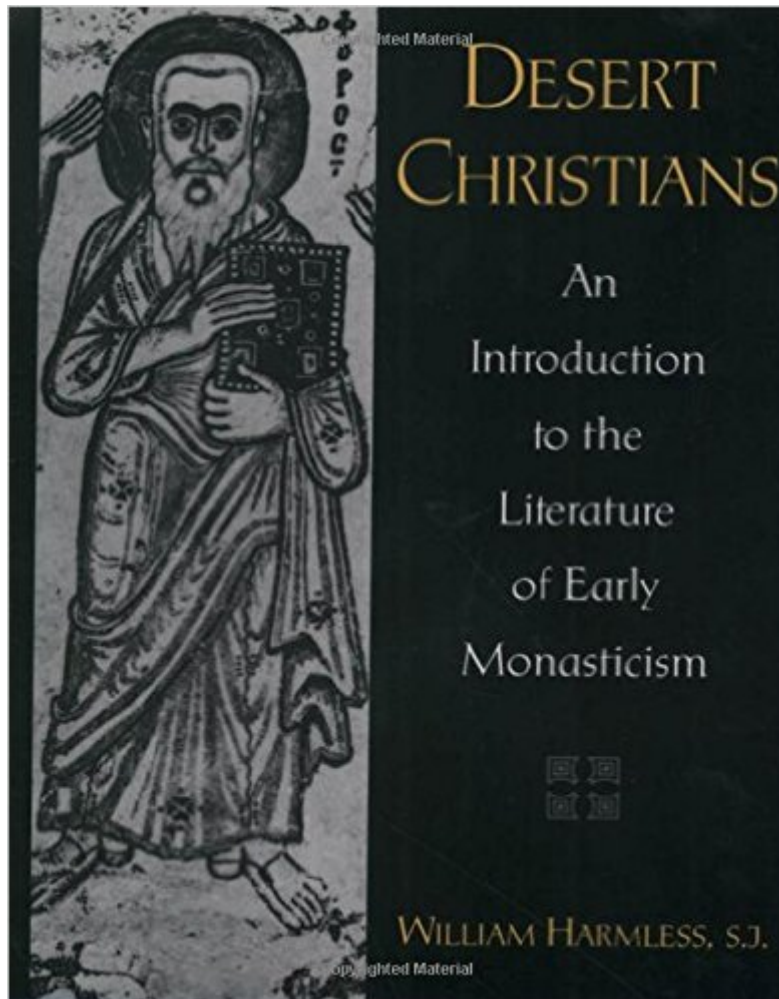


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Desert Christians: An Introduction To The Literature Of Early Monasticism



Synopsis

In the fourth century, the deserts of Egypt became the nerve center of a radical new movement, what we now call monasticism. Groups of Christians—from illiterate peasants to learned intellectuals—moved out to the wastelands beyond the Nile Valley and, in the famous words of Saint Athanasius, made the desert a city. In so doing, they captured the imagination of the ancient world. They forged techniques of prayer and asceticism, of discipleship and spiritual direction, that have remained central to Christianity ever since. Seeking to map the soul's long journey to God and plot out the subtle vagaries of the human heart, they created and inspired texts that became classics of Western spirituality. These Desert Christians were also brilliant storytellers, some of Christianity's finest. This book introduces the literature of early monasticism. It examines all the best-known works, including Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, the *Lives of Pachomius*, and the so-called *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Later chapters focus on two pioneers of monastic theology: Evagrius Ponticus, the first great theoretician of Christian mysticism; and John Cassian, who brought Egyptian monasticism to the Latin West. Along the way, readers are introduced to path-breaking discoveries—to new texts and recent archeological finds—that have revolutionized contemporary scholarship on monastic origins. Included are fascinating snippets from papyri and from little-known Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopic texts. Interspersed in each chapter are illustrations, maps, and diagrams that help readers sort through the key texts and the richly-textured world of early monasticism. Geared to a wide audience and written in clear, jargon-free prose, *Desert Christians* offers the most comprehensive and accessible introduction to early monasticism.

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Customer Reviews

Evolution of Monastic Vocation: In the fourth century, the deserts of Egypt became the nerve center of a radical new movement, what we now call monasticism. Groups of Christians—from illiterate peasants to learned intellectuals—moved out to the wastelands beyond the Nile Valley and, in the famous words of Saint Athanasius, made the desert a city. At the height of Christian asceticism in the Middle East, thousands of monks lived in monastic centers in Egypt, Nitria, Kellia, and Sketes in the West Delta, and Pachomian coenobitic communities in Upper Egypt. Later on the monastic practice moved into Palestine, and the Syrian deserts. Some lived in isolated caves, in real seclusion, rarely meeting other humans as did Abba Paul the first hermit. Basing his work on multiple sources, James Goehring, an eminent expert on the evolution of monasticism in Egypt, and a pioneer scholar of early Christianity, has resiliently influenced a new direction in understanding the evolution of monasticism. He carefully examines the whole multiple sources, papyrological documents, traditional literary sources, and archaeological finds, into a clear narrative that infusing the history of Egyptian monasticism with revived energy. Coenobitic Monasticism: Goehring convincingly dismantles some previously regarded scholarship on early Egyptian monasticism, and situates Pachomian monasticism in the midst of the economic and social life of its time. The diversity of Egyptian monasticism, in theology and lifestyle is here demonstrated. Philip Rousseau's careful reading of the available texts reveals that Pachomius's pioneering enterprise has been consistently misread in light of later monastic practices.

"Harmless states as his purpose: to introduce readers to the literature by and about the desert Christians of the fourth and fifth centuries..., serves as a resource for more advanced students because of its breadth and level of detail." R. Krawiec, *J. Christian Spirituality* Early Monastic Lives: Monastics forged techniques of prayer and asceticism, of discipleship and spiritual direction, that have remained central to Christianity ever since. Seeking to map the soul's long journey to God and plot out the subtle vagaries of the human heart, they created and inspired texts that became classics of Western spirituality. In so doing, they captured the imagination of the ancient world. These Desert Fathers were insightful wisdom teachers and brilliant hagiographers, some of early Christianity's finest was contained in Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, the *Lives of Pachomius*, and *Apophthegmata Patrum*, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: The study of Christian monasticism in the fourth century and beyond is important not only for appreciating the

history, theology, and spirituality of this early era, but since these central Christian institutions, Coenobitic and Hermitic Monasticism, that endured in East and West evolved within the Egyptian deserts. Despite this centrality, however, there has not been but few studies of the literature that survived from the formative period of monasticism. William Harmless's *Desert Christians* is a thorough assessment integrating and updating recent books written to fill this void.

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