

John Chryssavgis. *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc., 2008. 224 pp. Cloth \$19.95.

This study explores the essence of the monastic desert movement from the third century to the end of the fourth century CE by men and women who fled the surrounding cities they lived in, and came into the arid sands of Egypt in order to continue the trajectory of life. The ancient texts that survive, mainly 1,202 *Sayings of the Desert Fathers or Apothegmata*, which Dr. Chryssavgis explores for the purpose of resurrecting the ancient spirit of the desert within a modern context, reveal that these men and women had been specific about their goal in coming to the desert: “We entreat you, make us truly alive.”¹ In seeking out these “...unconventional persons...[who] sought aggressively to understand the deeper meaning and the fuller measure of human existence...,”² the author breathes new life into their Sayings. He generously chooses and strategically disperses the Sayings throughout the chapters of his book portraying the essence and the way of spiritual attunement to the things of God. Behind these powerful stories and messages “...is concealed the very face of God, Who speaks to each of us in the present and for all eternity.”³ The Sayings are meant to transform us rather than engage us in a dry and spiritless imitation of a behavior or a life that otherwise in a different context would belong to someone else. Thus, the aim of the book is to connect us in a common endeavor so that we may be challenged by our personal “profile of what it means to be human.”⁴

The book consists of eighteen chapters with an Introduction and a Conclusion. This volume includes a chronological table of the chief exponents of the desert movement, a detailed map, a generous bibliography, exquisite pictures, and an introduction to the tradition and the sources of the Sayings. Expanding upon an earlier volume, Chryssavgis has added several sections dealing with contemporary issues such as ecology and gender. In each meticulously arranged chapter, Chryssavgis explores the historical movement of the desert and the key figures. He then sets out the ascetic disciplines which characterized the movement and provides advice on living out these virtues. Finally,

¹ John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc., 2008), 1.

² Chryssavgis, 1.

³ Chryssavgis, 4.

⁴ Chryssavgis, 5.

Chryssavgis brings the desert to the city. Specifically, he tests its application to modern issues and concerns in line with his recent work on the environment and shows us how the Fathers and Mothers, “enjoyed a new awareness of everything that is in the world- human, animal, and natural.”⁵ Not only did Anthony see the desert for the first time “and loved it,”⁶ but what constituted holiness was the sense of wholeness and connectedness to each other and the natural environment.

The essence of the work is found in Chapter 11 where Chryssavgis’ opening sentence underlines the Christian faith, “Giving and sharing are of the essence of the desert.”⁷ The chapter concludes with a contrast between the mind (*nous*) and the heart where he captures the synthesizing and holistic message of the desert, “The two [i.e., heart and *nous*] should be held together; and they should be brought together in the presence of God.”⁸ By identifying peripherally the role of the *nous* in the Greek Fathers in contrast to the role of the heart in their Eastern counterparts,⁹ Chryssavgis alludes to the significant role that the desert held upon the Fathers of both traditions, the unified nature of the human condition, and the desert’s alchemy on lived existence.

Through the words of exceptional and exemplary elders, Chryssavgis demonstrates that the journey into the desert marked a profoundly humane approach to God, neighbor, and self. In the final chapter, he takes us back to the beginning of the book and reminds us that the purpose of reading the Desert Fathers and Mothers is so that we could catch a glimpse of their fire.¹⁰ It is not coincidental then that the author should conclude with the same message that he began with: “Then we can be grateful to God for ‘making us truly alive.’”¹¹ Chryssavgis’ spiritual insights and meaningful contextualization and application of the desert movement to today contribute enormously to a renewed interest into a way of life in which God, and more specifically theandric Christ was at the center of one’s life.

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⁵ Chryssavgis, 85.

⁶ Chryssavgis, 85.

⁷ Chryssavgis, 75.

⁸ Chryssavgis, 77.

⁹ Chryssavgis does not explore this point in depth in his work. It is, however, examined in J.A. McGuckin, *Standing in God’s Holy Fire: The Byzantine Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, Ltd., 2001).

¹⁰ Chryssavgis, 103.

¹¹ Chryssavgis, 110.