

“In *Desert Daughters, Desert Sons*, Rachel Wheeler offers a rich, robust reading of the Christian desert tradition. Observant of the multifaceted presence of women in desert literature, and the sayings collections in particular, Wheeler’s incisive analysis overturns normative assumptions about spiritual formation. By employing the common category of offspring, Wheeler exposes a quest for spiritual becoming grounded in community. Wheeler’s approach and findings are welcome; they merit examination and application in future scholarship. This is a timely and important book.”

—Bernadette McNary-Zak  
Associate Professor of Religious Studies  
Rhodes College

“Those familiar with the *apophthegmata* of early monasticism will appreciate Dr. Wheeler’s close reading of the stories of monks’ characterizations of women, especially those that discount women so as to protect men’s virtue. Dr. Wheeler peers ‘into the margins of the stories’ and offers a much-needed midrash and critique as invitations to read between the lines to present alternative interpretations for readers, seeking wisdom and desiring validation for living the Christian life today.”

—Mary Forman, OSB  
Prioress, Monastery of St. Gertrude, Idaho

“A beautiful, bold, and creative evocation of the representation and experience of women in the world of early Christian monasticism. With compassion, nuance, and courage, Rachel Wheeler offers us a feminist re-reading of these early monastic traditions that is both liberating and healing. Thanks to her painstaking scholarship and imaginative readings of the ancient texts, we can now encounter the lives and voices of women who have too long been obscured from view. But more than this, her work invites us to rethink the meaning of the tradition as a whole. An original and important work.”

—Douglas E. Christie, PhD  
Professor, Department of Theological Studies  
Loyola Marymount University

“Rachel Wheeler explores the contradictions in a literature that can be so moving and yet so jarring, focusing as it often did on the devaluing of women and family relationships in a new ascetic social dynamic based on spiritual fatherhood. Wheeler’s creative deconstruction of these ancient texts allows them to speak in a fresh voice while encouraging dialogue about their embedded assumptions. This is precisely the kind of reading we need so that classics of the monastic tradition can continue to inspire.”

—Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB, DPhil  
Executive Director  
Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Collegeville, Minnesota

“In *Desert Daughters, Desert Sons*, Rachel Wheeler skillfully turns the ship of contemporary spiritual praxis with the twin rudders of creatively reading early Christian desert literature and critically applying theoretical considerations to the texts and characters of Christian late antiquity. Wheeler uncovers the hidden waters of women’s voices and concerns that lie just under the surface of these dusty, male-centered texts, and in so doing floods the Egyptian desert with hidden communities necessary for spiritual formation—including forming oneself by oneself and allowing marginalized voices to form one’s own journey. In piloting the reader through these waters, Wheeler invites contemporary practitioners of Christian spirituality to refract early Christian wisdom in ways that emphasize the necessities of community and women’s voices, so long forgotten and underappreciated in the spiritual experience.”

—Zachary B. Smith, PhD  
Associate Professor of Theology (History of Christianity) and  
faculty in the Women and Gender Studies Program  
Creighton University

“With *Desert Daughters, Desert Sons*, Rachel Wheeler gives us an always-needed rereading of the desert fathers and mothers portrayed in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* or *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. With her close readings of sayings from the alphabetical, anonymous, and systematic sayings, she challenges assumptions, peers into the margins, and offers new insights into the ‘peripheral women’ in early-monastic stories and sayings. She re-stories the texts from a perspective that focuses with new insight mostly on the daughters of the desert.”

—Tim Vivian  
Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies  
California State University Bakersfield

“According to a famous monastic saying, the ancient Egyptian desert was the place where ‘there are no women.’ But Rachel Wheeler shows that this was not and could not be so. In this thought-provoking study of desert spirituality, she invites us to turn our focus away from the solitary male heroes of monastic stories and notice the many women who inhabit the periphery of those stories or who become hauntingly present in their absence. By attending to desert daughters as well as desert sons, Wheeler uncovers the pain caused by distancing ourselves from one another, and she offers us a way of love, not only for those traveling alone in their deserts, but also for those seeking renewed community among men and women in cities, churches, and families.”

—David Brakke  
The Ohio State University

# Desert Daughters, Desert Sons

*Rethinking the Christian  
Desert Tradition*

Rachel Wheeler



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*Not understanding what has happened  
prevents us from going on to something better.*

—Poemen 200



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## *Introduction*

When I first began reading *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* over twenty years ago, I was delighted to find that their teachings and tales—though ancient—often resonated with my own contemporary situation. These sayings told of men and women who were involved in a meaningful quest for experience of God and who knew how to use their bodily lives wisely while regulating food and sleep, relationships and time, in ways that made them more available and attentive to experience of God. These were men and women, too, curiously akin to the desert lovers I was reading while working on a graduate degree in English. Writers like Mary Austin, Ann Zwinger, and Terry Tempest Williams were all writing movingly of life in the desert.<sup>1</sup>

As I delighted in these ancient Christian writings and their modern analogues, I eventually began to work on a graduate degree in theology and then a doctoral degree in spirituality, both of which allowed me to go deeper into the spirituality of the desert tradition. All this time, I kept looking for evidence of archaeologists and scholars seeking—and finding—more of the texts comprising a desert literature of early

1. See, for instance, Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903), Ann Zwinger, *The Mysterious Lands: A Naturalist Explores the Four Great Deserts of the Southwest* (New York: Dutton, 1989), Terry Tempest Williams, *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001).

Christianity. In particular, I kept hoping for the discovery of more texts *about* and even *by women*. For, indeed, these kinds of texts were and still are in short supply. Though some ancient sources report thousands of women living in the late antique desert and in early monastic communities,<sup>2</sup> we seem to have tales of only a few. There were doubtless many more women we might have heard of and heard from, and I kept hoping for a long while that new *lives* and teachings of these women would surface. Women just as interesting and wise as the named desert mothers (or *ammās*) Syncretica, Sarah, and Theodora. Women just as innovative and adventurous in their personal and pilgrim lives as Macrina, Melania, and Egeria.

After a while, I checked my hopes, realizing with disappointment that, unfortunately, the gatekeepers to these women's lives were men unlikely to find such lives worth reporting about. I also checked my hopes for another reason: I began to notice that *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* were *full* of women. Though not center stage, they were in fact *there*. That I began to notice these women at all I owe to such important teachers as Dr. Mary Forman, OSB, and her teaching on desert *ammās*, to Dr. Barbara Green, OP, and her teaching on biblical wisdom and its feminine expression, and especially Dr. Darleen Pryds and her teaching on women's leadership and whose research on marginalized women in the Franciscan movement continues to inspire me.<sup>3</sup> These scholars and teachers, though not always pointing the light on the

2. *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, trans. Norman Russell, CS 34 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 67.

3. The classes I had with these women were deeply formative of my academic and personal journeys. For Mary Forman's work on women in the desert tradition, see *Praying with the Desert Mothers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005). For Darleen Pryds's work on women in the Franciscan tradition, see *Women of the Streets: Early Franciscan Women and their Mendicant Vocation* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2010).

specific women this book will showcase, did much to make it possible for me to *see* what had previously been invisible to me, and what I imagine remains invisible for many readers of the desert Christian tradition today.

Though the body of literature making up the sources for the desert tradition may strike some readers as arcane, the reader is likely to find some wildly fascinating stories to draw and retain her interest, even when not looking for or noticing women in the text. One such story involves a man assisted by ants to counter a bug infestation initiated by the devil to get the man to leave his cell during a Lenten fast.<sup>4</sup> The collaboration of the natural world in helping this man keep to his sacred routine evokes possibilities for reading the desert literature through a “green” lens, and much more work in that direction remains to be done. More commonly, we find exemplary men sharing their material goods and their wisdom with one another, in continuity with the biblical ideals expressed in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. It is these exemplary male figures who capture the interest of most scholars and teachers of the Christian desert tradition. Of course, in this body of literature, we find women as well appearing here and there as exemplars, but for the most part these women are not exemplars themselves but are visitors, friends, sisters, and mothers to the exemplary men. That this host of women never entirely disappears from the desert tradition is important to the contemporary reader, especially its female reader. These men were never entirely able to get away from women, as much as they might have desired, tried to, and led us to believe they *had*.

4. *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers: A Select Edition and Complete English Translation*, trans. John Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 629–31. Subsequent sayings from this source are cited by number as indicated in Wortley’s translation as in this case: (Anon 763).

The persistence of women in the desert literature is enlightening for what it suggests about the ways in which human beings optimally function. The persistent presence of women in the desert provides a countertext to the Neoplatonic belief that the spiritual life is “a flight of the alone to the Alone.”<sup>5</sup> Instead, that the stories in the collections of desert sayings commonly record what is often depicted as interference from both named and anonymous women suggests a reality we cannot overlook. Whether audibly or not, these women spoke wisdom about the spiritual life that we still need to hear. They said to male friends and family members, and they continue to say to us: “None of us are meant to go it alone.” They go on to say, “We are here to join you not in ‘a life taking no pleasure in the things of earth,’ (the phrase preceding Plotinus’s words quoted above) but in the participatory event of becoming.” Helpers and helped alike, these women and men might, alternatively, collaborate with one another in their spiritual maturing.

To understand these persistent women and to understand what the male collectors of the literature meant by allowing their peripheral presence to be recorded, we as readers need to enlist our openness, intuition, empathy, and creativity as we put aside what we may assume about this desert tradition and the monastic tradition it fed, and listen to it anew. To be the stalwart male adrift in the wilderness, pitting himself against and vanquishing its terrorizing solitude and his own demons, has been the aspiration of men as contemporary to us as Henry David Thoreau, Edward Abbey, and Chris McCandless.<sup>6</sup> But a different relationship to the process of spiritual formation,

5. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 6.9.11

6. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*; Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971); Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Villard Books, 1996). A recent feminist critique of the androcentrism of this wilderness impulse is provided by Abi Andrews, *The Word for Woman is Wilderness* (Columbus, OH: Two Dollar Radio, 2019).

to community's role in that process, and to our environments is possible if we listen to women. It is this book's task to call our attention to the voices of women in the desert sayings and to suggest ways that listening to them will offer an alternate vision for a way of living together characterized as a way of love.<sup>7</sup>

In this introduction, I describe the historical setting of desert spirituality and the sources we have for investigating this period. I next offer an explanation for why I have chosen to refer to the women and men of these stories as *desert daughters* and *desert sons* rather than with the more familiar terms, *desert mothers* and *desert fathers*. Though my terminology may never catch on and I do not mean for it to jettison a whole rich tradition of associations around the metaphorical engendering that spiritual companionship makes possible, my language *is* meant to function as a corrective against allowing our too-familiar words to cause us to forget that all these women and men themselves had *real*—that is, biological and not just socio-spiritual—mothers and fathers. To that end, they had specific (unchosen) individuals to whom they owed their personhood, biologically and socio-spiritually. Though it is natural to pick one's own spiritual mentors and models—we do it ourselves all the time—it is essential to remember and honor our origins. This book investigates why male desert Christians did this forgetting and dishonoring, and it appeals to the contemporary reader to question and challenge that gesture within an important movement in the early history of Christian spirituality. This book further appeals to the contemporary reader to seek alternate routes forward from a renewed understanding of the spiritual maturing these men and women sought, even when the means they used to realize this maturing may seem suspect to us.

7. This phrase draws implicitly from the work of Belgian feminist philosopher, psychoanalyst, and linguist Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, trans. Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček (New York: Continuum, 2002).

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Making Space for Women Readers of the Christian Desert Tradition*

Though few know much about the desert daughters and sons, the literature of the Christian desert tradition is still read by some for its charming stories of women and men given over as entirely as possible to encounter with God. Often the literature has been read by those within Christian monastic communities. More recently it has been “discovered” by Protestant evangelical readers and activists who cite its influence in their own formation of intentional community life, alternative social economies, and contemplative spiritual practices.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, the literature has been read with appreciation by modern people like me who wish they’d had a monastic vocation or an opportunity to live within an intentional community such as a Catholic Worker or Jesuit Volunteer Corps household, beyond the immediate family. Significantly, the appeal

1. See, for instance, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2010); Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry, *A New Monastic Handbook: From Vision to Practice* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2014); and Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko, *New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

of this literature comes at a time when many in contexts like North America feel isolated geographically and ideologically from family members and the community in which they were brought up. People like me read from outside cloister walls and are particularly drawn to this early tradition properly identified as *protomonastic* rather than monastic, because its inhabitants lived outside monastery walls, prior to the formalization of a certain kind of consecrated religious life that remains to our day. These individuals and the tales of their lives are often more accessible to modern readers than stories involving monks and nuns of later centuries with whom many readers do not share a religious vocation with its commitment to celibacy, obedience to community leadership and a rule, and the stability of life that monastic environments make possible and require for continuance.

The literature of the Christian desert tradition emerged from stories of men and women who were the revolutionaries of their day, countercultural exemplars who formed their own idiorhythmic rules of life and responded to and interacted with their own chosen spiritual companions. Thus, they offer contemporary readers a portrait of a lifestyle that, because independent of the explicit vocation that eventually derived from this context, might still feel possible for spiritual seekers today. From dwelling fruitfully in solitude to praying while one worked, from judiciously moderating one's experience of food or sleep or relationships to attending deeply to injurious habits of thought, the desert Christians' experiences contain a wealth of insight on the human condition and the seeking after and experiencing of the divine that remains as useful for those of us who remain outside monastery walls as it has been for centuries for those within such communities.

But just as there is much to cherish in the desert tradition, there is much as well that remains grievous, and even particularly offensive, to women. Just a cursory glance at a few pages of the sayings collections and the constant introductory repetition of "He also said. . . . He also said. . . . He also

said. . . .” may set some women’s teeth on edge. This kind of stitching of the sayings together may seem benign, but it indicates a reverence for men’s words and a continual pointer to the men who uttered the words that may make some women want to close the book. That this chapter attempts to make space for the female reader means that we acknowledge these aspects of an androcentric text and move past them as signposts providing a clear view of the bias expressed in this text that virtually compels us to let other voices speak.

I remember a conversation with a colleague a few years back, also a scholar of the Christian desert tradition, who referred to a certain desert elder named Arsenius as “a grumpy old man.” Arsenius is, in some respects, the exemplar solitary of the desert tradition, a figure whose desert solitude contrasted greatly with his former involvement with those living the high life in such cosmopolitan cities as Alexandria. Stories about Arsenius went on to influence the seventh-century ascetic, Isaac the Syrian, and his own privileged expression of Christian life as solitary. Hearing this colleague’s characterization of Arsenius, I was at first shocked, then intrigued, and finally amused as I realized my own assumptions were being tested and revealed. Finally, I asked myself: Could Arsenius *really have been* a grumpy old man?<sup>2</sup> He certainly valued his peaceful solitary retreat to such an extent that he was rather rude to visitors (Arsenius 28) and even rated poorly his fellow desert dwellers who could discern the sound of reeds blowing in the wind while trying to pray (Arsenius 25), two representations of his personality that may not impress readers today. Similarly, might not “grumpy old men” be an apt appraisal of many of the figures whom we learn of and are expected to admire in the desert literature? Though it initially surprised,

2. Interestingly, this kind of question is explored by Chris L. de Wet in the article, “Grumpy Old Men?: Gender, Gerontology, and the Geriatrics of Soul in John Chrysostom,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 24, no. 4 (2016): 491–521.

and even slightly pained, me to consider this possibility, this colleague's identification of Arsenius did much to awake me to the invitation to look more closely at the sayings collections and to consider how many of their heroes might have been "grumpy old men" and legitimately so. Many of them were dealing with internal contradictions between ideals and reality that would have made anyone grumpy. For instance, while the ability to be "alone with the Alone" was held up as an ideal virtue to develop, a saying such as Theonas's expresses a Christian countertext to this ideal (drawn perhaps from Matt 18:20): "Even if [one] acquires a virtue, God does not grant [that one] grace for [that person] alone" (Poemen 151). One needs the neighbor to share with, and with whom to experience God.

However, I have not only learned to look more closely beyond the representations of holy men in the sayings collections to their "real," and perhaps gritty, lives. I have also begun to peer into the margins of the stories, to recognize and greet characters who appear and say nothing or very little, to note their ephemeral passing, and to puzzle over why they appear, what kept them silent, and what they might have said had the storytellers remembered their words. This peering into the margins has, for me, yielded a new source of wisdom in the sayings.

Though the desert literature is so heterogeneous a collection, made up of anecdotes, teachings, lives, and histories, one of its common threads is its focus on exemplary men and their ordeals and successes. Sprinkled here and there, however, is the presence of a woman. Though three are named as known desert elders and have sayings attributed to them in the Alphabetical Collection of the desert sayings—Syncretica, Sarah, and Theodora—these women are exceptions. Others appear silently, seeming merely to occasion a moment of insight for men. These women were, nevertheless, leading their own lives, dealing with their own ordeals and successes, which seem not to have interested men. This book is an attempt to honor those

lives, proposing avenues of thought to consider what these women's lives might have looked like. Such an attempt is motivated by my profound love for these stories and a desire that they be rehabilitated for contemporary and future readers. Reading past some of the bias related primarily to gender (but also to ethnicity and social status) that is expressed in the desert stories may allow some readers to access more readily the value that still remains a part of the Christian desert tradition, and even to discern and imagine new values for this tradition.

### **Non-Judgment or Judgment?**

In this chapter, I explore assumptions around the traditional interpretations of stories contained in the sayings collections. Even as these assumptions are revealed and clarified, however, I suggest also an approach to the desert sayings that allows their underrepresented characters to offer something of value to the interpreter of this early Christian tradition—something that has, to date, been neglected. It is not surprising that these underrepresented characters are, principally, female. An example of such a story and such an approach may be useful here. This story appears in a chapter in the Systematic Collection called “against judging”:

Abba Poemen once came into the region of Egypt to dwell there, and there happened to be a brother living near him who had a wife. The elder was aware of this but did not ever condemn him. Now it happened that she gave birth one night, and, perceiving this, the elder called his junior brother, saying, “Take a measure of wine with you and give it to the neighbor, for today he is in need.” His brothers were unaware of the matter, but he did as the elder told him to do. The brother [his neighbor] benefitted; he was conscience stricken, and, a few days later, he dismissed the woman (giving her whatever she needed). Then he came and said to the elder, “As of today I am repenting, Abba.” He came and built himself a cell near the elder and often

went to him; the elder lighted him along the way of God and gained possession of him. (Against Judging 20)

First, we may notice that this story represents what may seem surprising to us: a situation that was still possible in the desert before the institutionalization of monastic life—that is, this early “monk” or single one (from the Greek *monachos*) had a wife and child. Yet it also represents a desert Christian who comes to see these relationships, entailing identities for himself as husband and father, as problematic, given his life goals. We see him conscience-stricken when dealt with gently, or *non-judgmentally*, by his neighbor, Poemen, upon the delivery of a child to the man’s family. The story ostensibly has a happy ending for the man, depriving himself of his wife and child, so as to “repent” and live nearer to Poemen—indeed, in slightly ominous language, to be taken “possession of” by Poemen—and apparently to receive more teachings from him about the kind of life men wanted to establish in the desert, without women and without children.

Surprisingly, Lucien Regnault cites this story as proof that there was “no contempt of women among the desert fathers.”<sup>3</sup> In order to do so, however, Regnault has had to abbreviate the story, showing only the parts of the story—the giving of wine in celebration of the baby’s birth—that are proof of the “goodness with which the Desert Fathers treated women who misbehaved with a monk.”<sup>4</sup> Having read the story in full, I hope we can see how the woman in this story has *not* misbehaved with a monk; rather, we see more accurately the man misbehaving *after* and prompted to do so by the giving of Poemen’s gift.

3. Lucien Regnault, *The Day-to-Day Life of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Étienne Poirier Jr. (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1998), 30.

4. *Ibid.*, 31.

Of what exactly is the man repenting as he leaves his family and joins Poemen's retinue? Given the morality of the Christian communities of this time and even of future times, he was not sinning by being with a wife and having a child with her. He was, however, living in a way that was *to become* incompatible with monastic reality and thus is represented after the fact as duplicitous in the desert context, as he appears to be one who has renounced sexual activity, to *be* monachos, when in fact he is not. An alternative morality was being developed in the desert context—by men—and this story documents its emergence: a seemingly more strenuous way of life, stripped both of familial responsibilities and pleasures, facilitated progress “along the way of God.” We might appreciate that the man sent the woman and child away with everything they needed (shades of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael? cf. Gen 21:14), but still consider: Was this man acting aright? Is this really exemplary behavior and thus imitable behavior?

The inclusion of this story in the chapter on non-judgment affirms Poemen's activity as the exemplary, imitable one. He does not judge this man for having a wife and child, and neither should we. Poemen responds to the man's needs without broadcasting his situation; if we are as well-versed in Scripture as the desert Christians themselves, we probably hear echoes of I Peter 4:8 in Poemen's act of love that covers over a multitude of sins. But the premise of the man's actions being sin remains fundamentally in error. The partnered man acts upon Poemen's gesture of generosity as if it *were* judgment—he can somehow read the shaming implicit between the lines of Poemen's lack of shaming, in a paradoxical manner worthy of the sayings genre in general (there is almost always more in these stories than meets the eye)—and replaces his familial relations with that of a man capable of non-judgment, further affirming for us by this recognition of exemplarity what we, the readers, are to consider exemplary. Ironically, reading this story in the contemporary context evokes just this response from me: one of judgment.

My judgment is this: This man was not wrong for having had a wife and child. But this man was wrong in having sent away the woman and child with whom he had been making a home. What grounds this judgment? Two reasons: First, the social implications for this woman and child were injurious. We can sense the uneasiness of the tellers of this story around this aspect of the story in their inclusion of the detail that the man provided the woman with what she needed.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the man imitates Poemen's gesture of gift-giving and provision in a way that cements their common identity as desert sons. However, clearly whatever this man could give his wife and new child would not be enough. What happened to her? Did she return to her family home? Did the child brought up without a father survive and even thrive? *Could* the two of them survive and thrive in the patriarchal culture of their time? We know from other desert sayings that women and children were dependent on men's work, income, and inheritance, so that in another desert saying we learn that it requires supernatural intervention from a desert elder named Milesius to converse with a dead man about how his death had come about (over the theft of money) and how to locate the stolen funds for his family's needs (Milesius 1). So that in yet another story we learn, similarly, that it takes Macarius's intervention on behalf of a weeping widow whose family, left destitute at her husband's death, is about to be enslaved to converse like Milesius with the dead man to find out where deposited funds have been stored (Macarius 7). It should not surprise us that women and children were so dependent on men but it should surprise us, and even cause us discomfort, that the woman and child in the story about Poemen's non-judgment, are offered as collateral damage in a man's spiritual quest. Indeed, that the women in the stories of Milesius and Macarius

5. Perhaps, too, we can sense Regnault's uneasiness in his interpretation of the desert men's charity in omitting recognition of the troubling aspects of this story.

appeal to desert sons for help suggests a terrible power these men of the desert accrued as they, themselves, as in the case of Poemen, occasioned the removal of male members of the family who would have helped the families survive and thrive.

This leads to the second reason why the man should not have sent away his wife and child: the spiritual implications were injurious, as well. Not just for the man, but for the emerging tradition and subsequent ideas of Christian discipleship that affirm this kind of action. The man had begun a life with this woman, and discarding her and their offspring at this point should be seen as insupportable of, rather than facilitating, spiritual life. That the man's actions are not represented that way in this story should register as problematic to us, and it should bring us to renewed consciousness and appreciation of what we do consider supportive of spiritual life.

While sudden ruptures to one's way of life are often seen as consistent with an experience of "conversion," such sudden ruptures affect others besides oneself. My point is that dedication to one's own spiritual formation at the cost of others' well-being should be discreditable, and we have to attend to these desert stories and what they say and what they don't say in order to bring these discreditable aspects of the stories and the subsequent tradition they helped form to further light. Indeed, to do so requires that we enter into a kind of judgment upon these stories, sympathetic to the many actors in the stories with whom we might share a desire to become more spiritually mature, more aware of the divine presence in our own lives and the lives we share with others. But we must also be critically reflective when it comes to noting the ways in which these desert sons and daughters acted upon that desire. Sometimes they may have been right. Sometimes they may have been wrong. In identifying these distinctions, we come to recognize to what degree we share some habits of thought in relation to the spiritual life we understand to be unfolding within and among us today.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Way of Love in the Christian Desert*

In this book, women's persistence in the desert tradition when they were not wanted there has been implicitly characterized as love. Sometimes these women have called out these men in word or deed, occasioning further examination of their ways of life. For instance, Ammonas feigned madness when some people came to him, appealing for his judgment on a matter (Ammonas 9). A woman observing the interaction names Ammonas's folly and apparently Ammonas heard her words, though spoken to a neighbor and not directly to Ammonas, and he lamented his exposure. This is, in fact, a puzzling story because you would think on the face of it that this woman was confirming Ammonas's inability to judge, helping to release him from an obligation he seems to want to avoid. He could have gone along with her words, not heeding them, and continued to act the fool. Instead, he calls attention to them and rebukes her for occasioning his loss of something it had taken him many years to acquire. The story seems to play on contrasts between wisdom and folly, truth and deception, men's humility and women's outspokenness in public spaces. Whatever the intention between the interaction between Ammonas and the woman, the story implies that

Ammonas has been exposed and will now take up the duty of serving in judgment. Woman has been used here to circumvent the humility men were supposed to adopt; woman has been used here to allow a man to regain his position of superiority. Stories of this kind continue to puzzle and frustrate the contemporary reader for what they seem to suggest of holiness, the spiritual life, and public engagement.

### **The Troubling Aspect of Men's Love**

A way of life could be surmised from men's interactions with one another. Their persistent presence to one another is also part of the Christian desert tradition. However, it seems to operate in ways that reinforce the patriarchal, hierarchical structure of relationships and community within the Christian desert. For instance, one story that is paradigmatic of desert obedience tells of a disciple Mark whose "master" is Silvanus. This story begins with the clarification of their relationship in this way: "The old man [Silvanus] loved him because of his obedience" (Mark 1). Other disciples of Silvanus were jealous of this relationship and, numbered at eleven, they are certain to recall to our minds the disciples of Jesus and tribes of Israel. In both cases of biblical communities, preferential treatment was evident in the "beloved" disciple and in Joseph, Jacob's favored son whom Rachel bore. When other elders in the desert story observe the dysfunction in the community occasioned by this jealousy, they "reproach" Silvanus for it. Rather than take their words to heart, however, Silvanus decides to illustrate just how obedient, and thus worthy of love, Mark is, especially in contrast to the other eleven disciples. He calls each and the only one who comes immediately when called is Mark. Indeed, Silvanus takes the elders into Mark's cell and exhibits how Mark's obedience had been so prompt he had not even finished writing a letter he had begun writing. The elders are converted and affirm that they, too, love Mark and know that God loves him, too.

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