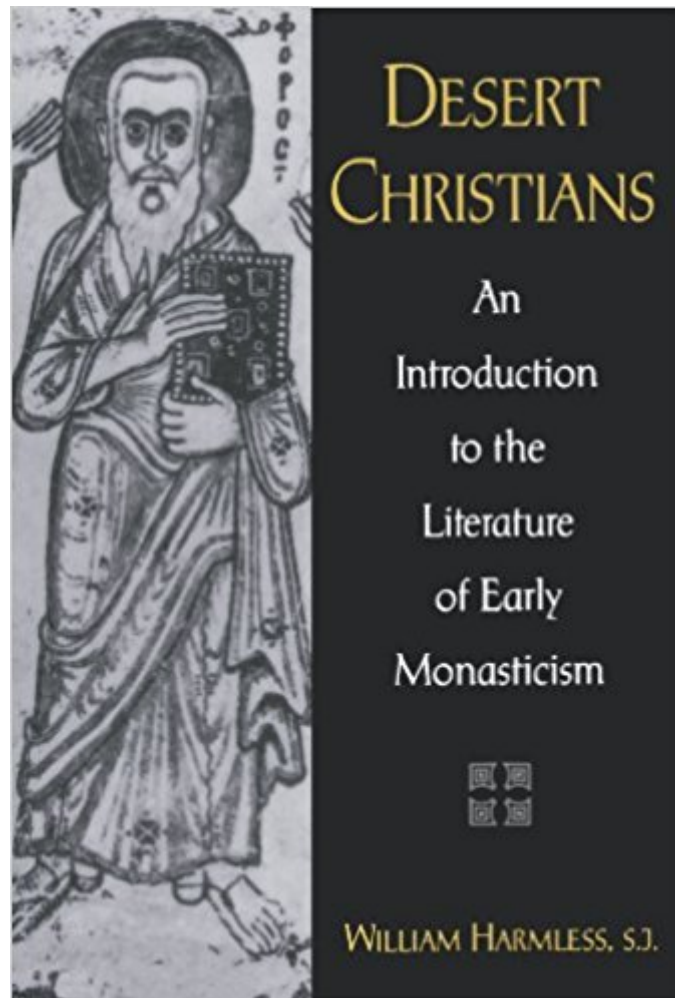


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# Desert Christians: An Introduction To The Literature Of Early Monasticism



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"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

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*.

This whole early monasticism literature is a mess and this is the best road map to understand the key figures and sources to make sense of the desert monastics and the social and political contexts

that gave rise and influenced this great religious movement.

I have heard few Desert Father names, but I didn't know who they are and what they did. This book is a good start to know them. Not too detailed and also not too shallow. A good book for those who want to know more on Desert Fathers and their view on theology and Christianity. I gave 5 stars, because I like it and I will re-read it again. Good content and good writing.

William Harmless has written a singularly enjoyable history of the desert fathers that brings them to life while attempting to strip away the accretions of legend that have fastened themselves to these holy men and women over the centuries. Fr. Harmless carefully examined the known and available resources resulting in a fascinating work of erudition.

"Harmless states as his purpose: to introduce readers to the literature by and about the desert Christians of the fourth and fifth centuries..., serves as a resource for more advanced students because of its breadth and level of detail." R. Krawiec, J. Christian Spirituality

Early Monastic Lives: Monastics 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. In so doing, they captured the imagination of the ancient world. These Desert Fathers were insightful wisdom teachers and brilliant hagiographers, some of early Christianity's finest was contained in Athanasius' Life of Antony, the Lives of Pachomius, and Apophthegmata Patrum, Sayings of the Desert Fathers.

Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: The study of Christian monasticism in the fourth century and beyond is important not only for appreciating the history, theology, and spirituality of this early era, but since these central Christian institutions, Coenobitic and Hermitic Monasticism, that endured in East and West evolved within the Egyptian deserts. Despite this centrality, however, there has not been but few studies of the literature that survived from the formative period of monasticism. William Harmless's Desert Christians is a thorough assessment integrating and updating recent books written to fill this void.

Early monastic literature: "Early monastic literature is a 'treasure trove not just for the spiritual life, but also for psychology, which finds here the expression in a different vocabulary of what it has laboriously worked out only in this century" wrote Anselm Gruen. Others monastic experts who examined the literature of early Christian monasticism, have recommended it deserves slow and deliberate meditation, on the lips, and in the heart.

Fr. Harmless explored new translation and analysis of

Athanasius', 'Life of Anthony,' a host of ancient biographies of Pachom(ius) career and his koinonia, a careful study of Shenoute of Atripe with a discourse on the significance of his role in leading monastic opposition to the Council of Chalcedon. He surveys and evaluates a wide range from investigations of the later literature and history of the important Upper Egyptian communal movement of Pachomius to the possibility of their ownership of the Gnostic library of Chenoboskion, near Nag Hammadi. *Apophthegmata Patrum*: Such corpus includes 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. Various collections exist of aphorisms and anecdotes illustrative of the spiritual life, of ascetic and monastic principle, and of Christian ethics, attributed to the more prominent hermits and monks who peopled the Egyptian deserts in the fourth century. **Book Evaluation:-** "Harmless has written a densely packed volume which, although it does achieve 'introductory' status by its accessibility, nevertheless also serves as a resource for more advanced students because of its breadth and level of detail." Rebecca Krawiec- "It has detailed background chapters and reading lists, well-constructed glossaries of names and places, and (as scattered appendices) translations of sources not widely available. It is also well written." Philip Rousseau

what can be said about a book that HAS to be read... well, it is a good book anyway. recommend

Excellent. If you love to think, this is the book that will entertain your brain in meditation and spiritual growth.

I saw this book listed when I was looking for books by Fr. Bill Harmless. I was delighted to find this one and his work on the Mystics. He was my Church History Professor during Diaconal Formation in the early 90s. I always looked forward to his classes, and this book is much the same. I looked forward to getting it and was not disappointed when it came and I began reading.

I have only read into this book about 100 pages or so, and I can tell you this is a thick, dense read. However, it is worth it and Harmless makes seamless transitions between subjects and is an overall excellent writer. Anyone who is willing to dedicate the time to this book should definitely put other books aside to take a gander at this one. It will be worth your while.

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