

Module: MIN 102 Lecture 2
CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Biblical Background and Historical Markers for Christian *Spirituality*

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Before we get into the historical writings, we need to consider the Biblical examples of Spiritual Contact with God

Moses Meets with God - Exodus 20

18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear.

They stayed at a distance...

20 Moses said to the people,
"Do not be afraid..."

21 The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached

the thick darkness where God was.

Darkness is a critical part of the understanding we get with *contemplative prayer*.

The LORD **made darkness His canopy...**

Psalms 18:11 and 2 Samuel 22:12

In this darkness...

Exodus 33

The Lord would speak to Moses ***face to face***, as one speaks to a friend.

The LORD Appears to Elijah

1 Kings 19

11 The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain **in the presence of the Lord**, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord,

but the Lord was not in the wind.

After the wind there was an earthquake,

but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

12 After the earthquake came a fire,

but the Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire came a **gentle whisper**.

Here God meets with His prophet through
a gentle whisper.

Paul in a Vision

2 Corinthians 12:2

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up *to the third heaven*.

Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know...

4 was *caught up to paradise* and
heard *inexpressible* things,
things that no one is permitted to tell.

Paul says he heard things that are
inexpressible [ἄρρητα]
from ῥητῶς [to express clearly]

This use of the alpha (α) in front of a
word - is called the "alpha privative,"
some call it "alpha negative."

...describing God by what He is NOT,
asserting what God is not,
because God transcends all human
concepts and language.

This what scholars in this field call
"Negative Theology."

Throughout our biblical text we are confronted with mysterious stories... about God.

Who is He? What is He like?

Isaiah 55:8-9 wraps it up quite nicely: (notice how the Lord speaks in negatives here)

“For my thoughts are **not** your thoughts, **neither** are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.

9 “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts.

These verses in Isaiah lay down a principle that we will see again:

God is completely "other" from us.

This becomes a very important part of *spiritual* language given to the Church by Greek philosophy.

By Greek philosophy? Yes!

So God is "without a body,"
asomatos (ἄσωματος)

God is everywhere...at once.
That means that He is "without location"

God is "without father" [ἄπάτωρ],
"without mother" [ἄμήτωρ],
"without genealogy" [ἄγενεαλόγητος]
Hebrews 7:2

This text from NT *Hebrews*. Many scholars believe Apollos wrote this NT book.

[See, Bruce, F.F., “‘To the Hebrews’: A Document of Roman Christianity?” ANRW 25.4 (1987), pp.3496-3521; and Bruce, F.F., *Men and Movements in the Primitive Church*, BCL (Carlisle, UK 1979).]

The NT introduction of Apollos (*Acts* 18) gives strong hints that Apollos had been a student of philosophy, probably under Philo of Alexandria.

God is **NOT** finite - He is infinite

God is **NOT** temporal - He is eternal

All of these "negatives" OR attempts to define God as completely "other" lead us to the abstract realities of God...

Thus, Moses entered into
the thick darkness [the unknown]
where God exists.

This concept is most clearly described by
Gregory Nyssa, a 4th century bishop in
modern-day Turkey, *Life of Moses*.

I am throwing a ton of stuff at you
guys...very quickly.

Do not get overwhelmed...you will
see/hear these concepts several
times.

Here is where things get difficult:
Is God really completely "other"
from us?

What in our faith bridges that gap?

Jesus...

Immanuel, **God is with us.**

And Jesus clearly says,

"If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." *John 14:9*

In theological terms:

We serve a God who is
utterly transcendent...

But also *immediately immanent.*

"close...present...tangible and real"

This is a mystery...something we cannot completely explain.

Also, our Spiritual Worship:

*Instead, be filled with the Spirit,
19 speaking to one another with
psalms, hymns, and songs from
the Spirit.*

*Sing and make music from your
heart to the Lord... Eph 5:18-19*

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[14 min]

So spirituality, by definition of our
view of God, is mysterious.

We claim that we have direct contact
with the *utterly transcendent* God.

Contemplative Prayer addresses this
in a unique way...

Let's look at other historical
influences on early Christianity.

Philo of Alexandria:

a first century Jewish Philosopher

Philo of Alexandria (cir 20BC - 40AD)
was a contemporary of Jesus.

He lived in Alexandria, Egypt.

Philo was an exceptional Hellenized
Jewish scholar.

He was a philosopher, studied Plato,
and yet was also an OT scholar and
wrote many works on the Jewish
scriptures.

One of his many works,
Vita Contemplativa,
(The Contemplative Life) records how a
group of people lived in a compound in
the Egyptian desert...like monks...

and practiced a *spiritual* life devoted to the pursuit of God through *contemplation*.

Here is a text from *The Contemplative Life* describing the daily life and worship of this group known as the Therapeutae (*mystical healers*):

*...their eyes and hands lifted up to Heaven, eyes because they have been trained to **fix their gaze** on things worthy of contemplation, hands lifted to show they are clean...and not defiled through any cause of profit-making. So standing they pray to God...*

Vit.Con. 66,5-12

*And after **the common meal together**, they celebrate the sacred festival during the whole night...they all stand up together, and in the middle of the entertainment two choruses are formed...the one of men and the other of women...(84) They sing hymns which have been composed in honour of God...all singing together...moving [**raising**] **their hands and dancing** [**or swaying**] in corresponding harmony, and uttering in an inspired manner songs of thanksgiving... VC 83-84*

These texts sound like modern-day charismatics/pentecostals.

[Also remember: we have evidence that Apollos studied under Philo. Could he have known about this group...this text?]

Eusebius (4th century historian)
appears to be calling this group the
first Christian monks.
WHY is this important?

Because this Therapeutae sounds
very similar to the Essenes,
the group that lived near the Dead
Sea...where we found the DS Scrolls
and the Qumran Community.

This community at the Dead Sea
were Levitical priests who walked
away from the Temple in protest.
They were protesting some of the
same things that bothered Jesus.

These former priests formed a desert community similar to the Therapeutai in Egypt.

Many scholars believe John the Baptist started his ministry from this Dead Sea community.

We have evidence (scant, not strong) that some of these Essenes followed John the Baptist and became part of the early Christian movement.

Add this to Apollos in *Acts* 18 coming from Alexandria...

already a Christian...

trained in philosophy and rhetoric.

What am I suggesting?

It seems possible that this *spiritual contemplation* could have been part of these early Jewish groups and brought into the primitive church.

It's possible that Jesus taught His disciples something similar, but we have no clear evidence of this.

[22 min]

We have very little evidence of this *spiritual contemplation* after the apostles.

The Shepherd of Hermas gives us scant evidence. It is apocalyptic... mysterious...and charismatic,

BUT has no clear indications of
spiritual contemplation.

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With **Clement of Alexandria**
(cir 200AD) things change.

Like many other early Christian
fathers, Clement had studied
philosophy prior to coming to faith.

When he came to Egypt to study in
the philosophical school, he met a
man who brought him to faith.

Sometime around 190AD Clement
became the leader of the school and
drafted three works, like a trilogy.

Exhortation to the Greeks
[Protrepticus] - a call to accept the gospel

The Educator [Paidagogus] - what appears to be Christian training for new believers - to be baptized and take his/her first Eucharist (communion).

Miscellanies [Stromateis] - a dense work, seemingly unorganized, yet *hidden* within is the first clear Christian exposition on *prayer* and *spiritual contemplation*.

[Here are some choice passages from *Stromateis* Book 7 that illustrate this

concept (all emphasis is mine, **yellow text** and/or *italics*):

Now we are commanded to reverence and honor the same one...He is Word, Savior, and...by Him, the Father, not on special days, as some others, but doing this **continually in our whole life**, and in every way...not in a specified place, or selected temple, or at certain festivals and on appointed days, but during his **whole life, the Gnostic** in every place, even if he be alone by himself... VII.7.35,1-2

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[Clement is arguing against the Gnostics, but uses their term "gnostic" to describe the truly *spiritual* Christian.

This is an important point a student of church history must quickly grasp: many of the church

fathers use rhetorical devices (strong sarcasm, pretending to agree with their "opponent" to make a point, usually *ad absurdum*) which can sometimes make it difficult to understand what they are saying.]

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Holding festival, then, in **our whole life**, persuaded that God is altogether on every side present, *we cultivate our fields, praising; we sail the sea, hymning...*

The Gnostic, then, is very closely allied to God, being at once serious and cheerful in all things... VII.7.35,6

The concept of "silent prayer" was very important in Clement's system.

"Silence," and "Quiet" were together important as they both relate to "rest."

[the concept of "rest" will come up again later in *contemplative prayer*.]

Prayer is, then, to speak more boldly, converse with God. **Though whispering, consequently, and not opening the lips, we speak in silence...** VII.7.39,6

For God hears continually all the inward converse. So also we raise the head and lift the hands to heaven... VII.7.40,1

Now, if some assign definite hours for prayer, as for example, the third, and sixth, and ninth - **the Gnostic prays throughout his whole life**, endeavouring by prayer to have fellowship with God.

VII.7.40,3

[This is just a sample. *Stromateis* VII is the first lengthy treatise on prayer in the

early church. We will see later why Clement is so important.]

As we read, just remember this is Clement, a philosopher who believes that God is *utterly transcendent*....

Yet he is also a Christian...

So you can see that for him the "spiritual Christian" has *immediate access/contact* with God.

[Finally, this last reference points to Moses, who climbed to *the summit* of the mountain in Exodus, covered in darkness. The "summit" also refers to the concept that the spirit can "rise" above the conscience of the mind....into an interior place of the spirit.]

And *the Gnostic*, who has reached the

summit, will pray that *contemplation* may grow and abide... VII.7.46,4

...the Gnostic will pray along with those who have recently believed...And his whole life is a holy festival. His sacrifices are prayers, and praises, and readings in the Scriptures before meals, and psalms and hymns during meals and before bed, and prayers also again during night. By these he unites himself to the divine choir [*this is Clement referencing angels*], from continual recollection, engaged in *contemplation* which has everlasting remembrance. VII.7.49,3-6

This text (below) reminds me of the one above:

*we plow our fields, praising;
we sail the sea, hymning...*

But while engaged in walking,
in conversation, while in silence, while
engaged in reading...he in every mood
prays. **If he just forms the thought in the
secret chamber of his soul**, and call on the
Father...He is near, and is at his side,
while not speaking. VII.9.50

His **whole life is prayer** and converse
with God. And if he be pure from sins, he
will by all means obtain what he wishes.
For God says to the righteous man,
"Ask, and I will give thee;
think, and I will do." VII.12.73,2-3

[This text above is a VERY optimistic view of our ability to call on God in prayer: just "think" it and God will do it!...wow, I cannot fully agree with this view.]

This next text is a subtle reference to *Rev 5* - when we worship, we are joining the multitude in heaven.

So is he always pure for prayer. He also prays **in the society of angels**...and he is never out of their holy keeping; and though he pray alone, he has **the choir of the saints** standing with him. VII.12.78,6

[35 min]

Ok. I am almost done with Clement of Alexandria's role in the development of *contemplative prayer*.

I want to give you 5 things Clement does that shows his reader that this *spiritual prayer* is not just strange and mystical....

But is something that happens in space and time...it is REAL and tangible....

Not just abstract and mysterious.

1. He shows the truly *spiritual* Christian is the new Moses.

He communes with God face to face.

He is called the "friend" of God.

2. Clement links “prayer” with *contemplation* (deep thought, silent prayer, even just thoughts...)

3. He describes (as we have read) the truly *spiritual* one has **direct contact** with God in prayer.

4. He uses “face to face” (like Moses) with God **10 times** to describe the truly *spiritual* person.

Ok. From here we move into several strands in the Early Church...

We will see how *contemplative prayer* continues to be taught...

QUESTIONS?

PRACTICUM

- 10 minutes of silent prayer practice
- 20 minutes to write down your thoughts in your prayer journal.
- Q and A discussion time.