

Demons and the Making of the Monk

Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

2006

Contents

I	THE MONK IN COMBAT	
1	The Single One: The Monk against the Demons	3
2	The New Martyr and Holy Man: Athanasius of Alexandria's <i>Life of Antony</i>	23
3	The Gnostic: Evagrius Ponticus	48
4	The Vigilant Brother: Pachomius and the Pachomian Koinonia	78
5	The Prophet: Shenoute and the White Monastery	97
II	WAR STORIES	
6	"The Holy and Great Fathers": Monks, Demons, and Storytelling	127
7	Ethiopian Demons: The Monastic Self and the Diabolical Other	157
8	Manly Women, Female Demons, and Other Amazing Sights: Gender in Combat	182
9	From Gods to Demons: Making Monks, Making Christians	213
	Afterword: The Inner Battle	240
	<i>Abbreviations</i>	249
	<i>Notes</i>	251
	<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	291
	<i>Index</i>	295

The Single One

The Monk against the Demons

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

—Ephesians 6:12

One winter night probably in the 450s (Tybi 9 in the Coptic calendar), Shenoute, the leader of a community of some four thousand monks in Upper Egypt, could not sleep. As he later told his followers in a short address entitled *In the Night*, he was “in distress” over a group of monks whom he had ordered to be bound and confined because they had committed a sin of some gravity (which he does not identify). Should he return the offenders to the community after a period of punishment? Or should he expel them from the monastery? The former course of action would restore the sinners to the monastic life and thus to the path to virtue and salvation; but retaining known sinners in their midst could endanger the spiritual health of the other monks, as it might suggest that they too could commit grievous sins without being expelled. On the other hand, expulsion would deprive the offenders of the stable life they had known in the monastery, most likely consigning them to eternal damnation. As Shenoute wandered the monastic compound in prayer over this matter, a man suddenly appeared before him, dressed as a middle-ranking government official and accompanied by a subordinate. The man grabbed hold of Shenoute and appeared ready to attack him in defense of the offending monks. “What are you?” Shenoute demanded of his attacker, adding that if he were an angel, perhaps he would tell him whether it was Shenoute or the offending monks who had “sinned against God” and thus whether he should expel the monks or not. When

the man made no answer but continued to wrestle, Shenoute fought back and soon prevailed. Then Shenoute realized that the man was no angel, but a demon, because it would have been impossible for him to defeat an angel. The demons then disappeared.

From this encounter Shenoute realized that he must expel the monks. He told his followers that they must not be afraid to expel sinful colleagues even if they came from wealthy or powerful families. And he said that he himself must be ready to expel such sinners “even if I pray with them and they with me, even if I eat bread with them and they with me, and my hand and their hand are in the same bowl on the same table.” It seems that the appearance of a demonic advocate for the offending brothers as an officer of some kind made clear to Shenoute the real reasons for his hesitation to expel the monks: they came from prominent backgrounds, and also he was reluctant to cut ties with brothers with whom he had shared the worship and fellowship of monastic life. Such considerations must be set aside in the cases of those who might “corrupt God’s creatures with any defilement or impurity in this house.”¹

Most twenty-first-century persons with oversight responsibilities—parents, teachers, athletic coaches, business managers—likely recognize the complex issues that Shenoute faced, especially balancing concern for the health of a group with care for the individual. Some may sympathize with Shenoute’s final decision: if a few individuals pose a significant danger to the welfare of others in the group, they must go. But probably very few would struggle with such a problem in the same way, by wrestling with a demon; even if they believe in the existence of a devil and other evil spirits, the idea of engaging in physical combat with a demon probably would seem strange and primitive to them. Even historians and scholars of religion, aware that demons appear with great frequency in early and medieval monastic literature, may find this story strange. This demon does not really tempt Shenoute: instead, from his encounter with the demon, Shenoute becomes aware that social position and personal feelings were clouding his judgment. The demon, by appearing as a figure of high social standing and power, in fact helps Shenoute reach a decision and follow what he considers the right path.

As modern people, we are tempted also to focus entirely on the demon, the player in this drama that strikes us as more bizarre, and thus to miss the novelty of the main character, Shenoute. Why should thousands of men and women have submitted to the authority of this one

man? Why did they trust him with their ultimate salvation? Shenoute's account to his followers of his experience with the demon must have served in part to legitimate his position as leader of the monastery. As someone who engaged in physical combat with a demon and prevailed, Shenoute demonstrated his own virtue, the (literal) strength of his character, and thus his capacity to lead others to salvation by expelling the sinful ascetics. Part of Shenoute's identity as a leader of monks, as an archimandrite, was his ability to successfully resist demons, the forces of evil that surrounded him and his fellow ancient Egyptians.

This book examines both characters in this ancient encounter, the demon and the monk, and argues that neither can be understood apart from the other as they developed over the course of the fourth and early fifth centuries in Christian Egypt. During this period the new religious identity of the Christian monk—in Greek, the *monachos*, “single one”—was invented. Or, better put, in various settings throughout the Mediterranean world, ascetic Christians developed a new set of social roles and religious identities that they gathered under the category “monk.” The monk is now such a familiar figure that it is difficult to remember that he did not always exist, that he has had to be imagined, embodied, legitimated, and reconceived from late antiquity to the present day. Likewise, in this same period, even non-Christian philosophers, such as Iamblichus, began to accept an idea that their predecessors had rejected: the *daimōn* was not merely an intermediary divine being, filling in the gap between human beings and the distant gods, but could be an evil power that caused harm to human beings.² Scholars who study ancient understandings of the *daimōn* often rightly use the more neutral English “daemon” to signal that the *daimōn* was not always a negative force. But in this case such neutrality would be deceptive. For the Christian monk, the *daimōn* became a fearsome enemy, an agent of evil that could appear as a human being, a wild animal, or even an angel. The opponent of the monk was the unambiguously evil demon. In this book I do not attempt to present a complete history of either of these characters and their changing identities in late antiquity; rather, I explore their interaction in early Egyptian monasticism and claim that the Christian monk was formed in part through imagining him in conflict with the demon, which in turn gained its identity through its relation to its monastic opponent.³

I focus on early monasticism in Egypt because, although demons

tempted and frightened monks in other areas of the ancient Mediterranean, the literature from Egypt shaped subsequent Christian demonologies in both the Byzantine East and the medieval West. The chapters in Part One study the primary images of the monk in combat—that is, the social and religious identities for the monk that monastic authors constructed through their presentations of conflict with demons. In the closing section of this chapter, I examine how Antony the Great (and less so his disciple Ammonas) adapted previous demonological teachings, especially those of Origen and Valentinian Christians, to the desert monk's new project of returning to his spiritual essence, of becoming a truly integrated personality, a "single one." In his *Life of Antony*, however, Athanasius portrayed the monk as the new martyr, who preserves his Christian faith and virtue in the face of opposition from the pagan gods (the demons), and also as the holy man, who provides some of the spiritual benefits (exorcisms, healings, divination) for which people had looked to their gods. Evagrius Ponticus took up Antony's modified Origenism and Athanasius's dramatic picture of fierce combat and constructed a compelling and subtle demonology, by which the monk could measure his progress toward freedom from the passions and then to knowledge of God. The Evagriian monk's goal was to be a gnostic, a "knower"; even in his conflict with the demons, it was knowledge that gave the monk his power. The literature emanating from the federation of monasteries founded and led by Pachomius adapted contemporary ideas about demons to its ideal of the monk as a brother, one who lives in community in submission to a rule and in support of his colleagues. The Pachomians emphasized a state of constant moral vigilance, symbolized by the protective walls that surrounded their communities. Finally, Shenoute presented himself as a prophet who was called to end idolatry among the heathens and to expose hypocrisy among the people of God: he wielded the dualistic contrast between Christ and Satan as a sword to bring clarity to the fluid religious situation in late ancient Egypt. Martyr, holy man, gnostic, brother, prophet, monk—such were the diverse ways in which these authors understood the Christian "single one" in conflict with evil.

Whereas Part One examines the discrete demonologies and monastic self-understandings constructed by single authors or limited communities, the chapters in Part Two explore common themes in stories about monks encountering demons. After an initial survey of three im-

portant collections of anecdotes about fourth- and fifth-century Egyptian monks, I study accounts in which demons appear as Ethiopians or black persons and describe how such appearances enabled monks to represent as “other,” and so to renounce, aspects of their selves. Yet the presence of Ethiopian monks in their communities introduced an ambivalence into this theme in monastic literature and reveals a paradox at the heart of the monastic project: the monk must always consider at least a part of himself to be demonic. Consideration of the gendered dimension of demon stories and rhetoric will show that monastic writers used women, both female monks and female-appearing demons, to visualize demonic conflict and the masculinity that the monk gained or lost in that conflict. The female body provided a compelling image with which to render visible an unseen drama of temptation, followed by seduction or resistance. Finally, stories that highlight the demons’ identities as the pagan gods take care to differentiate the Christian monk from religious virtuosi that looked like him—the pagan priest and the magician—and provide a triumphal narrative for the process of “Christianization,” in which the monk played no small role. Telling stories about monks meeting and overcoming demons was one way to announce the victory of Christianity and its God over traditional religion and its pseudo-gods, the demons.

Previous scholars have, of course, offered highly probable explanations for encounters between monks and demons and for their rationalization in demonologies, discursive theories about the demons. For example, historians have claimed to know what “really happened” to Shenoute that winter night: An actual local magistrate came to the White Monastery, accompanied by his assistant, probably to investigate charges that Shenoute was mistreating his monks by beating them, tying them up, and the like. Shenoute confronted the official, charged him with being an emissary of Satan, fought with him—and won! So the original editor of Shenoute’s Coptic text entitled this work *Magistratus quidam e monasterio pellitur*: “A certain magistrate is driven from the monastery.” The incident can then serve as straightforward evidence for the tense relations between local government officials and monastic leaders.⁴ There is a good chance that this is what “actually happened” on the morning of Tybi 9, and we shall see that Shenoute’s understanding of the devil did not preclude his incarnation, so to speak, in an actual person. But as a

historian of religion I am not satisfied with this extremely sensible line of argument, which seeks to explain demonic experiences in terms that cohere with a modern scientific and historical worldview. For one thing, although Shenoute was a brilliant orator, extended irony does not appear to have been part of his rhetorical arsenal. I see no indications that the addressees of *In the Night* were to understand that Shenoute wrestled with anything other than a true demonic being. Shenoute's spiritual world—not to mention his emotional life—was clearly richer than this rational modern explanation will allow.

Psychoanalytic perspectives might be more helpful. These understand experiences of the demonic, particularly visual ones, as products of repression, projection, and persistent anxieties.⁵ The psychoanalytically inclined interpreter of Shenoute's experience on Tybi 9 may find its roots years earlier in an incident from Shenoute's life before he became the leader of the monastery, when Shenoute had learned that certain leading monks had committed grave sins and that others had colluded to keep the transgressions secret. When Shenoute informed him of these transgressions, the monastery's head refused to take any action, leaving Shenoute open to ridicule and resentment. Although Shenoute was later vindicated, the dramatic appearance of a demon at a time when Shenoute, now himself the monastery's leader, was vacillating over punishing sinful monks may be seen as the eruption and resolution of unresolved feelings from this past incident. This interpretation seems probable to me as well; when historians use psychoanalytic concepts to understand demonic appearances, the danger of anachronism—feared by historians, rightly, but perhaps too much—is ameliorated by the ancient monks' own conviction that demons adapt their strategies and appearances to the monk's internal condition. I shall at times invoke psychoanalytic concepts such as repression and projection, especially in discussing demonic appearances like Shenoute's encounter with the official. But their utility is limited in other respects. For example, Shenoute's physical combat with a demon was a rare event, even for him. Most of the Egyptian monks' conflicts with the demonic had no visual content, but consisted of thoughts, suggestions, or inclinations, which they attributed to demons. We must also be alert to how monastic tradition, transmitted both in influential works such as the *Life of Antony* and in countless interactions between monastic guides and their disciples, shaped the experience of individuals as much as it expressed it. Ulti-

mately we have primary access not to the real experiences of monks (what happened on Tybi 9) but to the stories they told and the theories they articulated to explain those experiences (Shenoute's report to his followers). Our topic is less the psyches of individual monks than the culture(s) in which monks sought to form themselves into virtuous persons. Finally, the monks did have their own psychological theories—most prominently that of Evagrius, which rivals any modern system in its complexity, subtlety, and (just possibly) insight.

This last point renders problematic another traditional explanation for monastic demonologies and demon stories: that they represent “folklore,” particularly remnants of a pagan past that uneducated monks could not leave behind but adapted to their new Christian worldview.⁶ Historians with this view might emphasize Shenoute's identity as a Copt: lacking a classical education, Shenoute, even as a Christian, inhabited a world that he crudely imagined to be filled with dangerous spirits. Such historians can only express amazement that stories of demons appearing as wild animals and as a black boy appear in the *Life of Antony*, written by a literate and intelligent Greek-speaking bishop, Athanasius of Alexandria.⁷ Although elements of traditional Egyptian religion and of “popular” beliefs certainly contributed to the demonological views of early monks—after all, the Christians identified the pagan gods as demons—this perspective misunderstands both demonology as a discourse and the monks who created and shaped that discourse. Scholars once believed that nearly all Egyptian monks came from the lower classes and so were uneducated, illiterate, and even anti-intellectual and thus that philosophically inclined monks like Evagrius Ponticus were anomalous. Recent studies, however, have demonstrated that a significant number of the early monks came from a high social background, could read and write, and possessed at least some education.⁸ Late ancient Egyptians do not easily divide into urban educated Greeks and rural less-educated Copts: Shenoute read Greek, could refer to classical authors like Aristophanes, and criticized a range of practices that we would associate with “popular religion.”

In general, demonology—not just theoretical explorations of the nature and activities of demons, but also the transmission of vivid stories about their attacks on people—is an activity of literate, educated persons, who often use demons to address pressing intellectual problems, as recent studies of medieval and early modern demonologies illustrate.⁹

Educated monks could not have been ignorant of previous religious and philosophical thought, including discussions of demons and their roles in a human being's quest for virtue and knowledge of God. For the most part, monastic demonologies concern themselves with the roles that adversarial spirits play in the monk's ethical life, not with the uncanny forces that haunt perilous intersections or reside in threatening animals—the demons of local religion that interest most anthropologists and historians of religion.¹⁰ The demons of the Egyptian desert do fit this category, of course, but we shall see that even these the monks assimilated to their ethically oriented interests. Monastic demons certainly appeared to people, caused diseases, and even possessed people, but they more often suggested evil thoughts, provoked disagreements between monks, or stirred up a monk's passions.

Learned reflection on demons had been a part of Christian theology and moral formation from the beginning of Christianity itself. The earliest Christian authors, especially Paul and his students, believed that Christians were living near the end of the world as they knew it. They believed that history was hastening to a final battle between God, his angels, and the elect, on the one side, and Satan, his demons, and the earthly rulers, on the other. The exorcisms performed by Jesus and his disciples, vividly described in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, dramatized this conflict and brought it into immediate experience. To join the fledgling Christian movement was to enlist in this cosmic war on the side of God and his angels. Christians endeavored to remain faithful to God and Christ in the face of the evil spiritual and political forces that surrounded them, and this was primarily a moral task. The individual's ethical life, including his or her relationships with spouse, children, and slaves, took place within the context of cosmic struggle. As the author of Ephesians put it, "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).¹¹

Even when intellectually inclined Christians of the second and later centuries lost the sense that the end of the present age was imminent, they inherited this image of the Christian in battle with demonic forces.¹² Martyrdom provided a new battlefield for this contest, as the Christian on trial stood fast against the demons that demanded to be acknowledged as gods. Although few Christians faced the prospect of ac-

tual martyrdom, the martyr's arena served as a symbol for every Christian's ethical life, understood as a resistance to the temptations offered by the surrounding demonic culture. Drawing on Jewish precedents, some Christian authors, such as the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, reduced this ethical struggle to a simple conflict between two spirits: a good and a bad angel (suggesting, respectively, virtue and vice) accompanied every person.¹³ At a more communal level, demons supplied a ready explanation for a variety of ills that beset Christian groups, including the numerous and persistent divisions among them ("heresies"). The Gnostics and the Valentinians also considered demons in terms of their resistance to the ethical life, but they differed from other Christians by claiming that nearly all the "divine" beings that were active in the universe were demonic: even the God of Israel, if not a demon, was merely an ignorant lower god. Christians' extreme minority status in the Roman Empire and their bitter divisions among themselves and with Jews put a sharp social and cultural edge on their belief that they were fighting a cosmic war with evil powers.¹⁴

Christians were not alone in devoting sustained attention to demons: non-Christian philosophers also made the nature and activities of demons a primary topic of their speculation.¹⁵ Plato had defined "the demonic" (*daimonion*) as that which is "between God and the mortal." "God," he explained, "does not mingle with humanity; rather, it is through it [the demonic] that all interaction and conversation takes place between gods and people, whether sleeping or awake. . . . These demons are in fact numerous and diverse, and one of them is Eros."¹⁶ This enigmatic statement, along with the stories of various divine and semidivine beings appearing and speaking with humans in the Homeric literature, prompted a long tradition of philosophical thought, which sometimes rationalized and sometimes resisted more popular ideas about demons. In the first three centuries of the common era, philosophers increasingly emphasized the remote nature of the ultimate divine power, a trend in which Jews and Christians fully participated, and thus they devoted more attention to the lower divine beings, including demons, that mediated between human beings and the first principle. Philo of Alexandria (d. ca. 45 C.E.) and Plutarch (d. ca. 120 C.E.) developed the fullest demonologies before Origen; as a Jew who followed the Bible, Philo accepted the existence of malevolent demons (fallen angels) that sought to harm human beings and to lead them into vicious activ-

ity; Plutarch appears to have been open to the idea, even if he did not fully accept it.¹⁷

Within this complex cultural context, the Christian intellectual Origen (ca. 185–254) created a rich and multifaceted demonology, whose legacy we shall find in many of our monastic authors.¹⁸ Origen, whose demonology defies brief summary, brought together and elaborated on a range of Christian demonological beliefs, including the identification of the pagan gods as demons, the existence of and conflict between good angels and evil angels (demons), the association of the demons with temptation to vicious behavior, and martyrdom as a combat with Satan. He accepted the teaching found in the *Shepherd of Hermas* that each person has two accompanying angels. In the chapters that follow I shall explore specific points on which Origen influenced monastic demonologies, but three general aspects of Origen's demonology deserve highlighting as particularly significant for later monastic thought. First, Origen taught that all rational beings, including angels, demons, and human beings, fell from an original unity and equality in which they worshiped God as pure intellects. Demons are the beings that fell the farthest away from contemplation of God, and human beings fell a distance between that of angels and that of demons. Human beings seek to return to this original unity, and demons attempt to stop them from doing so.¹⁹ This teaching lay behind the monastic sense that demons can figure people out and know how to attack them, because human beings and demons share an originally equal rational nature, and it provided the overarching metaphor of ascent or return to God despite demonic resistance in the air, which appears in numerous monastic works.

Origen's ruminations on the demonic opposition to human virtue strongly influenced monastic thought in two additional ways. Origen taught that individual demons specialize in particular vices (there is a demon of gluttony, another of pride, and so on), and he believed that, like an army, these demons form groups and ranks, led by commanders.²⁰ We shall see how Evagrius adapted these views in developing his theory that there are eight primary demons, which he also called thoughts. And this association of demons with thoughts also stemmed from Origen. Evil "thoughts" (*dialogismoi*), Origen said, come to us either from ourselves or from demons. We are able to resist the suggestions that demons make, but if we succumb to them often enough, we

can eventually become enslaved to the demons, and our nature can turn as vicious as theirs.²¹ The hallmark of Origen's theorizing about demons is his overriding interest in the Christian's quest for virtue. To be sure, the existence of demons raised metaphysical issues concerning the nature of the soul and the composition of various bodies, and Origen used demonology in part to address the problem of theodicy—how and why evil and evil beings might exist in a universe created by a single, good God. But Origen treated demons primarily in terms of their resistance to the human being's efforts to love God and do the good, and the monks of the fourth century followed him by focusing on their own progress toward virtue and on how demons paradoxically facilitated that progress by providing the resistance they had to overcome.²²

From the final quarter of the third century into the fourth, ascetically inclined Christians in Egypt, both men and women, began experimenting with more extreme forms of withdrawal from society.²³ Particularly by moving to the edges of cities and villages and even into the desert itself, ascetics intensified the demonic opposition that all Christians faced. Egyptians considered the desert the peculiar home of the demons, and a more solitary existence, less distracted by the concerns of ordinary life, permitted a more acute experience of temptation and evil thoughts. These experiments in Christian asceticism took diverse forms. For many monks the basic social unit was the relationship between an advanced monk (an "old man") and a disciple (a "brother"). The modes of life that built on this basic relationship ranged from the fully independent solitary life associated with Antony, who had monastic retreats both at Pispir near the Nile and at a location deep in the desert near the Red Sea, to the so-called semi-eremical life practiced by the monks of Nitria and Scetis in northern Egypt, who gathered at least weekly for worship and shared meals. Other monks formed full-fledged communities with formal rules and leadership structures; the most famous of these were the federation of monasteries in southern Egypt that Pachomius founded and the set of three monasteries centered on the White Monastery, which Shenoute led for nearly eight decades. Other monks conformed to none of these patterns: for example, Syncletica isolated herself in a tomb outside the city of Alexandria and attracted a circle of disciples.

Just as their ways of life were diverse, so too were both the literature that monks produced and the demons they faced. The sources for this

book include biographies of exceptional monks, collections of monastic sayings and stories, letters from ascetic teachers to their disciples, sermons, community rules, biblical commentaries, and discursive treatises on the monastic life.²⁴ The authors of all of these monastic writings agreed with Plato that the demons were astonishingly varied in their characteristics and tactics. This investigation, then, of the relationship between monk and demon will employ diverse interpretive positions and modes of analysis, at times resembling intellectual history and at other times recent forms of cultural studies. The story that Shenoute tells in *In the Night* cannot be reduced to any single explanation: lying behind it are biblical and theological traditions about angels and demons, Shenoute's own psychological history and emotional condition, his social and political relationships with his fellow monks and persons outside the monastery, and finally, whatever "actually happened." Even if we can fully reconstruct only some or even none of these aspects, no single one of them "explains" Shenoute's encounter with the demon. While I shall imitate both monk and demon in varying my interpretive strategies, I shall pursue a consistent theme of how conflict with demons formed the monk both as a social role and as a virtuous individual, giving his quest for virtue a specific tone and character.

I use the masculine pronoun advisedly because the normative monk that these demonologies form is gendered masculine. To be sure, some women, like Syncletica, eschewed the traditional lifestyle of the Christian virgin within a city and instead embraced the more withdrawn, desert-oriented lifestyles that monastic literature celebrates. Such ascetic women as Amma Sarah and Amma Theodora, whose sayings are included among those of the desert "fathers," fully deserve the title *monk*, and the monastic communities led by Pachomius and Shenoute included houses for women.²⁵ Shenoute intentionally included both his male and his female followers among the "monks" he addressed. Still, the vast majority of the monks that we will consider here were men, and authors such as Athanasius and Evagrius, unless they explicitly include women in their texts, assume that the paradigmatic monk is a man. As we shall see in Chapter 8, even those works that present female monks in their own right do so with male readers in mind, and they call their virtuous subjects "manly." The demon-fighting monk tended to be masculine, even when he was a woman.

Long before Shenoute wrestled with the demonic official, perhaps in the 370s, another monastic leader faced dissension from some of his followers. Unlike Shenoute, Ammonas did not manage a large, well-structured monastic community with a common rule; rather, he served as guide and spiritual leader to a looser confederation of monks centered on Pispir, where Ammonas's teacher, the great Antony himself, had once had a cell. For reasons unknown to us, some of the monks whom Ammonas guided had become dissatisfied with their life in the desert and had resolved to return to a city or village and practice their asceticism there. In his effort to dissuade his disciples from abandoning the eremitical life in the desert that his teacher Antony had pioneered, Ammonas invoked Satan and the demons. The emotional turmoil that the monks experienced, Ammonas explained, was a "trial" that Satan and his assistants had imposed on them: "The demons, knowing that in being blessed the soul acquires progress, wrestle against it either in secret or in the open." Moreover, Ammonas characterized the disciples' inclination to leave the desert and take up a less withdrawn ascetic life as a "temptation" rather than "the will of God." Consonant with Origen's teaching, he argued that every human motivation comes from one of three sources: Satan, the self, or God, only the last being acceptable. Because the monks' plan to leave the desert was not God's will, it must have come from either the devil or themselves. Inasmuch as the inexperienced monks could not easily discern among these sources of motivation, it was essential that they submit to the discernment of their "father," Ammonas.²⁶

Equally essential to the demon-fighting monk, according to Ammonas, was withdrawal into the desert. Only in the desert could the monk practice quietness, "see the adversary" and "overcome" him with divine assistance, and finally return to human society as a spiritual guide. Elijah and John the Baptist were biblical examples of "holy fathers" who "were solitary in the desert" and were able to achieve "righteousness" not by dwelling among people but only by "having first practiced (*askein*) much quiet (*hēsuchia*)." In turn, Ammonas attacked city-based monks as "unable to persevere in quiet" and enslaved to "their self-will." Because they received their support from their neighbors rather than from God, such monks were "unable to conquer their passions or to fight against their adversary."²⁷ The presence of people enervated the contesting monk by diminishing his reliance on God and de-

prising him of the focus he needed to see the devil and his demons. Ammonas employed the view that the demons inhabit the desert in particular, and that one can fight them only when alone, to argue for the superiority of one form of the monastic life over another. In his effort to maintain his authority over his disciples and prevent them from taking up another discipline, Ammonas made combat with Satan and withdrawal into solitude for this combat central to his ascetic program.

Ammonas's teacher Antony, the reputed pioneer of monastic withdrawal into the desert, had not tied conflict with the demons precisely to solitude in the desert, but he did provide one of the earliest articulations of the monk's identity and task in terms of such conflict. Modern scholars have long suspected that the portrayal of Antony the Great as illiterate and uneducated in Athanasius's *Life of Antony* might not present a completely reliable portrait of the famous monk, because it clearly reflects Athanasius's own theology as well as commonplaces in the literary lives of pagan sages. Recently Samuel Rubenson published a thorough study of a set of letters attributed to Antony and made a compelling case for their authenticity.²⁸ His work contributed substantially to the new perspectives on early Egyptian monasticism that I have discussed here. Rather than Athanasius's simple, uneducated Copt (a picture undermined even within the *Life* itself), Antony has emerged as a thoughtful, philosophically inclined ascetic, whose teaching emphasizes the transformative nature of "knowledge" (*gnōsis*) of self and God.

Antony's *Letters* provide an early and clear example of how a monk accepted and adapted previous ideas about demons found not only in such theologians as Clement and Origen, but also in Gnostic and Valentinian literature.²⁹ His demonology constructs the monk as a single, unified personality in opposition to the multiple, divisive demons. Like Origen, Antony writes that all rational beings originated in a lost unity, from which they fell because they engaged in "evil conduct." The devil and his demons, "since their part is in the hell to come," plot against human beings: "They want us to be lost with them." Their means of attack are diverse, and thus monks require "a heart of knowledge and a spirit of discernment" to recognize their "secret evils." In particular, the monk must discriminate between three kinds of bodily movements: those natural to the body, those caused by the monk's own negligence regarding food and drink, and those caused by demons. The mind or soul that fails to attend to the teachings of the Spirit of God becomes disordered, al-

lows the demons to stir up movements within the body, and serves as “a guide to the evil spirits working in its members.” Still, even this condition will bring the monk to weariness and despair, to reliance on God’s help, and thus to conversion and healing. The demons themselves are invisible, but a monk’s capitulation to their suggestions renders them visible on the monk’s person: “And if you seek, you will not find their sins and iniquities revealed bodily, for they are not visible bodily. But you should know that we are their bodies, and that our soul receives their wickedness; and when it has received them, then it reveals them through the body in which we dwell.” Demons are “all hidden, and we reveal them by our deeds.”³⁰

Antony’s demons operate as products, agents, and symbols of the diversity and separation that resulted from the fall, as opposed to the uniformity and unity in which the monk originated and to which he seeks to return. Echoing a discussion of Origen in his *First Principles*, Antony speaks of the diversity of rational creatures in terms of their names—*archangel*, *principality*, *demon*, *human being*, and so on—which God assigned to them based on the quality of their conduct. Demons are “all from one (source) in their spiritual essence; but through their flight from God great diversity has arisen between them since their deeds are varying. Therefore all these names have been imposed on them after the deeds of each one.” There is, then, something deceptive and unreal about names, which have been given to creatures, “whether male or female, for the sake of the variety of their deeds and in conformity with their own minds, but they are all from one (source).”³¹ Although the basis of this teaching on names derives from Origen, Antony’s pervasive reflection on names as secondary and as masking the origination of all spiritual beings in a unity owes as much to the Valentinian tradition as to Origen.

Valentinus, a Christian philosopher who taught in Alexandria and Rome in the second century, contrasted the divine plenitude that God offers in Christ with the material lack of humanity’s present condition in part by distinguishing between “proper” or “lordly” names and more defective names “on loan.”³² His theological followers elaborated on this contrast. The author of the *Gospel according to Philip* writes that “names given to worldly things are very deceptive, since they turn the heart aside from the real to the unreal”; they can be tools of the demonic powers, which seek “to deceive humanity by the names and bind them to the

nongood.” Although the name of Christian has great power, persons who have been baptized only and who have not received the Holy Spirit have only “borrowed the name.”³³ The original unity of the fullness is associated with a single true Name, “an unnamable Name,” which is the Son; the fallen aeons (lower divine beings), who have moved into multiplicity and away from unity, possess now only “a shadow of the Name” or a “partial name.”³⁴ As the Valentinians saw it, naming in this present world is deceptive, a function of the fall away from spiritual reality and unity into material illusion and diversity. The unreliable character of ordinary names plays into the hands of the demonic rulers, which seek to enslave us to evil and whose existence itself bears witness to this fall. Yet an ultimately true Name, an unnamable Name, provides grounding for the reality of unity to which human beings aspire. Although by Antony’s day Valentinus and his followers had been condemned as heretics, their writings continued to circulate in fourth-century Egypt, as the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices demonstrates.

Like Origen and the Valentinians, Antony associated multiple names with the fall away from unity into diversity, epitomized by the diversity of the evil spirits. The names “Jesus” and “saint,” he wrote, can themselves be deceptive cloaks that cover with the “form of godliness” persons who actually “act according to their own hearts and bodies.” Ordinary names, meanwhile, fail completely to name people’s true identities—that is, “themselves as they were created, namely as an eternal substance, which is not dissolved with the body.” Multiple names of transient flesh must give way to the single real name through self-knowledge: “A sensible man who has prepared himself to be freed at the coming of Jesus knows himself in his spiritual essence, for he who knows himself also knows the dispensations of the Creator, and what he does for his creatures. . . . About your names in the flesh there is nothing to say; they will vanish. But if a man knows his true name he will also perceive the name of Truth. As long as he was struggling with the angel through the night Jacob was called Jacob, but when it dawned he was called Israel, which means ‘a mind that sees God’ [compare Gen. 32:24–28].” Antony contrasts the monks’ “names in the flesh” with their identity as “holy Israelite children, in their spiritual essence”; the monks’ diversity as “young and old, male and female,” with their unity as “Israelite children, saints in your spiritual essence.” “There is,” Antony tells his readers, “no need to bless, nor to mention, your transient names in the

flesh.” In light of these passages, it comes as no surprise that the only contemporary person besides Antony whose name appears in the letters is the heresiarch Arius, who “did not know himself.”³⁵ People have multiple names of flesh—Jacob, Antony, Arius, and many other besides—just as in their fallen condition they have diverse bodies and individual wills; but they share only one true name, Israel, as they share only one spiritual essence.

In addition to Valentinian thought, Antony is drawing on a long tradition of Alexandrian ascetic exegesis of Genesis 32, in which Jacob wrestled with an angel, gained the victory, and received a new name, Israel. According to Philo, whom Clement and Origen follow, Jacob’s wrestling with the angel represents the ethical life of struggle with the passions, while the name Israel, meaning “one who sees God,” signifies the contemplative life, which victory over the passions allows.³⁶ But Antony elaborates on this tradition by associating Jacob, the monk’s “name in the flesh,” with transience, diversity, and corporeality, as well as with struggle with the demons, and Israel, the monk’s “true name,” with eternity, unity, and spirituality, and thus with overcoming the condition of fallenness represented by the demons. Antony’s teaching further echoes Valentinian tradition when it connects discovery of one’s “true name” with the ability to “perceive the name of Truth,” a mysterious term, most likely related to, but not identical with, “the name of Jesus Christ.” The “name of Truth” that belongs to God may ground the validity of the “true name” that belongs to humanity in its single spiritual essence, just as for the Valentinians the name of the Son provided the only reality in which the “partial names” of fallen beings shared. The Antonian monk must withdraw from his individual, separate, surface self of the fleshly name to the shared, united, hidden self of the true name. Although Antony does not explicitly recommend solitary withdrawal into the desert, his teachings clearly support that practice.

Demons oppose the monk’s quest for restored unity by promoting difference on two levels: through embodied vice they encourage a movement away from the invisible unity of spiritual essence, and through interpersonal strife they incite division within the social unity of the Church. These two aspects come together in the metaphor of “the house.” At the level of the person, Antony calls the fallen existence of corporeal individuality, in which the true spiritual self is hidden in the visible body, confinement in an inhospitable “dwelling.” “We dwell in

our death and stay in the house of the robber,” also known as “this house of clay,” “a house full of war,” “this house of dust and darkness,” and so forth. In this metaphor, a person’s true identity as spiritual essence is “invisible,” while externality takes on the negative valence of “outward confusion.”³⁷

Succumbing to demonic suggestion, then, emerges as a process of negative externalization. Demons, because they share the same spiritual essence as human beings, are “hidden” and “not visible bodily,” but they become “revealed bodily” through the monk’s actualizing of their sinful potential, by creating embodied deed from spiritual thought. The result is that “we are their [the demons’] bodies.” Just as the demonic came into being as the result of a fall away from unity caused by activity, the demonic now incites a movement from interior invisible spirituality to exterior visible corporeality, but one that embodies or exteriorizes negative invisible spirituality—namely, the demons. In contrast, virtuous acts effect a positive exteriorization because by them “we shall reveal the essence of our own mercy.” The demons try to cover their tracks by similarly distracting the monk’s attention away from his own interior life to his monastic colleagues and external circumstances: “[We are] accusing each other and not ourselves, thinking that our toil is from our fellows, judging what is outside while the robbers are all inside our house.”³⁸ Although the appellation is biblical and traditional, based especially in exegesis of the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37),³⁹ the demons are “robbers” for Antony because they provoke embodiment or exteriorization of a false identity, one foreign to the monk’s actual identity as spiritual essence, thus stealing the body and making it “their home” rather than an anticipation of the monk’s future resurrected “spiritual body.”⁴⁰

The demons’ creation of alienation among monastic colleagues represents their attempt to undermine the social unity of the Church, which anticipates the eventual return to the single spiritual essence and is also a “house.” Antony calls the Church “the house of truth” (compare Num. 12:7; Heb. 3:2–6): it is the mechanism through which God restores dispersed and divided creatures to the original unity. Although the Church originated with Moses and the prophets, only Christ could heal the “incurable wound” of human sin, and he was able to gather people from all lands and teach them about their essential unity. Restoration of unity and the suppression of corporeal individuality are the goals of the

Church, so the demons prey especially on the monk who follows his own will, and they “sow the seed of division” among monastic colleagues because “he who loves his neighbor loves God.”⁴¹ The “house of truth” should, through a harmony of wills in love, socially embody the unity of undifferentiated essence. Demonically inspired division exposes the house’s character as a collection of individual and therefore conflicting wills.⁴² The demonic intruder is, then, “a robber in our house” because it alienates the monk from his spiritual essence at the levels both of his own personality and of the monastic community.

Once again Antony’s teaching echoes that of at least one stream of Valentinian thought. Valentinus himself drew on the language of the parable of the good Samaritan to describe the fallen human heart as a “caravansary” (Luke 10:34), rendered “impure by being the habitation of many demons.”⁴³ The Valentinian author of *The Interpretation of Knowledge* elaborated on this demonic inhabitation of the person and, like Antony, on its consequences for the Church: “Since the body is a caravansary that the rulers and the authorities have as a dwelling place, the inner person, having been imprisoned in the modeled form, came into suffering. And having compelled him to serve them, they forced him to assist the powers [*energeia*]. They divided the Church.”⁴⁴ Although much of the preceding text is lost in a lacuna, the phrases that remain—“robbers,” “down to Jericho” (6:19–21)—indicate that this discussion also works from the good Samaritan parable. While Valentinus had identified the “heart” as the dwelling that the robber demons invade, this teacher anticipates Antony by making it the body and extending the demons’ work to dividing the Church. When Antony calls the body “the house of the robber” and says that it can become a body for demons, he sounds a lot like these Valentinian authors. But Antony departs from his Valentinian predecessors by understanding the estranged body not as the inevitable condition of material existence but instead as the result of succumbing to demonic temptation and thus as amenable to restoration through the ascetic program.

Because Antony considers the monk’s life to be a process of return to an original undifferentiated unity, the demons represent the tendency toward separation, division, and individuality. Although they incite a movement toward false externality, they themselves are not forces external to the monk, because the monk’s very existence as a separate individual implies the demonic pull of division. Demons are built into the

structure of the fallen cosmos as the principles of differentiation. There is no individual existence without demonic estrangement. But Antony believes that eventually existence will give way to essence: “Now therefore, I beseech you, my beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, not to neglect your true life, and not to confound the brevity of this time with time eternal, nor mistake the skin of corruptible flesh with the reign of ineffable light.”⁴⁵ Antony’s demonology harnessed insights from earlier philosophical traditions of Egyptian Christianity to a monastic goal of annihilation of the individual self or, rather, its reabsorption into an original undifferentiated unity. This objective is similar to what Pierre Hadot identifies as the aim of note-taking for ancient philosophers: “The point is not to forge oneself a spiritual identity by writing, but rather to liberate oneself from one’s individuality, in order to raise oneself up to universality . . . to accede to the universality of reason within the confines of space and time.”⁴⁶

Antony adapted an astonishing variety of previous demonological ideas to create a philosophical ideology, in a cosmological or mythological mode, for monastic withdrawal: as principles of differentiation, the demons render problematic individuality and difference, the symptoms of society as a collection of selves. Like his disciple and successor Ammonas, Antony was the intellectual heir to the spiritual guides who directed their disciples’ ascent to virtue within and alongside the Christian communities of urban Alexandria and other cities. By striking out into the desert, however, the *monachos* or “single one” radicalized the quest for simplicity of heart and likewise intensified an ambivalence about the multiplicity of human relationships that was deeply rooted in the late antique project of self-cultivation and particularly acute for Egyptian villagers of this period.⁴⁷ For Antony, demons, incorporeal as they were, embodied the fallen state of diversity, in which a multiplicity of selves provided, paradoxically, the essential context for achieving a simplicity that would transcend difference. What made “the single one” single was not only his celibacy, not only his pursuit of wholehearted devotion to God, but also his individual combat with the many demons, which was a struggle to regain his identity as part of a lost spiritual unity.