“I am afraid I do not know where to begin,” He said. He was quiet in his speech and if the wind had been blowing any harder that day or it had been time to sing psalms I indeed may not have been able to understand what he was saying.

“Perhaps we could begin with your name and the Gospel your cell has committed their lives to meditating on, dear brother,” I said. Although I began to wonder if conversation with this monk would prove useful at all and if I might instead give him leave and move on to conversation with a more talkative man of God.

“Kerauno, and the Gospel of John,” He replied simply.

“Kerauno, I assure you that there is not a particular piece of information that I am looking to glean from your testimony. Your testimony could simply be a description of your cell or to tell more of the origin of your own community. I believe that the Spirit will guide your words and know that, should they be the words of God, they will not return void but will minister directly to my heart,” I said in a last attempt to get glean any information from him.

“Forgive me. In my order we are not accustomed to speaking much². It is through this practice that we hope the Word would be spoken through us. That is the Word who became flesh would dwell make his dwelling amongst us. It is in our silence that we pray the Son of God would speak,” He replied.

² Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. I*. Silence was a common spiritual practice for monks, especially in the Egyptian desert.

“You need not ask for forgiveness, in fact I believe it is I who must now ask for your forgiveness for I did not even think of my own insensitivity in asking you to tell me your story. Kerauno if I have caused you to break a vow unto God I ask that you forgive me and pray to Christ for my forgiveness! We need not continue in conversation if conversation leads you to sin,” I said, truly repentant for my inconsiderate actions towards another monk. Even as I write this I rebuke my own arrogance in assuming a guest had a desire to speak of what God had done. Kerauno smiled warmly at me.

“Fear not, for I have broken no such vow. We do speak, but we do so sparingly. For words said without thought can lead to wrong understanding and even idolatry.³ We pray that the Word would control us so that we do not try to control the Word,” he said.

“This is wise. It is indeed difficult when it comes to scripture, for often we may bring our own will to the text. This is something that we strive to do here within the abbey as well,⁴” I said.

“No. You speak of the word of God, revealed to man through scripture, I speak of the Word of God who came before all things.⁵ The Word that was there at the beginning and yet chose to make dwelling amongst us. The scriptures have value, but do not forgive sins. The words of prophets hold wisdom but cannot drive away darkness. The laws of Moses can bring

³ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 11. Rollins makes the point that there are two main possibilities for idols, the aesthetic idol and the conceptual idol. An aesthetic idol is one that is physically worshiped but a conceptual idol is often more dangerous. Conceptual idolatry takes place within mind and understanding and therefore is able to grow without correction and is able to find root in pride. God is greater than even our conceptions of God, therefore by placing too much value in theology one places too much value in conception of God instead of Godself.

⁴ Stanley E. Porter Jr., Beth M. Stovell, and Craig L. Blomberg, eds., *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012), 20-25. The idea of bringing one’s own will to the text is an idea that has been present throughout the history of hermeneutics. It is important to note that meaning is not found in only one place nor is it found in isolation.

⁵ Joel C. Elowsky and Thomas C. Oden, *John 1-10*, vol. 4a, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 1-5. John is especially significant to ancient readers because of the cosmological scale on which his account operates. John recognizes that Christ did not just come to the world to fulfill Jewish prophecy, but to save the entire world. This Word of God sets all things right and invites us to see God’s glory.

order but only the Word of God can create life, and life everlasting⁶! This is the Word that we serve and indeed this is the Word that served us all,” he said, looking back up at the clouds, as if he was waiting for something.

“Truly you have shared great wisdom brother, and I apologize for my pride and misunderstanding. Could you now share with me some of your testimony? Perhaps you could tell me what your place of dwelling is like?” I said

“Certainly. The place we dwell is in the desert and it is marked by two things: a lone fig tree and a dried up well.” He said.

“And how do you survive under such harsh conditions and with no access to water? Surely you need to drink to live.” I said.

“You speak true. When our founding monk was wandering the desert, looking for a place to meditate on the scripture, he stopped at the empty well, for he was thirsty and thought that if he did not find water soon he would surely die. When he realized that it was dried up, he prayed that Christ would show him the way to water. However, instead of finding directions in his heart to walk he felt conviction to read. And so, he took out the Gospel and read of the Samaritan woman who Jesus promised everlasting water.⁷ He meditated on this story all day and night and when he opened his eyes in the morning he noticed a jug by the well that seemed to have been left. He took the jug and lowered it to the well to try once again to draw water, but he could not hear or see water running and could only hear the jug drawing out grains of sand. But when he

⁶ N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10*, 2nd ed., The New Testament for Everyone (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 3-5. While John sets out to describe creation of life through Jesus, it is clear that he views creation on a grand scale. The eternal life that Christ offers creates something new within us, something that goes beyond our own understanding of the world. The Word echoes to philosophy and religion, yet both find their answer not in a temple or university but in the person of Jesus Christ.

⁷ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11*, vol. 25A, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 1996), 203-209. “Although the woman may have been thinking about well water, Jesus was interested in internal or spiritual water. Such water would become in a person (en auto) not stale cistern water but a free-flowing fountain or spring of water leaping or bubbling into life eternal.”

brought up the jug he saw that it was filled with water. It was just as the Word turning chaos to order at the beginning, or water to wine in Canna, but this time the Word had turned sand into water, and in a desert! Since then our community has had water that was truly everlasting, but this water is nothing but a shadow compared to the true Living Water that is Jesus,” he said, smiling as if he was still in awe of a miracle he had clearly witnessed many times.

“Praise be to God! For you speak words that are good not just for flesh but for spirit,” I said.

“This is true for all things in Christ. For Christ is the embodiment of both Word and flesh. The power of the creation wrapped up in creation for the sake of love. That we may participate not just in the physical works of God but in the spiritual as well. We die to our flesh so that we may be reborn, like Lazarus coming out of the tomb we awaken to life not restricted by what is physically possible.⁸ For what are rules of nature to He who created nature? This is our savior, who prepares a way for us as we too prepare a place for Him,” he said.

“How do you structure your days for this? For I must admit there does not seem be specific practices that guide your way of living,” I said.

“Our lives are structured around the Word. In the morning we read the words and life of the Word, at midday we meditate on the Words, in the evening we pray and serve one another. These practices have kept our order for many years,” He said.

“And how many are you?” I asked, truly curious.

⁸ Joel C. Elowsky, *John 11-21*, vol. 4b, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 20-23. John’s is the only Gospel to mention the resurrection of Lazarus, but it serves as an important event. One reason is that it shows us the importance of weeping with those who weep. Perhaps more importantly, it teaches us of the legitimacy of resurrection as something that Christ followers can put their faith in. Lazarus is like a taking a small sip of the resurrection, Christ offers us a full drink when he returns.

“There are three of us total, although in my absence there are only two. By having community, we can practice the love of Christ that served even his own disciples.⁹ This is why we daily wash one another’s feet with the water we draw from the well. In fact, we do this before we drink water for the day, for we know the true power of the Living water is not life for oneself but life to be shared with one another. It is in this way that we are able to practice the self-giving love that chooses relationship with humanity,” he said.¹⁰

As he said this, the clouds began to move to where they only slightly covered the sun, rays of sunlight poured through them as if the heavens were painting. I had a number of other questions that I thought I should ask, but as I looked at the clouds I felt a sense of both peace and mystery. This was not the mystery that beckons one to find solution, but rather the mystery that beckons one to marvel. It was as if God was saying that there were no more answers that could be shared through the use of words, but only through spiritual sharing of the heart. These truths were not secret knowledge, but were encouragements to pray and seek the Lord, to find comfort in the Word and not in our finite understanding of the Spirit at work.

“I am afraid, my brother, that I am unsure what else to say or share. This is not for lack of miracles that the Lord has done, but because I believe if we were to try to speak of all of the

⁹ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, vol. 25B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2002), 83-89. Foot washing is an event that is found in John’s account but is not found in the synoptic Gospels. It takes the place of the Last Supper in order of events, placing emphasis on Jesus humbling himself to serve his disciples. Foot washing has fallen out of popularity within much of the Christian tradition, yet it still serves as a vital lesson in biblical scholarship. To Christ, true love is willingness to become last, following in the sacrificial nature of God. While the eucharist invites us to remember the sacrifice of Christ, foot washing expects us to re-enact the selflessness of Jesus.

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21*, 2nd ed., The New Testament for Everyone (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 43-47. Relationship is an important theme for John, both in the beginning and in the climax of death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is seen sharing the love of relationship with humanity to not be an abstract exchange but an intimate shared experience of humility. The message of Jesus finds power in the Word becoming flesh, but it finds meaning in the washing of disciple’s feet.

things God has done we would be in the courtyard for all of eternity¹¹. I do not believe this would be beneficial, for there are times when we must speak of God and others when the greatest thing we can say of God is to sit in silence and listen to the sermons of creation.” Kerauno said.

“I believe you have spoken truth. I thank you again for your time in speaking with me. Would you like to join me for lunch to refresh your body?” I asked.

“Thank you, but my bread is in my cell. I will send the next monk to meet with you in the dining room though.” he said.

I was not sure where he had gotten bread for his room, but nonetheless I understood and was not offended at his refusal to eat with me.

“Thank you. May the Word of God bless you and keep you.” I said, bowing my head. He smiled and walked back towards his room as I made my way for the dining room.

¹¹ Elowsky, *John 11-21*, 396-398. This mirrors the sentiment of John, in regards to the work of Christ. For if Christ has been at work since the beginning, there are a great number of deeds not accounted as well as if Christ is at work in us, there are a great deal of deeds that have not even happened.

CHAPTER 5

ACCORDING TO JUNAH

It did not take long for the next monk to arrive in the dining room. This monk was smaller and seemed younger than the rest of the monks I had met, in fact his features seemed almost boyish to me. He had a shaved bald head, thin eyebrows, and a small frame. His eyes were grey blue and he was clearly not afraid of making eye contact with me, for when he entered the room he immediately sat and looked into my eyes as if he was studying the thoughts that were traveling through my mind.

“I am Junah, and I have devoted my life to study and meditation of the Gospel of Luke. Before we begin, I believe that there is something you ought to know about me, but I pray that this does not make you feel as if I have betrayed you or your order for I have committed myself to holiness just as every other monk that you have seen today and live in a way that is devoted to seeing the Holy Spirit at work in my life and on this earth,” he said, in a soft almost whisper of a voice.

“I assure you my brother that I hold nothing against you for you and your fellow monks were indeed my honored guests before I even met you. I had long prayed for your travel, although I did not know that there would indeed be four of you, but nonetheless my prayer was for the will of God to be done and I believe it has been done in bringing you here. However, if you feel it is important to the testimony or would help you feel as though any unintentional wrong has been done unto me, please share.” I said.

“I thank you and am glad to hear you say that, for I too believe that it is the will of God for me to be here. I will admit that when I first received the invitation to come and meet you I thought that I would surely not be welcome. It was only after much prayer that coming to Monte

Cassino seemed right to me and to the Holy Spirit.¹ If I am honest with you, I felt much the same way when I came to meet the eldest monk of my cell but after prayer and encouragement from holy women I sought them out. You see when I was still a child, my father began to teach me how to read, since I was his only child and my mother was unable to have any more children.” He said, again speaking so quite that he was almost whispering to me.

“Is this uncommon in your land? For here many sons train in the work of their father so that they may carry on the trade of the family. Also, forgive me for asking this, but could you speak a little louder? My ears are truly eager to hear your words, but my age does not allow me to fully understand truths wrapped in whispers,” I said.

“It is not uncommon for sons to learn their fathers trade, but it is uncommon for daughters,” the monk said.

As the words left the young monk’s mouth it was clear to me that this was not a young boy committed to a life of holiness but a young woman. This explained the delicate features and small frame. It also explained why she had spoken softly, not because she was unable to raise her voice, but because she did not want to disrespect the order of the monastic community at Monte Cassino.² She could clearly see that I had reasoned out what she was trying to tell me.

“Once again, I apologize if this appears as deception or if you feel as though I have sinned against you,” she said, looking concerned but not for her own sake, rather for my own sake.

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 1992), 333-335. The phrase “It seemed right to them and the Holy Spirit” is common throughout Acts, especially in the midst of major decision making. Being as though Luke was the author of both Luke and Acts, it seemed right to include phrasing and themes from both volumes. This unique perspective of Luke seeing the good news of the Gospel continuing into the history of the Church

² Benedict, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, 4. Benedictine monasteries were not co-ed, this was to help ensure that sexual sins were not taking place in monks (who had taken vows of celibacy).

“While I admit that I am surprised at this revelation, I do not consider this a sin against me or any others here in Monte Cassino. Although it does go against our rule, it is clear to me that there are instances in which the Lord is doing things that go outside of our own limits for God to operate in. While I am okay with this, I hope that you continue to keep this secret between our small group and the Lord, for I do not wish for others in the abbey to feel as though I have betrayed them,” I said. I will say here that this is an instance in which I used discretion granted only to the Abbot,³ I made this choice based on the fruit of the Lord I had seen in the testimony of the others as well as the willingness to submit to the Holy Spirit that the monk exercised.

“Of course. As I am sure you are curious, I will now speak of some of my history of my cell and a bit about our way of life and how I joined the community. As I mentioned, my father taught me how to read and write in Greek, Latin, and a few other languages. For me, it came naturally, but there did not seem to be anything that I could do with this skill, for few people look to a woman for interpretation of scripture. I realized that the only way that I could do something that seemed to put the talents that God gave me to good use was to take a vow of virginity and join a convent.⁴ I arrived at a convent where the sister of Antony once dwelled and asked that I may begin to live there in a pursuit of holy living and so that I may study and meditate on the scriptures. The Abbess was shocked to learn that I could read and write and told

³ Benedict, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, 5. The Abbot was the leader of the monastic community and was privy to information that others were not. This was thought of as a burden of leadership and one that was not thought to be a perk. Knowing more than others or having more than others was a potential for pride to form within a monk.

⁴ Amy Oden, *In Her Words: Women's Writings in the History of Christian Thought* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 22-25. A great deal of inspiration for Junah was drawn from the story of Thecla, who is often looked to as an important female figure in celibacy and holiness. Thecla heard Paul preach the Gospel of Jesus and felt called to remain celibate and devote herself to prayer. This outraged the people, especially her mother, and she was sentenced to execution. However when she was placed on the stake to be burned, the heavens opened and put out the fire. Then when she was sent to be executed by animals in the coliseum, but the lionesses that were sent to attack laid down at her feet and protected her from any threat. After all of this, she was released and all exclaimed “All praise the God of Thecla, the One true God!”

me that I was welcome to stay the night, while she prayed and sought the will of the Holy Spirit. I awoke the next morning and prayed with the rest of the women there, but after prayer the Abbes asked me to speak with her.”

“As I prayed, the Spirit reminded me of a conversation I had with Antony’s sister before she died and went to dwell with Christ.⁵ She told me that Antony had told her of his encounter with four monks who each had a copy of a gospel and had retreated to the wilderness to study and meditate on the scriptures. I believe that it is to join one of these monks that the Spirit is lead you. Therefore go, follow the Spirit and find where you can participate in the will that God has for your own life. For you have truly found favor in the eyes of God and it is not by accident that you have come here. Rather the Spirit has brought you here so that you may be sent out to find the place that Christ has prepared for you!’ I stayed that day and prepared for another journey, although I was nervous as to what may happen during my journey and even more nervous to see what would happen when I arrived--” She stopped speaking as one the younger monks came up to ask me a question, clearly trying to be respectful by not raising her voice to share her story around another monk and therefore give suspicion for such a feminine voice coming from a traveling monk. After he left, she continued.

“As I was saying, I was apprehensive to seek out a monk in the desert, not because I did not trust the leading of the Holy Spirit but because I had been convinced from my own experiences, that men, even holy men,” she smiled at me “distrust women. I know not if this is residual fear of Eve giving Adam the fruit or if it is fear of not being able to control their own fleshly desires around a woman, as if they were not men but suddenly transformed into bulls or horses as soon as someone of the opposite gender was around them. However, despite my fears, I

⁵ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony of Egypt*, 24. Antony’s sister is not mentioned a great deal, but it is accounted that she was sent to a commune by Antony and lived a holy life.

pressed on, crossing the desert until I came to a large, seemingly abandoned cell. I was tired from my journey and so I decided to approach the cell and if it was abandoned I would stay the night alone, and if it was occupied by a monk or other hermit I would seek help. To my surprise, when I walked up to the cell a voice called out to me. ‘I was wondering when you would arrive. I’m sure you are hungry and tired, come on in and be refreshed.’ Admittedly, I was apprehensive about the situation, and I was certain that I was not the person that this voice was looking for. But I was hungry and tired, and I did not have another place to stay the night, for the desert is a lonely place. I followed the voice.”

“Inside the cell, there was a warm fire, bread, and water. Next to the fire sat an old man, with short white hair and a smile. He held out a piece of bread and beckoned me to sit with him. ‘Welcome dear sister, praise be to One true God who makes all things and is at work in all things. It has been three weeks since I saw the vision of your arrival and I have been hard at work preparing a place for you. That is, if you choose to stay.’ he said, in a tone friendlier than any other monk I had ever met. ‘I am sorry Abba but I am still somewhat confused. You said that you had a vision of my arrival? And that you have a place here for me to stay? How can this be?’ I said. ‘By the work of the Spirit of course! For there is always work to be done, even when we are not aware. The Lord showed me of a young monk arriving at my cell and told me that you would carry on the practice of study and meditation of the scripture. I knew it would happen someday, and I am glad that the day has arrived already!’ he said, smiling. ‘And in your vision, you saw that I was a woman?’ I said. ‘I did not see that in my vision, but I had my expectations. The Lord seems to work in ways that include all people, male and female, Jew and Gentile.’⁶ It

⁶ F. Scott Spencer, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008). Luke is the most explicitly inclusive Gospel. Throughout the text there are constant parallels drawn between male and female, Jew and Gentile.

only made sense that the same would take place in the study and meditation of the scriptures. Why should women not be involved in the telling of the story of Christ when Mary herself treasured this story in her heart?⁷ You are welcomed here as a child of God and a child in the Spirit. And should you be concerned of causing me to stumble down a path of fleshly desires, do not be, for long before I came out to this desert I castrated myself to rid myself from any possible temptations⁸.’ He continued to smile, as if the memory had no effect on him. I smiled in return and began to cry tears of happiness for the Spirit was at work! I have dwelt in that place ever since, studying, praying and meditating, day and night.”

“I can see the work of the Spirit within you. I see now the wisdom that monk showed in welcoming you to pursue holy living, for the Lord has used your eyes to see things that mine could not,” I said.

“We might even look to Mary and Martha as the example for the Christian life. As monks, we see wisdom in the ways of Mary but also recognize the value of Martha. Both are portrayed as women. Christ seeks to know all and have relationships with all,” she said.

“This is truth. Thank you for sharing your testimony and for respecting our traditions during your stay. You are always welcome, sister,” I said.

“Thank you, for your hospitality, may the Spirit be with you.” She said and stood up and walked back to her cell.

⁷ Arthur A. Jr. Just, *Luke*, vol. 3, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 42-43. Mary storing up or treasuring things in her heart, is reference to Luke 2:19 when Mary took times to reflect and remember the birth of Christ. It is interesting to note, that this treasuring is not done in isolated context, rather Mary knew the prophecies and expectations for the Messiah.

⁸ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. Although this is not overwhelmingly common, monks did cause harm to themselves in order to prevent sexual temptations.

Since then, the difference among the body of Christ has been reverberating in my soul. Even going back to the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, there is so much room made for others to be welcomed into the church. Praise be to God that he has come for all.

CHAPTER 6

ACCORDING TO ‘ASADA

When it came time for ‘Asada to meet with me, my head was spinning. Although my spirit was willing my flesh was indeed weak and I began to look forward to the end of the day and the rest that would come with the evening. I had already heard so much about the lives of others and the way that each of them had taken the words of scripture and devoted their lives to them. Each of them, having only a piece of the whole Gospel was able to live a Christ centered life, that while some of it seemed completely foreign to me, other parts resonated like my own voice in my chest. Everyone I had spoken to talked of their own commitment as if they were the most logical step to take in the pursuit of following Christ in holy living. Each one, based their life on a different scripture that they studied daily and each of them manifested it differently. I asked myself how different not just my understanding of God Almighty but also the way I lived my life might be if I lived my life based on only one of the Scriptures¹. Would I find myself lacking?

As I pondered these questions, ‘Asada walked in, and while he clearly did not see me, he walked towards me, without nudging or bumping into anything. For an old blind man, he walked with the purpose and poise of a skilled swordsman; every step was intentional and brought him closer to his target. I smiled at him, not that he could see it.

“My dear friend, it has only been hours since we last saw each other and yet I feel as though I have lived a lifetime. I wish to thank you and your fellow monks once again for sharing

¹ Chris E. W. Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation: Vocation, Holiness, and Scripture* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2015), 1-3. It is clear that scripture affects the way that one reads, scripture affects the way one lives, and operates within the holiness of God. The issue comes when one seeks to separate some parts of ourselves from others. Scripture is interpreted faithfully in the context of humanity’s purpose and calling.

with me the stories of your life and your cells. It is my belief that I will be meditating on them for a long time²,” I said, as ‘Asada took a seat next to me.

“It brings me great joy to hear you speak these words. While I was unsure as to what exactly you hoped to glean from meeting with us, I had faith that the Holy Spirit would tune your ears to hear the still small whisper of the Almighty. Now then, I am one of the four and I believe that you wanted to ask all of us some questions,” he said.

“I have a great number of questions, although I believe that even you will not be able to answer all of them, for I have learned again today that many mysteries can only be answered from prayer, study and meditation.³ I would like to hear your story. How did you meet the founder of your cell?” I said.

‘Asada took a deep breath and looked up, as if seeking counsel from heaven itself. After several minutes he looked back to me, his eyes staring, not into my eyes but into my soul. Instead of averting my eyes, I stared back into his. Some blind men have eyes that seem empty, others have eyes that seem lost, ‘Asada had neither. His eyes seemed to reflect a deeper understanding, like your reflection in a calm river, the image moving but reflecting something familiar.

“I met the founder many years ago, although many things seem to have happened many years ago when you are as old as I am. I grew up in the tradition of a scribe but was convinced that there must be a way to truly live out the truths in the text that went beyond studying. So, I set out to the desert, carrying with me just a few items needed for my survival. I walked for a

³ Gary M. Burge, Gene L. Green, and Lynn H. Cohick, *The New Testament in Antiquity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009). One of the major themes in the Gospel of Mark is the presentation of God’s kingdom being different from what was previously understood. Throughout the narrative, Jesus makes decisions to go off alone to pray and commands demons and people to not tell of his status as Messiah. Christ invites his followers into the kingdom of God, encouraging them to reorient themselves towards God.

great distance until I came to a great river. I felt God say to me that I must enter the river in order to find the place that I was looking for.⁴ I left my materials on the bank and walked into the river until only my head was above the water. My eyes level with the water, I looked down and saw the great distance that the river still had to travel. Somehow, it seemed a great distance but also seemed so close. I submerged my head completely under the water and felt a great darkness around me. In this darkness there were many voices, some that seemed familiar and some that seemed far away. It was then that I realized that one of these voices was my own but I was not speaking good things, I was telling lies and speaking proud. The other voices that I heard, seemed to be people that I had known, all of them speaking accusations against me. Worst of all, the accusations were true, and I knew it. Under the river, I felt the full weight of the sins of my past, each of them called out to me, driving into my skull like a herd of goats. Then I heard a voice call out to me, ‘Come follow me!’⁵ I followed the voice, focusing only on that one sound. Ignoring the others. Ignoring my own. As I followed the voice, it continued to grow louder and louder until I could not hear anything else. I recognized the voice now, it was the same voice that whispered for me to enter the river. It was Christ.”

“‘I will follow you!’ I said. I lifted my head and felt the water of the river break into liquid pieces as I breached the surface. I looked around and saw the shining sun, but it seemed to shine brighter. The light reflected off the dancing current of the river. Even the sand seemed to

⁴ Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, *Mark*, vol. 2, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 11-15. For Mark, one of the first main events is the baptism of Jesus. This has been interpreted by some as a display of the Trinity at work (God the Father, speaking, Christ the Son, being baptized, and the Holy Spirit descending like a Dove).

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, 2nd ed., The New Testament for Everyone (London : Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 8-10. “Come follow me!” are the words that Jesus used to call his disciples. While contemporary readers may gloss over this as a small piece in the narrative, it is interesting to think of the meaning and echo that this serves for the disciples. To follow Jesus meant leaving behind profession and often time family to follow Jesus. Wright points out, that in many ways this echoes the calling of Abraham, to follow God into the promised land.

be participating in a dance with the wind. It was then that I realized what happened. I had been baptized anew and became a new creation,”⁶ he said, looking as though he had witnessed the whole thing again as he told me of it.

“I crossed to the other side of the bank and found that my materials had somehow crossed the bank while I was under the water. I thanked God Almighty and continued praising the ways of Christ as I walked, but I did not walk far. Rubbing my eyes, I approached a large wooden object. It was an old fishing boat, but it was broken near the front, seemingly from catching on a rock. While it was no good for fishing or traveling, I saw it for what it could be, turning it over so that it could serve as a shelter. This boat became my cell, that which was once abandoned and broken was made useful again. I have dwelt there ever since.” He said.

“Forgive me brother, for I seem to have missed part of your tale. When did you meet the founder of your cell? Was he dwelling within the boat already? Or perhaps he happened upon your boat and invited you to come back and learn the ways of holy living from him?” I said.

“You have not missed any part of my tale, for I am the founder of the cell,” he said.⁷

“While I do not doubt your honesty, I am having trouble seeing how you could be the man who founded the community, for it is my understanding that the men who founded the cells were contemporaries of Antony of Egypt who lived nearly 200 years ago.” I said.

“Indeed, I met Antony and I am still alive, though I believe that my journey on earth is finally nearing its end. My age has continued to grow in number over the years and yet there still seemed to be a mission for me. I have often wondered how this is possible, but the only thing

⁶ James A. Brooks, *Mark: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, 1st ed., vol. 23, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 1991). Throughout Mark, there are several stories of Jesus performing miracles, healing the sick and forgiving sins. It is these miracles that display the creative power of God manifesting itself in the personhood and life of Jesus. It is by being willing to reach out and heal those who are broken that Jesus engages with the brokenness of the world and re-creates the broken into something full of life.

⁷ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony of Egypt*, 96. While it is quite a bit older than Antony himself, who lived to 105, I wanted to include the extension of life as a possibility for the lives of dedicated monks.

that I can begin to think of as a potential catalyst for my continued livelihood is the baptism in the river. At first, I thought that it was from living a holy life, but I began to outlive the other monks in the desert, except for the other three scribes who I first embarked upon the monastic life with. Then I thought it may be from study and meditation of the scriptures coupled with holy life that the four of us all committed ourselves to. Then one by one, the monks of the other cells began to pass on, leaving the care of the text to young monks who had joined them in the quest for holy life. One day I was meditating on this and realized that my baptism in the river seemed to be an experience unique to me. It was as if Christ had formed me into a new creation in the river, in order to accomplish a specific task. I waited to see what the task was for many years, until one day a traveler came to my cell. He claimed to have traveled a great distance to find a holy man, devoted to prayer and meditation on the scriptures. 'I am one who has made such a vow, but there are 3 other communities in the desert that have also made this vow. Perhaps you are looking for them?' I said.

'But how will I know where to find these men? For it has taken me a great deal of time to find you, and I fear that the person that sent me is growing impatient or has deemed me a deceiver. He nursed me to health, based on the commandments of Christ and so I desired to find a way to bring fresh life to him. Oh Abba, what am I to do?' The traveler said. I thought for a little and then said to him 'I will go with you to find these monks and if you wish we will all accompany you to meet the man who ministered the work of Christ.' I said. The rest is history, for I am now here with you.'

Indeed, this was a miracle, for it was clear to me now that if it was not for this man Asim never would have found any of the monks I had met with. If the Spirit had not kept this man alive, I would never have heard of all the ways that Christ was at work in the desert. Christ was

at work, in more than one way, the Gospel understood in very different ways but coming together nonetheless.

“Truly the Lord works in mysterious ways. I am astounded at the way we have come together and thank you for the part you played. I believe that none of this would have happened if you had not made yourself an instrument of the Spirit,” I said.

“I have been made new, and now I believe I will be made new again in the light of eternity. For during prayer today, the Lord showed me that I would die when we return to the desert⁸. I believe I have answered as many questions as I am able to, so I will now retire to my room. I will see you tomorrow before we leave.” He said, got up and left.

They left the next morning, and it truly was a sad farewell, though I know I will see them in heaven. I have been thinking long and hard about all that I had learned in those days and yet I feel as though I have not scratched the surface when it comes to understanding who Christ is. For even if there were a thousand monks and a thousand gospels, there would not be enough to describe to whole Gospel; that Christ came for all and that all may have relationship with Christ.

Please, listen to these words. Let not the Rule get in the way of falling in love with Christ. Do not trade mystery for study! Do not try to master the Spirit, but let the Spirit be your master. For we all can only see in part, but soon we shall see in full. Amen!

⁸ Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony*, 97. Antony seemed to echo a similar desire to be buried out in the desert. What an interesting thing, that the Spirit would keep a monk alive for so long just to speak with Benedict.

CONCLUSION

A RESPONSE FROM FATHER CRAIG TO ADAM

Dear Adam,

Thank you for sharing this with me. You've gotten quite good at translation! While I am not familiar with this document, I think it is possible that Benedict wrote it. For many, Benedict represents the beginning of monasticism in the western church, so to hear his testimony from a latter point in his life is valuable beyond measure. If it's alright with you, I would like to contact some of my friends at the university about taking a look at the original text. If this is what we think it is, it could change the way we understand the history of monasticism and biblical studies.

I have marked your translation with footnotes that offer historical and theological context to the document. If you're interested, it might be advantageous for you to re-read it with the footnotes. Sometimes a bit of added context can bring a whole new meaning to the text. Perhaps this is the true lesson of *Synecdoche*, that the good news of Christ can always find added meaning from a new perspective. There is always room for more voices in the Kingdom of God because the Gospel is so much more than a sum of its parts.

Grace and Peace,

Father Craig

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