

Desert Fathers Dispatch

The Desert Fathers: A Sad Omission of the Black Church

One of the first books I received when I converted to the Orthodox Church was “The Sayings of the Desert Fathers.” Only briefly in Malcolm X’s autobiography did I see any mention that we should even consider knowing about them. I have read and been familiar with black liberation theology. But, authors such as Cone and Willmore seemed more willing to use Barth, Tillich, and even Marx as material of how we should consider the place of religion in the black community rather than the wisdom of St. Moses the Black and his contemporaries. In my years as a Baptist pastor, there was discussion of the latest books and sermons from the latest Christian ministers. Yet, I can’t say that I had ever heard my former colleagues discuss lessons from the *Life of St. Anthony* or the *Homilies of St. Macarius*. I think this lack of knowledge of the Desert Fathers is detrimental to black Protestantism in a couple of ways. Denial of the Desert Fathers gives black Christians a lack of an ancient African Christian perspective that we can present to those in our community who are looking for disciplined spiritual path to God. In the Nation of Islam, Hebrew Israelites, and other beliefs in our community, black men (in particular) are drawn by the challenge of having to read prescribed sets of scriptures and offer prayers that have been handed down for hundreds of years. While we can point out how Elijah Muhammad, Samuel Crowder, and others do not represent ancient truths; at least they have not turned Islam and Judaism into places of entertainment and emotional release as modern churches have done. Brothers who are in these faiths are tired of sacredness that constantly tries to mold it’s self into a secular form. They have no interest in ministers and ministries that are busy keeping up with popular trends. They want a path of spirituality rooted in something ancient. The current black church has become too contemporary.

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Saint Moses the Black (aka, the Ethiopian, the Strong) was a former slave and gang leader in late 4th century Upper Egypt. He converted to Christianity and became one of the most influential of the African “Desert Fathers.” He died in 407 AD at the hand of bandits.

The Brotherhood named for him seeks to share the Orthodox Christian faith with African-Americans and others who are interested in the history and spirituality of the early Christian faith.



(Desert Fathers continued)

The black church can say, with absolute accuracy, that Jesus was not a blonde haired man with blue eyes and pale skin. But, what is the point of saying that when they offer no writings (or images) of early Christians that were African? There are books and writings by the monks of Egypt that would open the eyes of black men to further develop lives of spiritual discipline with prayer, fasting, and challenging ways to consider the scriptures. Indeed, there are old Coptic, Ethiopian, and even Byzantine and Eastern European icons where Christ, Mary, and the saints look like us. If black churches put these books and images in the hands of black men, they could be used not only to put brothers back in the pews. Even more so, they may become stronger Christians as they have authentic tools to help them in this effort. But, too many in the black clergy and laity are more interested in modern styles rather than ancient spiritual substance.

During Black History Month, church bulletin boards are loaded with pictures of King, Obama, Robinson, Tubman, and Truth. But, very rarely is there one image of Athanasius, the African bishop who (in 367 AD) put together a list of 27 books he requested the clergy under him to use in worship services.

It is a strange thing to say, "Everything I need to know about God is in the Bible," when you don't know where the Bible came from and that some of the people who it came from looked just like you.

ANCIENT PRAYERS FOR TODAY

PRAYER I, OF ST. MACARIUS THE GREAT:

O God, cleanse me a sinner, for I have never done anything good in Thy sight; but deliver me from the evil one, and let Thy will be done in me, that I may open mine unworthy mouth without condemnation, and praise Thy holy name: of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Though not one of the Desert Fathers himself, Athanasius was under the tutelage of St. Anthony the Great. And before he accepted the office of bishop, he consulted with the monks that had aided him. Of all the black inventions from the hot comb to the "super soaker" water gun, very rarely do black Christians speak of the New Testament, the list made by Athanasius, being canonized by the Church at a council in Carthage in 398 AD. The black church does a poor job of showing how ancient and black Christianity is. It is a strange thing to say, "Everything I need to know about God is in the Bible," when you don't know where the Bible came from and that some of the people who it came from looked just like you.

There is a growing movement of African-Americans to argue that Christianity is a mere copy of stories from Egyptian religions. Osiris is also said to have been resurrected from the dead and that his mother, Isis, conceived him miraculously as well. Some would say that Emperor Constantine and other Romans and Byzantines forced Christianity on the Egyptians and other North Africans as far south as Ethiopia. Of course this is false. The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 was the first Christian of that nation. The Apostle Matthew evangelized in that kingdom. Mark the Gospel writer established the church in Egypt. African martyrs such as Cyprian of Carthage, Maurice of Thebes, Perpetua and Felicity were killed by pagan Romans long before Constantine was even born. Paul of Thebes, Anthony the Great and other men and women fled to the desert to pursue the spiritual life before Constantine saw any vision of the cross. And even after becoming Christian, the only city where he had a heavy hand against pagan worship was in his new Roman capital, Constantinople. But, when modern black Christians do not know about the Desert Fathers or anything else in ancient African Christian history, they are easy prey for those who argue against them.

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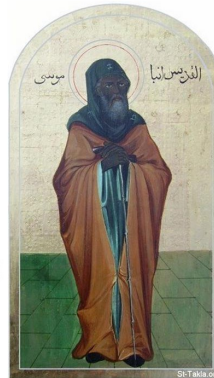


**VIRGINIA CHAPTER
BROTHERHOOD OF
ST. MOSES THE BLACK**

The Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black is a fellowship of Orthodox Christians who are committed to multi-racial, pan-Orthodox fellowship, and study of the ancient African roots of our faith.



**Compline & Canon Prayers for
Racial Reconciliation
Wednesday Nights @ 6:30 pm
(Bible Study @ 7:00 pm)
St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church
4900 Mooretown Road
Williamsburg, VA 23188**



**Contact: John Gresham, Jr
804-514-2563, johnarejr@yahoo.com**

**VA BSMB Website:
desertfathersdispatch.org**

(Desert Fathers continued)

Sticking one's head in the sand and saying, "Well, I don't see all that in the Bible," is not answering any questions. Denying a need to reveal the real and whole story of African Christian is stirring up dissatisfaction with the black Church and is helping to cause more of us to leave.

Granted, there was no way for our slave ancestors to have known about ancient African Christians. Nor were there very many opportunities for those growing up in the Jim Crow era to learn about such history and wisdom. During the Civil Rights Movement, we were too busy dealing with fire hoses and police dogs to read and contemplate anything from the Desert Fathers. But, what possible excuse do we have now not to learn about these men and their writings? Yes, there is still racism in America. But, no one is stopping us from reading and studying this material that has existed for almost two thousand years.

It is high time for African-American Christians to reclaim this vital element of who we are in the faith. Books such as the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, *Fifty Homilies of St. Macarius*, and the *Life of St. Anthony the Great* are not that hard to order online. The Coptic *Agbeya* and Ethiopian *Glory of the Kings* are also available to anyone who wants them. Ancient writings such as St. John Cassian's *Institutes* and the influential volumes of the *Philokalia* have a wealth of wisdom from African and Middle Eastern Christians. More modern Orthodox writers such as Ignatius Brianchaninov, and Seraphim Rose also made use of many quotes from black saints and scholars. The black community is asking spiritual questions of its church. I believe we should look to our past for answers.

(John R. Gresham, Jr)

FROM THE SCRIPTURES

Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.

ACTS 8:26-31

FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE DESERT FATHERS

One day Abba Arsenius consulted an old Egyptian monk about his own thoughts. Someone noticed this and said to him, 'Abba Arsenius, how is it that you with such a good Latin and Greek education ask this peasant about your thoughts?' He replied, 'I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not know even the alphabet of this peasant.'



WHY ORTHODOXY? ROOTS

For a black Baptist pastor to become a member of a predominately white congregation was a tremendous sacrifice and change of atmosphere. Strangely enough, in my first encounter with the Orthodox Church, I found that many of the roots the faith are very much black. I visited St. Cyprian of Carthage Orthodox Church in Richmond 1993 and saw Eastern Europeans and white converts bowing, burning candles to, and even kissing pictures (icons) of it's patrons, Cyprian and Moses of Ethiopia (aka The Black). During coffee hour, the priest explained to me that the Orthodox Church honors all of it's saints from all parts of the world. The Russian St. Vladimir, the Upper Egyptian St. Pachomius, St. Isaac the Syrian, the Alaska Native St. Peter the Aleutian are examples of the universal family of holy men and women of the Church. On the fifth Sunday of the Lenten Fast, St. Mary of Egypt is honored by Orthodox believers all over the world.

The Orthodox Church offers African-Americans the opportunity to know our whole past in the Christian faith. We Orthodox have a vast treasure trove of heroes who rejected the world pleasures and wealth for the sake of the kingdom of God. We have collections of prayers and wisdom from the Desert Fathers and those who have learned from them. Rather than chase after the latest catch phrases and follow "flavor of the month" preachers, it is to our advantage as Africans in the diaspora to investigate this Church that traces it's history back to Jesus Christ and His apostles and gave us the New Testament.

ABOUT THE BROTHERHOOD OF ST. MOSES THE BLACK

Rev. Karl Berry, a AME and non-denominational minister, converted to the Orthodox Church in the 1980's after seeing the icon of St. Moses and worshiping in a parish in Richmond VA. He took the name Moses and became a priest in St. Louis. David & Thelma Altschul ran an interracial non-denominational church on the racial dividing line of Kansas City. After meeting and working with Fr. Moses Berry, they too became a part of the faith. During a visit to the St. Herman of Alaska Monastery in Platina CA, the Abbot Gerasim suggested that they meet with two other black Orthodox Christians, Fr. Jerome Sanderson and Nun Katherine Weston, to hold a conference to discuss the issues of blacks in the Church and to encourage outreach. Twenty three years later, the Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black has grown to be a multi racial fellowship devoted to sharing the ancient faith with people of all walks of life and with the African diaspora in particular. We welcome all Orthodox and non Orthodox to be a part of our Brotherhood and be inspired by the beauty and wisdom of the 2,000 year old body of Christ on earth.

PRAYERS FOR RACIAL RECONCILIATION

St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church in Williamsburg and the VA Brotherhood come together on Wednesday nights for evening prayers (Compline) and to pray the Canon for Racial Reconciliation. The canon was written by Dr. Carla Thomas of the Aniston AL Chapter and has been used by chapters across the nation in times of racial conflict. Rather than wait for a problem to arise, Fr. Milton Gianulis, chapter president John Gresham, and St. Demetrios & brotherhood member Adrienne Thomas decided it is best to be proactive. The prayers are held every Wednesday night ahead of the 7 pm Bible Study (which is open to all). The canon can be found on the Desert Fathers Dispatch website. Contact John at 804-514-2563 or St. Demetrios at 757-220-0994.



Our Lady of Czestochowa
A Polish Black Madonna

My people fail for lack of knowledge —Hosea 4:6

ON THE BOOKSHELF

Wade in the River: The Story of the African Christian Faith

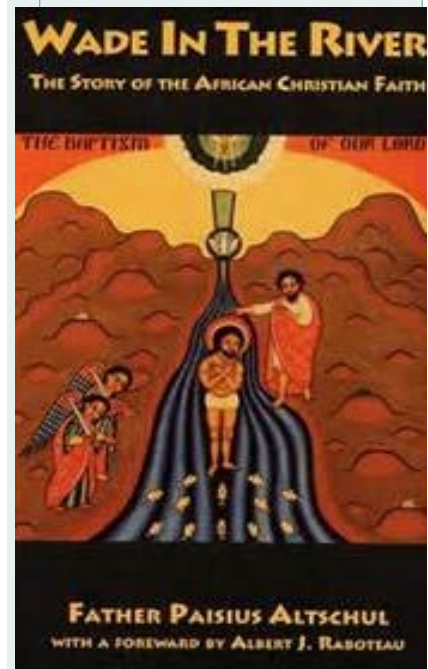
Fr. Paisius Altschul, Crossbearers Publishing, Kansas City MO, 2001

So, you know about Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross for Jesus, the Ethiopian Eunuch (his name was Djan Darada) being the first non-Jew to be baptized. But what is the rest of the story of Africans in early Christianity? Is that ancient faith still practiced by anyone today? Is there a link between early African and African-American Christianity?

Fr. Paisius (now Heiromonk Alexi) gives well researched answers to these and other questions about Africans and the genesis of the Christian faith. There are details about how the Gospel writers Mark and Matthew estab-

lished the Church in Egypt and Ethiopia, the rise and influence of the desert fathers, and the role that the spirituality of African saints still play in Orthodox Christianity. Marcus Garvey's influence on the development of Orthodoxy in East Africa and the Church's support for Kenya's independence from Brittan is also detailed. Although separated from the ancient Church, the faith born through struggle of African-Americans is highlighted to be equal to that of the great martyrs in Christianity's early years.

This book is a very good starting point for anyone interested in learning the fullness of who we African Americans are in the Christian faith. It can be ordered online, or contact John Gresham (johnarejr@yahoo.com, 804-843-2067) for a copy.





SAINTS OF THE MONTH

In November, the Orthodox Church celebrates the lives of two Egyptians . St. Menas was a highly ranked soldier in North Africa who left the Army to devote his life to prayer as a celibate hermit. He was martyred in 309 AD. Legend has it that he helped the Allies defeat the Germans in the WWII Battle of El-Alamein in Egypt. (Feast Day, Nov. 11)

Catherine was the daughter of the governor of Egypt. Only 18, she criticized the Roman Emperor and impressed 50 pagan scholars he sent to pursue her to reject Christianity. Rejecting his offer to marry her, Catherine was brutally tortured before being martyred in 305 AD. St Catherine's Monastery has existed in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula since 565 AD. (Feast Day, Nov. 25)

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