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The Preparation

"After the Christmas season," Father Kyriakos said to me, "I shall go down to Mar Saba for a few days. You must come, too."

That was in 1941, when I was twenty-six. I had gone out to Jerusalem on a traveling fellowship from Harvard Divinity School, had got stuck there when the Mediterranean was closed by the war, and had started work for a doctorate in philosophy at the Hebrew University and found myself an apartment in the old city. By good luck I found it in a Greek hostel beside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The hostel was a former monastery and Father Kyriakos lived there as its superior. He was really Archimandrite Kyriakos Spyridonides, Custodian of the Holy Sepulchre, one of the highest dignitaries of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, but I knew him first as a pleasant old gentleman who drove a good bargain for the apartment, but then went out of his way to help me deal with the innumerable problems of life in a new and strange society.

Thanks to him I saw much of the Holy Sepulchre and fell in love with it and with the Greek Orthodox services. The great cathedral was then undergoing extensive repairs for earthquake damages. It was a tangle of struts and trestles, of mysterious shadows, tiny passageways, and unexpected enormous spaces, of

bare wood and iron supports, of gilded carvings and magnificent marble. Through this fantastic structure passed the long lines of priests and monks in their black robes and glittering vestments, while from above came the clang and thunder of the huge Russian bells. At the beginning of the mass, with the majestic opening of the great doors of the golden altar screen, the unspeakable solemnity of the procedure, I understood what the northern barbarians must have felt when they were permitted to enter Byzantium.

What most of all delighted me was the music. From the Protestant tradition, where church music has a uniform tone of respectable reverence and the organ is regularly used to cover the inadequacy of the performers, I had no idea of what could be done with unaccompanied choirs, nor of the variety and vivacity of the music for the Greek monastic services, which can go from gaiety to grandeur, from passion to awe, with unmatched lightness and power. Father Kyriakos gave me permission to stand in the choir so that I could see the texts as they were sung. (There was little written music; most of the tunes were traditional.) Soon I was memorizing words and tunes, probably to the horror of my neighbors. It may not have been unadulterated altruism that prompted the invitation to go to Mar Saba.

Whatever the motive, I was delighted by the invitation. I had often heard of Mar Saba. With St. Catherine's on Mt. Sinai, it was one of the two great desert monasteries of the Orthodox Church, monasteries in which the Byzantine order of services and way of life were still preserved. St. Saba—in Arabic, Mar Saba—its founder, had lived in the fifth century, roughly a thousand five hundred years ago, and ever since, with brief interruptions, there had been some sort of monastic life at the site.[1]

We set out early one morning with the old man who every week took the monastery its food—its only connection with the modern world. Father Kyriakos, who did a good deal of riding,

1. Unfortunately, the only good history of the monastery is in Greek: J. Phokylides, *He hiera Laura Saba tou hegiasmenou*, Alexandria, 1927. Phokylides has refuted the report of Sophronius (repeated by Khitrowo, Erhard, Strzygowski, and others) that the site was abandoned from 1450 to 1540; see *Laura*, pp. 506–21.

went ahead on his horse; I had a donkey and an Arab boy to drive him; the man followed, driving the other donkeys with the luggage. It was a journey into the middle ages.

The monastery lies in the desert, roughly a dozen miles southeast of Jerusalem. In those days the trail to it lay along the wadi (canyon) that runs from Jerusalem down to the Dead Sea. For a short way there were houses and a little cultivation along the edge of the stream, but then the desert closed in—rocks and gravel and silence except for the crunch of the animals' footsteps. After we had ridden for an hour or so we came suddenly, around a corner of rock, on an Arab butchering a camel. The beast was already dead and on its back, with its great legs sticking into the air at odd angles, and the butcher was at work on it with an old saber. He was naked from the waist up and had blood all over him. The sunlight, the red blood, the brown body, the magenta and purple of the skinned legs and carcass, the orange and gray rocks, the black silhouette of that saber swinging in the air, I shall never forget. I remember also the sweat (it glittered) and the flies. We exchanged greetings and rode on. Later we passed some caves. The women who lived in them came out to look at us and waved and shouted. Then more desert. Finally, a little after noon, we came over a rise and saw the monastery lying below us—a strong, medieval tower dominating two curtain walls that closed off a stretch of the wadi's rim and then plunged down it. The trail zigzagged past the tower and down to a narrow, fortified gate in the wall below.

There was no radio at Mar Saba. The existence of the outside world was not denied; it was not mentioned. Father Kyriakos arranged for me to stay on after his departure, and I must have spent almost two months there, two months of absolute peace in a world of which the only concern was the daily round of work and worship.

Worship began at midnight and went on without interruption until about six in the morning. This was on ordinary days; on festivals it lasted longer. After the service there was bread and coffee. The meal of the day was at noon, and about one-thirty the

afternoon service began. It went on for a couple of hours; then there was a brief intermission; about five o'clock came half an hour of evening prayers; after that one slept until midnight. Between the services there was silence—the silence of the desert, no voices, no sounds of animals, not even wind in the trees.

In their free moments the monks showed me around the monastery and also took me to visit some of the caves that lined the walls of the wadi on both sides up and down stream. Many of the caves had formerly been the homes of hermits, and in some one could still see the remains of old paintings and inscriptions. In a few of them, I was told, fragments of manuscripts had been found. Moreover, the caves were excellent hiding places. Many had mouths that only an expert climber could reach, and often the mouths were so small as to be almost unnoticeable from the floor of the wadi. In such caves the monks had hidden when the monastery was sacked in times of war or persecution. There was a story, too, that on one occasion the monk in charge of the monastery's treasures, fearing an attack by the bedouin, had hidden a lot of the finest manuscripts in a cave known only to himself and his assistant. The attack came, both of them were killed, and the manuscripts were never recovered. The story sounds like romance; but this same wadi runs by Qumran where the spectacular finds came from a Jewish "monastery." Its inmates hid their manuscripts in neighboring caves when a Roman attack was impending. The attack destroyed the community (four hundred years before Mar Saba was founded) and the manuscripts remained in the caves until their recent discovery. Exploration of other wadis along the edge of the Dead Sea and the Jordan valley has shown that the caves in them have been used for dwellings and places of refuge, off and on, since neolithic times.

In such caves the monastery had begun. Many of the cells were still caves with only a facing built across the front of them. The whole structure clung to the cliff face like a gigantic swallow's nest, with terrace above terrace yielding, at most, a garden plot for cultivation, often a mere path to another terrace. The new church had been built in the nineteenth century on monumental piers

that rose from far down in the wadi, but earlier the church, too, had been in one of the largest caves, where services were still sometimes held. Here were many of the most beautiful icons, and here, I was told, had occurred the great fire, sometime in the eighteenth century, when many of the finest icons, manuscripts, and vestments, stored in the inner windings of the cave, were destroyed. Most of the remaining manuscripts had been carried off to Jerusalem in the late nineteenth century, at the order of the Patriarch, but there were still a few stored in the great tower, and there was a good library of old editions of the Church fathers in a room over the porch of the new church.

I was shown the two libraries, as I was the other sights of the monastery, but at the time I paid them little attention. My main interest was in the services, which gave me a new understanding of worship as a means of disorientation. The six hours in darkness with which the day began were not long—they were eternal. The service was not moving toward its end, it was simply going on, as it had from eternity and would forever. As one ceased to be in time, one ceased also to be in a definite space. In the enormous church, lit only by the flames of scattered sanctuary lights and candles, there were no visible walls, floor, or ceiling. The few small flames far above, like stars, burned again on the polished marble of the nave, as if other stars were an equal distance below. Or were those tiny fires, far down beneath, the earth? The painted walls reflected the dim light as if it came from a remote distance, and in the vast, vaguely luminous space thus created the huge black frescoes of the saints and monks of old stood like solid presences all around, the great figures of the eternal and universal Church, present in this realm among the stars, above space and time, the unchanging kingdom of the heavens, where the eternal service was offered to eternal God.

The words of this worship, too—the enormous hymns of the Greek monastic offices—were unmistakably hypnotic, interminably ringing the changes on a relatively small number of brilliant, exaggerated metaphors, dazzling the mind and destroying its sense of reality. I knew what was happening, but I relaxed and

enjoyed it. Yet at the same time I somehow came to realize that I did not want to stay. For the monks, it was truth, for me it was poetry; their practice was based on faith, mine on a willing suspension of disbelief. When Father Kyriakos came down again, early in Lent, I was ready to return to Jerusalem, went back with him, and resumed my work at the university.

When I began this chapter my conscious intention was merely to explain how I happened to go back to Mar Saba, years later, and find the manuscript. Also I wanted the pleasure of recalling this strange and beautiful experience, and the advantage of beginning my book with this picturesque material. But just now, while writing, I see this story has introduced one of the important themes of the book. For what I really discovered in this first visit to Mar Saba was the inner purpose of the Orthodox liturgy: to make the worshipers on earth participants in the perpetual worship of heaven. And this discovery, I now realize, provided one of the key ideas by which I was later enabled to explain the Gospel material in the manuscript. Is this a coincidence? Or has the mystical tradition of Greek monasticism, which shaped the hymns and suggested my experience, preserved and developed the primitive Christian tradition that lay behind the Gospel? Or have I imposed on the Gospel my understanding of the Orthodox rites?

Another element in my experience at Mar Saba now also seems significant. I became aware of a fundamental difference between my attitude toward the service and that of the monks. For me, at that time, the liturgy was primarily a means for the experience of beauty, and thus a means of revelation, since beauty was of God. For the monks, the liturgy was just what its Greek name said—*leitourgia* means "service"—and this service was primarily a duty. Certain words had to be said, certain actions, to be performed. Whether or not the result was beautiful was, at best, a secondary concern. The mere performance was both essential and effective. This attitude is basically magical. For example, it explains the magical gems of the ancient world, on which spells and figures are often scribbled with no regard at all for appearance, but with

an iron determination to get the necessary words and patterns, somehow or other, onto the stone. During my visit I simply thought the monks' attitude curious, but I now suppose it helped to shape my understanding of the religious mind and subsequently, without my recalling it, to explain the new Gospel text.

Another important element of the later pattern appeared during my stay in Jerusalem. I had, by chance, met Professor Gershom Scholem whose great book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism,* was just then being prepared for publication. He asked me to read over the English translation. I was fascinated by what I found, and most of all by the account of the *hekalot* books. *Hekal* (plural, *hekalot)* means "hall" or "palace," but in late antiquity it came to be used of the heavens, the palace of the great King. At that time some Jews had developed a technique of self-hypnosis which gave them the experience of ascending into the heavens and sitting on the throne of God. The technique consisted mainly in the recitation of long rhythmical prayers and hymns and lists of angels with terrific, resonant names, like Seganzagael. The texts often had prose comments telling how great rabbis had used the formulae and what to expect when using it, and so on. Texts and comments circulated in a number of collections called the *hekalot* books. Unfortunately, they didn't work, but they interested me because the experiences they described were so much like those I had glimpsed in the monastery. And they came, in the main, from late antiquity and the early middle ages, roughly from the same period and the same area as the monastic tradition. Was there any connection between them?

I remember, too, that I did some reading about the Baal Shem, the legendary founder of Hasidism. Scholem has called attention to a letter the Baal Shem wrote about 1752 to R. Gershon of Kuty, telling "of a visionary 'ascent of the soul' to heaven which he experienced in September 1746. Such experiences, as he has testified himself, came to him not infrequently, and he was able to induce them by his own volition."[2] Did I come across the

2. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, New York, 1971, p. 182.

Baal Shem's letter at that time, or did other stories of his ascents to heaven get into my memory and lie dormant? I don't remember.

For almost seventeen years all such experiences went unused. At the Hebrew University, for three years, I worked on the relations of the Gospels to the earliest rabbinic literature, from which magic and mysticism have almost wholly been weeded out. Just as I finished my thesis[3] the Mediterranean was reopened for American convoys. I went home on the first one I could get and soon found myself back at Harvard, working for a second doctoral degree, this time in theology. Under the influence of Professor Werner Jaeger, an outstanding classical and patristic scholar, I became interested in Greek manuscripts and manuscript hunting. But other fields of research also attracted me and a great deal of my time went into teaching, first at Brown University, then at Drew, finally at Columbia. By the spring of 1958 I was ready for a rest and remembered the tranquillity of Mar Saba.

During all this time I had corresponded with Father Kyriakos and after 1948, when the division of Palestine flooded the Patriarchate with destitute Orthodox refugees, I had taken an active part in organizing an "American Friends" group that raised some money for their relief. Consequently the new Patriarch, His Beatitude Benedict, graciously gave me permission to spend three weeks at Mar Saba, study the manuscripts there, and publish my findings. For that permission, this book is an inadequate expression of thanks. Little did I know that one find of the summer would push all my other plans into abeyance for half a dozen years.

3. *Maqbilot ben haBesorot le Sifrut haTanna'im*, Jerusalem, 1948; English translation, revised, *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels*, Philadelphia, 1951, reprinted 1968 *(Journal of Biblical Literature Monograph Series VI).*