

Climacus, John

1. Person. John Sinaites (ca. 525–ca. 603 CE) is also called John Scholasticus or, after his major work, the *Ladder* (=Klimax) of *Divine Ascent*, John Klimakos or Climacus. Reliable biographical data about him no longer exists. The description of his life written by Daniel of Raithu illustrates, by means of a contrived biography, the transformation of the ideal (monastic) life described in the *Ladder* into reality. It makes possible, at most, a relative chronology. The *Diegemata* of Anastasios Sinaites, in which John is mentioned and which François Nau used for a late dating (according to Nau, John died ca. 649 CE), cannot be used for this purpose. They have been revised literarily several times – only the last editorial layer can be dated clearly. The Sinaite can be dated only on the basis of the names of monks referred to in the *Ladder* as well as also, among others, in the *Leimonarion* of John Moschos and *Diegemata* of Anastasios. Accordingly, he lived probably from ca. 525 until ca. 603 CE. With the aid of the relative chronology by Daniel of Raithu, his stay with his monastic father Martyrios can be dated as from ca. 540 until ca. 559 CE. He spent the years between ca. 559 and 599 CE as a hermit in Thola in the central Sinai massif. Subsequently, he became

hegumenos in the Burning Bush Monastery (today St. Catherine's Monastery) located there. He held this office possibly for only four years. The *Ladder* could have originated during his time as *hegumenos*. According to a tradition that no longer can be verified with certainty, the Sinaite is said to have returned once more to a life of seclusion.

2. Works. According to the suggested dating, John Sinaites would have had experience of the legislation regulating monastic life issued by the emperor Justinian and, as abbot of the Burning Bush Monastery, would have corresponded with Pope Gregory the Great. His major work, the *Ladder* (quoted *gr.* = *gradus*, steps), thus can be seen as a document that was written in a period of rapid growth in Sinai monasticism. It is one of the most widely read books of late antiquity. This is shown not only by the great number of manuscripts of the text, but also by the number of translations. Along with the earliest translation into Syriac as early as the 7th century CE, there exist others into Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopian, and Slavic, as well as into Latin and several modern languages. Along with the *Ladder*, the *Λόγος πρὸς τὸν ποιμένα* (= *L*) and a letter to John of Raithu come from the pen of the Sinaite.

3. Reception of the Bible in the Monastic Environment. The orientation of monastic life on the Bible was of great significance for the founding fathers of Christian monasticism. Basil understood monasticism as well as worldly Christianity as *vita evangelica*. The Sinaite, too, has a strong biblical orientation, even if he does not cite it as frequently as Pachomius or Basil. Thus, the entire *Ladder* is deeply marked by the Bible already in its structure: The image of the ladder itself comes – mediated through Gregory of Nyssa, among others – from the story of Jacob in Gen 28:13. John, further, bases his idea of ascent on Isa 2:3. The Sinaite derives the number of thirty steps, or chapters, from the thirty years that Jesus, according to Luke 3:23, lived as a time of preparation, as it were, before his appearance in public. The “full age of Christ” is, as he says in accordance with Eph 4:13, namely an aim for which one should strive. Central virtues of monasticism, such as obedience, are justified biblically: The disbelief of Adam led to expulsion from paradise (cf., among others, *gr.* 3.9; 6.3; *L* 67). Only the obedience that Christ lived as a paradigmatic example, as in the hymn in Philipppians, leads back to paradise. For this reason, the monks are to exercise such obedience, also toward the spiritual father.

Holy Scripture is for John even the *θεῖα φωνή* (cf. *L* 29). Yet, there is no doubt that it in no way serves, as in Basil, as a direct authority in shaping monastic life. Required for the communication of the divine will are not only rules of life determined by the Bible, but also other authorities, such as especially the spiritual father.

4. The Bible as the Standard of Monastic Life for the Sinaite. A comprehensive study of the Sinaite's treatment of the Bible is yet to be written. Preliminary work has been done by Michel van Parys. In this, van Parys determined that the reading of the Bible, according to the *Ladder*, holds a central place in the life of the monk. Supported by the working of the Holy Spirit, the Bible contributes to the illumination and concentration of the monk. In particular, the recitation of the Psalter in the "spiritual battle" offers a real bulwark against the "demons." Bible passages even can be used in the formulation of monastic prayers (cf., *gr.* 5.5; 28.2–42). Van Parys accordingly sees in the Bible, as it were, a school of prayer for the Sinaite. Through his spiritual exegesis of biblical texts in the form of short glosses, which in method is reminiscent, above all, of Gaza monasticism and Neilos of Ancyra (so John Chrysostom), John, of course, brings the monks into close contact with the Bible (even through genuine interpolations). But Holy Scripture does not serve as clearly as with Basil as a mediator of divine commandments for the concrete life of the monks in the literal sense, but rather much more as an aid for the spiritual ascent of the monk in the spiritual sense.

Obedience to the commandments of God plays a central role for John. Accordingly, he can say that one is the only monk who "obeys only the commandments (δῶροι) and words (λόγοι) of God, at every time, in every place, in every matter" (*gr.* 1.10). Thereby, however, nothing is yet said about how the commandments and the words of God are conveyed to the monk. In one passage, the "gospel commandments" (εὐαγγελικαὶ ἐντολαί, cf. *gr.* 26.10) are at least mentioned. Whether the written instructions recorded in the biblical gospels are meant here cannot be drawn clearly from the *Ladder*. The same is true also when the "gospels" in general are cited as an argument against the love of money (φιλαργυρία) – the lover of money, after all, would turn up his nose at the gospels (εὐαγγέλια) and violate its commandments (cf. *gr.* 16.3). In a similar manner, poverty is identified to the same degree with faith in the commandments (πίστις ἐντολῶν) on the model of the general psychological argument that this poverty guarantees freedom from care and from sadness (cf. *gr.* 16 [ed. Rader: 17] 11). A primary argumentation using the biblical regulations does not exist here, either.

5. Limitations Upon a Life Lived According to the Bible. According to *gr.* 26.2, obedience toward the biblical commandments is subject to certain conditions. The call in Matt 18:15 (going beyond the "imperfect" Mosaic law) to reprove the brother is, for example, to be implemented only when one does this sincerely, with humility, and with the agreement of the partner (cf. *gr.* 26.2.16). If this is not the case, then one should follow only the "im-

perfect" Mosaic law of introspection in Deut 4:9. Further, it is necessary, according to *gr.* 26.2.34, to verify whether one does not injure the conscience of the brethren or does not offend them through obedience to a commandment. Obedience toward the commandments found in the Bible is, thus, in no way to be carried out in all cases, but rather is to be refrained from along the lines of other commandments according to the situation. In both cases, it is not clearly said who decides about the suspension of commandments, or who possesses the capability of διακρίσις that is the subject of this chapter. John appears, on the one hand, to concede this to one's own conscience, but, on the other hand, he is likely to think also of the "Spiritual Father" and his competence in differentiation.

6. False Exegesis of Holy Scripture. John also emphasizes the danger inherent in false exegesis of Scripture. He warns, for example in *gr.* 9.9, against interpreting the bible in rancor. Rancor leads to a distortion of the inspired words (τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος λόγια) of Holy Scripture in one's own interest, or in one's own sense (ἴδια εἰδήσις) in the form of allegory. For a true, spiritual understanding of Scripture, it is necessary to have a pure heart. Especially clear is the warning against an independent exegesis of the "divine Scriptures" in degree beyond the gift of differentiation (*gr.* 26.2.36). Impure spirits, that is, the demons, would seduce especially the vain, who are schooled in the wisdom of the world, to produce a rash interpretation of the Bible. Thereby, such people would be enticed to utter heresies and blasphemies. Such a theology, or better "theomachy," of the demons, could be indicated, on the basis of a deep inner anxiety and a simultaneous joy in the soul, when there is a false interpretation of Scripture.

Direct influence through Scripture, direct obedience to the commandments, or a reference to a scriptural principle for correcting other authorities appear, thus, to be almost impossible for the Sinaite. The reception of Scripture and its exegesis are possible, at best, with the aid of διακρίσις.

7. The Spiritual Father as Interpreter. John sees διακρίσις guaranteed in a particular way by the "spiritual father." This becomes clear when two statements in Scripture apparently contradict each other, as is the case with Matt 7:14 and Matt 11:30. In his Λόγος πρὸς τὸν ποιμένα, in most cases found in the manuscripts as an appendix to the *Ladder*, the Sinaite declares the ability of differentiation possessed by the "spiritual father" to be indispensable in such cases. The latter, he says, must emphasize the one or the other biblical instruction more or less strongly in accordance with the personal makeup of his penitents. Whoever, on the basis of serious sins, easily falls prey to despair should be strengthened with the statement in Matt 11:30, according to which the burden imposed by

Christ is easy. Whoever, on the other hand, is vain and proud should be reminded, with Matt 7:14, that the Christian path is narrow and hard.

A deeper knowledge, or the gift of differentiation, is necessary not only in the case of supposedly contradictory biblical sayings so that each may be applied in an appropriate manner. Genuine understanding of Scripture requires in general a kind of preparation or purification that is not to be assumed for every monk, but certainly for the Spiritual Father.

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