

“And Who Will Show Me the Way?” St. Antony’s Alchemy of the Inner Mountain and the Pathless Abyss

By Michael Bradburn-Ruster

Within one’s self deserts and mountains...

—Ursula Vaughan Williams, “Sight”

Two mountains constitute a central symbol in the life of St. Antony of Egypt (c. 251-356 AD), regarded as the “father of monasticism.”¹ This twin image is worthy of our focused reflection and meditation, proffering a constellation of profound images—or rather a single iconic gem whose various facets betoken a dialectical process of integration: a vital interlace of height and depth, of the outer and inner man, of solitude and community, nature and grace.

Antony, born in Alexandria and orphaned by the age of twenty, was inspired by the Gospel to sell his possessions and renounce the comforts of society, devoting himself to a life of solitude and prayer.² “If thou wilt be perfect,” he heard in a reading of Matthew’s Gospel, “go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.”³ After some twenty years of practising an ascetic life—withdrawing first to the outskirts of his village under the guidance of an old man and the advice of other adepts, thence to a solitary life in a tomb, and later to an abandoned Roman fortress—he would retreat into the desert near Mt. Pispir, which would later be known as the Outer Mountain.⁴

¹ The classic source for St. Antony’s life is the *Vita Antonii* of St. Athanasius, translated as *The Life of Antony* by Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist P, 1980), cited hereafter as *Life*.

² *Life*, Chs. 2-3, pp. 31-2.

³ Mt. 19:21.

⁴ *Life*, Chs. 3 & 4, p. 32-3; Ch. 8, p. 37; Ch. 12, p. 40. Mt. Pispir (now called Dayr al-Maymūn) lies 75 km south of Memphis (Manf), and to the east across the Nile from Faiyum (el-Fayyūm), halfway between present Itfih and Beni Suef; it was known in Antony’s time as Arsinoë, and before that as Crocodopolis.

The significance of this departure is marked by the long discourse preceding it, offered by Antony in response to a request from a group of monks, after the ascetic emerges from the fortress; his teaching addresses thoughts and apparitions, voices and visions, discernment between good and evil spirits.⁵ More than curiosity would seem to motivate their request; for despite many years of battles with demons, Antony is left neither weary nor distressed, but radiating a luminous equanimity: Athanasius tells us that the hermit comes forth as from a shrine, like someone who had been “led into divine mysteries and inspired by God,” and is soon both healing people and expelling demons.⁶ The tomb and the fortress prefigure the Outer and Inner mountains: a double chrysalis in which has been wrought a transformation verging on rebirth or even resurrection: like Lazarus, he has died to his former life and arisen into new life.

During his sojourn at the Outer Mountain, he is inundated with visitors whose number and frequency hinder the silence and tranquility he seeks; after some five years there he withdraws yet further, journeying south-east to Mt. Qolozum (variously spelt as Colzim or Al-Qalzam or Qulzum). This remote place, between the Nile and the Red Sea, was to become known as the Inner Mountain.⁷ Though he would dwell there until his death, Antony did not remain entirely isolated, frequently returning to the Outer Mountain in order to minister to both monks and laymen.

The symbolic significance of these two mountains is evident, the ascending slopes and lofty peaks representing propinquity to heaven. In all three Abrahamic traditions, mountains echo the archetypal Mt. Sinai, where Moses’ intimacy with God allowed him to receive the Ten Commandments.⁸ A generation after Antony, St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 395 AD) will note that Moses “lived alone in the mountains

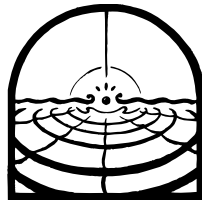
⁵ *Life*, Chs. 16-43, pp. 43-64.

⁶ *Life*, Ch. 14, p. 42.

⁷ The move from the Outer to the Inner Mountain is recounted in Chs. 49-50 of the *Life*, pp. 67-9. The latter is the site of the Coptic Monastery of St. Antony, with its self-contained village and five churches, known today as Deir Mar Antonios. An excellent brief film can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAh-qxh1_Ic

⁸ As well as the secret teachings of the Kabbalah: thus both exoteric and esoteric revelations. Leo Schaya, *Universal Aspects of the Kabbalah & Judaism*, ed. Roger Gaetani (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2014), 126.

To read the balance of this article, please subscribe to this volume.



SACRED WEB

A JOURNAL OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

www.sacredweb.com