

“*Humble Aspiration* is a welcome addition to a growing body of scholarship on the meaning and practice of humility. In this thoroughly researched book Bernadette McNary-Zak illuminates the construction of Christian humility in the lives of fourth- to seventh-century female ascetics, demonstrating clearly its ‘multivalent’ nature and its centrality to their commitment to the way of Christ. While twentieth-century feminists were right to critique the much later construction of humility as a feminine virtue, ensuring women’s submission to patriarchal power, McNary-Zak brings to life an assembly of early Christian women who stand strongly as equals, alongside their more celebrated male counterparts, in their imitation of the humble Christ. Christian humility was indeed a ‘countercultural’ force in the world of late antiquity, as McNary-Zak richly demonstrates.”

—Jane Foulcher
Associate Head of School, School of Theology
Charles Sturt University

“Bernadette McNary-Zak offers a convincing portrayal of the polyvalent values attendant upon humility. *Humble Aspirations* represents McNary-Zak’s comprehensive examination of humility in late antiquity, from Syriac and Coptic texts to texts penned by familiar representatives of the Latin church such as Augustine. Furthermore, McNary-Zak’s facility in drawing out the very best from these primary sources is exemplary. She shows with remarkably fine detail how ‘humble aspirations,’ though shared by late antique Christian women and men as imitation of Christ, were more subversively realized in the late antique female ascetic than the male ascetic. And, women’s ‘humble aspirations’ were authoritative for the Christian communities who witnessed them. Perhaps most importantly, McNary-Zak’s models for understanding late antique expressions of humility, such as theological, social, intellectual, and moral, avoid the trap of re-inscribing ideologies of women’s socio-cultural inferiority in her valorization of humility; instead, McNary-Zak’s attention to how humility expressed wise understanding of oneself in relation to God and others through practices of solidarity and through internalization of such values as vulnerability and dispossession, continue to have relevance for readers, both women and men, today.”

—Rachel Wheeler, PhD
Assistant Professor of Theology
University of Portland

“In a world where humility is often misunderstood, especially as applied to women, this book offers a deep and wide exploration of the concept. McNary-Zak gathers views of humility from ancient and modern sources into a resource unlike any other currently available.”

—Judith Sutera, OSB
Mount St. Scholastica, Atchison, Kansas

Humble Aspiration

*Constructing
an Early Christian
Ideal*

Bernadette McNary-Zak



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In memory of Mariya

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Introduction

“Picture in your mind His humility.”¹

Leander of Seville’s late sixth-century imperative invites his sister, Florentina, and her fellow nuns to focus on the centerpiece of Christian humility. By imagining divine humility, with Christ as their exemplar, Leander asks the nuns to direct their attention beyond themselves, diminishing their self-concern and emphasizing their dependence. In doing so, the nuns may encounter humility as a relational act of theological, social, and intellectual consequence with the potential to form their monastic community. Given such outcomes, what did it mean for these nuns to be humble like Christ? This book indicates that the response is neither simple nor self-evident.

Humility was an especially prevalent topic for discussion and debate in Christian monastic circles like those of Leander and Florentina during the period of late antiquity (3c.–7c.). The centrality of humility as a distinctly Christian value would come to be defined in the contexts of evolving theological interpretation and ecclesiological development. An examination of select sources from this period retrieves areas of contestation and concern in emergent formulations of Christian humility. We see several types of humility operative in this period. These types, defined by the relationships they express, illumine how humility is conceptualized, represented, and inscribed as a value in late antique ascetic contexts. Specifically, these types reflect the ways ascetic women—real

¹ Claude W. Barlow, trans., *Iberian Fathers*, vol. 1, *Martin of Braga, Paschasius of Dumium, Leander of Seville* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1969), 206. Leander of Seville (534–600 CE) drew on a number of earlier monastic sources in his short book *The Training of Nuns*, directed to Florentina and her fellow nuns.

and ideal—are deployed for evaluative purpose, namely, to explore the capacity for humility to focus a Christian worldview.

Humility as a Christian Value

Monastic scholar Andre Louf reminds us that all forms of Christian humility are bound firmly “in the context of Jesus Christ.”² This context forms the broader “background of significance” as “a wider picture of the goals of human life, or the best way of living” against which Christian humility is defined and measured in our sources.³ This “background” is the call to follow the example of Christ. If we turn to Christ’s teachings about humility in the synoptic gospels and “Q” source, we see frequent use of the word *ταπεινός*⁴ where, as Eben Scheffler observes, it “suggests not a mere state, but a disposition that the followers of Jesus must constantly fulfill.”⁵ The mandate of disposition emphasizes distinction as Scheffler explains that Jesus “prophetically preached humility in a Graeco-Roman context that was contravening it in thought and behaviour.”⁶ Indeed, Kari Konkola succinctly claims that neither the Greek nor the Jewish tradition “reached the conclusion that, if pride or hubris is evil, humility must be good. Only Christianity took this step.”⁷ Jane Foulcher writes that, in its Greco-Roman context, “humility . . . was primarily a condition of the socially inferior, whose servile status and dependence on physical labor precluded them from all that was considered in public life”;⁸ in its Jewish context, “care for the lowly or humili-

² Andre Louf, *The Way of Humility*, trans. Lawrence S. Cunningham, Monastic Wisdom Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007), 9. See also Sheryl Overmyer, “Exalting the Meek Virtue of Humility in Aquinas,” *Heythrop Journal* 56, no. 4 (2015): 660.

³ John Cottingham, “What Difference Does It Make? The Nature and Significance of Theistic Belief,” *Ratio (new series)* 19, no. 4 (December 2006): 408.

⁴ Eben Scheffler, “Reflecting on Jesus’ Teaching on Humility from a Positive Psychological Perspective,” *Neotestamentica* 51, no. 1 (2017): 101. In Latin, *humus* or *humilis* is tied to earth.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷ Kari Konkola, “Have We Lost Humility?,” *Humanitas* 18, nos. 1–2 (2005): 183.

⁸ Jane Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility: Four Studies in the Monastic Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 17.

ated emerged as a core value in the Hebrew Scriptures . . . with God taking the side of the oppressed and downtrodden.”⁹ According to Foulcher, both contexts directly inform humility in early Christianity. Vestiges of its Greco-Roman connotation lingered in those “readings of humility that begin to serve the interests of those in authority.”¹⁰ Vestiges from Jewish thought persisted by “affirm[ing] God’s solidarity with the humiliated, but also . . . nam[ing] humility a central value.”¹¹ The call to follow the example of Christ, then, meant following the humility of Christ as a nonnormative, primary religious value.

The formulation of Christian guidelines for this mandate took time. The centrality of humility emerged during an intense period of Christian self-definition. Under Constantinian and post-Constantinian rule, late antique Christians across the empire grappled with core questions about religious identity. They sought to determine those defining characteristics that would imprint indelibly what was “Christian.” Questions about interpretation are present in debates regarding canon formation and ritual practice; doctrinal and liturgical developments framed heretical and orthodox ways of being Christian. Historian Peter Brown captures a sense of significance when he observes that “during the late antique period there was a slow shift from one form of public community to another—from the ancient city to the Christian church. The life of the individual, the life of the family, even matters as intimate as the perception of the body itself came to be seen in relation to changing social contexts, associated with the rise of new forms of community.”¹² As these Christians constituted their values, humility would contribute unequivocally to define a Christian identity. The emergent centrality of humility would continue to set them, and their religious worldview, apart by linking their efforts, through lineage, to Christ. Such a lineage was constructed formally by the doctrinal decisions made by a series of ecclesiastical councils that stressed the anthropology and theology of Christ. Donald F. Winslow explains, “As the Trinitarian controversies reached a tentative resolution at the councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381), where the preexistent Son was declared to be ‘of the same substance with the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 24.

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹² Peter Brown, *Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 23.

Father,' humility began to take on specifically theological connotations. The humility of Christ, that is, came to be perceived as the humility of God. . . . It was divine humility, then, that was embodied and articulated by Jesus Christ."¹³ In the contexts of stabilizing ecclesiologies and evolving christological formulations, this androcentric position would decisively inform the background of significance for the question of what it meant to be humble like Christ.¹⁴

The ideological implications of these decisions became embedded in prevailing constructions of the female Christian body.¹⁵ Androcentric bias remained in the definition of female asceticism. Whereas ascetic renunciation offered women "an alternative to conventions of marriage and motherhood, and thus a kind of control over their sexuality,"¹⁶ constructions of "liberation" were necessarily constrained and regulated by prevailing social and religious ideologies, according to Elizabeth Castelli.¹⁷ In her groundbreaking 1986 article, "Virginitly and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," Castelli argues that in the period of late antiquity a woman's body—in marriage and in virginity—measured her value. She writes, "The religious system adopted the reigning idea of women's sexuality as token of exchange and reinforced it by investing it with theological significance" tied to her *redemptive* value.¹⁸ In this way, virginity reinscribed prevailing restrictions on a woman's body and amplified its controlled status, thereby exacerbating competing perspectives regarding its religious value. As Castelli explains, "For women, their sexuality is synonymous with their identity in this cultural order; to demand its negation is to make a far more profound demand for alienation and renunciation of self than any demand for

¹³ Donald F. Winslow, "Humility," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed., ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1998), 547–48.

¹⁴ See Willi Braun, "Body, Character, and the Problem of Femaleness in Early Christian Discourse," *Religion and Theology* 9, nos. 1–2 (2002): 108–17.

¹⁵ There is a strong body of scholarship on issues related to gender and sex in the contexts of early Christian asceticism and monasticism.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginitly and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 1 (1986): 85.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 88. See also Joelle Beaucamp, "Women," in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 749.

¹⁸ Castelli, "Virginitly and Its Meaning," 86.

continence on the part of men.”¹⁹ These tensions were not dismissed as female ascetic practice “was moving from a self-generated alternative to family life toward an institutionalised alternative whose conditions were legislated by men, though women determined their application,”²⁰ according to Jo Ann McNamara. Such institutionalization would further marginalize the already “disadvantaged” female body that was “physically weaker than males . . . unlikely to be the intellectual equals of males, and had a more difficult time controlling bodily desires and the onslaughts of emotion.”²¹

Virginia Burrus observes the specific connection between heightened attention to the sexual bodies of women and doctrinal development in the fourth century in her 1994 article, “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity,” where she writes that “female sexuality first comes to occupy a central and clearly articulated place in Christian thought.”²² Such attention would reinforce a binary interpretation of the female body as fraught with vice or capable of virtue. Burrus continues, “Significantly, the earliest treatments of female virginity and heretical harlotry are found in the writings of Alexander of Alexandria and coincide precisely with the onset of the Arian controversy and the accession of Constantine in the east,”²³ initiating the dissension that would culminate with the Council of Nicea. The “dramatic reconfiguration of Christianity” under Constantine introduced efforts to define Christian identity—self, communal, and organizational.²⁴ With these efforts, “the men who struggled to construct an imperial, catholic orthodoxy were drawn again and again to the problems of boundaries and social order—above all the order of the relations between men and women. Within this context the well-bounded and constrained virginal body came to carry much of the weight of ecclesiology, and female sexuality became almost unbearably heavy with symbolic meaning.”²⁵ Male control of the narrative

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jo Ann McNamara, *The Ordeal of Community*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, ON: Peregrina, 1993), 7.

²¹ Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 119.

²² Virginia Burrus, “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 31.

²³ Ibid., 34.

²⁴ Ibid., 44.

²⁵ Ibid., 45.

construction of female sexuality influenced the definition of female values, including humility, as Elizabeth Clark demonstrated in her 1985 article, “Authority and Humility: A Conflict of Values in Fourth-Century Female Monasticism.” Here, Clark examines how some of the early church fathers wrote about female monastic leadership. Their focus on the ways these women redistributed their considerable personal finances signals their humility for these ecclesiastical figures. Clark contends that “by their emphasis on the women’s humility and abject lowliness, the Fathers were in effect highlighting, by way of contrast, the true source of authority the women possessed: status, family background, wealth.”²⁶

Ecclesiastical formulations about the identity of Mary further impacted the identification of the ascetic woman. Drawing on Louf’s assessment, Foulcher explains that Origen “identified the humility of the Virgin Mary in the *Magnificat* as the classical virtue of *metriotes* (measure), which in turn became the Latin *mediocritas* (moderation).”²⁷ Such a view informed later thinkers, including Aquinas, at notable cost.²⁸ Fifth-century conciliar decisions about the status of Mary as Theotokos (God-bearer) at the Council of Ephesus (431 CE) were reinforced in subsequent ecclesiastical statements, including those at the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), in which it was affirmed that Jesus Christ “was begotten by the Father before all ages according to his divinity and, in these latter days, he was born for us and for our salvation of Mary the Virgin, the Mother of God (*Theotokos*), according to his humanity.”²⁹ In her study of Mary, Sally Cunneen observes that, “As God-bearer, Mary began to take over some of her son’s functions; she was invoked for healing and protection.”³⁰ Conciliar statements responded to broadening and deepening popular

²⁶ Elizabeth A. Clark, “Authority and Humility: A Conflict of Values in Fourth-Century Female Monasticism,” *Byzantinische Forschungen* 9 (1985): 22. See also Elizabeth A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 209–28.

²⁷ Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, 29.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁹ “Definition and Canons of Chalcedon,” in Bart Ehrman and Andrew S. Jacobs, eds., *Christianity in Late Antiquity, 300–450 CE: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 262.

³⁰ Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 138.

and monastic access to Mary, as Patricia Ranft asserts: “After Ephesus devotion to Mary increased. It became a permanent, public, and official aspect of orthodox Christianity.”³¹ Serving as the only complete human witness to the humility of Christ in incarnation, birth, and death, Mary would come to hold a distinctive role in late sixth- and early seventh-century monastic sources for women.³² In word and in image, Mary’s example offers a fruitful site for interpreting monastic guidance in this post-Chalcedonian context. Jaroslav Pelikan writes, “The area of worship in which Mary performed as leader most effectively was in the adornment of icons.”³³ Pelikan further explains, “As Theotokos, Mary—and that included the Mary of the icons—was the legitimate object of orthodox worship [*proskynēsis*].”³⁴ One of the implications of these decisions, as Kate Cooper maintains, was “to honor the spiritual achievement of virgins among the Christian faithful.”³⁵ Many thinkers, like Leander of Seville, attest to the example of Mary for Florentina and her fellow nuns, especially with regard to the cultivation of humility. Due to Mary’s increasingly exalted status as co-redeemer through her humility, she could do for them what she had done for Christ; she could serve them as she served Christ. Through their imitation of her humility they, in turn, could become daughters of Mary as their spiritual guide.

Humility as a Religious Value

Typically, constructions of humility contrast with constructions of pride.³⁶ The ideological implications and existential limitations of this binary opposition persist to this day. As Valerie Saiving observed nearly sixty

³¹ Patricia Ranft, *Women and Spiritual Equality in Christian Tradition* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 90.

³² See the discussions in Ranft, *Women and Spiritual Equality*. See also Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

³³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 99.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁵ Kate Cooper, “Virginité,” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 744.

³⁶ See John Cottingham, “What Difference Does It Make?,” 407.

years ago, in a patriarchal context women's sin is more accurately understood in terms of "underdevelopment or negation of the self" rather than "pride."³⁷ Applying Saiving's insight to the contemporary role of humility as a feminist value, Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty contends further that "pride could not be women's sin when women have been forced to stand at intersections created for them by men and have been deprived of the power and freedom to shape their own destinies, projects, and identities . . . humility known only in acts of self-sacrificial love cannot be the means to redeem women's circumstances if women's freedoms have been taken from them."³⁸ Given these conditions, Hinson-Hasty maintains that "genuine humility" is "a choice made through one's own moral agency"³⁹ reliant on a relational sense of self.⁴⁰

A similar intellectual move is made by the philosopher James Kellenberger. Kellenberger offers a particularly useful qualification when he acknowledges that there are many forms of humility, and proposes that "the more profound expression of humility is one that spontaneously and naturally excludes pride as a self-concerned reaction (and as well other self-concerned reactions, in particular that of shame). The person who is humble and has the moral virtue of humility in this way is not one who struggles to be humble in order to meet a pride ideal."⁴¹ In a later work, Kellenberger explains that religious humility has a "cognitive aspect" that is "a recognition of oneself as one is, a recognition of God, and a recognition of one's relation to God."⁴² Furthermore, "in light of that recognition, the expression of humility required for

³⁷ Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (1960): 109. See also James Kellenberger, *Relationship Morality* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 337.

³⁸ Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, "Revisiting Feminist Discussions of Sin and Genuine Humility," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 1 (2012): 109.

³⁹ Hinson-Hasty, "Revisiting Feminist Discussions," 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 112. See Andre Louf, *The Way of Humility*; Louf encourages consideration of the state of humility rather than the virtue of humility on 9–10. See also Stephen Pardue, "Kenosis and its Discontents: Towards an Augustinian Account of Divine Humility," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 3 (2012): 271–88; Stephen Pardue, *The Mind of Christ: Humility and the Intellect in Early Christian Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁴¹ James Kellenberger, "Humility," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2010): 330. See also Joseph Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (2003): 249–69.

⁴² James Kellenberger, *Dying to Self and Detachment* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 28.

religious humility is a turning away from self and self-concern.”⁴³ This cognitive aspect indicates self-knowledge, what Vance Morgan refers to as an “awareness.”⁴⁴ Joseph Kupfer prefers the term “orientation,” as humility “directs our attention, thought and action in a sustained way.”⁴⁵ As an orientation, humility informs knowledge of others and of the world. This is founded, according to Kupfer, on “radical dependence” that recognizes “just how much of our success depends on people, institutions, and circumstances outside of our control.”⁴⁶

These scholars further emphasize that humility assumes agency. Put succinctly, in the words of Jay Newman, “humility is a quality involving self-determination based on self-evaluation.”⁴⁷ As a relational value, humility necessarily impacts not only the self but others. Humility consistently assumes a broader community, and it can operate as a common or collective end. This is due to the fact that, as George Schlesinger explains, humility is often interpreted in a nexus of other values: “the virtue of other-directedness, the core of humility, is the ultimate source for all other characteristics that involve an impartial concern for worthy ideals and causes, and that require sympathy for the well-being of others.”⁴⁸ Humility is thereby typically recognized in relation to, and in relation with, other values, including obedience and charity.

An emphasis on the relational features and orientation of religious humility offers an expansive approach to the subject that hearkens to humility as a “disposition,”⁴⁹ suggested earlier in the teachings of Christ. Such resonances suggest that Christian humility intends an orientation beyond the self that “excludes pride as a self-concerned reaction.”⁵⁰ In order to think about the tension between the real and the ideal in humility as it is found in our sources, I adopt the operative definition provided by

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 26; see also Kellenberger, “Humility,” 333.

⁴⁴ Vance G. Morgan, “Humility and the Transcendent,” *Faith and Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (July 2001): 314.

⁴⁵ Kupfer, “The Moral Perspective of Humility,” 251.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁴⁷ Jay Newman, “Humility and Self-Realization,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 16 (1982): 282.

⁴⁸ George N. Schlesinger, “Truth, Humility, and Philosophies,” in *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 254.

⁴⁹ Scheffler, “Reflecting on Jesus’ Teaching on Humility,” 102.

⁵⁰ Kellenberger, “Humility,” 330.

Lisa Fullam, who writes, “Humility is the virtue of true self-understanding in context, cultivated through the practice of other-centeredness.”⁵¹ Fullam’s definition attends to the aspects of cognition, agency, affect, and relation in humility. Furthermore, her definition indicates that humility is a *practice*, a key defining feature in our sources; as a practice, humility not only shifts one’s orientation beyond the self but does so with the potential for excluding a reaction of self-concern, thereby leaving open divine humility as exemplar, the very issue that is being confronted in our sources. Moreover, her definition recognizes the role of context in defining humility. In our sources, Christian humility has a recognizable background of significance formed by Christian scriptures that orients the self toward a divine presence in a way that acknowledges the social implications of radical dependence. Dependence signals hierarchy as Sheryl Overmyer explains, humility “is primarily found in our reverence for God. . . . Humility secondarily concerns others through primary subjection for God.”⁵²

Humility as an Ascetic Value

When we turn to our sources, we must be mindful of what they can and cannot tell us, of their potential and their limitations. Many of our sources function as “orthodox attempts to frame and order experience and doctrine into a single, monolithic image of Christian existence.”⁵³ As well, we need to read with awareness that our sources were written by and attributed to individuals, primarily men. In many cases, our authors were directly connected to their subjects and to their audiences. In all cases, writing served as a relevant means of interrogating and asserting identity; these authors named and reified their own ideologies and ideals in their works.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Lisa Fullam, “Humility and Magnanimity in Spiritual Guidance,” *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 32 (2012): 38.

⁵² Overmyer, “Exalting the Meek Virtue of Humility in Aquinas,” 655.

⁵³ Castelli, “Virginity and Its Meaning,” 65.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 63–64. See also Claudia Rapp, “Storytelling as Spiritual Communication in Early Greek Hagiography: The Use of Diegesis,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, no. 3 (1998): 431–48; Claudia Rapp, “Figures of Female Sanctity: Byzantine Edifying Manuscripts and Their Audience,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50 (1996): 313–44; Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); David Brakke, “The Lady Ap-

Patterns of Intellectual Humility

“Stand here.”¹

The women ascetics considered in the previous chapters provide examples for theological and social humility centered in a Christocentric interpretation and application of Scripture. The present chapter builds on this foundation to consider intellectual humility. Specifically, we will examine women ascetics who pray in community with other Christians from the perspective of a female guest, the fourth-century traveler Egeria. Egeria sought to witness to a divine power in her encounters with fellow Christians; because her account interprets these encounters in the context of Scripture, we can examine how her travels demonstrate a type of intellectual humility connected to theological and social humility.

Egeria’s example is but one of many from women travelers in late antiquity. According to an early Egyptian desert abba, the instruction with which this chapter opens was issued by a young woman to her servant before leaving from a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The young woman had journeyed to Jerusalem from Constantinople for the purpose of discernment. Trying to determine how to inform her family of her desire to live as an ascetic, she sought time in prayer. Her father, an aristocrat, supported her request, supplying her “with horses, servants,

¹ Samaan El-Souriany, *The Hermit Fathers*, trans. Lisa Agaiby and Mary Girgis (Putty, NSW, Australia: St. Shenouda Coptic Orthodox Monastery, 1993), 35; the story of the unnamed female hermit is on 33–36.

maids and 3000 denarii with which to distribute amongst the holy churches and monasteries.”² In her travels, the young woman met holy persons and prayed at holy sites. Over time she determined that she would not return to her homeland and to the marriage that awaited her. Following her final words to her servant outside the church, the young woman returned to one of the abbas she had met previously and asked for his assistance. The abba complied. Renouncing all of her remaining possessions and seeking repentance, the young woman prepared for anonymity as a hermit. With shaved head and monastic garment, the young woman submitted willingly to go “wherever God leads me,” accompanied by the abba’s prayers.³ Divinely guided to a cave, the young woman lived there as a hermit, uninterrupted for nearly ten years, before she met the narrator of her story.

This story reveals Christian participation in an early type of pilgrimage best characterized, in the words of Mary Campbell, as “significant journeying” whereby “the motion of travel becomes the action of quest.”⁴ Containing formal and informal elements, according to Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, “the term *xeniteia* (ξενιτεία, usually translated into Latin as *peregrinatio* and borrowed into Syriac as *aksaniutha*) implies wandering, leaving one’s birthplace, as well as pilgrimage to holy places, holy men, and the shrines of martyrs.”⁵ In the case of the young woman, access to formal travel from her homeland to what would come to be referred to as the Holy Land indicates status and means; it recalls a sizable network of relations and of human labor that made her journey possible and safe.⁶ This network required an uncommon form of collaboration between men and women, as Peter Brown observes, and provided members

² *Ibid.*, 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴ Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 15.

⁵ Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 148.

⁶ For late antique travel, see Maribel Dietz, *Wandering Monks*. See also Gregory I. Halfond, “Transportation, Communication, and the Movement of Peoples in the Frankish Kingdom, ca. 500–900 C.E.,” *History Compass* 7/6 (2009): 1554–69. See also E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, AD 312–460* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), including discussion of the way pilgrimage brought together persons from across social and economic classes.

of both sexes with “moments of unstructured meeting [that] carried with them a warm breath of hope for a lost solidarity and for the lowering of social boundaries that haunted the urban Christian communities of the Mediterranean world.”⁷ For this young woman, and for others, such formal travel provided a novel opportunity for an uncommon type of encounter and experience. Her specific purpose suggests a willingness to embrace travel as a type of wandering. This aligns well with Georgia Frank’s assessment that “ancient Christians spoke of voyaging *orationis causa* (‘for the sake of prayer’), to pray (*euchesthai*, *proseuchesthai*), to venerate (*proskunein*) the holy places.”⁸ John Wilkinson reminds us that this purpose is neither exceptional nor distinctive of pilgrimage in the ancient world, given that “apart from the fact that his particular places and their interpretations were within a Christian framework, he [i.e., the Christian pilgrim] was undertaking a journey for prayer hardly at all different from the pilgrimages of his pagan contemporaries. Pilgrimage as such was neither the invention nor the monopoly of Christianity.”⁹ As the work of these and other scholars has shown, such a fluid exchange of ideas and practices affected the development of asceticism for women across the empire.

In general terms, before the fourth century, Western asceticism in and around Rome consisted primarily of individuals or loosely ordered groups dedicated to lives of chastity and prayer, but they remained in the city and often in their family homes. By the end of the fourth century, knowledge of Eastern asceticism was gained through commercial exchange and travel. Travelers carried ascetic literature and their own stories of pilgrimage and visits back to their homes and shared these with others.¹⁰ Exchange of ideas and practices continued to move in both directions. Athanasius of Alexandria encouraged the adoption of Eastern ascetic

⁷ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 43.

⁸ Georgia Frank, “Pilgrimage,” in *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, 826 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Frank appeals to the scholarship of Pierre Maraval.

⁹ John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades* (Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, 1977), 33.

¹⁰ See Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

practices while in exile and traveling in Rome and Milan.¹¹ Rufinus of Aquileia brought the influence of Basil's monasticism from Bethlehem to Italy through his translation of Basil's Long Rules as well as other ascetic writings.¹²

With regard to women in particular, Athanasius's and Rufinus's contemporary Theodoret of Cyrhus offers numerous instances of pilgrimage travel in his works that, as Bitton-Askelony maintains, demonstrate the range of "foci of pilgrimage" at the time.¹³ Theodoret's *Religious History* includes his visits to two female ascetics, Marana and Cyra. Both, like the young woman at the opening of this chapter and the pilgrim Egeria, were women of means. Marana and Cyra reflect another type of Christian pilgrim alongside these other women. Long engaged in the self-discipline and prayer associated with communal ascetic practice, Marana and Cyra visited the city of Jerusalem and the shrine of Thecla in order "to kindle the firebrand of their love for God."¹⁴ Theodoret interprets their ascetic wandering as an affective component of their Christian identity undertaken for the sake of humble prayer, thereby depicting a distinctive relationship between "asceticism and pilgrimage."¹⁵

By the late fourth century, the time of Egeria, several women are clearly identified for their role in constructing support networks for Christian pilgrims. Many of these women had undertaken the experience of pilgrimage for themselves and chose to remain in the Holy Land. Upper-class aristocratic women such as Paula traveled from the West to Egypt, toured the monastic sites, and founded religious communities to support pilgrims to Jerusalem. Others, including Poemenia, Silvia, and Melania the Elder, accepted a similar path by remaining in the region and adopting an ascetic lifestyle of service to local monks and pilgrims.¹⁶ Although Egeria's travel account ends with her intent to return to her community,

¹¹ Marilyn Dunn, "Asceticism and monasticism, II: Western," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 2, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick Norris, 669–90 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹² *Ibid.*, 674.

¹³ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 175.

¹⁴ Theodoret of Cyrhus, *History of the Monks of Syria* 7, p. 185.

¹⁵ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 179.

¹⁶ See Bernadette McNary-Zak, "Problematizing Women and Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity," *Magistra* 8, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 3–24. See also the discussion of Egeria's *Itinerarium* in Cohick and Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World*, 127–55.

it is possible that she joined those nuns whom she encountered on her travels. Regardless, for those who returned to their homelands and for those who chose to remain “exiled,” travel to the Holy Land served as an expression of Christian devotion and Christian orthodoxy.

This chapter considers the role of intellectual humility in the travelogue of Egeria, a Christian woman who spent several years far from her homeland tracing events recorded in Scripture, which she refers to primarily as the “books of Moses.”¹⁷ These “books”—the five books of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)—contain the foundational narratives of the Israelites as the chosen people of Yahweh. Egeria’s biblical references extended beyond these books to include, among others, appeals to 1 and 2 Kings, Joshua, Job, Judges, and 2 Corinthians. The extant portions of her text indicate that the story of the exodus, in particular, provided the text and the guidebook for her journey.

Scholars continue to debate the details of Egeria’s identity and itinerary, as well as the precise dates of her travels. Her extant account is partial and largely contains information about her experiences rather than biographical matter. It suggests that her travels occurred over an extended period of several years, with a dating in the late fourth century, circa 381–384 CE.¹⁸ Egeria was likely, as Maribel Dietz has argued, an “ascetic wanderer(s) practicing a form of monasticism based on itineracy.”¹⁹ Hadith Sivan writes that Egeria’s travel “demonstrates how pilgrimage created a channel that enabled pious believers of different social classes to enjoy a singular freedom of movement while uniting them in a common enterprise.”²⁰ Like the young woman whose story opens this chapter, Egeria undertook her travels as a form of prayer. Despite certain solitary aspects, Egeria’s “itineracy” was a public and communal endeavor. From the start, Egeria was connected to a religious community;

¹⁷ See Hadith Sivan, “Who Was Egeria? Piety and Pilgrimage in the Age of Gratian,” *Harvard Theological Review* 81, no. 1 (1988): 71.

¹⁸ See the discussion in Anne McGowan and Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria: A New Translation of the Itinerarium Egeriae with Introduction and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 24–27.

¹⁹ Dietz, *Wandering Monks*, 64. See also the discussion of Egeria on 43–68. For a thorough presentation of the debates regarding Egeria’s economic and religious status, see McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, 3–33.

²⁰ Sivan, “Who was Egeria?,” 72.

she recorded her travels as letters for the members of her Christian community who were unable to join her. Sivan argues that the members of this religious community helped plan Egeria's itinerary through prayer and Scripture reading.²¹ Furthermore, Egeria accepted assistance and hospitality from a sizable network of persons, and she prayed regularly with fellow Christians. Mary B. Campbell explains, "Traveling along a route sanctified by Scripture, she reads aloud from the Bible and participates in sacramental rites at every site, working continually to elevate her raw sense experience into a form of communion with that sacred world which *in illo tempore* merged for a while with this one."²² As Averil Cameron writes, "This pattern was repeated as the journey continued, and Egeria's own account is full of her knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and her enthusiasm to fit what she saw into the biblical text."²³

Egeria's prayer is indicative of theological humility; her experiences of ascetic hospitality are expressions of social humility. Egeria's experiences of receiving hospitality inform our reading of the ways vulnerability and anonymity factored into her pilgrimage. By attending to the decentering orientation of prayer and of ascetic hospitality provided at each of the sites she visits, Egeria illustrates an ongoing willingness to suspend judgment. The decentering perspective she adopts through the repetition of patterns of prayer with others before a divine presence over the course of her travels indicates a type of intellectual humility, a capacity for learning through the ongoing interpretation of Scripture.²⁴ Intellectual humility features prominently in her verbal exchanges with those who explain how the sites she visits are connected to their scriptural sources; intellectual humility also factors into how she sees these sites as evidence for the persistent presence of a divine power. Egeria's intel-

²¹ Hadith Sivan, "Holy Land Pilgrimage and Western Audiences: Some Reflections on Egeria and Her Circle," *Classical Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (1988): 528–35.

²² Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, 32.

²³ Averil Cameron, "Remaking the Past," in *Interpreting Late Antiquity: Essays on the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 9.

²⁴ For related discussion see Pardue, *The Mind of Christ*; see also Grant Macaskill, "Christian Scriptures and the Formation of Intellectual Humility," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 46, no. 4 (2018): 243–52, especially 246–47. Unfortunately, timing prohibited me from making use of Macaskill's larger monograph (2019).

lectual humility enables her to participate in the ritual practices and in the christianization of the spaces she traverses, with members of the communities she encounters.

Egeria encounters a wide range of holy people on her journey; she greets bishops and visits monks, she befriends female Christian leaders and walks with other pilgrims, she speaks with nuns and recalls the witnessing acts of early martyrs. Egeria's purpose for her "holy wandering" and encounters with "holy persons" inform a type of intellectual humility rooted in prayer and in ascetic hospitality that seeks communion with the divine and with others; through prayer and ascetic hospitality, Egeria becomes a member of a larger "wandering," praying Christian community that acknowledges its radical dependence on a divine power. By focusing on the communal dimension of her journey, we can examine how Egeria's prayer and ascetic hospitality, undertaken in solidarity with others espousing a similar orientation, inform intellectual humility. Here, being led and being guided become humble acts that mirror the examples of biblical predecessors whose faithfulness required movement and relocation as well as commitment and resignation. Regardless of whether Egeria presents "an idealized account of an ideal pilgrimage,"²⁵ Egeria's account reinforces relationships of theological, social, and intellectual humility as the centerpiece of Christian community.

The Humility of Covenant

In a compelling assessment of Egeria's work, Campbell explains that "it is not just Egeria's self-effacement and purely devotional orientation that separate her from the tradition she helped to engender. It is finally her ecstatic *contemptus mundi*."²⁶ Building on the earlier work of Leo Spitzer, Campbell attends to Egeria's use of repetition, imagery, and restricted formulaic vocabulary to demonstrate that "her literary task is somehow to depress the reader's interest in herself and the course of her journeying, while at the same time maintaining the presence of that inviting and intercessory first person which makes her meditative tool

²⁵ Leo Spitzer, "The Epic Style of the Pilgrim Aetheria," *Comparative Literature* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1949): 249.

²⁶ Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, 30.

effective.”²⁷ Egeria’s expressions of theological humility are evident in those “moments of awe, reverence, wonder, or gratitude” that further orient the reader beyond the author.²⁸ Egeria repeatedly names both her “unworthiness” for her travels and her certainty that “God wills” her travels; both are markers of a type of theological humility signifying her awareness of a divine power before whom she is submissive.

Spatial and ideological considerations mark the distinctiveness of Christian pilgrimage in this period. Prayer was a signifying marker in Egeria’s travels, as she joins others at sites recollecting biblical events pertaining to Israelite predecessors as well as sites commemorating the more contemporary witness of Christian martyrs. Prayer provides the context for theological humility depicted in her work. In particular, she recalls the theological humility of several exemplars, including Abraham and Moses. These role models reinforce the orientation of theological humility as the product of submission and obedience before a divine power. Their recollection joined a panoply of others who were heralded anew in this period; as E. D. Hunt explains, “The range of Holy Land relics was considerably extended with the sudden awakening, towards the end of the fourth century, of the impetus to discover hitherto unsuspected remains: thus revelations unearthed a succession of Old Testament prophets, Habakkuk, Micah, Zechariah.”²⁹ This was due, in part, to a politically and religiously changed context. Emperor Constantine set a precedent for imperial involvement in the affairs of the developing Christian churches that would culminate in the relocation of the empire in Constantinople. Under Constantine’s Theodosian successors, Christianity would continue to assert a dominant position in the religious and political viability of the empire. Under Constantine, John Wilkinson writes, “Christians seem to have been encouraged, by the political favour they had enjoyed . . . to make a take-over bid for everything connected with the Old Testament.”³⁰ Co-optation and colonization of these sites for Christian repurposing was more than cosmetic; Egeria’s account, like those of other Christian travelers, served an implicit ideological end by

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26. I have added “theological” to these expressions of humility identified by Campbell in order to qualify them further.

²⁹ Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 131.

³⁰ John Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels* (London: SPCK, 1971), 296.

recasting events in the Hebrew Bible to foreshadow and foreground Christian narratives around the persistent presence of a divine power through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Such alignment with the political program of Constantine following the Council of Nicea would not only “give Christianity the same public and political visibility enjoyed by other cults of the Empire”³¹ but also create tensions between Christians and Jews in the Holy Land. It would also produce the context in which Christian travelers, including Egeria, encountered a type of intellectual humility.

In her travels, Egeria journeys to sites notable for their connection to her Hebrew predecessors Abraham and Moses, and signifies both by appeal to covenant, “the main biblical image for the distinctive relationship of the people of Israel with God.”³² In each case, she recalls a site of education in theological humility. Egeria visits the house of Abraham (20.3), a site of turmoil and trust according to the accounts in Genesis. Events at the site would build on Abraham’s faithfulness to God’s promise and covenant promise of an heir (Gen 15). The covenant is fulfilled through the actions of Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham with the birth of Ishmael and then of Isaac.³³ Yahweh’s protection and ongoing commitment to both male offspring (Gen 17, 21) is evidence for the sustained covenant relationship of trust with the line of Abraham.

This extends to the covenant with Moses. Here, it is telling that Egeria ascends Mount Nebo (10:1–2) recalling the ascent of Moses, who was led there by God. This ascent is a culminating event in the context of the biblical account of Moses; his leadership and authority, depicted as chosen by Yahweh, were consistently questioned and resisted by the Israelites. He had served as a mediator between the Israelites and Yahweh by adjudicating the terms of the covenant. Following periods of oppression and liberation, the covenant reinforced the conditions of Israelite service

³¹ F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 131. Also see Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 35–36.

³² Steven L. McKenzie, *Covenant* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 9.

³³ Leonard Shlain observes the anomaly that this covenant is oral rather than written in *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (London: Penguin, 1998), 92.

before Yahweh. Lawrence Boadt explains that “the covenant created the unity of the nation Israel, based not on blood relationship but on submission to the divine will and the confession that he alone is God. In turn, God pledges himself to be Israel’s personal protector and helper.”³⁴ It is telling that not only the site but the actions are replicated; Egeria is shown—as was Moses—all of the surrounding places from the mountaintop.³⁵ This serves as a means of “scriptural illustration” as her guides identify sites recorded in the biblical text for her.³⁶

As Wilkinson observes, with regard to the Christian use of sites connected with the Hebrew Scriptures, “the Christians relied on late Jewish tradition for the identification of these sites, and were therefore drawn to make use of the same holy places.”³⁷ In some cases, as with the site of Abraham’s house, this entailed intentional co-optation to support a supplemental Christian function. When Egeria reaches the site of the monk-martyr Helpidius in Carrae (Haran), she explains that his martyrdom is with a church that now sits on the site of Abraham’s house.³⁸ And so Egeria commemorates both Abraham and Helpidius. Identifying the site for her sisters, she recalls the relevant Scripture passage prompting Abraham to wander under divine protection.³⁹ The passage signals theological humility, as Abraham’s radical dependence on a divine power continued to evolve over the course of his lifetime. And yet, the passage also bears distinct signification in the context of Egeria’s present endeavor. It is especially noteworthy that Egeria hearkens to this passage as it serves, in a Christian context, as part of the scriptural basis for the ascetic life and, by association, for the ascetic wandering undertaken by Egeria and other early Christian travelers. Here Abraham is recalled as the consummate model for wandering, trusting completely that he would

³⁴ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 175.

³⁵ Egeria, *Travel Journal* 12, p. 340 in *Christianity in Late Antiquity, 300–450 CE: A Reader*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Andrew S. Jacobs, 333–47 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); from *Égérie: Journal de voyage (Itinéraire) et Lettre sur la Béatissime Égérie*, ed. Pierre Maraval, trans. Andrew S. Jacobs (Paris: Cerf, 1982).

³⁶ Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 36. See also Cohick and Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World*, 137.

³⁷ Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels*, 296. See also Cohick and Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World*, 155.

³⁸ Egeria, *Travel Journal* 20.3, in Ehrman and Jacobs, *Christianity in Late Antiquity*, 345.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 20.1, p. 345.

be guided and directed. This aligns closely with the ascetic practice of those hermits and monks, as Bitton-Ashkelony explains: “Genesis 12:1—‘Get you out of your country and from you kindred and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you’—became the maxim of the monks who left their homeland for foreign countries in which they initiated their new life as well as that of the monks who undertook pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the Byzantine period.”⁴⁰ Fraught with symbolic meaning, then, Abraham serves as a model for Egeria’s ascetic wandering as well.

Both Abraham and Moses represent theological humility expressed as “a submissive (‘humble’) attitude toward the sovereign God of Israel.”⁴¹ What Egeria takes from her predecessors appears to be a trust that her purpose was divinely intended and therefore that her pilgrimage is an opportunity for her to be guided by divine will. For our purposes, it is significant that theological humility, in these “moments of awe, reverence, wonder, or gratitude,”⁴² is contextualized and supplemented not only by Egeria’s appeals to Scripture but by her expressed purpose and by her experience of ascetic hospitality; for this reason they represent a type of social humility informed simultaneously by a divine power and by other persons.⁴³ Theological humility and social humility orient Egeria to the task of interpretation she assumes in her travels. Theological humility creates a foundation from which she expresses and experiences social humility; both, in turn, influence Egeria’s cognitive willingness to learn. By building a community of Christians around prayer and ascetic hospitality, Egeria’s travels attest to the Christocentric focus of biblical interpretation as a type of intellectual humility.

The Humility of Dislocation

Egeria’s wandering is neither aimless nor unintentional. Egeria writes that she undertook travel “for the sake of prayer,”⁴⁴ “for the sake of

⁴⁰ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 148.

⁴¹ John P. Dickson and Brian S. Rosner, “Humility as a Social Virtue in the Hebrew Bible,” *Vetus Testamentum* 54, no. 4 (2004): 459–79.

⁴² Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, 26.

⁴³ See Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*. This chapter intends to complement the studies by Campbell, Spitzer, and others by focusing more directly on how Egeria’s experience of decentering, a result of the collective expression of communal prayer and ascetic hospitality, correlates with intellectual humility.

⁴⁴ Egeria, *Travel Journal* 17.1, in Ehrman and Jacobs, *Christianity in Late Antiquity*, 343.

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