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## Christian Asceticism

David Allen OSB

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, [dmallen@csbsju.edu](mailto:dmallen@csbsju.edu)*

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# Christian Asceticism

by Br. David Allen

## **ABSTRACT:**

The experience of the desert and wildlife was one of the hallmarks of early Christian monasticism. This paper offers a few vignettes about how animals and the natural world influenced the spirituality and writing of the ascetic life of early Christian monastics.

## **SYNOD:**

As the Church focuses on its vocation as a church, the relationship to the environment and the natural world is an essential topic for the future of the Church to be engaged in. Understanding that monasticism, even in its earliest foundations, expressed a relationship to the natural world sparks and motivated us to consider the natural world and our place in it.



*"You can't see any more than you are. You can't see in any way other than the way you are, either. But you can cultivate that. You can grow in it by exercising it little by little. And when it is achieved, it is the most remarkable, wonderful resource in the world. The wilderness around us is the proving ground for this."— Frank Lloyd Wright*

When asking a Midwesterner about how he imagined the deserts of the American Southwest, he shared these images: bright sun, red rocks, harsh grainy soil, dried up bushes, big sky, wide open space. In a way, he was not far off from the truth. The desert is a dry and barren landscape, providing humans with not much protection from the sun. For many, the desert has been a place of desolation- the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years- a place of uncertainty, suffering, and anguish. Early Christian writing and practice highlighted the wild landscape of the desert as an experimental theater for testing blurred boundaries between humanity and other forms of being. In our course, we discussed the spiritual practices and lives surrounding a variety of historical desert writers and spiritual leaders. In this essay, I wish to explore how monastics interacted with the wilderness of the desert, drawing attention to how they interacted with animals, both wild and domestic and how this influenced their spiritual ascetic practices.

## MOVE TO THE DESERT

As Christianity spread in the fourth century towards a more wealthy, urban, government supported institution, a migration of Christians left the urban cities of Alexandria, Rome, and Antioch to abandoned desert, wild places. These desert fathers and mothers chose a difficult way of life on purpose. The desert, being the testing place for Jesus before his ministerial activity, became a place where the example of self-knowledge and spiritual growth could be cultivated. As desert dwellers, they chose to be transformed by a simple life of inner devotion, prayer, work, meager living, and poverty. More than anything else, ascetics spent their time in prayer, for they allowed prayer to quiet their hearts, minds, and bodies. In this experience, monastics encountered the extremes of the desert seasons: harsh winds, coldness, lack of shade, deep heat, and unbearable dryness. Flight into wilderness remained the master sign of ascetic practice, even as wandering monks were settled in communal monasteries. In the fourth century, wilderness was cast as a

universally accessible natural scripture in which even the illiterate could read the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> As monastic life shifted from urban environments into the desert primarily in Egypt, monastic men and women began living in a sort of paradox. On one hand, their spiritual life was given an immense opportunity for renunciation of material goods, celibacy, isolation with God, and silence; while on the other hand, the desert is an unforgiving, dry, barren, and challenging setting in which to live and grow.

For early Christian ascetics, the desert offered an environment conducive to spiritual exercise and the inner work of God. The wilderness surrounded them with quiet and simplicity where they were not distracted by societal life, but engaged in the internal battle with evil, and a desire to become closer to God.<sup>2</sup> The desert life encouraged and assisted in the development of virtues, including silence, self-restraint, refraining from fornication, sobriety, and contemplative prayer. The monks absorbed the qualities of the desert and the wilderness around them and developed a strong sense of place, as though the desert became a part of their spiritual goals. Survival in the desert was an affirmation of holiness, as the desert monastics were compelled to spiritually grow in the setting where Moses, John the Baptist, and Jesus experienced God. The desert allowed Jesus to be alone with God, to be tempted by the devil and the desires of the world. Jesus was able to discern through prayer in the desert his divine ministry and strengthen his relationship with God. The desert, in its remoteness, provides isolation for the monastic to develop ascetic and prayerful expressions which force him or her to look inward, to truly dwell alone with God.

As monastic life spread into the desert, outside of urban life, community was once again formed in new ways, such as a community of hermits each devoting time to their inner prayer, but also supporting one another. The monastic literature these monks (and their chroniclers) left behind gives us a very precious insight into a new sort of living and understanding of the

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1 Adler, Judith. "Cultivating Wilderness: Environmentalism and Legacies of Early Christian Asceticism." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 1 (2006): 23,

2 Bratton, Susan. *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife: The Original Desert Solitaire*. Scranton, Pa.: University of Scranton Press, 1993. 175.

world. As followers of Christ, these desert communities emphasized radical inclusion but also a stringent, isolating, and ongoing formation of boundaries both physically and spiritually. As these communities grew, the demand for perfection rose, resulting in the need often for grace and often some form of companionship.

## ANIMALS AND DESERT CHRISTIANS

Like Adam before the Fall, redeeming the promise of a new order initiated by Christ as the New Adam, desert monastics lived with wild and venomous creatures without fear, destroying or taming them. In fact, a new “friendship” paradigm of human-animal relations was formed. Many interpreters of Desert Christianity view stories of monks’ friendly and even intimate relationships with wild animals as conceptualizations, in narrative form, of monastic life as offering the hope of the recovery of a peaceable kingdom.<sup>3</sup> This idealism and pursuit made sense as desert monastics believed their way of life was the closest one could become to the perfection of God. Their experiences of animals and nature would permit them to recover the peaceable intimacy Adam had in Eden. The stories of desert monks and their animal companions are not just signs for ideas like a new paradise regained; they are complex tales, with biblical allusions.

There is a famous story in desert literature about two monks from the Syrian monastery at Soubiba. One of the brothers was asked by the elder to send a message to the monastery of Chorembe, but the brother did not know the way. The elder said to his little dog, “Go with the brother so that he can deliver his message”. The dog accompanied the brother until he stood before the gate of the monastery.<sup>4</sup> Intimacy is a major theme between animals and the desert monastics. In another story, the Abbot Postumianus and his guide are being entertained by a monk who had, with his one ox, created a mini paradise in the desert sand, using water from a well to produce a flourishing vegetable garden. After dinner, the monk invites his guests to accompany him to a date tree, and there they meet up with a lion. The visitors tremble in fear,

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3 Miller, Patricia Cox. “Wild Animals: Desert Ascetics and Their Companions.” In *In the Eye of the Animal: Zoological Imagination in Ancient Christianity*, 119–54. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 120.

4 Moschus, John, and John Wortley. *The Spiritual Meadow*. Cistercian Studies Series, No. 139. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1992.130.

meanwhile, the monk picks some dates and holds them out to the lion, who runs up and takes the dates just “as readily as any domestic animal could have done,” eats them, and then runs back off into the desert.<sup>5</sup> To the visitors, the lion is a terrifying monster; to the holy man, it is a fellow resident of the desert as deserving of food as any human being and accustomed to receiving it.

The lion is a dominant wild animal in desert literature and spirituality. One example of this is with Abbot Peter, who would often go off and stay on the banks of the Jordan River. There he found a lion’s den in which he installed himself. One day he found two lion-cubs in the cave. Wrapping them in his cloak, he took them to the church.<sup>6</sup> Notice the intimacy in both stories of the lions. Bodily gesture and touch—the outstretched hand from which the lion eats—found and sustain their relationship. Monk and lion belong together in the sacred circle of intimacy. The lion is not a symbol of fear, but a symbol of the compassion and love God has with the humans who interacted and followed Christ in the desert community.

Abbot Macarius relates that on one occasion, while traveling in the desert, he ran out of water and bread. During this life-threatening situation, he saw a herd of antelope and went up to it. He heard a voice, “Macarius, arise, go to the antelope, drink the milk, and recover your strength and go to your cell.” He went and drank her milk and slept a little. The antelope went away and one of them, either her or another one, gave him milk each day.<sup>7</sup> The lactating antelope makes its milk available to the thirsty monk. This is a sign of true compassion and intimacy. “The willingness to ‘be with’ another in an experience of suffering and to redeem that person through this action is one of the most striking aspects of the practice of compassion found in the desert.”<sup>8</sup> Although humans are called to be caretakers of all creation,

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5 Miller, Patricia Cox. “Wild Animals: Desert Ascetics and Their Companions.” In *In the Eye of the Animal: Zoological Imagination in Ancient Christianity*, 119–54. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 125.

6 Moschus, John, and John Wortley. *The Spiritual Meadow*. Cistercian Studies Series, No. 139. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1992. 13.

7 Miller, Patricia Cox. “Wild Animals: Desert Ascetics and Their Companions.” In *In the Eye of the Animal: Zoological Imagination in Ancient Christianity*, 119–54. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 149.

8 Miller, Patricia Cox. “Wild Animals: Desert Ascetics and Their Companions.” In *In the Eye of the Animal: Zoological Imagination in Ancient Christianity*, 119–54. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 149.

including animals, this story of the antelope nurturing the monk reverses the social order of the human-animal relationship. Humans become reliant and supported by the wild beast who is generous. Perhaps this fluidity is a sign of how the monastic must surrender himself completely to the experience of God, even calling support from animals in time of suffering.

St. Benedict's relationship with the raven featured in the *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict*, offers another story of animal companionship in monastic life. Gregory shares the story that St. Benedict regularly fed a raven from his own portion of bread at mealtime. On one occasion, a malicious priest sent Benedict a poisoned load of bread. Knowing that the bread was tainted, St. Benedict called upon the raven to dispose of it and to ensure that no other being would be harmed. According to the story, the raven obeyed St. Benedict's command and flew off with the poisoned bread.<sup>9</sup> The raven partnered with Benedict to protect others from being poisoned.

Often these stories, whether true or not, served as spiritual metaphors for ascetic practice and spiritual growth. Human experience and formation can be vulnerable. It would make sense that the Desert Fathers would have felt how they interacted with the created world was a call for companionship, security, and desperation for spiritual nourishment. These are aspects of life where ascetics cultivated intimacy, and by doing so, they discovered deep wells of kindness, compassion, and a transformational healing power in themselves. They had met the animal body, and it was them.<sup>10</sup> Their interactions with animals empowered their followers to not be afraid of the physical or spiritual extremes they encountered. Intimacy was with God, but also with the created world around them, for that too was spiritual. One of the great gifts of animal experiences in the spiritual life is that oftentimes, animals do not foster pre-established bias or judgment on an individual, and often their energy and desire for interaction allows the ascetic to step away from their inner life and develop a nurturing sense about the world. This was then, and is today, incredibly important for those practicing a deep commitment to the search

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9 Gregory. *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict: Book Two of the Dialogues*. trans. Odo John Zimmerman. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1980. 23.

10 Miller, Patricia Cox. "Wild Animals: Desert Ascetics and Their Companions." In *In the Eye of the Animal: Zoological Imagination in Ancient Christianity*, 119–54. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 146.

for God. The inner life practice of the spiritual life should demonstrate balance and inner peace with the outward.

Ascetic vocation is about being led by the spirit into the desert, the space where perfection can truly be one's aim. Besides the physical desert, a move into a more remote "inner desert," is the sign of spiritual progress and exaltation. The desert offered the space for spiritual transformation, where the monastic could find solitude, even if accompanied by wild animals to illustrate their virtuous life and holiness. Stories of the Desert Fathers are forerunners of diverse wilderness romances: lives of the saints who will tame beasts, discover their earthly home as the "fitness center" for spiritual preparation in the heavenly community.

## THE ENVIRONMENT TODAY

How humans interact with their natural environment has become a global topic in recent years, as humans have placed more physical stress on the natural world over the past two-hundred years than any other time in human history. Immigration, urbanization, a more globalized economy, industrial pollution, accessibility to clean water and food have all impacted our world and the environment. How would our desert ascetics who viewed their natural environment as vulnerable, desolate, and harsh view our current approaches to handling resources? For example, water has become for many places in the world a precious resource, and equal access to clean, usable water is not available for all. I believe the Desert Fathers would be horrified to know this. Perhaps, as Christian consumers today, we can draw from the spiritual relationship our desert forefathers had with their natural world to inspire a new generation of environmentally aware citizens.

I am not suggesting that countries and communities suddenly propose a more direct, intimate relationship to the natural world where people abandon their homes, and all move to the desert or isolated areas. I do believe the virtues of simplicity of life, solitude and respect for our common home are lessons we can draw from the desert ascetic practice into our individual and communal philosophies of how we interact with the environment. Identifying how and when we interact with the natural world around us is an important spiritual exercise, one that can help us reflect and experience creation in a new light. Intimacy with the created world, with animals, and with God are



all aspects of desert monasticism which can serve as examples of how we can be more mindful of our interaction with wilderness today. By forming an appreciation, respect, and value system which includes a mindfulness to humans' interactions with the environment, we can create a spiritual reverence, infer our own human vulnerability, and the vulnerability we have placed on the environment.

As the Creation story presents the earth as the peaceable kingdom, we today in 2021, are faced with an incredible opportunity to create a system of values and actions that reflect the peaceable kingdom. As this has always been our calling, it is more important now than ever before to slow down our consumption, become more intentional about how we value our natural surroundings, preserve habitats and spaces for wildlife to live and flourish safely, and to work to provide greater access to food and water for the next generation around the whole world. As engaged citizens, spiritually rooted in a philosophy of reverence and love for the natural world, we can create a generation inspired to renew and sustain the beautiful creation God has given us.



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