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Towards a Biblical Spirituality—Recovering the Past for the Future”—that title captures the essentials of the project articulated in the Sarum Theological Lectures for 2004. Over years of research, I had learned much about the way the Bible had been used and interpreted by the so-called Fathers of the church. As a teacher of Biblical Studies, I had operated in a very different way—according to the academic conventions of modernity. As a preacher I had struggled with the gap between the work of biblical scholars and what is practised and believed by faithful church-goers. The invitation to deliver the Sarum Theological Lectures provided an opportunity for me to try and address the questions raised not only by that gap but also by the current tensions around Scripture that cross the denominations, and to do so by seeking a renewal of biblical spirituality through learning from past Christian teachers.

The lectures thus drew on a long-standing research interest in a context that demanded engagement with contemporary church life and spirituality. My idea was that exploring the ways in which the earliest theologians and preachers read the Bible would enable us to follow their approach, not necessarily adopting all their conclusions, but certainly reopening the question whether the “spiritual meaning” of the text may not be more important than the “literal” or “historical” meaning. In seeking contemporary applications, the lectures drew on reflections on current global issues, but also on personal experiences.
It was always my intention to refer to the L’Arche communities, from which I have learned much. In L’Arche, people commit themselves to living in community with those who have learning disabilities. Founded by Jean Vanier, these communities are now spread all over the world. Originally in the French Roman Catholic tradition, they now have, in the Federation, communities which are ecumenical, and in some parts of the world, multi-faith.

In the event, however, when I should have been preparing the lectures I was in fact distracted by my husband’s prostate cancer, so that in delivery they were a rushed job! A year later, as I began to develop and write them, my ninety-four-year-old mother was slowly sinking after a massive stroke and the trauma of moving to a nursing home. Despite years of coming to terms with the prenatal developmental failure of my first-born son, whom we still support at home as he nears forty years of age, I was continually reminded how profoundly difficult it is to live with our vulnerability and mortality—how we question and rebel, as we are overwhelmed by grief and distress. The biblical spirituality which emerged from the project challenges the culture we have assimilated, and its assumptions and values, while offering both a realistic view of the human condition and the wonderful gift of grace which brings hope of transformation. It is this conversion of heart which constitutes the purpose of Scripture, according to the Fathers.

Many of our well-known hymns, in fact, pick up the same kind of spiritual reading of Scripture as we find in the Fathers. For this reason each lecture began with a hymn related to its theme, and these hymns will be found at the head of each chapter in this book. In this way we can see how we already have access to this biblical spirituality, and so we may find the Fathers less strange than we might have supposed. Because we are drawing on this material, Scripture will not be consistently quoted from a modern translation but more arbitrarily in ways that reflect the meaning and usage of the hymn writer or the Fathers.

The Fathers may be described as the early theologians of Christianity, dating roughly from the second century to the early medieval period. They include bishops, pastors, and preachers, as well as philosophers and intellectuals, scholars and thinkers. The body of literature that has been passed down over the centuries comprises letters, treatises, apologetics, commentaries, homilies, dialogues, polemics, histories, and many other writings.1 Clearly, it is necessary

to provide some information about the people whose work will be exploited and about some terms that will be used which are not in common usage. The rest of this introduction will consolidate the information that was given to the lecture audience through the medium of handouts. It is intended to be useful rather than daunting! The reader is urged not to wade through these lists at the start, but to consult this material as the chapters are read. For this reason the material has been reorganized into alphabetical lists, and only includes those individuals who are actually mentioned and those words that are actually used. Apart from the Fathers, reference is also made to certain Greek philosophers, as well as to one of the most famous of Jewish Rabbis. They are included in the list below.

The Fathers and Others

Abba (= Father) John the Persian: a character who appears in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the collection of the anecdotes and teachings of the famous ascetics known as the Desert Fathers. They come from approximately the fifth to the eighth centuries.

Ambrose: bishop of Milan in the late fourth century; a politician and pastor, and author of many books in Latin. His preaching contributed to the conversion of Augustine (see below).

Amma (= Mother) Theodora: cf. Abba John the Persian (see above).

Antony: traditionally the founder of Egyptian monasticism. His *Life* was written by Athanasius.

*Apostolic Constitutions*: a compendium of works concerning church order, compiled in the fourth century but containing earlier material, and attributed to the Apostles.

*Apostolic Fathers*: the term given to the earliest writings other than the New Testament (i.e., the canonical books)—some, such as *The Shepherd of Hermas* and *1 Clement*, were regarded as part
The Desert Experience

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
Hold me by thy powerful hand;
Bread of heaven,
Feed me now and evermore.

Open thou the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream shall flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
Strong Deliverer,
Be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell’s destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan’s side:
Songs of praises
I will ever give to thee.

In this well-known eighteenth-century hymn, we easily recognize allusions to incidents in the exodus narrative: the manna, the water from the rock, the pillar of fire by night, and the pillar of...
cloud by day. Here these motifs become metaphors illuminating each person’s life pilgrimage. Thus the hymn provides a telling example of the classic reading of Scripture by which it provides “types” of the life that each one of us has to live. The way that people understood their own lives was once shaped by patterns and models found in Scripture, and, conversely, people read their own lives into Scripture.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that this kind of “typology” is how the Bible has traditionally functioned, thus producing a biblical spirituality which was carried in liturgy and hymnography, as well as in private devotion and Scripture reading. This was the case from the beginning: it is already there in the New Testament writings; it was developed in the theology of the Fathers of the church. We shall explore some examples from this Christian past, focusing on the motif of the desert experience; but we shall also consider why it is important self-consciously to reclaim this tradition in our postmodern world and how it might enable us to approach the Bible more imaginatively and creatively so as to find it a resource for living in the troubled world of the early twenty-first century.

The Desert Motif in the Bible and the Early Church

Inner-Biblical Interpretation

An obvious appeal to the story of the exodus occurs in Psalm 95 (once regularly used in Anglican worship as the *Venite* of the traditional Mattins in the Book of Common Prayer). The worshippers who chant the psalm are exhorted not to harden their hearts today as their fathers did in the days of temptation in the wilderness. Already then in the Psalter, the memory of the exodus becomes a warning to each generation—it has a present reality rather than just being an event in the past.

This perspective is drawn out in the New Testament as this psalm is taken over by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The words of verses 7–11 are quoted in full, and then the author adds his own exhortation: “Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12). He goes on to insist that that response is required now—“Today” means “Today” every day! Always it is possible to lose the promise if you are not careful and so fail to enter into the rest that God has prepared. This “rest” becomes more than the Promised Land,
for it is taken to represent God’s kingdom, the *eschaton*, heaven. The pattern of the whole of history is implied, for God’s rest on the seventh day symbolises this “end”—God’s ultimate purposes. The author worries about the possibility of Christians failing through disobedience, even though he is sure that, for the people of God who persevere to the end, a Sabbath rest still remains. Thus even within the Bible, the importance of the story is not what happened in the past but the way it functions in a new situation, as encouragement or warning for “today.”

**The Desert Monks**

The prophets sometimes suggested that comfortable Israel needed to return to the desert, and such a return became literalized in the world of the early church. Tradition makes St. Antony the first to have crossed the line from settled land to wilderness. The tale is told that Antony wandered into a church just as the Gospel was being read and heard the Lord saying to the rich man, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Matt. 19:21). His literal response was to sell his inheritance and withdraw into the desert. The story of his ascetic exploits was celebrated in *The Life of Antony*, attributed to Athanasius, a work which had enormous influence on the development of ascetic and monastic practices in both the East and the West. Soon the desert became “a city”¹ as more and more people rejected civilization, and a new way of Christian discipleship was celebrated in collections of stories and sayings from the Desert Fathers.

Some years ago I was flying over Egypt and, looking down, I could see that sharp defining line which differentiates the cultivated Nile valley and the desert on either side of it. I realized more than ever before what stepping across that boundary meant.

For the early ascetics the desert was a place of trial and temptation—as for the Israelites, and as for Jesus. There they found their inner demons exposed: fear and insecurity, anger and violence, self-deception and self-hatred. Let one rather amusing example suffice:

A certain brother while he was in the community was restless and frequently moved to wrath. And he said within himself, “I shall go and live some place in solitude: and when I have no one to speak to or to hear, I shall be at peace and this passion of anger will be stilled.”
So he went forth and lived by himself in a cave. One day he filled a jug for himself with water and set it on the ground, but it happened that it suddenly overturned. He filled it a second time, and again it overturned; and he filled it a third time and set it down, and it overturned again. And in a rage he caught up the jug and broke it. Then when he had come to himself, he thought how he had been tricked by the spirit of anger and said, “Behold, here am I alone, and nevertheless he hath conquered me. I shall return to the community, for in all places there is need for struggle and for patience and above all for the help of God.” And he arose and returned to his place.\(^{2}\)

The monks felt they were engaged in battles with the devil, just as Christ had been. They saw their role as engaging in a “mopping-up operation,” Christ having already achieved the victory in principle.\(^{3}\) They were “filling up what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ” (Col. 1:24), contending with the powers of evil on behalf of the whole church, even the whole world.

The practice of renunciation constituted the fight against desire and temptation, a fight which necessitated detachment from possessions. A saying attributed to Amma Theodora goes like this: “Just as the trees, if they have not stood before the winter’s storms, cannot bear fruit, so it is with us; this present age is a storm and without many trials and temptations we cannot obtain an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven.”\(^{4}\) Temptation was inseparable from experience and was a good thing, enabling discernment of spirits and endurance. It produced freedom—it meant not being anxious or worried, and a willingness to move on and venture into unknown territory.

Yet the desert was not just a place of struggle. It was also the place where you met God, where you received wisdom. One saying went, “Renounce this life so that you may be alive to God.”\(^{5}\) They looked for holiness and intimacy with God. It was through deep identification with scriptural motifs that they acquired authority and a kind of prophetic insight into the state of society. They lived out a desert hermeneutic, as their lives were modeled on Scripture, and their reading of it reflected the issues arising in desert life and the world around them. Many were illiterate, but regularly they recited the Psalms by heart. They heard the Scriptures read and were absorbed into the world of the texts. They recognized the power of the word, resisting demonic temptations by scriptural quotation, as Jesus had; “they felt themselves recapitulating the experience of Jesus,”\(^{6}\) and the motif of forty days of solitude in the wilderness is repeatedly

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The Desert Experience

found in the records. They wanted to fulfill all the commandments, thus “doing the word.” As Douglas Burton-Christie comments, “the desert monks took seriously the ethical commitment required for understanding the biblical texts.” Macarius is reported to have said: “Meditate on the Gospel and the other scriptures, and if a distracting thought arises within you, never look at it but always look upwards, and the Lord will come at once to your help.”

The characters of the Bible provided exemplars. Abba John the Persian, in reply to the question whether the monks would inherit the kingdom after enduring so many afflictions in the desert, said: “I have been hospitable like Abraham, a hermit like John, filled with repentant sorrow like Jeremiah, a master like Paul, full of faith like Peter, wise like Solomon—so like the thief [crucified with Jesus] I trust that he who of his natural goodness has given me all that, will also grant me the kingdom.” Jesus Christ was the paramount model, however, especially of the virtue of humility. They wanted to imitate his kenōsis (self-emptying): “Obedience is the best ornament of the monk. He who has acquired it will be heard by God, and he will stand beside the crucified with confidence, for the crucified became obedient unto death” (see Phil. 2:8). Humility was to be achieved by the endurance of trials for the sake of Christ; that was the way to be blessed (Matt. 5:10ff.). Indeed, the whole purpose of life in the desert is summed up in the Beatitudes creatively reminted: “Happy is the monk who thinks he is the offscouring of all” (cf. 1 Cor. 4:13). Thus the Gospel and the whole of Scripture was interpreted through a literal living-out of the desert motif.

The Model for the Spiritual Life

The desert motif was not only played out literally but also functioned metaphorically as a symbol of the spiritual life. Probably the clearest example is Gregory of Nyssa’s Life of Moses. Gregory intended his exposition of the scriptural story to provide a pattern of life, possibly for a priest, though this is not explicitly stated. The work illustrates the principle of typology or “figural reading”—the way the biblical narrative shapes a sense of the Christian life. Gregory’s theme is perfection and its attainment.

Perfection in this world needs “boundaries.” This was a fundamental classical idea. Chaos is not beautiful—rather, beauty is found in the perfect shape of a statue or other artifact. Perfection requires defining