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**THE PRACTICE OF LENTEN SOLITUDE IN THE *LIVES*
OF CYRIL OF SCYTHOPOLIS**

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THE PRACTICE OF LENTEN SOLITUDE IN THE *LIVES* OF CYRIL OF SCYTHOPOLIS

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Abstract

In his hagiographical works Cyril of Scythopolis described an annual practice during which a select number of monks would leave their monasteries for the solitude of the surrounding desert for the period of Lent. This article examines the appearance and use of this unique monastic practice within the literary context of late antique Palestinian monasticism. Rather than being widely adopted as some scholarship has suggested, the practice of Lenten solitude was primarily used by the abbots of the Judean Desert as a method to temporarily achieve *hesychia*, stillness and solitude. Within Cyril's narratives spiritually advanced monks continually sought more reclusive forms of asceticism for the sake of *hesychia* by limiting their contact with other individuals by enclosing themselves in a cell or fleeing the region entirely. The administrative and temporal duties expected of monastic leaders prevented their engagement with these practices. I argue that Lenten solitude provided abbots the temporary opportunity to engage with their desired ascetic praxis without abandoning their monastic institutions and positions as leaders. This reveals the continued interplay between institutionalized monasticism, with its connections to the imperial church, and the internally focused ascetic goals of spiritual perfection which remained at the heart of the monastic way of life in sixth-century Palestine.

Keywords

Cyril of Scythopolis, *Hesychia*, Monasticism, Late Antiquity, Judean Desert, Lenten Solitude

Introduction

“After celebrating the commemoration of the great Euthymius, which is celebrated on the twentieth of January, he [Sabas] would then retire to the utter desert, withdrawing himself from all human intercourse until Palm Sunday. This he did nearly every year.”¹

In this excerpt, Cyril of Scythopolis, a Palestinian monk writing in the mid-sixth century, described an annual practice in which a small number of monks left their monasteries for a period of solitude during the season of Lent.² These monks, either alone or in small groups

¹ Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Sabas*, 106.13-15: ἐπετέλει τὴν τοῦ μεγάλου Εὐθυμίου μνήμην τὴν κατὰ τὴν εἰκάδα τοῦ Ἰαννουαρίου μηνὸς ἐπιτελουμένην, εἰθ' οὕτως ἀνεχώρει ἐπὶ τὴν πανέρημον πάσης ἀνθρωπίνης συναναστροφῆς ἀφιστῶν ἑαυτὸν ἕως τῆς τῶν Βαίων ἑορτῆς καὶ οὕτως ἐποίει σχεδὸν κατ' ἑνιαυτὸν.

² On Cyril see Binns 1994; Chitty 1966; Hirschfeld 1992; Patrich 1995; Hombergen 2001; Bitton-Ashkelony 2006, 415-431.

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of two or three, would retire to the surrounding desert and then return in time for Palm Sunday. The appearance of this practice is unique in late antique monastic literature. It does not appear in any of the other monastic texts composed in Palestine prior to the seventh century.³ It also rarely appears in the broader world of late antique monastic literature. There are currently only three other texts that mention some variety of this tradition, two of which are also centered on the Judean Desert and postdate Cyril. The seventh century *Life of Mary of Egypt* and the early ninth century *Life of Stephen the Sabaite* both mention the idea of monks leaving the monastery for Lent in some fashion.⁴ The final text that mentions the practice, and actually predates Cyril, is the fifth century *Life of Barsauma the Mourner*.⁵ Even among this small selection of texts, we witness significant variations of this monastic tradition.

While the presence of this Lenten tradition has been briefly noted in several foundational works on Cyril and late antique Palestinian monasticism, most have been vague about who engaged in the practice and the purpose behind it has yet to be provided.⁶ Given the unique appearance of this ascetic practice and the lacuna in scholarship, the intention of the article is to explore Cyril's presentation and use of Lenten solitude in his monastic *Lives*. In particular, the article will examine which monks he described as engaging in the practice and why this specific expression of asceticism was chosen by Cyril's monastic figures. The analysis of these topics will reveal that within Cyril's vision of Palestinian monasticism the practice of Lenten solitude was primarily adopted by the abbots (*hegumens*) of the Judean Desert. This practice provided those monks who had taken on the temporal and administrative duties of leading a monastery the temporary opportunity to achieve a more complete form of *hesychia* than they were able to practice within the walls of the monastery. Throughout his *Lives* Cyril presents the attainment of *hesychia*, further stillness and solitude from the world, as the pinnacle of the ascetic process.⁷ However, the duties and responsibilities expected of abbots prevented them from being able to fully engage in the practice. The exile of the *paneremos* provided by the practice of Lenten solitude allowed for a severance from most individuals and a greater opportunity for *hesychia*, which would allow a greater connection with God and the spiritual advancement it provided.⁸

³ The practice is not mentioned in the *Life of Chariton*, the *Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschos, the *Correspondence* of Barsanuphius and John, the *Discourses* of Dorotheos, or the works of John Rufus.

⁴ Hirschfeld 1992, 214, 248. Leontius of Damascus, *Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas*. Sophronius, *Life of Mary of Egypt*, 39-40.

⁵ Caner 2020, 149-170.

⁶ Binns states that it was the "hardest of ascetics" who went on the Lenten journeys. See Binns 1994, 105, 109. Hirschfeld mentions that the Lenten practice was "observed by experienced monks" and that there were "many monks who went down 'to the depths of the desert' for Lent." Hirschfeld 1990, 12, 214. Patrich does note that abbots used the practice but does not discuss it in detail. See Patrich 1995, 272; Chitty 1966, 107-108.

⁷ For discussions of *hesychia* see Gould 1993, 109, 175; Ware 1976, 22-47; Mezynski 2012, 63-64; Ward 1975, 250; Chryssavgis 2000, 586-87; Chryssavgis 2012, 262-276; Valantasis 2008, 141, 153; Harmless 2004, 228-29.

⁸ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 14-15.9.

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Overview of Lenten Solitude

Cyril is quite clear regarding where he believes the practice of Lenten solitude in the Judean Desert originated. He tells that Euthymius began the tradition while still in Armenia, where he would retire to an uninhabited mountain for the season, beginning on the day of Epiphany and lasting until Easter.⁹ When Euthymius transitioned to Palestine in 405/06 CE he brought the practice with him and passed it along to his fellow monks. Several other monks, most notably Sabas, proceeded to adopt the practice on their own. After the death of Euthymius, Sabas started leaving slightly later in order to celebrate the commemoration of Euthymius before departing.¹⁰ In regard to where Euthymius himself learned the practice, it is less clear. Cyril simply states that Euthymius was copying the philosophy of Elijah and John.¹¹

The core idea of Lenten solitude remains consistent throughout Cyril's *Lives*. The monk was to leave their monastery during Lent for a period of solitude generally in the *paneremos*, the utter desert outside the colonized regions of the monasteries. It is the solitude which these Lenten retreats provided that Cyril emphasized as the key important element in the practice. According to Cyril, the practice allowed the participating monks to sever all other human connections for a period of time. Severing these connections allowed the monk to consort with God in solitude through prayer, which would help subdue the body and supply spiritual nourishment (πνευματικὴν τροφήν) for the soul.¹² The monk would then return in time for Palm Sunday.

Regarding the physical actions of the practice, that is what the monks actually did during their Lenten solitude, there is some uncertainty and variety. In many instances, Cyril is vague about what the monks did in a physical sense outside of retiring to the utter-desert and simply states that they left for Lent. There are enough instances, however, in which Cyril provides more detailed information about this practice that allows for more concrete information to be assembled. In general, it seems that the monks would travel to a select region or choose to traverse in a general direction. For instance, the first year that Euthymius brought Sabas along with him for Lent he traveled southwards in the desert from Rouba to beyond the Dead Sea.¹³ Once the monks had reached their desired area, they would then find a suitable cave in the region and settle there for the remainder of Lent. One year for instance Sabas traveled across the desert of Zóara by the Dead Sea and saw a small island in the sea. He decided he wanted to settle on the island for the remainder of Lent and attempted to make it to the island.¹⁴

How far these monks would travel during Lent depended on their individual desires. In connection with Sabas' extensive building efforts, he used these Lenten excursions as opportunities to scout out and spiritually cleanse new areas for additional monasteries. In these instances, Sabas did not travel very far at all before he settled down. In 492 Sabas traveled to the hill of Castellion, about twenty stades from the Great Laura. Cyril reported that the hill was known to be occupied by a large number of demons. Sabas spent Lent there,

⁹ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 13.20.

¹⁰ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 106.5-15.

¹¹ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 13.25. In 1 Kings 19:3-9 Elijah is described as walking forty days and forty nights from Beersheba to Mount Horeb where he sought shelter in a cave. All four of the canonical gospels describe John the Baptist as being of the wilderness. See Matt. 3:1-3; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:2-4; John 1:23.

¹² Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 15; *Life of Sabas*, 94.19, 106.15. This will be developed below.

¹³ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 94.20-25.

¹⁴ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 106.

cleansing the area through ceaseless prayers.¹⁵ Sabas returned to his laura for Easter and then brought monks back to Castellion to establish the coenobium which bears its name. The second instance follows much the same description. Sabas, this time accompanied with one disciple named Paul, only traveled about fifteen stades from the laura to a gorge and found there a large cave. They settled in the cave until Palm Sunday and then returned to the laura. After Easter, Sabas again brought monks with him back to the gorge and established the new Monastery of the Caves.¹⁶ In a similar vein, Gabrielius, who served as abbot of St. Stephens, had a cell built on the Mount of Olives and retired to it for Lent.¹⁷ In at least one instance, Sabas traveled much further during Lent. Cyril states that Sabas and Agapêtus traveled north along the Jordan and prayed at Chrosia, Heptapêgus, and other unnamed holy places as far north as Pnias (Caesarea Philippi) before returning to the Great Laura.¹⁸ Juxtaposed to these instances of either remaining close to or traveling far from their monasteries are those who simply traveled into the surrounding *paneremos*. The distance that one traveled or the act of traveling itself was not the focus of the Lenten practice and varied depending on the monk and their desires. The act of traveling away from the monastery was a means to an end rather than the goal itself. In Cyril's description of the practice, the primary purpose of these Lenten excursions was solitude for abbots.

As with most forms of asceticism in Palestine, fasting was also an element of Lenten solitude.¹⁹ A part of the ongoing process of mortifying the body for the sake of the soul.²⁰ It is during Lent that Cyril extends his monks' ability to fast to extremes. Sabas was able to survive his forty-day wanderings by subsisting only on communion on Saturdays and Sundays.²¹ During this same tale, Sabas' disciple Agapêtus was able to subsist on a small bag of dried bread during the season. In other instances, Cyril describes the monks as foraging for wild plants as their food source in the desert. Upon settling in the gorge that would become the monastery of Theoctistus during one Lent, Euthymius and Theoctistus are described as feeding on the plants that grew in the region, at least until they were discovered by herdsman of the nearby village of Lazarium who subsequently administered to the holy men.²² Elsewhere, when Euthymius first brought Sabas along, Cyril mentions that they subsisted off the roots of *melagria*.²³ In these instances, the monks seem to have veered towards the lifestyle of the *boskoi*, or grazers, who made their home in the same deserts of Palestine.²⁴ Fasting, as well as the harsh conditions of the desert itself, at times caused less experienced monks to collapse or otherwise succumb to their physical needs. During another Lent that Agapêtus accompanied Sabas, a few days after they left the Great Laura, Agapêtus laid down one night due to "...fatigue and fasting."²⁵ In Sabas' first excursion he himself became

¹⁵ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 110.10. On Castellion see Hirschfeld 1990, 33-34; Patrich 1995, 137-145.

¹⁶ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 126.15. On the Monastery of the Cave see Hirschfeld 1990, 38-39; Patrich 1995, 146-153.

¹⁷ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 56.5.

¹⁸ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 108.1-20.

¹⁹ Patrich 1995, 270; Hirschfeld 1992, 82-91.

²⁰ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 15.

²¹ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 109.

²² Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 15.20.

²³ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 57. On *melagria* see Hirschfeld 1992, 89-90; Patrich 1995, 42; Binns 1994, 107-108.

²⁴ On the *boskoi* see Wortley 2001, 37-48; Baynes 1947, 409; Hunt 1984, 67-68; Rousseau 2010, 43.

²⁵ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 107.10: ἀπὸ τοῦ κόπου καὶ τῆς ἀστρίας.

weakened from the heat and lack of water. In this instance, Euthymius dug down to the water level to provide for his disciple.²⁶ Cyril presents this as a miracle; however, it seems instead to have been an excellent example of Euthymius' survival skills and knowledge of the *paneremos*.²⁷

Who Engaged in Lenten Solitude?

As might be surmised based on the references so far, a majority of the mentions of Lenten solitude in Cyril's *Lives* are connected to Euthymius and Sabas. In fact, of the roughly twenty mentions of the practice, eighteen concern Euthymius or Sabas. The first mention of Lenten solitude is early in the *Life* of Euthymius, prior to him coming to Palestine. In his hometown of Melitene in Armenia Euthymius was ordained priest and put in charge of the monasteries near the city.²⁸ It is in connection to these appointments that Cyril first describes Euthymius' practice of retiring to a nearby uninhabited mountain for Lent. After coming to Palestine and settling in the *laura* of Pharan, Euthymius continued the annual period of solitude, joined by Theoctistus, and it was during one such Lent that they founded what would become the monastery of Theoctistus. After fleeing from this monastery out of a desire for *hesychia*, Euthymius eventually settled again and established his *laura*. Cyril continues to occasionally mention Euthymius engaging in Lenten solitude throughout the remainder of his life. The fact that Euthymius had not made preparations for his annual journey was actually the occurrence which caused Euthymius to reveal that he was to die soon.²⁹

Shifting to the *Life* of Sabas, it was Euthymius who taught Sabas the tradition by bringing him along one Lent. In Cyril's narrative this occurred soon after Sabas had shifted from the coenobium to a solitary cell, just outside the monastery of Theoctistus around 469 CE. With this transition Sabas began to live a life of *hesychia*, remaining in his cell during the week and only returning to the coenobium on Saturday and Sunday. Cyril states that Euthymius heard that he was living in this manner and it was why he decided to bring him along during Lent.³⁰ In the narrative of Sabas' life, Euthymius soon died and Sabas fully retired to the desert of Coutila and Rouba to live in solitude.³¹ During this section of Cyril's narrative there is no mention of the Lenten practice. It is not until after Sabas established the Great *Laura* and begins serving as abbot that he is mentioned as leaving the monastery for Lent.³² The Lenten practice is then regularly mentioned, particularly in connection with Sabas' building efforts, until Sabas was sent to Constantinople and the court of Anastasius in 511. After this point there is no further mention of the practice in the *Life* of Sabas.

Outside of Euthymius and Sabas, there are only two other monks who are described as choosing to engage in the practice in their own right, rather than being brought along by others. These two monks are Gerasimus and Gabrielius and similar to Euthymius and Sabas,

²⁶ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 56.25; *Life of Sabas*, 94.14.

²⁷ Binns argued that Lent coincided with the period of higher rain in the region, allowing the desert to be more hospitable for the wandering monks. Binns 1994, 105.

²⁸ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 13.15.

²⁹ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 57.20.

³⁰ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 94.15.

³¹ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 95.10-15.

³² Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 106.10.

they were both abbots. Gerasimus founded his combined monastery (a coenobium surrounded by a laura) around 455 CE along the Jordan. He is mentioned as adopting the Lenten practice in his own right and occasionally meeting with Euthymius during Lent to receive the Eucharist.³³ Gabrielius served as the abbot of St Stephens and is said to have built a small cell on the Mount of Olives where he would retire to and spend Lent.³⁴

Beyond these four abbots, Cyril describes a small number of promising disciples being selected to accompany their masters on these Lenten journeys. As mentioned above, Sabas himself was selected in such a fashion by Euthymius and is mentioned as regularly accompanying Euthymius up until his death. In addition, Euthymius' long-time disciple Domitian, as well as the Egyptian archimandrites Martyrius and Elias, are also mentioned as sometimes joining Euthymius.³⁵ Once Sabas established the Great Laura and continued the Lenten tradition on his own, Cyril mentions a disciple named Agapêtus as regularly joining Sabas during these excursions as well as a monk named Paul. Cyriacus is the only monk mentioned as being brought along by Gerasimus.³⁶

While the practice of Lenten solitude is mentioned multiple times in the *Lives* of Sabas and Euthymius, in his subsequent *Lives* Cyril rarely mentions the practice. Cyril never mentions John the Hesychast, despite his connection with Sabas, as engaging in the practice. Likewise, as just mentioned Cyriacus was brought along by Gerasimus early in his monastic career, however, once he had transitioned to the anchoritic life Cyril never again mentions Cyriacus maintaining the practice. Lenten solitude is also completely absent from Cyril's *Lives* of Theodosius, Theognius, and Abraamius. While these subsequent *Lives* are shorter than those of Euthymius and Sabas, the absence of the practice seems odd. Cyriacus clearly knew of the practice and Cyril found it important to note but is never described as engaging in the practice later in his life.

The vision that Cyril provides of the practice of Lenten solitude is one in which certain abbots of the monasteries of the Judean Desert decided to engage in the annual practice and bring a select number of disciples with them. Most commonly abbots, particularly Euthymius and Sabas, were accompanied by only one or two select disciples each year rather than a large group of monks. Sabas is described as ever only being joined by one monk, either Agapêtus or Paul. One-year Euthymius was joined by both Sabas and Domitian. In another, he was joined by Martyrius and Elias.³⁷ Finally, it is worth mentioning that occasionally abbots would remain alone during these Lenten travels. The clearest examples of this comes from Sabas, who during one Lent is presented as being alone when he attempted to reach an island and had his beard burnt off by hot vapors.³⁸ During another year, Cyril described Sabas as befriending a lion, who remained his sole companion for the remainder of Lent. He was also alone during the Lent in which he cleared Castellion of its demons.³⁹ The practice of

³³ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 51.12.

³⁴ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 56.6. Gabrielius was one of Euthymius' first disciples accepted into his laura. Cyril claims that he was made abbot of St. Stephens by Eudocia. See Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 49.15; Hirschfeld, 1992, 45-56.

³⁵ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 51.10, 56.25, 57.20.

³⁶ Cyril, *Life of Cyriacus*, 225.10.

³⁷ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 51.10.

³⁸ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 106.20.

³⁹ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 110.10.

Lenten solitude in the Judean Desert remained a small and intimate affair used by abbots, rather than a communal monastic practice open to all monks.⁴⁰

Purpose of Lenten Solitude

In his monograph on Sabas, Joseph Patrich also briefly mentions that it was the abbots of the Judean Desert who Cyril depicted as engaging in this Lenten practice. However, Patrich suggests that it is only the abbots who engaged in the practice because they were the only monks who had the authority and privilege to leave the monastery in this manner.⁴¹ While authority is certainly an element in the ability to leave the monastery, it is not the primary reason abbots were the monks who engaged in Lenten solitude. Mobility was a common occurrence in the monasteries of Palestine, with monks moving from coenobium to laura or from laura to desert cave and back again.⁴² The monks that engaged in such movements were certainly required to have reached a certain level of spiritual advancement and mastery before they were deemed ready by spiritual directors to do so, but most were not, nor would become, abbots. The emphasis on authority also side-steps the central question of the motivating factors that led abbots to leave their monasteries.

Similarly, in his study of the *Lives* of Barsauma the Mourner and Alexander the Sleepless, Daniel Caner presents the Lenten practice in Syria as primarily penitential with an emphasis on physical hardships.⁴³ While penance could have been an element of the practice in Palestine, Cyril's language suggests it is not the primary motivating factor. The harsh realities of the practice are not the primary emphasis in Cyril's *Lives*. He instead describes Lenten solitude in language similar to his description of *hesychia*. For abbots who engaged in the practice, Lenten solitude was primarily undertaken for the sake of a limited period of extended solitude which they were otherwise not able to fully engage in as desired. The duties and responsibilities of the abbot limited their own spiritual growth and the Lenten excursions provided opportunities to again focus on their own asceticism.

Hesychia in Palestinian Monasticism

Throughout late antique Palestine, the adoption and achievement of *hesychia*, stillness, was presented as the height of ascetic development. The anonymous author of Chariton's *Life*, most likely written shortly after Cyril, described *hesychia* as the mother of all virtues and identified Chariton's adherence to it as the reason he was able to reach the pinnacle of spiritual mastery.⁴⁴ For the monastic authors and their audience *hesychia* meant a further withdrawal from the world and another step into the spiritual realm as a citizen of heaven.

⁴⁰ This portrayal of the practice differs significantly from that in the *Life of Mary of Egypt*. In the seventh century version, the entire monastery, except for a few monks, are described as engaging in the practice and wander the desert during Lent. Sophronius, *Life of Mary of Egypt*, 39-40.

⁴¹ Patrich 1995, 272: "Begun by Euthymius, the departure into the desert during Lent was a privilege reserved for the abbot, who could choose the monks who would accompany him."

⁴² Chitty 1966, 82-85; Patrich 1995, 37-43; Baynes 1947, 409-10; Rousseau 2010, 43-44.

⁴³ Caner 2020, 164-166. Caner's article is focused on Barsauma and Alexander the Sleepless. However he does briefly mention the practice in Palestine.

⁴⁴ *Life of Chariton*, 24. On Chariton see Hirschfeld 1992, 10-12; Hirschfeld 1990, 6-12; *Life of Chariton*, 393-396.

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Hesychia could not be adopted by every monk that had entered the coenobium. It was a gift only granted to individuals that had truly attained humility and obedience and proven to their spiritual directors and abbots that they had sufficiently progressed in the creation of their new selves. Sabas is said to have required that a solitary monk must “possess discernment and zeal, be a combatant, sober, self-controlled, respectable, a teacher not needing teaching, sufficiently able to curb all the members of his body and a steadfast watch on his mind.”⁴⁵ It was only after these milestones were met that a monk was allowed to transition to a cell. Barsanuphius, as a contemporary who had established himself in a monastery near Gaza, stated that prior to entering stillness monks must “hasten to purify our hearts of the passions of the old self.”⁴⁶ It was only after this that stillness could be entered. While it was the job of the elders to determine if monks were ready to adopt such a life, it was only through God that the true, spiritual, benefits of *hesychia* could be attained. According to Barsanuphius, only at the proper time could the spiritual gift that was *hesychia* be granted.⁴⁷ Removing one’s own will and attaining humility, obedience, and the other virtues just described by Sabas was the process by which a monk removed from themselves “those things which are hated by the Son of God” and allowed God to make “a home in you and teach you what stillness is and illuminating your heart with ineffable joy.”⁴⁸

After attaining the requisite virtues and granted the right to enter stillness by both their spiritual elder and God, a monk's routine should consist of both a physical and spiritual element, as reflected in the word *hesychia* itself. Externally *hesychia* meant the practice of secluding oneself in a monastic cell and limiting contact with others to a minimum. Within Palestine this meant living in a cell on the outskirts of a coenobium, a cave in the desert, or transitioning to a *laura*. A monk first entering solitude was urged to remain in their cells for five days a week and then come together on Saturday and Sunday for Church service and the Eucharist.⁴⁹ While still living in the coenobium he founded with Theoctistus, Euthymius maintained this practice, not seeing anyone until Saturday each week because of his practice of *hesychia*.⁵⁰ When Sabas transitioned to a cell from the Coenobium of Theoctistus he also followed this practice of five days of solitude. He would leave the coenobium on Sunday evening, bringing with him enough palm leaves to last him the week out of which he made baskets.⁵¹ When first living in stillness, John the Hesychast also kept himself secluded for five days and used the weekend for attending services.⁵²

⁴⁵ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 113.10-14: αὐτοῦ πάντοτε λέγοντος ὅτι δεῖ εἶναι τὸν κελλιῶτην μοναχὸν διακριτικὸν καὶ σπουδαῖον, ἀγωνιστὴν, νηφάλιον, σώφρονα, κόσμιον, διδακτικὸν οὐ διδασκαλίας χρῆζοντα, ἱκανὸν ὄντα τὰ τε μέλη πάντα τοῦ σώματος χαλιναγωγῆσαι καὶ τὸν νοῦν τηρεῖν ἀσφαλῶς.

⁴⁶ Barsanuphius and John, *Correspondence*, L. 71: Σπουδάσωμεν οὖν καθαρῖσαι τὴν καρδίαν ἡμῶν ἀπὸ τῶν παθῶν τοῦ παλαιοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ὧν μισεῖ ὁ Θεός. Barsanuphius was an ascetic and spiritual director at the monastery of Seridos in Tawatha, a few miles southwest of Gaza throughout the early to mid-sixth century. He, along with his disciple John the Prophet, practised an enclosed form of *hesychia* and only directly interacted with a select disciple. See Hevelone-Harper 2014; Bitton-Ashkelony & Kofsky 2006; Bitton-Ashkelony 2010, 244-267.

⁴⁷ Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 208.

⁴⁸ Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 208: καὶ μόνην παρὰ σοὶ ποιήσει καὶ διδάσκει σε τί ἐστὶν ἡσυχία καὶ φοτίζει σου τὴν καρδίαν ἐν χαρᾷ ἀνεκλαλήτῳ.

⁴⁹ Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 32..

⁵⁰ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 19.19. Barsanuphius advised John of Beersheba to follow the same schedule. See Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 50 Barsanuphius also gives this same advice to a monk-priest who sought to live in stillness. See Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 211.

⁵¹ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 94.5.

⁵² Cyril, *Life of John the Hesychast*, 206.20-25.

After living in stillness for an extended period of time—Cyril generally stuck to about five years in his narratives—some monks took the practice of *hesychia* further, fully cutting themselves off from everyone and permanently remaining in their cells. Barsanuphius and John the Prophet maintained this practice, both never leaving their cells and refusing to see or talk with anyone except their designated disciple, who read and wrote all of their correspondences with the larger monastic and Christian community. Within the Judean Desert, John the Hesychast maintained this same practice. John lived in stillness in his cell for four years (498/9-502/3), never leaving or meeting with anyone except his disciple who served him.⁵³ He then transitioned to a cell in Rouba, coinciding with Sabas' exile from his lura, where he spent six years in solitude, “withdrawing himself from all human intercourse.”⁵⁴ Finally, after Sabas returned from his exile and began building the New Laura, John the Hesychast returned to a cell in the Great Laura where he remained for forty-seven years. During this last period, Cyril describes him as living in solitude and not leaving his cell, however, he did seem to begin to meet with individuals that sought him out.⁵⁵

According to Barsanuphius, it was only through such an act of perfect stillness that a monk would come to “know Christ and be amazed by his gift.”⁵⁶ Cyril similarly described Sabas' practice of *hesychia* as consisting of him “speaking with God and cleansing his mind's eye so as with ‘unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory.’”⁵⁷ Cyril maintains this practice in his description of John the Hesychast, who is described as “desiring to speak with God in stillness and cleansing his mind's eye with long philosophy so as with ‘unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory.’”⁵⁸ The life of stillness was the final preparation a monk needed to shed themselves of all earthly cares and make themselves ready and worthy to receive God.⁵⁹ The attainment and practice of *hesychia* is identified as the pinnacle of ascetic mastery in Palestine. It marked the personal spiritual progress of the individual monk and their place among the spiritual elite of the monastic communities of Palestine.

***Hesychia* and Lenten Solitude**

It is this last, enclosed, form of *hesychia* that was most out of reach of abbots and for which Lenten solitude served as an alternative. Within Cyril's *Lives*, the position of abbot was, in many ways, presented as an obstacle to this idealized monastic life. The position of abbot which Euthymius and Sabas held prevented either of them from fully practicing *hesychia* as

⁵³ Cyril, *Life of John the Hesychast*, 208.25-209.

⁵⁴ Cyril, *Life of John the Hesychast*, 209.10: πάσης ἀνθρωπίνης συναναστροφῆς ἀφιστῶν ἑαυτόν.

⁵⁵ Cyril, *Life of John the Hesychast*, 225.09. Cyril mentions that John was despondent over not leaving his cell to be present for Sabas' death. See Cyril, *Life of John the Hesychast*, 214.5-10. In addition to Cyril's multiple personal meetings with John, Cyril mentions John exorcising a child by anointing him with oil. See Cyril, *Life of John Hesychast*, 218.5. It seems that John would physically see people, as he opened his door for his disciple Theodore. See Cyril, *Life of John the Hesychast*, 219.5-10.

⁵⁶ Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 22: τότε γνώση αὐτόν καὶ θαυμάσεις τὴν τοῦ Χριστοῦ δωρεάν. Prior to this point, Barsanuphius described monks as being among the people.

⁵⁷ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 99.5: ὁμιλῶν τῷ θεῷ καὶ τὸ τῆς διανοίας ὀπτικὸν ἐκκαθαίρων πρὸς τὸ ἀνακεκαλυμμένοι προσώποι τὴν δόξαν κυρίου. 2 Co 3:18.

⁵⁸ Cyril, *Life of John the Hesychast*, 209.10-15: Ο ὁμιλεῖν τῷ θεῷ ἐπιποθῶν ἐν ἡσυχίαι καὶ τὸ τῆς διανοίας ὀπτικὸν τῇ μακρᾷ φιλοσοφίαι ἐκκαθαῖραι πρὸς τὸ ἀνακεκαλυμμένω προσώπω τὴν δόξαν κυρίου.

⁵⁹ Barsanuphius encouraged John of Beersheba to not care about anything after becoming a hesychast. See Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 36.

the administrative duties that the position required meant that they could not completely isolate themselves as other advanced monks could. The acceptance of such a position limited their own ascetic praxis. This understanding of the position can be seen within Cyril's text itself.

Prior to coming to Palestine, Euthymius is described as seeing the charge of serving as priest of the Church of Melitene in Armenia and leading of the monasteries near the city as an "obstacle to virtue" and it was in part because of this that he decided to flee to the deserts of Palestine.⁶⁰ After establishing his first monastery in the Judean Desert with Theoctistus, Euthymius became "vexed and impatient" and remembered the "former peace he enjoyed as a solitary."⁶¹ He then soon fled this monastery as well for the desert with a single disciple. Even once Euthymius settled at the site that would become his *laura*, Cyril describes Euthymius as resisting the acceptance of additional disciples. Euthymius did not want to establish a monastery of any type or accept other monks due, in part, to his desire for *hesychia* and the administrative duties which serving as an abbot required.⁶² It was only after receiving a vision of God which told him to accept others that Euthymius conceded and began his *laura*.⁶³ Similarly, Sabas only began to accept others at what would become the Great *Laura* after being persuaded by the word of God.⁶⁴ Euthymius and Sabas were responsible for founding their own monasteries and permanently maintaining the position of *hegoumenos* over them. In this role, they did not only serve as spiritual directors, guiding their monks through the ascetic process, but also maintained administrative duties ensuring that they had "within the monastery the required necessities, in order that none of those who desired to withdraw from the outside turmoil would be compelled on account of these needs to go out into the world."⁶⁵

Sabas' administrative role is well documented by Cyril and discussed in scholarship.⁶⁶ He was a prolific builder, responsible for establishing nine monasteries (four *lauras* and five *coenobia*), penetrating far into the Judean Desert.⁶⁷ It was Sabas himself who scouted the locations, secured the funding, oversaw the construction, and appointed the administrators of each of these monasteries. As Patrich expertly argued, Cyril presented Sabas as the community leader of not only the Great *Laura*, but all of his monastic foundations. While the other monasteries had administrators (*διακηταί*), only Sabas was *hegoumenos*.⁶⁸ As *hegoumenos* Sabas remained involved in the care of his monasteries, especially the Great *Laura*.⁶⁹ After beginning to accept disciples and founding the *laura* around 483, Sabas then remained attached to this monastery for roughly twenty years until 503. During this period Sabas only temporarily left the *laura* to establish additional *coenobia* and for Lenten solitude, which as discussed above frequently coincided. From 503 to 507 Sabas was exiled from his

⁶⁰ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 14.

⁶¹ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 21.20.

⁶² Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 25.2. Binns, 1994, 156.

⁶³ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 25.25.

⁶⁴ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 99.10-15.

⁶⁵ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 102.12-15: πρόνοιαν γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐποιεῖτο πρὸς τὸ ἔχειν αὐτοὺς ἔνδον τὰς ἀναγκαίας χρείας, ἵνα μὴ τούτου ἕνεκεν ἐπὶ τὸν κόσμον ἀναγκάζονται ἐξιέναι οἱ βουλόμενοι ἀναχωρεῖν τῶν ἕξω θορύβων.

⁶⁶ Binns 1994, 161-170; Hirschfeld 1992, 15-17; Patrich 1995, 169-196; Chitty 1966, 108-111.

⁶⁷ Patrich 1995, 8, 55. The four *lauras* are: the Great *Laura*, the New *Laura*, the Heptastomos *Laura*, and the *Laura* of Jeremias. The five *coenobia* are: the Monastery of Castellion, the Mikron *Coenobium*, the Monastery of the Cave, the Monastery of Scholararius, and the Monastery of Zannos.

⁶⁸ Patrich 1995, 169-173.

⁶⁹ Patrich 1995, 170.

monastery, however, after regaining leadership of the Great Laura Sabas would again remain attached to the monastery until his death except for his two journeys to Constantinople in 511 and 530. During these years he did eventually build a more solitary tower for himself connected to the laura's church, however Cyril never claimed that Sabas was living in *hesychia*, whether during the week or completely.

Euthymius likewise remained attached to his laura after founding it. Other than the annual Lenten practice, Cyril's only mention of Euthymius leaving his monastery for an extended period was the two years he lived in self-imposed exile in Rouba between 451-3 in response to the Palestinian revolt against the council of Chalcedon. Otherwise Euthymius appears to have remained involved in the administrative and spiritual welfare of his laura during his forty-five-year tenure as *hegoumenos*. From the outset Euthymius maintained responsibility for the physical needs of his monastery and its monks. After establishing his laura it was Euthymius that asked Peter Aspébetus, bishop of the Saracens, to build his first disciples their cells and decorate their church.⁷⁰ After the death of Theoctistus, Euthymius seems to have maintained some authority over his first monastic foundation as well.⁷¹ Originally Euthymius asked Patriarch Anastasius to care for the monastery after Theoctistus had died, however, the patriarch said that since Euthymius had helped to found and make holy the site, he should look after it.⁷² Euthymius consented and he alone appointed a monk named Maris as *hegoumenos*.⁷³ When Maris died two years later it was again Euthymius who appointed Longinus as the next abbot. While Euthymius did not hold the title of *hegoumenos* of the monastery of Theoctistus, as Sabas did over his other monasteries, he did maintain an authoritative primacy; the monastery of Theoctistus was considered a branch of Euthymius' laura and under his authority. Along with ensuring the spiritual welfare of the monks of their monastic communities, which Sabas and Euthymius provided due to their own ascetic perfection, these two fathers of the Judean Desert are also presented as remaining responsible for their communities' physical welfare.

As a comparison to the held positions and acetic practices of Euthymius and Sabas, the near contemporary holy men Barsanuphius and John the Prophet who lived in the monastery of Seridos near Gaza are worth examining. In contrast to Euthymius and Sabas, Barsanuphius and John did not take on the position of abbot and the administrative duties that such a role entailed. The Old Men maintained their positions as the spiritual backbone of the community while Seridos carried the title of abbot and its required duties.⁷⁴ Instead, Barsanuphius and John both adopted the practice of complete enclosure for the sake of *hesychia*. They did not leave their cells and, except in a few rare cases, only directly interacted with a single disciple.

Barsanuphius confirms the importance of Seridos' position as abbot by describing him as the one who "protects us after God."⁷⁵ Barsanuphius continues by telling John that he should be thanking and praying for the preservation of Seridos from evil for their own benefit and

⁷⁰ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 26.15.

⁷¹ This was the monastery that Theoctistus and Euthymius established together after leaving the Laura of Pharan. See Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 25.15-25.

⁷² Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 55.10.

⁷³ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 55.15

⁷⁴ Neyt 1974, 62; Bitton-Ashkelony & Kofsky 2006, 82-106.

⁷⁵ Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 48: τῷ μετὰ τὸν Θεὸν σκεπάζοντι ἡμᾶς.

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that of the community.⁷⁶ It was because of Seridos and his willingness to deal with and maintain a connection with the world as abbot that Barsanuphius and John could live a life of *hesychia*. During his younger years, John attempted to assert his own authority in the monastery and quarreled with Seridos on several occasions. Barsanuphius admonished John over this, asking him if he had forgotten “the settlement which you share in stillness as a king, while he [Seridos] bears the burden of those coming and going from us, making us undisturbed?”⁷⁷ Barsanuphius and, eventually, John recognized the distinction between their positions and that of Seridos and the benefits of that distinction for their asceticism. Within Barsanuphius’ understanding the administrative authority of the abbot was a burden that Seridos took on for the benefit of the Old Men. It allowed the two old men to focus on their personal asceticism and practice a complete form of *hesychia*, something that Euthymius and Sabas could not.

Cyril’s conception of monasticism was one of personal asceticism, of perfection being a state of alienation from the human realm and a spiritual existence in communion with God. For those nearing, or reaching, perfection this was best achieved through the practice of *hesychia* and physically isolating oneself from others. However, to have the possibility to reach such a spiritual state, monasteries and spiritual directors were needed to train and pass along their wisdom. Individuals such as Sabas and Euthymius were required as abbots and spiritual directors. This concession placed a need on the abbots to have a temporary period during which they could practice the higher ascetic virtues; this is what the Lenten practice provided.

Lenten solitude was primarily adopted and maintained by the leading abbots of the Judean Desert as a temporary method of achieving *hesychia*. The annual practice provided Euthymius, Sabas, and Gerasimus with an alternative way to achieve stillness while maintaining their responsibilities as abbots. In addition to their status as holy men and spiritual directors, the communal and administrative requirements of this position prevented them from being able to effectively practice the anchoritic enclosure which Palestinian asceticism encouraged.

Cyril’s own language also places emphasis on Lenten solitude as a way to achieve temporary stillness and solitude. While describing how Sabas imitated Euthymius’ use of the Lenten practice, Cyril states that Sabas would leave slightly later in January in order to commemorate Euthymius’ death on the twentieth of January. Sabas would then immediately retire to the *paneremos* “separating himself from all human intercourse” (πάσης ἀνθρωπίνης συναναστροφῆς ἀφιστῶν ἑαυτὸν) until Palm Sunday.⁷⁸ With slightly altered language, Cyril repeats this same sentiment in two other descriptions of the Lenten practice. Once more in relation to Sabas, when Euthymius brought him along for the first time when he was younger, and once when describing Euthymius and Theoctistus engaging in the practice.⁷⁹ The separation from others that these Lenten excursions provided is what Cyril emphasized as

⁷⁶ Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 48.

⁷⁷ Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L 48: ἀλλὰ τοῦ καθίσματος, οὗ μετέχεις ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ ὡς βασιλεύς. καὶ αὐτὸς τὸ βάρος τῶν ἐρχομένων πρὸς ἡμᾶς καὶ ἀπερχομένων βαστάζει, καὶ ἀνενοχλήτους ἡμᾶς ποιεῖ.

⁷⁸ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 106.15: πάσης ἀνθρωπίνης συναναστροφῆς ἀφιστῶν ἑαυτὸν.

⁷⁹ Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 94.49. πάσης ἀνθρωπίνης χωριζόμενοι συναναστροφῆς; *Life of Euthymius*, 15. πάσης ἀνθρωπίνης συναναστροφῆς χωριζόμενοι.

the core element of the practice. For it was such separation which allowed the monks to achieve stillness and as a result a greater connection with God through prayer.

To further cement this connection between Lenten solitude and *hesychia*, Cyril also uses the same language when describing how a monk adopted complete, enclosed, *hesychia*. This is most clear when describing John the Hesychast's adoption of the practice in a cave in the Rouba. Coinciding with Sabas' exile from the Great Laura, John fled to the desert where he settled in a cave and would remain as a hesychast for six years "separating himself from all human intercourse" (πάσης ἀνθρωπίνης συναναστροφῆς ἀφιστῶν ἑαυτὸν) in order to connect with God.⁸⁰ The use of the same language by Cyril clearly suggests that there was a connection between *hesychia* and Lenten solitude. Due to its temporary nature, the practice of Lenten solitude was meant as an alternative to enclosed *hesychia* for monks, particularly abbots, who could not engage in the practice. It allowed abbots to temporarily achieve the stillness they desired due to their ascetic development without completely abandoning their monastic foundations and duties.

This interpretation of the purpose behind Lenten solitude can also explain its absence from Cyril's other monastic *Lives*, in particular from the *Lives* of John the Hesychast and Cyriacus as they never served as an abbot of a monastery. Both John and Cyriacus served as spiritual directors and are presented as holy men by Cyril, but only served in lesser administrative roles in their respective monasteries. In 492/3 John was made guest-master and cook of the Great Laura, which he held for a year.⁸¹ John then began a life of *hesychia* and maintained this lifestyle for three years. Sabas appointed John steward (ἐνχειρίζεται ... οἰκονομίαν) of the laura, which he held for a year.⁸² It was then in 498/9 that John began living a hesychastic life of complete enclosure, "neither going to church nor meeting with anyone except the one that served him."⁸³ In 503, when Sabas was forced into exile from the Great Laura, John also left and retired to a cave in Rouba where he remained until 509 when Sabas brought him back to the Great Laura and enclosed him in a cell.⁸⁴ John lived as a hesychast in this cell for thirty-eight years, until 547 when the Origenist George temporarily became abbot of the Great Laura. John fled to the Mount of Olives for the seven months that George remained in power and then returned to his cell and life of stillness until his death in 558. During John's time as a hesychast he maintained a status as a spiritual director and holy man.⁸⁵ As was the case with Barsanuphius and John the Prophet, John the Hesychast's authority lay in the spiritual realm due to his ascetic perfection. Except for the two nonconsecutive years that he spent as guest-master and steward, John did not wield administrative power and was not involved in the day-to-day decisions of running the Great Laura.

Cyriacus' life had a similar pattern in his progression towards an anchoritic life of *hesychia*. Cyriacus also held the position of steward for one year at the Laura of Souka.⁸⁶ In addition he served as the baker, infirmarian, and guest-master for a single year and then

⁸⁰ Cyril, *Life of John*, 209.10.

⁸¹ Cyril, *Life of John*, 206.

⁸² Cyril, *Life of John*, 207.

⁸³ Cyril, *Life of John*, 208.25-209: καὶ ἀπὸ τότε ἠσύχαζεν εἰς τὸ κελλίον αὐτοῦ μήτε εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν προερχόμενος μήτε τινὶ τὸ σύνολον συντυγχάνων παρεκτός τοῦ διακονοῦντος αὐτῷ.

⁸⁴ Cyril, *Life of John*, 212.25

⁸⁵ Patrich 1995, 169.

⁸⁶ Cyril, *Life of Cyriacus*, 226.25.

treasurer and canonarch for thirty-one years during his first tenure at the Laura of Souka.⁸⁷ While he did not take on a greater administrative role, Cyriacus, as with John, took on the role of spiritual director and holy man. After his thirty-five years in the laura he reached—or at least got close to—perfection and sought a further removal from human contact. He transitioned to a desert cell in Natoupha with a disciple and it was here that he began to preform miraculous healings.⁸⁸ This caused a number of lay individuals to seek him out for healings, which caused him to repeat his flight to more removed deserted regions two more times before agreeing to return to Souka where he took up residence in the sanctified hanging cave of Chariton.⁸⁹ Cyriacus had clearly reached a high degree of spiritual mastery and authority, however, he was never an abbot.

The position of spiritual director that John the Hesychast and Cyriacus held had more in common with that of Barsanuphius and John the Prophet than that of Euthymius and Sabas. These four monastic elders of the Judean Desert and Gaza never took on the position of abbot and the administrative duties that the position held. This allowed them to practice *hesychia* and further distance themselves from others through enclosure or movement to remote areas of the desert. Both Cyriacus and John the Hesychast, as evidenced by Cyril's decision to write their *Lives*, are presented as having the spiritual mastery to engage in Lenten solitude. Both practiced forms of solitude at least, if not more, extreme than the Lenten excursions for an extended period of time. However, they never do. This is because John and Cyriacus never took on the administrative position of abbot. They had the freedom to practice *hesychia* through enclosure and moving to new locations. Thus, their stillness could be achieved without Lenten solitude. So then, it was only the abbots who were presented as maintaining the practice of Lenten solitude. Cyril presented the practice as an alternative to maintain the virtue of *hesychia*. The temporary solitude allowed Euthymius, Sabas, and Gerasimus to lead their monasteries while still engaging in the personal ascetic development emphasized in the Palestinian monastic communities.

Mobility for the sake of *Hesychia*

The concept of a monk leaving a monastery or cell, either temporarily or permanently, for the sake of *hesychia* can be witnessed elsewhere within the writings of Cyril and sixth-century monasticism in Palestine as a whole. The acclaim that holy individuals could receive, especially from lay individuals, is presented as a continual obstacle for monks throughout the literature. If a monk could not stem the flow of these individuals, in many cases they would seek out a more remote location and cell. As just mentioned, Cyriacus, while staying with a disciple in the desert of Natoupha, healed the son of a man from Thekoa who subsequently spread the tale. Many people began to seek him out for their own cures, which caused him to flee to the inner desert of Rouba. However, his location was discovered, and individuals continued to bring the sick to him which caused him to flee again, this time to a place that was further secluded where no other anchorites stayed.⁹⁰ It was here in the area called Sousakim that Cyriacus was able to find the stillness that he sought.

⁸⁷ Cyril, *Life of Cyriacus*, 227.1.

⁸⁸ Cyril, *Life of Cyriacus*, 228.09-13.

⁸⁹ Cyril, *Life of Cyriacus*, 229.05-08.

⁹⁰ Cyril, *Life of Cyriacus*, 228.24-25.

It was the continual stream of individuals seeking cures which the author of Chariton's *Life* cites as what disrupted his tranquility and conversation with the Lord through prayer and caused him to flee from his laura at Pharan.⁹¹ In addition, the crowds of lay people were a source of disturbance and distraction for the other brethren of the laura, going so far as stopping others from "acquiring additional perfections."⁹² Chariton's decision to flee then was not only for the sake of his own maintenance of *hesychia*, but for the sake of his disciples as well. As mentioned above, the praise and importuning for cures that individuals heaped upon Euthymius "vexed" him as he remembered the "stillness he had when a solitary ascetic."⁹³ This caused him to flee from the monastery he helped to found with Theoctistus to Rouba with a single disciple. In addition to the distraction that a stream of miracle seeking individuals could cause, the danger of praise and renown was central to the decision to flee. Such praise could cause the monk to become full of pride, negatively impacting the monk's way of life. When a monk living in stillness asked John the Prophet about this exact issue, he replied that the individual must take care not to take pleasure in or give consent to such praise.⁹⁴ Chariton's author commented in a similar manner, suggesting that such vainglory could obscure virtue as rust does iron.⁹⁵

The decision to flee, instead of denying visitors, can be connected to the desire to not show favoritism to anyone.⁹⁶ In the case of monks living in stillness, this meant either accepting all visitors or none at all. In a tale that echoes—if not directly copies—one told of Arsenius in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Euthymius declines a visit from Anastasius the Patriarch of Jerusalem.⁹⁷ Euthymius had prophesized that Anastasius would become patriarch and after it came to pass he wished to return to the holy man. To this request, Euthymius responded that while he would happily receive Anastasius if he came, this would also cause him to have to receive every visitor and no longer be able to stay in his laura.⁹⁸ The flood of visitors that a visit from the patriarch would spawn is presented as a possibly disastrous event for the life of stillness that Euthymius wished to maintain and his response to such an event was flight.⁹⁹ Barsanuphius also cites the same tale of Arsenius in his explanation for not meeting an Egyptian monk in person. For if Barsanuphius were to open his cell up to this monk, then he would be required to open it up to everyone because he strove to not make a distinction

⁹¹ *Life of Chariton*, 16.6-7. It was for this same reason that Chariton also fled from Douka, the second laura that he founded after fleeing Pharan.

⁹² *Life of Chariton*, 18.1-3.

⁹³ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 21.20-23: Βλέπων δὲ ὁ πατὴρ ἡμῶν Εὐθύμιος πολλοὺς ἰάσεως ἕνεκεν ὀχλοῦντας αὐτῷ καὶ μνημονεύων τῆς προτέρας ἡσυχίας ἧς εἶχετο ὅτε κατὰ μόνας ἡσκεῖτο, ἐδυσχέραινε σφόδρα καὶ ἐδυσφόρει διὰ τὸ οὕτως ὑπὸ πολλῶν ὀχλεῖσθαι τε καὶ δοξάζεσθαι.

⁹⁴ Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 204.

⁹⁵ *Life of Chariton*, 16.12-13.

⁹⁶ On monastic hospitality See Wortley 2019, 98-115; Gould 1993, 139-166.

⁹⁷ Archbishop Theophilus wanted to visit Arsenius and asked if he would be welcomed into the monk's cell. Arsenius responded that if Theophilus came, he would open his door. However, it also meant that Arsenius would be required to welcome all visitors to his cell, which would mean he could no longer remain in the same location. See Arsenius 8. *The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers; The Systematic Collection*, trans. John Wortley.

⁹⁸ Cyril, *Life of Euthymius*, 52.10-19.

⁹⁹ During Sabas' first exile in the region of Scythopolis, Cyril connects his decision to return to the Great Laura with him being plagued by people of the world. See Cyril, *Life of Sabas*, 120.5-10.

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between anyone.¹⁰⁰ Barsanuphius confirms this point in another letter when a monk asked if, while living in stillness, he should be in the company of only certain people or if he should avoid everyone altogether. Barsanuphius responded that rejecting some and not others would be discrimination, and that an individual who could instead show no favoritism would be best.¹⁰¹

Fleeing the monastery or completely enclosing oneself are two sides of the same coin. They were both strategies for achieving *hesychia* by limiting contact with other, especially lay, individuals. For monks that were not willing or able to cut off all contact, transitioning to a new region when their renown became too much of a temptation or distraction was a viable strategy for maintaining their own spiritual wellbeing and that of their monastic brothers. The annual practice of Lenten solitude can be understood as part of this same impulse. The personal desire for stillness and solitude urged monks to leave and separate themselves from distractions and obstacles to virtue. However, in contrast to these other examples, Lenten solitude allowed the abbots to remain a part of their monasteries. They did not have to flee from their positions and permanently abandon their duties while still being provided a period of concentrated *hesychia*. Euthymius and Sabas were able to engage in their personal ascetic praxis and spiritual development while continuing to serve as abbots in the Judean Desert.

Within his *Lives* Cyril presents the unique practice of Lenten solitude as a compromise between the desires of an abbot's personal asceticism and the duties required of them as leader of a monastery. The advanced virtue of *hesychia* required monks to increasingly limit their contact with others through a life of enclosed solitude. Conversely, those same advanced monks were the ones who were eventually called to establish and lead monasteries. The requirements of the position of abbot that Euthymius, Sabas, and the others held limited the personal asceticism which they could practice. Lenten solitude as presented by Cyril of Scythopolis provided Palestinian abbots with an annual opportunity for advanced forms of *hesychia* by separating themselves from their monasteries in favor of the surrounding desert. Rather than permanently flee or relocate away from their monastic foundations and its responsibilities, Lenten solitude allowed for a temporary ascetic reprieve and a period of focused solitude before abbots returned to their positions. In his hagiographies, Cyril strove to praise the qualities of both personal asceticism and the foundation and expansion of organized monasticism in the Judean Desert. Lenten solitude highlights the strain between personal interior spiritual development and the increasingly outward facing position of the abbot within organized monasticism and wider late antique Christianity, while simultaneously offering a possible solution.

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¹⁰¹ Barsanuphius, *Correspondence*, L. 204.

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