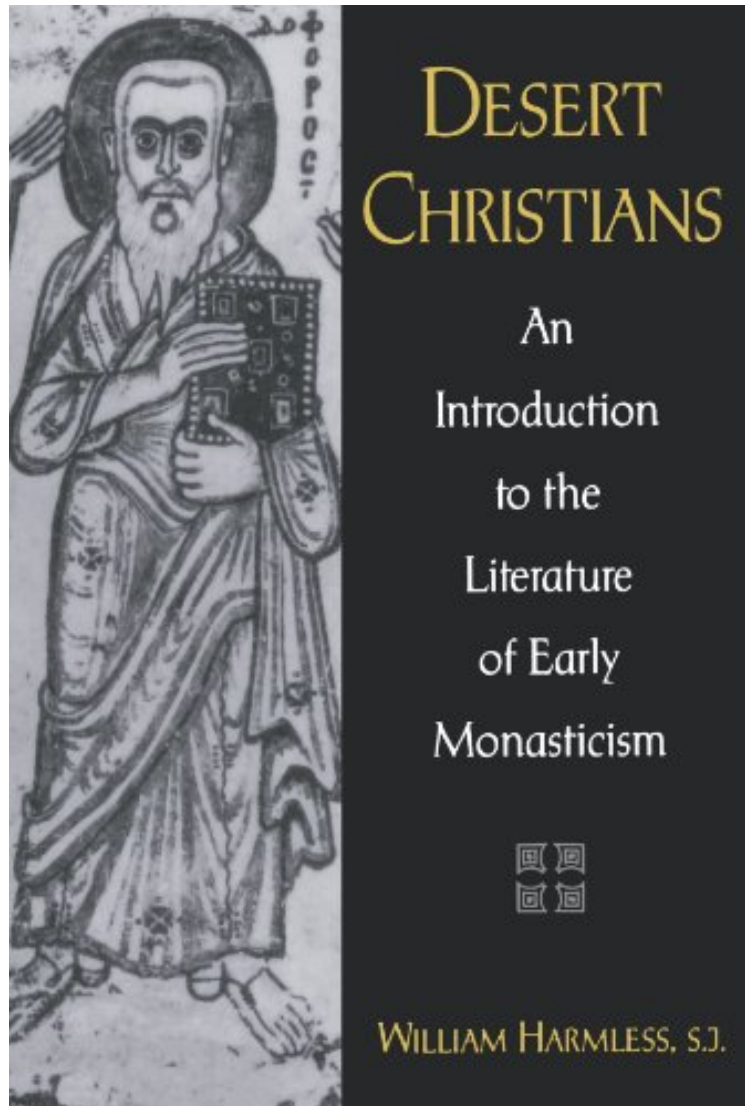


[Free] Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism

Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism

William Harmless

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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.

"Those who teach courses in early monastic history have longed for a book like this. Some of us have thought about writing it ourselves. Now the task has been done. Harmless has applied his considerable energy and pedagogical experience to developing a book that is informative and filled with resources for ongoing, in-depth study. He also navigates very complex historiography with clarity, candor, and respect. Surely, this superb contribution will remain the starting point and essential reference work on Egyptian monasticism for some time to come. We owe its author deep thanks for making the work of both teacher and researcher considerably easier." --Theological Studies "...an indispensable work for anyone interested in ancient Christian monasticism, early Christian history and literature, and indeed the general examination of spiritual impulses that shape religion. This book is an outstanding achievement in presenting and analyzing major works, interwoven with the diversity of scholarship that has blossomed in this area in the past thirty years." --Spiritus "...comprehensive, absolutely current with respect to research, and deeply sympathetic to the monastic enterprise. Desert Christians belongs in every monastic library and would be well placed in the hands of every monk who wishes to know his or her tradition." --Cistercian Studies Quarterly "It is the rare book that can introduce a literature and a field of study intelligently and thoroughly and make a significant scholarly contribution in its own right. This book does just that. It will become required reading for anyone interested in the world of early Christian monasticism." --CHOICE "Why waste words? This is a thoroughly admirable book... An accomplished and unassuming piece of scholarship." --Scripta Classica Israelica "There is no other volume on the desert Christians that is so generous with the facts and so reliable a key to modern debate on so many topics, great and small." --Times Literary Supplement

About the Author William Harmless, S.J. is Professor of Theology at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. From 1996 to 2003, he held the Thomas E. Caestecker Chair of the Liberal Arts at Spring Hill College. He has been a member of the Society of Jesus since 1978 and is the author of Augustine and the Catechumenate (1995). His research on early monasticism has appeared in the journals Theological Studies, Church History, and Studia Patristica.