

Angel or Devil? Visionary Dilemmas in the Egyptian Desert

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For the desert was a vast trackless waste, and there were many demons in every part of it who made monks lose their way and destroyed them.¹

Egypt, 250 A.D. The demons had fled from the cities and their dense populations of religious men and women. The collective force of concentrated prayer drove them out of the Nile valley and into the desert. They were pursued by the strongest of the "athletes of Christ," holy people who felt themselves strong enough to face the physical and spiritual rigors of a hostile environment. These people left behind the petty cares and temptations of public life, all their ties of family, money, and luxury, in order to confront the real tempters directly--the host of demons and the Devil himself.

The monks' success in discovering and fending off demon attacks depended on their religious capabilities, and was at the same time a factor in determining their spiritual greatness. Only Antony, Pachomius, and others of the highest virtue were consistently able to ascertain the true nature of their spiritual visitors and to resist every temptation placed in their paths. The lesser monks, those who did not have the gift of discernment of spirits, did the best they could by their own wits, or by the counsel of a respected elder. They often went astray in the face of such complex tasks of discrimination. Demons appeared as Christ, angels could be as violent and as cruel as demons, and the distinction between the two blurred. The confusion faced by the monks when confronted with these sublime visions is not surprising considering the complexities of the spiritual world, yet the deceived were censured by their brethren for their unholy worship of the Devil. Discernment was deemed to be God's gift; therefore if this gift was denied, it was a commentary on the unworthiness of the deceived, rather than the craftiness of the Devil.

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The question of the actual existence of demons is a point that has been overemphasized by the readers of visionary literature. Modern skeptics dismiss as superstition what the ancient Christians considered established fact. It matters very little whether the accounts are accurate, or have any basis in truth whatsoever. Indeed, hagiography is so riddled with *topoi*, or exaggeration, and pure fiction that it is almost impossible to discover the true biography within the story. But in the study of demons the importance of physical reality is completely overshadowed by the perceived reality. Whether demons actually existed or were merely hallucinations of starved, sleep-deprived religious fanatics matters much less than how these visions were related, and explained. The mythology of a culture is often more interesting than its factual history, for in myth one finds the society's beliefs and their explanations of the workings of nature. In the desert texts, we see the monks' belief in the denizens of the otherworld as the controlling agents in this world.

A study of visions must necessarily begin with an analysis of the nature of the beings concerned: angels, demons, and the Devil himself. The demons of the desert had their origins in biblical demons and pagan *daimons*: the demons of the Bible usually confined their activities to possession, and required exorcism to drive them out. The ones who manifested themselves in visions were much more complex, having their roots in pagan mythology. *Daimon* translates simply as "spirit," whether good or evil. In addition to mere spirits, the very gods and goddesses of pagan religions who did not fit with Christian theology were categorically declared to be minions of Satan, and by nature evil.

Origen, one of the early Church Fathers, believed that all spirits are made of the same divine substance, and therefore a spirit's position on the scale of good and evil varied according to its actions.² The distinction between angel and demon results from the fall of some and the rise of others; it is possible for one type of being to become another through a moral shift.³ Origen maintained that it was possible for angels to fall through sin, or for demons to be redeemed by turning away from it at any time until judgement day. Even Satan, he believed, will have an opportunity for salvation at the final judgement.⁴

Since the souls of men are the most susceptible to influence in becoming good or evil, Origen believed that influence was exerted on men by either an *amicus*, a "guardian angel," assigned to each individual at birth to guide him toward the good, or a *daimon* to oppose the angel and to tempt his charge to evil.⁵ Both beings were omnipresent, and existed to steer their host to the more desired path: the angel towards righteousness and the demon, of course, towards hell.

It was in part to escape the widely accepted theology of Origen that the monks went to the desert to fight their demons. These eremites, for the

most part, believed that demons were unredeemably evil, and eternally fated to be minions of Satan. Angels were the creatures and messengers of God. Both categories were fixed and movement between the two was impossible; there was a regimented and immutable order in the universe of the desert fathers and mothers. Origen's more lenient theology was a threat to the monks who felt the need to fight the enemies of God in order to win salvation for themselves.

Knowing something of the origins of the spirits, it is important to know something of their habits as well. Both angels and demons attempt the same purpose as the *amici* and *daimons* of Origen—to steer the holy person on the path to heaven or hell. Angels have traditionally held the place between God and man on the hierarchy of existence. In such a position, they inevitably become mediators between the two. In the Bible, angels seem to have no will of their own, but serve rather as the messengers and servants of God.

The role of the angels in the desert texts is taken, for the most part, directly from biblical precedents. From bearing messages to protecting the chosen, God's minions act always to further his will on earth. Apollo tells of a group of monks held for heresy and released by a miracle:

At about midnight an angel bearing a torch appeared to the guards, and shed a dazzling light on all who were in the room. At the sight, the guards' mouths fell open with astonishment. They got up and asked all the monks to leave, for the doors had been opened for them.⁶

Such a miraculous escape, whether or not aided by providence, reads very much like the rescue of Peter in Acts 12.7:

And behold, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him saying, "Get up quickly," and the chains fell off his hands.⁷

Similarly, Palladius said of one brother, "I know that at least three times he received necessary food from an angel."⁸ This action is reminiscent of the feeding of Elijah in 1 Kings 17. The angels of the desert, as of the Bible, feed and protect the faithful both corporally and spiritually.

The angels that the monks saw were not limited to those biblical roles however; as representative of God they took on some of the characteristics associated with Christ himself. They may be found as healers of the faithful and, in some cases, tellers of parables.

The voice led him to a certain place and shewed him an Ethiopian cutting wood and making a great pile. He struggled to carry it in

vain. But instead of taking some off, he cut more wood which he added to the pile. . . . The man cutting wood is he who lives in many sins and instead of repenting he adds more faults to his sins.⁹

The spirit of Christianity took its very nature from the examples of Christ's life. The divine visitors continued these ministrations much like the clergy did. Their mission, like those of Christ and clergy, was to spread the word of God, provide spiritual support and comfort to those who were failing in their faith, to protect the monasteries from assault, whether earthly or demonic, and to expand the power of the church.

Like Moses, who received the stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments from God, Pachomius was handed the rules of a new monastic order by a visiting angel, who informed him that, "the Lord's will is to minister to the race of men and to reconcile them to Him."¹⁰ The angel proceeded to give him a bronze tablet engraved with the rules of the monastery the Lord intended him to build. Pachomius' plans were given the authority of God himself—the rules, like the Ten Commandments, were therefore unquestionable.

The angels were known to personally give the sacrament to particularly devout monks as a sign of favor or grace. They would even occasionally intervene to protect a holy individual from demons:

I saw the demons coming like flies upon the younger one, some sitting on his mouth and others on his eyes. I saw the angel of the Lord circling round about him with a fiery sword, chasing the demons far from him.¹¹

The angels protected the holy places as well as holy people. Pachomius tells of the monastery whose walls were torn down every night by pagans: "an angel stood near them and by his finger, as it were, encircled the wall with fire."¹² The cloister was built without further trouble.

The angels had a more threatening side for those monks who did not strictly adhere to the rules. Saint Jerome, famed for his intellectual approach to religion, was summoned while yet alive to face God's anger. He was threatened with eternity in hell for reading pagan philosophy, unless he mended his ways:

Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the tribunal of the Judge. . . . Upon being asked my status, I replied that I was a Christian. And He who sat upon the judgement seat said: "Thou liest. Thou art a Ciceronian, not a Christian. Where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also." I was struck dumb on the spot. Amid the blows—for He had ordered me to be beaten—I was tor-

mented more by the flame of conscience. . . . "Have mercy on me, Lord, have mercy upon me." The petition re-echoed amid the lashes.¹³

Jerome's terrifying vision seems insignificant when compared with Piamonas' tale:

Once when he was celebrating the Eucharist he saw an angel standing to the right of the altar. The angel was noting the brethren who came up for Communion and writing down their names in a book. As for those who were not present at the Synaxis, he saw their names erased. And in fact thirteen days later these died.¹⁴

Such punishment was a sharp reminder to the desert monks that God was not always inclined to be merciful. His angels could act out the will of the harsh Jehovah as well as the merciful Father. For the most part, angels worked to aid man in his quest for a holy life and salvation, yet they retained the ability to punish severely any violation of God's will.

The Devil and his minions existed in opposition to God. As they could not harm his omnipotence directly, they worked instead against his agents and worshipers, the desert monks. Their goal was to lure the hermit away from the path of righteousness, either through deception or temptation.

The Devil took joy in changing his form to trick the gullible. The master of deception could put on any form he chose:

The Devil appeared in a variety of human forms as well—as an old man or woman, an attractive youth or girl, . . . as a holy man, a priest, monk or pilgrim . . . a theologian, mathematician, physician, or grammarian. . . . He could appear as an angel of light, as Saint Paul had warned, and occasionally he even dared masquerade as Christ or as the Blessed Mother of God. . . . His proper form is invisible or amorphous, but he can shift his shape to suit his purpose.¹⁵

With such an array of shapes, it is little wonder that some of the monks would be taken in. Take, for instance, the story of Valens, a cenobite whose arrogance led him into a state of vulnerability, and then to his downfall:

The demon . . . went and disguised himself as the Saviour. He appeared at night in a vision of a thousand angels carrying lamps and a fiery disc in which, so it seemed to Valens, the Saviour had taken shape, and an angel approached Valens, saying: "Christ has loved

you because of your way of life and your liberality to Him, and He has come to visit you. Leave your cell now, and you have only to retire to some distance to behold Him, kneel down to do homage to Him, and then go back to your cell." So he went out, and when he saw marshalled in the line those who carried lamps, and the Antichrist himself about a stade or two away, he fell down and adored.¹⁶

Valens was one of a small host of monks who because of their spiritual imperfections were susceptible to the deceptions of the demons. Although those who failed in their asceticism were usually lost in obscurity, an unlucky few who were deceived as greatly as Valens were held up as models of human fallibility.

If the demons could not trick the monks with their disguises, they tried temptation instead. The spirits would use any means to distract or divert a monk from his holy quest for spiritual achievement. Some of their tricks are conveniently summarized by one of the desert mothers:

Many are the wiles of the Devil. If he is not able to disturb the soul by means of poverty, he suggests riches as an attraction. If he has not won the victory by insults and disgrace, he suggests praise and glory. Overcome by health, he makes the body ill. Not having been able to seduce it through pleasures, he tries to overthrow it by involuntary sufferings. He joins to this very severe illness, to disturb the faint-hearted in their love of God. But he also destroys the body by very violent fevers and weighs it down with intolerable thirst.¹⁷

A reading of the life of Saint Antony is revealing: "At times the demons would attempt to gain their end by feigning piety or would encourage excesses of asceticism so that the monk revolts against discipline."¹⁸ They howled, danced, beat the monks, played pranks, "for sometimes, as he was praying and about to kneel, they made the space in front of him appear as a pit, so that he might not kneel out of fear."¹⁹ The demons would use any means within their power to keep a monk from his ascetic life.

The Devil's greatest weapon was to instill thoughts of lust, which troubled all the monks from the great Jerome to the lowliest anonymous ascetic. Thoughts of the joys of the flesh led Jerome to see dancing girls, Antony to find naked women in his cave, and countless hermits to sweat in desire. The temptation was so powerful that the "demon of fornication took on an identity of its own: no longer was it an internal compulsion of the flesh, but an external force, battering at the hermits' resistance. The monks lived in fear of succumbing to the temptations of this demon: "A brother came to Scetis to see Abba Amoun and said to him, 'My father is

sending me out on an errand but I am afraid of fornication."'²⁰ Each monk had his own way of attempting to control the demon through *asceticism*, or self-discipline, with varying success. Olympius imagined the horrors of marriage and the difficulties of providing for a wife and child.²¹ Daniel suggested avoiding contact with women: "Never put your hand in the dish with a woman, and never eat with her. . . ."²² Abba Cyrus advocated constant vigilance, for, "he who does not fight against the sin and resist it in his spirit will commit the sin physically."²³ Control of the demons became a metaphor for control of self. The greatest *abbas*, or desert fathers, had the faith to resist this and all other temptations.

Any instant of attention that the demons received was a small victory against God; for when the monks were not praying, their souls were in jeopardy of being lost. Succumbing to even the most minor temptation was a defeat for God and his monks. Lest the constant trials and constant threat lead them to despair, there were occasional divine reassurances that the monks were not completely alone in their battle:

Then Abba Isidore took Moses out onto the terrace and said to him, "Look towards the west." He looked and saw hordes of demons flying about and making a noise before launching an attack. Then Abba Isidore said to him, "Look towards the east." He turned and saw an innumerable multitude of holy angels shining with glory. Abba Isidore said, "See, these are sent by the Lord to saints to bring the help, while those in the west fight against them. Those who are with us are more in number than they are."²⁴

With a basic knowledge of the nature and habits of spirits, both good and evil, the problems of discernment become clearer. If a demon can appear in the guise of an angel or even Christ, how is one to distinguish between the two? If an angel chooses not to appear in a vision but remains instead a disembodied voice, how can one be sure it is not the voice of Satan?

The Bible places the attainment of the ability of discerning spirits firmly out of the hands of the ordinary man, categorizing it as one of the "gifts of the spirit":

Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. . . but the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom . . . to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits. . . . But all these worketh that one and selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.²⁵

The determination of which monks were granted discernment was left to the somewhat capricious will of the Holy Spirit. This gift, essential to spiritual survival in the desert, could not be earned by any set rules, but rather only by being "right with God," and praying that the Holy Spirit would grant discretion when needed.

Those who had this gift of the spirit did their best to explain it to their less privileged brothers. The greatest *abbas* each had their own intricate explanations of how one may distinguish the spirits. However, discrimination was an extremely sensitive task, and most of the fathers' explanations were contorted, incomplete, and most often contradicted those of the other *abbas*.

Antony's system of discrimination gained much respect for its simplicity. This great *abba* took his theory directly from the Bible's description of the nature of Christ; for his purposes he generalized the characteristic to apply to all of God's servants: "He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets. . . ."26 Antony claims that by this characteristic one can know an angel and distinguish it from a demon, for an angel will appear quietly and inspire no fear, while a demon will appear with a cacophony of noise, instilling terror in the hearts of his audience:

A vision of the holy ones is not turbulent. . . . But it comes quietly and gently that instantly joy and gladness and courage arise in the soul. . . . And the thoughts of the soul remain untroubled. . . . On the other hand, the attack and appearance of the evil ones is full of confusion, accompanied by crashing and roaring and shouting. . . . This at once begets terror in the soul, disturbance and confusion of thoughts, dejection, hatred of ascetics, . . . and fear of death; and then a desire for evil, a disdain for virtue, and a complete subversion of character.²⁷

Demons are creatures of chaos and so chaos attends them at every appearance. Since angels are of purely good nature, one is overwhelmed with peace, love and infinite contentment in their presence; it seems to be an obvious enough distinction. Yet perhaps without the prior gift of discrimination such distinctions are not so useful. Take again the case of poor Valens, who believed he was worshipping Christ himself: Valens did not feel terror and confusion as Antony suggested he should; perhaps he felt pride, or even joy at being chosen to witness such a great vision. This criterion seems only to work for those who had already been blessed by the Holy Spirit.

In the case of continued uncertainty, Antony suggested this further test:

When any phantom appears, do not promptly collapse with cowardly fear, but whatever it may be, first ask with stout heart, "Who are you and whence do you come?" And if it should be a vision of the good, they will reassure you and change your fear into joy. If, however, it has to do with the Devil, it will weaken on the spot, seeing your steadfast mind.²⁸

This second tactic relies on the monk's ability to intimidate the demons, and the demons' dubious obligation to truthfulness. Certainly it is possible for the masters of deceit to easily conceal their identity without recoiling in fear at the inquisition of a hermit, though Tertullian claimed that a demon must answer truthfully when addressed by a Christian.²⁹ Perhaps Antony could intimidate them with his confidence, asceticism, and great spirit, but any lesser monk's efforts in the face of the demons or even the Anti-Christ himself would be merely laughable.

Pachomius, another of the fathers who had been granted the gift of discrimination, took quite a different approach to the question. He too believed that the distinction between angel and Devil depended on the internal reaction of the observer, but his focus was on the intellectual rather than the emotional aspect:

a demon appeared to him as a phantom and claimed to be Christ. . . . He thought, "When the vision is of good spirits the thoughts of the man who sees the vision disappear altogether, and the man sees nothing save the sanctity of the vision. Here I am seeing this vision and still thinking and deliberating. Therefore, the vision is mendacious and evil."³⁰

He found that in the company of the holy visitors, all thought was suspended, and it was only possible to stand in awe of the fantastic event that he had been allowed to witness. If the visitation were demonic, "[reasoning] would still disturb the mind,"³¹ thus leaving the wits free to combat the temptation or the looming evil. Perhaps the demons did not have the power to completely shut off the minds of their victims, whereas the angels could overwhelm any intellectual function and thus open the minds of the monks to any appeal by eliminating their resistance.

Yet, this system too must have been unacceptable to many. Saint Jerome, for instance, who had approached belief in God through rational argument, would never concede that reasoning was suspended in a divine presence. And if Antony's explanations held true, the terror of seeing a demon would overpower any rational thought. Most minor monks would stand in awe of any supernatural presence, whether angel or demon.

The general desert population had little practical use for these systems of discernment, though they listened intently to the fathers who

preached them. Realistically, either one had the gift of discrimination or one did not. If so, it was merely a matter of recognizing the Devil on sight, like the brother John, who saw the Devil in the form of a priest, and simply, "realized who it was."³² If one did not have it, the result was humiliation or worse, damnation. At the very least, the lack of the power of discrimination would result in confusion and a hindrance of the spiritual life, exactly as the demons intended. Macarius the Great, originally considered unworthy of discernment, was forced to wrestle with this dilemma:

One day when I was sitting in my cell, my thoughts were troubling me, suggesting that I should go to the desert and see what I could see there. I remained for five years, fighting against this thought, saying, perhaps it comes from the demons. But since the thought persisted, I left for the desert.³³

Macarius had yet to earn his gift by spiritual achievement in the desert, and was left without guidance in this critical decision. Because he could not tell angel from Devil, he was delayed for five years in his quest.

Discernment was granted as a gift of spirit only to those who were truly holy. Even Macarius, later to be granted the appellation "the great," was not granted discrimination until he had proved his worth. The spiritual gifts became associated with great holiness and worthiness before God. Those who were so blessed were exalted by their less fortunate brethren, acquiring greater respectability and authority.³⁴ Here was one way to distinguish the true saints, like Antony, Macarius, and Pachomius, from the common run of desert monks. Their fame lent credibility to their teachings and brought crowds of people, both the holy and the secular, to hear their wisdom. Despite the attention it was necessary for the saint to retain his humility—a difficult feat when throngs of people gather to praise one's wisdom. The truly spiritual were able to keep fame, humility, wisdom, and vision in a careful balance.

Once a monk had determined that he was indeed seeing a demon, evil being, or creature of Satan, his real task began. The reason for being out in the desert at all was to concentrate more closely on the struggle against evil, to develop an almost personal relationship with both God and Satan. Antony's first advice to a new recruit was, "Behold, you have become a monk! Stay here by yourself in order that you may be tempted by demons."³⁵ The monks had left the cities to escape from petty distractions and focus their lives on the greater task of facing temptation on a highly personal and individual level.

Like the tasks of discernment, demonic temptation could not be faced alone. Without the support of the Holy Spirit, man's will crumbled

in the face of the greater power of the demons. One must be "deemed worthy of the gift of spitting on demons"³⁶ before it was possible to face them alone. This gift was granted as erratically as the gifts of discernment or prophecy or healing, based on the monk's goodness in the eyes of the omniscient Holy Spirit rather than by any rules comprehensible to man. The Spirit could see purity and greatness of soul that was not evident to mortal eyes.

There were almost as many methods of controlling demons as there were holy men to control them. The theories were again contradictory, though each method had a valid basis in scripture or popular theology. Each individual used whatever means would work to stave off temptation and other-worldly attacks.

The ascetics' power was the same as that of the exorcist: the ability to drive out unwanted demons. Indeed, many people from the cities would seek out the hermits in order to be freed of a troubling spirit. Christ, as the son of God, was of course the most powerful of all exorcists, merely needing to say to the devils "Go,"³⁷ and at his word they fled. When he extended this ability to his disciples, "and gave them power and authority over all demons,"³⁸ He was doing so in His own name; the disciples had no power of their own but merely that which they could utilize by invoking God and Christ. Thus many believed that the spirits could be repelled by the naming of Christ. Tertullian believed that the power of the divine name lay in its reminder of the eternal suffering at the final judgement.

Yet this whole mastery and power of ours over them derives its effectiveness from the mere mention of the name of Christ and the reminder of those punishments which they expect will come upon them from God through Christ, His Arbiter. . . . Thus, at a touch, a breath from us, rebuked by the thought and description of that fire, at our command, they quit the bodies of man.³⁹

But Tertullian believed that neither demons nor angel were fixed in their states and so were as subject as mankind to judgement at the final reckoning; thus the spirits would fear the name of Christ. Others held that the demons were already damned and as they resided in hell, further torture would hold no fear for them. These monks sought other explanations of the power of Christ's name and his symbol, the sign of the Cross. The more widely accepted belief was that the invocation of Christ, through name or sign, took its power from the memory of the crucifixion, "since it was on the Cross that the Saviour stripped them [the demons] naked and held them up as an example."⁴⁰

Usually the mere mention of Christ's name was enough to send the demon slinking off, except in some particularly stubborn cases:

The old man arose, said an efficacious prayer, and addressed the demon-ridden man: "Father Antony has said that you must leave this man." The demon cursed him roundly and said: "I am not leaving, you evildoer." Paul took his sheepskin coat and struck him on the back and said: "Father Antony has told you to go." Then the demon cursed Antony and Paul still more. Finally Paul said: "You are going to leave or I will go and tell Christ. Jesus help me, if you do not leave, I will go tell Christ now and woe to you what he will do."⁴¹

At this point, if Tertullian's logic held true, the demon should have fled in terror at the sound of the name "Jesus." However, this particular demon needed more convincing.

The demon cursed him still more and said: "I will not leave." Thoroughly enraged at the demon then, Paul went out of his lodging at high noon . . . and he stood on the rock of the mountain and prayed, saying: "You see, Jesus Christ, You who were crucified under Pontius Pilate, that I will not come down from the rock, or eat, or drink, until death overtakes me, unless You cast out the spirit from the man and free him." Before the words were finished and out of his mouth, the demon cried out and said: "O violence! I am carried off! The simplicity of Paul drives me out!"⁴²

Paul's attempt to use Antony's authority is scorned; while the saint's presence might be enough to drive demons out, his mere name, that of a mortal, is not at all terrifying. In this case, the mention of Christ's name, usually a sufficient weapon is ineffective too, because rather than using it to make the demon feel the wrath of God, Paul simply threatens to "tell." It is only the forceful calling down of Christ, the invocation of God himself, that can drive out this stubborn spirit. It is God's power, not man's, that can make a demon flee.

Even invoking Christ was not effective if one was not deserving of his aid, leading a righteous and spiritual life and having "greatness of soul."⁴³ The Egyptian monks believed that leading a holy life meant living in strict asceticism, and that only by mortifying the flesh could they endure temptation and drive away demons. "A brother asked him, 'Why are the demons so frightened of you?' The old man said to him, 'Because I have practised asceticism since the day I became a monk.'⁴⁴ By becoming emotionally detached and existing for spiritual rather than bodily needs, it was possible to beat the Devil. Yet Christ's essential role must not be forgotten:

It was related of Amma Sarah that for thirteen years she waged warfare against the demon of fornication. Once the same spirit of fornication attacked her more insistently, reminding her of the vanities of the world. But she gave herself up to the fear of God and to asceticism. Then the spirit of fornication appeared corporally to her and said, "Sarah you have overcome me." But she said, "It is not I who have overcome you, but my master, Christ."⁴⁵

Sarah went into the desert to battle against sin and had no wish to escape from her task. She desired rather the power to repel demons which could only be granted by Christ, and only if she lived in perfect asceticism.

Others of the holy group, like Macarius the Great, claimed that it was not asceticism at all that drove the demons away, but rather humility. Macarius said that devils have by nature all the ascetic abilities of the monks except humility, and because monks are humble they are spiritually greater than the demons and therefore able to defeat them.⁴⁶ Theodora explains in more detail:

There was an anchorite who was able to banish the demons; and he asked them, "What makes you go away? Is it fasting?" They replied, "We do not eat or drink." "Is it vigils?" They replied, "We do not sleep." "Is it separation from the world?" "We live in the deserts." "What power sends you away then?" They said, "Nothing can overcome us but only humility." "Do you see how humility is victorious over the demons?"⁴⁷

Other monks, perhaps finding that humility alone did not protect them from temptation, sought a more active means of repelling their enemies. Many turned to prayer, a supplication to God to keep them from succumbing. Pachomius, in accordance with his belief on maintaining rational thought in the presence of demons, suggested an extremely logical argument, intended more for self-persuasion and dismissing temptation than for expelling the demons themselves. He suggested this rebuke to put evil spirits to flight:

"Impure demons, how can I contemplate blasphemy together with you, the apostates, against my God and maker? Even if you keep on suggesting such a thing until you burst into pieces, I shall not be defeated. These things are not for me but for you who will be punished in unquenchable fire for ever. As for me, I shall never cease blessing, singing praises, and thanking the one who created me out of nothing, and I shall not cease cursing you. You are accursed by the Lord." If you speak thus with faith, the demon's suggestions will vanish like smoke.⁴⁸

Prayer was a matter of both begging the aid of the Lord and convincing oneself that demons could be resisted through the exertion of will.

Self-assurance was perhaps the most vital quality one could have; assurance in the fact that, "it is impossible that one who thinks and acts rightly could fall into disgrace or into the trap of demons."⁴⁹ Throughout the desert monks voiced the conviction that God was merciful and, more importantly, would never allow a monk to be tempted beyond his ability to resist. If a monk was truly righteous, he would always be able to overcome temptation. Thus reassured, they were able to contend with their demons without fear for their immortal souls.

I returned then fully satisfied, and I settled down confidently, worrying no more about the struggle, but dwelling in peace for the rest of my days. The demon who knew my contempt for him no longer came near.⁵⁰

With God's protection and the assistance of the angels the monks believed they could accomplish any feat of asceticism and overcome any demon that dared to come between their souls and salvation.

Resisting demonic temptation and distinguishing holy visitors from the unholy would remain the two most difficult obstacles to purity for as long as the holy men and women stayed in the desert. As monasticism gained popularity and moved west, back into centers of population, the focus of temptation shifted from the supernatural back to the more comprehensible mortal and worldly. Demons, the legends say, cannot live where there is concentrated Christian faith and prayer, so when the monks left the desert for the monastic communities, the spirits lost the full force of their power. The cenobites, after all, originally gathered to provide mutual aid against temptation and sin. Never again would the demons attain quite the degree of power and prominence that they had held in the desert.

ENDNOTES

1. Norman Russel, trans., *Lives of the Desert Fathers* (United States: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 109.
2. Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil, Demonology & Witchcraft* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 29.
3. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca:

- Cornell University Press, 1981), 126.
4. *Ibid.*, 145.
 5. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 51.
 6. Russel, *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, 72.
 7. *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard ed. (United States: World Publishing Co., 1962).
 8. Palladius, *The Lausiatic History* (Maryland: Newman Press, 1965), 153.
 9. Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (United States: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 15.
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