

# Christe Eleison!

The Invocation of Christ in  
Eastern Monastic Psalmody  
c.350–450

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## Introduction

For centuries the Jesus Prayer has been leading Orthodox Christians beyond the language of liturgy and the representations of iconography into the wordless, imageless stillness of the mystery of God. In more recent years it has been helping an increasing number of Western Christians to engage with God not only with the lips and the mind but also with the heart, and drawing them into a deeper contemplation through the continual rhythmic repetition of a short prayer which, by general agreement, first emerged from the desert spirituality of early monasticism.

It has been claimed that the earliest source to cite the standard formula of the Jesus Prayer, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me' (Κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, υἱὲ τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἐλέησόν με), is the *Peri tou Abba Philēmon*,<sup>1</sup> a work dating from the sixth or early seventh century.<sup>2</sup>

This anonymous piece of writing relates to the teaching of an Egyptian hermit and to his rule of life in the later period of the Roman Empire in Egypt. In the *Peri tou Abba Philēmon* we encounter many of the words and concepts traditionally associated with the spiritual environment of the Desert Fathers. Throughout the narrative there is a pronounced emphasis on stillness (ἡσυχία), watchfulness (νήψις), 'pray without ceasing' (ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε), and secret or inward meditation (κρυπτὴ μελέτη), all of which are acknowledged to have played a part in the development of the Jesus Prayer.

1 *Philokalia tōn Ierōn Nēptikōn, Vol. II* (Athens: Astir Publishing Company, 1959), 241–52.

2 Irénée Hausherr, *Noms du Christ et voies d'oraison*, OCA 157 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1960), 239–46; Gerald E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, ed. and trans., *The Philokalia. The Complete Text compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth, Vol. II* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 343–57; A Monk of the Eastern Church, *The Jesus Prayer* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 37–8 note 5.

There is also, within this work, an important passage relating to another aspect of the ascetic discipline of this hermit:

Once a certain brother who lived with him asked him: ‘What is the mystery of contemplation?’ Realizing that he was intent on learning, the Elder replied: ‘I tell you, my son, that when one’s intellect is completely pure, God reveals to him the visions that are granted to the ministering powers and angelic hosts’. The same brother also asked: ‘Why, Father, do you find more joy in the psalms than in any other part of divine Scripture? And why, when quietly chanting them, do you say the words as though you were speaking with someone?’ And Abba Philemon replied: ‘My son, God has impressed the power of the psalms on my poor soul (οὕτω προετύπωσεν ὁ Θεὸς τὴν δύναμιν τῶν ψαλμῶν ἐν τῇ ταπεινῇ μου ψυχῇ) as he did on the soul of the prophet David. I cannot be separated from the sweetness of the visions about which they speak: they embrace all divine Scripture’ (Πάσης γὰρ τῆς θείας Γραφῆς εἰσι περιεκτικοί).<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this study is not to attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the steps leading up to the appearance of Κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, υἱὲ τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἐλέησόν με in this sixth- or seventh-century narrative. Nor is its aim to prove any direct causal connection between any aspect of monastic discipline and the establishment of the Jesus Prayer. Its objective is rather to shine a new light upon the culture out of which the Jesus Prayer is believed to have emerged by focusing on one particular expression of monasticism, which up to now has not been strongly associated with the early development of this prayer. To this end, we will consider the relevance of Eastern monastic psalmody of the late fourth and early fifth centuries to the environment which, by general consensus, gave birth to the Christ-centred invocatory prayer which first appeared in its standard form in the *Peri tou Abba Philēmon*.

To this extent, we will be involved with the quest taken up by the orientalist, Irénée Hausherr. Born in Alsace in 1891, Hausherr entered the Jesuit order and was ordained to the priesthood. He went on to become a professor at the Oriental Institute in Rome, and is the author of a number

3 *Philokalia tōn Ierōn Nēptikōn*, Vol. II, 243–4; Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, *Philokalia*, Vol. II, 347.

of influential works, including *Noms du Christ et voies d'oraison*, published in 1960. In *Noms du Christ* Hausherr contends that the Jesus Prayer arose from a search for unceasing prayer in the life of the early Eastern monastics. The premise of this study is that the picture he offers is incomplete. Hausherr's concentration on the monastics' private asceticism has been at the expense of the broader picture of their liturgical life. The aim here is to correct this omission and to allow the monastic understanding of the psalms to make its own contribution to our comprehension of the culture out of which the Jesus Prayer developed.

Part One of the study begins with a critique of Hausherr's work, and goes on to explain the factors which justify the singling out of psalmody for this area of research. Part Two then explores the vital contribution made to this subject by Evagrius of Pontus, with particular reference to his understanding of the relationship between prayer and psalmody, and to his teaching on the manner in which and the extent to which the person of Christ is to be encountered in the Book of Psalms. From there it embarks, in Part Three, on an investigation into four key elements within the commentaries on the Septuagint Psalter, attributed to some of the leading authorities of this period, which were encouraging early Eastern monastics to understand psalmody in terms of a recurring invocation of the person of Christ.

The first of these elements is the recognition of Christ as the divine name (ὄνομα) of the Psalter, while the second consists of acknowledging him as the divine face or countenance (πρόσωπον). The third is the identification of Christ in the psalms as a partner in prayer for divine assistance, while the fourth consists of invoking him directly as a deliverer or indirectly as the agent of deliverance.<sup>4</sup> The analysis of the psalm-commentaries seeks to establish the meaning of these psalm-texts for those engaged in their habitual recitation. Following this analysis, the study, by way of a conclusion, makes an assessment of the contribution made by psalmody to the

4 See James F. Wellington, 'Encountering Christ in the Psalms: Antecedents of the Jesus Prayer in Eastern Monastic Psalmody c.350-c.450', in *SP* 52 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2012), 19–26.

shaping of the early Eastern monastic culture which gave rise to the Jesus Prayer. It should be noted that, unless otherwise stated, the Greek texts of the Septuagint are taken from Henry Barclay Swete's edition.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, translations of the Septuagint Psalter are based, in the main, on the work of Albert Pietersma.<sup>6</sup>

- 5 Henry Barclay Swete, ed., *The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint, Vol. II, Pt. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891).
- 6 Albert Pietersma, trans., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and other Greek translations traditionally included under that title, The Psalms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).