

Introduction: Evagrius Ponticus and his theology

O.I DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MODERN STUDY OF EVAGRIUS PONTICUS

In the course of the twentieth century, two major developments transformed our awareness of Evagrius Ponticus, a figure known (chiefly from external references in ecclesiastical histories and other documents) to have lived in Egypt in the final decades of the fourth century and to have been associated with fierce debates over the legacy of Origen of Alexandria that began in the later years of his life and roiled on for some time.

The first was an unprecedented increase in the rate of recovering Evagrius' writings – not only in their original Greek, but also in ancient translations. The publication of major funds of Evagrian writings began in 1907, when Fr Barsegh Sarghissian of the Mekhitarist monastery of San Lazzaro degli Armeni brought out a volume of Evagriana, surviving in Armenian, under the title *Srboy horn Evagri Pontac'woy. Vark'ew matengrutiwnk'targmanealk'i yowne i hay barbar i hingerord daroy*. The translations are important because they provide access, albeit at a linguistic remove, to documents which were otherwise lost to us. But they are also important because they have enabled scholars to identify confidently some writings in Greek that are now known to have been written by Evagrius, despite the fact that they have been traditionally

2 *Introduction: Evagrius Ponticus and his theology*

attributed to someone else. There is even a case in which the consensus of ancient translations allows modern scholars to reach behind the surviving Greek text, as it were, and to argue for the loss of content in the Greek tradition. (We will come on to specific examples in due course.) As for documents in the original Greek, critical research into manuscripts – especially the research undertaken by Antoine Guillaumont, Claire Guillaumont and Paul Géhin under the auspices of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique – has produced many volumes of Evagrius’ notes (or *scholia*) on various biblical texts and of his ‘chapters’ (or *kephalaia*) that describe and analyse key aspects of the Christian monastic life. We will have more to say about Evagrius’ writings and their recovery later in this book, but for now it suffices to note that since 1907 dozens of writings have been recovered and published.

On the basis of the documents recently restored to scholarly consideration, students of Evagrius have initiated a second phase of development. From roughly the early 1960s, this detailed textual study gave rise to the publication of synthetic research into Evagrius and the Evagrian tradition. Of course, Evagrius had been studied by earlier generations, but the substantial increase in availability of primary sources means that we can date the beginnings of the modern study of Evagrius to 1962, when the first monograph on Evagrius – Antoine Guillaumont’s *Les ‘Képhalaia Gnostica’ d’Évagre le Pontique et l’histoire de l’Origenisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens* – was published in Paris. Guillaumont’s monograph transformed the study of Evagrius and his works, catalysing debate and discussion of such a qualitatively distinctive order that we are justified in treating its publication as inaugurating a new period of study.

Since this book has been written as a contribution to precisely the modern phase of Evagrian study as inaugurated by Guillaumont’s

Introduction: Evagrius Ponticus and his theology 3

work, and since mention has just been made of the debates and discussions that have followed on from that work, it is appropriate here to say a word about those debates and to position the current study within them. As we will see when we come to consider ancient evidence about Evagrius subsequent to Evagrius' own life, there is a dominant trend of interpretation according to which Evagrius' theology (if not his very writings themselves) was absolutely central to the debates about Origen of Alexandria that erupted in about 399 and episodically thereafter, culminating in a series of condemnations in the mid sixth century. That trend of interpretation is well established, having been proposed and endorsed over several centuries. It is an interpretation that Guillaumont has also endorsed; indeed, Guillaumont regarded a remarkable discovery that he made (and that we will consider in greater detail later) as providing definitive proof of the substantial accuracy of that interpretation.

However, as fresh evidence of Evagrius' thinking has amassed in the form of recovered writings, and as the scholarly understanding of events in Egypt and Palestine from the final years of the fourth century for a little over a decade and in Palestine throughout the mid sixth century have evolved, some scholars have come to question the conventional ideas about Evagrius' place in the history of the Origenist controversies. The analysis offered in this book is critical of several assumptions that underlie the received account and the first part of this book offers an account of Evagrius' historical significance that is accordingly distinctive from the conventional account.

O.2 THE PLAN OF THE PRESENT STUDY

This book is divided into two parts. The first part surveys the primary evidence concerning Evagrius and his writings. Evagrius

lived during a vibrant time, and even a partial list of his personal contacts reads like a conspectus for *Who's Who in Fourth-Century Greek Christianity*, among them Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus (in whose retinue Evagrius attended the Second Ecumenical Council), Melania the Elder, Rufinus of Aquileia, Macarius the Alexandrian, Macarius the Egyptian, the Tall Brothers, and Palladius of Hellenopolis. He corresponded with Theophilus of Alexandria and John of Jerusalem, and probably met John Cassian during one of his extended pilgrimages in Egypt. There is no direct evidence that he knew Jerome, but they certainly had friends (or, as is ever the case with Jerome, erstwhile friends) in common. It will not be possible to recreate in this book a survey of the Greek Christian world during Evagrius' lifetime – nor would that be desirable, since other surveys admirably fill the need for such a thing. Even so, it is good to have a sense for people who influenced Evagrius and were influenced by him.

The reconstruction of Evagrius' life provides a framework for understanding Evagrius' writings. Those writings are our chief source for understanding Evagrius' theology and, as such, they are central to this book. An initial presentation of his works will identify the major genres of Evagrius' work. These preliminary considerations are important because form and content are mutually reinforcing in Evagrius' writings. It is not coincidental that the two works fundamental to the scholarly consensus that this book challenges are a collection of six centuries of *kephalaia* (a literary form that will be explained in due course) and a personal letter to an old friend. A third-party reading of someone else's correspondence obviously poses specific problems. As for centuries of *kephalaia*, they are comparable to scholastic *summae* in the sense that both are indigenous to a highly developed discourse and are incomprehensible without some awareness of the discourse from which they emerged.

The history of transmission for Evagrius' writings will also come into consideration. That history is tortuous. A major factor that explains, for example, the immense value of ancient translations of Evagrius' works is the way his reputation evolved. In Chapter 3, we will focus on that process over several generations after his lifetime. Evidence for Evagrius' reputation comes in the form of references to him by name, of course, but (even more significant for modern scholarship) there are also other records about debates where some scholars have identified traces of Evagrius' influence. The value of this second body of evidence is subject to controversy, however, and we will scrutinise the criteria that are used to determine which ancient accounts are considered relevant and why. Whilst assessing those debates, the methodology used in this study and the position it takes in matters of controversy will both be clarified.

After discussing the times in which Evagrius lived, and considering in some detail the methodological problems that are involved in reconstructing the teachings of a figure who has proven historically controversial, we will be ready for the second part of this book. For in Part II, we will move from a chronological study of Evagrius' life and times to a synthetic study of major themes that emerge from his writings. These themes have been chosen because they are recurrent across the corpus of Evagrius' writings and indigenous to it. The merit behind those two points is as follows. First, because the themes are found across Evagrius' writings, the danger is minimized that any of them could be overturned if a given writing were demonstrated to be inauthentic. Or, to raise essentially the same point, there is less likelihood of arriving at a distorted account of what Evagrius thought as a result of unduly relying on a single source.

As for the second point, readers of this book who benefit from a thorough training in theology may be startled initially to find the

categories idiosyncratic. One might expect to find standard categories in a systematic approach (e.g., *De Deo uno*, *De Deo trino*, *De Christo*, *De ecclesia*, etc.), but in these pages instead will be found extended treatments of themes like fellowship, Scriptures and prayer. The fundamental topics of Christology and the Holy Trinity will indeed be the subjects of two chapters, but they are reserved for the end of this study. They have been reserved till that point precisely because there is in Evagrius' very writings a pedagogical structure that this explication of those writings will respect by beginning with practical matters (e.g., life in community) before moving to topics for which understanding is required (e.g., the reading and interpretation of the Scriptures), and then moving on to discourse with – and thus discourse *about* – God (e.g., prayer). The final two chapters will move from the threefold scheme, recurrent throughout Evagrius' own writings, to consider Evagrius' teachings about the economy of salvation (in the chapter on Christology) and about the dynamics of divine life (in the chapter on the Trinity).

There is a reason for this selection. As will become clear by the conclusion of Part I, there are problems in the scholarly evaluation of Evagrius' theology that originated from the retrojection of subsequent theological categories, which are then imposed upon his writings. For that reason, it is actually preferable that the themes should be derived from a critical engagement with Evagrius' writings, rather than being simply brought to his writings with the expectation that the writings will be relevant to the themes. The results may require an imaginative leap insofar as they are foreign to contemporary patterns of thought, but that is not an unreasonable effort to make in order to come to terms with theological texts that were written over sixteen centuries ago and that even then were not written for ready comprehension.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89680-1 - Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy

Augustine Casiday

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

Evagrius Ponticus
in ecclesiastical history

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89680-1 - Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy

Augustine Casiday

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Evagrius' life

I.1 INTRODUCTION

Evagrius lived during eventful times and, for a while at least, was actively involved in them. In this chapter, we will survey the events of Evagrius' life and draw particular attention to the people with whom he associated. The value of this exercise will be seen when we embark on our account of Evagrius' thinking, in the second part of this book. Evagrius' associations will provide us with a fund of evidence to which we can compare his works and which will help us identify major points within those works that might otherwise be less apparent. Further, the associations will also give us a meaningful context, historical and intellectual, for interpreting Evagrius' writings.

I.2 EVAGRIUS IN ASIA MINOR (344/5 TO 382)

Evagrius was born to a Christian family who lived in Ibora, Pontus (Roman Cappadocia; the modern location is Iverönü, Turkey).¹ Two lines of chronological analysis converge to indicate that Evagrius was probably born in 345.² Evagrius' family appears to have been affluent

¹ H. Leclercq, 'Ibora', in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1907–53), VII: 4–9.

² The first argument is based on Palladius' unambiguous statement that Evagrius died in the desert at the age of fifty-five (*Lausiac History* 38.1), and the fact that Palladius does not

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89680-1 - Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy

Augustine Casiday

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and rather well connected with other Christian families – most notably, with the first family of Christian Cappadocia, the household of Basilius and Emmelia, whose formidable offspring included Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Macrina the Younger.³ We have no evidence when the contacts between Evagrius' family and Basilius' began, but we do know that in about 358 (and so probably in the early years of Evagrius' adolescence) Basil came to nearby Annisa to retreat into monastic life. Basil paints a vivid picture of the area, sparing none of his training in classical Greek literature: coming to Pontus, he found that

There indeed God showed me a spot exactly suited to my taste, so that I really beheld just such a place as I have often been wont in idle reverie to fashion in my imagination.

There is a high mountain, covered with a thick forest, watered on its northerly side by cool and transparent streams. At its base is outstretched an evenly sloping plain, ever enriched by the moisture from the mountain. A forest of many-coloured and multifarious trees, a spontaneous growth surrounding the place, acts almost as a hedge to enclose it, so that even Kalypso's isle, which Homer seems to have admired above all others for its beauty, is insignificant as compared with this. For it is, in fact, by no means far from being an island, since it is shut in on all sides by barriers. Two deep ravines break off abruptly on two sides, and on a third side, at the bottom of

mention Evagrius amongst the many people who sought refuge with John Chrysostom when they were expelled from Egypt in 399. This is a well-known and widely accepted argument, but for two reasons it is not entirely satisfactory: in the first place, as an argument from silence it is necessarily weak; in the second, it subtly reinforces the idea that Evagrius was sufficiently important in that crisis that he ought to have been named by contemporary sources. (That second reason is something that will be directly challenged in this book.) A second argument is based on Gregory of Nazianzus' *Letter 6*, which the modern editor dates to 359 since it pertains to Gregory's time teaching rhetoric in Nazianzus. In that letter, Gregory praises the recipient's young son, whom I take to be our Evagrius, for his virtue and accomplishment. Working backward from both sources, we reach a reasonable approximation of 345 as the year of Evagrius' birth. For a survey of the varying estimates, see now A. Guillaumont, *Un philosophe au désert: Évagre le Pontique* (Paris: Vrin, 2004): 63 n. 6.

³ See further P. Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994): 1–26.