

[MJTM 14 (2012–2013)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Bradley Nassif. *Bringing Jesus to the Desert: Uncover the Ancient Culture, Discover Hidden Meanings*. Ancient Context, Ancient Faith Series. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. 133 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0310318300.

In *Bringing Jesus to the Desert*, part of the Ancient Context, Ancient Faith series edited by Gary N. Bunge, Bradley Nassif seeks to make the Desert Fathers an accessible spiritual resource for the evangelical Protestant community. Indeed, these ascetics from the early church provide a window into authentic Christianity and share many fundamental orthodox perspectives in common with modern evangelical Christians: human depravity and grace, the theme of pride and humility, spiritual warfare and temptation. In this work, Nassif seeks to show that while these Christians are dead, they still speak. Aside from providing a contextual setting by which to better place these early Christians, he also enlivens their personal stories by accurately demonstrating their relevance.

Dr. Nassif is a Lebanese American and a member of the Antiochian Orthodox Church. He holds degrees from Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox universities, including a MA in New Testament (Denver), MA in European History (Wichita), MDiv in Eastern Orthodox Studies (St. Vladimir's), and PhD in Historical Theology (Fordham). He is a pioneer, introducing orthodoxy to Protestant evangelicalism. He has held positions at various evangelical schools such as Fuller Seminary and Regent College, and often writes columns for *Christianity Today*. One of his favorite sayings from the Desert Fathers highlights a disconnect that often exists in Western Christianity, "A theologian is one who prays truly, and he who prays truly is a theologian."

Nassif is to be commended for his work's introductory

attempt to make this topic accessible for Western evangelicals. He appears to be a scholar who has a heart for Christ and teaching others of the rich blessings locked within the history of the church. The book is crisp—visually appealing—filled with pictures that make it easier for lay-learners, seminary students, and pastors to relate. There are a number of things that he does well and are worthy of mention, namely, his success in answering why the desert was so closely linked with these individuals, the benefit to the Christian of simple prayer, and the gravity of sin in the Christian worldview.

These Abbas and Ammas focused on their asceticism by withdrawing from society to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Their extreme lifestyle forced others to reflect on their own ways. The spiritual wisdom gained through stillness and solitude made them a highly sought after resource for others' spiritual journeys. They lived individually as hermits, in hermit clusters, and in monasteries. Some lived in caves, tombs, mountains, or abandoned forts. In their seclusion they prayed, fasted, held vigils, used manual work to learn spiritual truths, and gave to the poor. Though Westerners might think the desert an odd place to grow close to God, it is interesting to note that virtually every major character in the Bible spent time in the desert, including Jesus. Though Nassif cites the growing worldliness and nominal Christianity of the post-Constantine church as the impetus for retreat into the desert, he could have expanded more upon the wider church context of the time. After all, the largest struggle in pursuing such a probing historical work is the large chasm of time that separates historic Christians from contemporary Christians.

In the West, many lay Christians think they are insufficient in offering prayer because they cannot pray the “refined” prayers of church leaders. Nassif introduces his readers to the many short prayers the Desert Fathers employed such as the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner” (cf. Luke 18:13). After introducing the reader to other short prayers, he reminds them that sometimes our best prayers can be as simple as that. Along with the Ammas and Abbas, he also helps challenge the notion that if you are praying, you are

not actually working or doing something valuable. Prayer and reflection is indeed work, and meditation is very valuable (Josh 1:8).

Another invaluable contribution of the Desert Fathers that Nassif rightly highlights is the centrality of recognizing ourselves as fallen from God's original design. Though modern Christianity does not like to dwell on themes like sin, hell, temptation, and the like, Scripture and the Desert Fathers will not allow us to escape their reality. They are fundamental to orthodox Christian doctrine; if we are not sick then we are not in need of a Savior. It is only when we understand we need help that grace will make any sense. The Desert Fathers knew this truth very well. Athanasius declared, "God became humanized so that humans might become divinized" (p. 51). This process of regaining the likeness of Christ was called *theosis* in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In the West this concept would be termed *sanctification*, the process of holiness after one is justified in Christ. The main obstacle to such holiness is the sinful human heart.

Nassif could have expanded upon the wider historical context in which the Desert Fathers were situated. It was indeed a pivotal and exciting period of church history, and one that the Desert Fathers played an invaluable role in shaping. Nassif could also have elaborated further, though he did attempt to do so briefly, to explicitly commend to the reader the original sayings of the Abbas and Ammas. It cannot be overstated that these must be read in conjunction with even a preliminary focus to truly receive their full blessing. Though Nassif has gone out of his way to make the work practical and engaging, some examples seem somewhat contrived and, at times, I wondered about the direct relevance of these and some of the associated photographs. That the book lacks a bibliography or any other direction for future reading also leaves the reader unable to connect with past and present conversations on the topic.

Overall, Nassif's work in this series is a good start to bringing this important piece of Christian history to bear upon the evangelical Protestant world. Nassif's comprehensive knowledge on the subject covers many of the key points pertaining to studies on the Desert Fathers. His passion and work with

evangelicals also shines through as he writes into their context. An evangelical work appropriating the practical nature of the Desert Fathers, in greater detail and context, would also prove valuable. As Nassif states, Western Christians can profit much from the sayings and spirituality of the desert Fathers and Mothers in our dark days. I hope Nassif's work is only the beginning of evangelicals reclaiming this tradition.

Christopher W. Crocker  
McMaster Divinity College