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The Making of Monastic Hamartiology I: Eastern Ascetics in Search of a Definition of Sin[1]

Abstract: This paper considers the discussions led among Eastern ascetics of the fourth and fifth centuries about the concept of sin and focuses on two case studies that typify the voice of Eastern ascetics in theological controversy and their contribution to the ecclesiastical doctrine of sin. The first case study concerns the debate between Pseudo-Macarius and the Messalians, along with the later reworkings of Pseudo-Macarius by Mark the Monk and Diadochus of Photice. The second case study concerns the discussion of John Cassian with the Pelagian camp, on the one hand, and with the Augustinian camp, on the other. Together these case-studies reveal, in different ascetic milieus, a large variety of ascetic views about sin and considerable discrepancy in the terminology used to discuss it. The consideration of these two case-studies shows the discrepancy of approaches and lack of the definition of sin among ascetics.

Keywords: monastic hamartiology, sin, Messalianism, Pelagianism, Pseudo-Macarius, Diadochus of Photice, Mark the Monk, John Cassian, Augustine, Jerome

Introduction

One of the main problems of the early ascetics was the issue of sin. They dealt with this problem in every-day life and tried to solve it through prayers, discipline and various ascetic practices.

[1] The article is a result of research conducted on the doctoral program at KU Leuven (Belgium) in 2012 and during my fellowship at the New Europe College (Bucharest, Romania) in 2023–2024. The second part of this research is published in the New Europe College Yearbook, 2023–2024 (Vol. I, Bucharest, 2025, pp. 153–208; available online: https://nec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Anuar-NEC-2023-2024-vol-1.pdf). I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Richard Bishop for proofreading of this paper and his valuable comments and suggestions that helped to improve it.

The answers they proposed were very diverse and often hardly compatible. They reflect different approaches and understandings of sin among the early monks and this discrepancy brought them into the discussions both among themselves and with the mainstream of the Church doctrine. The engagement into the theological controversies prompt them to develop their argumentation and systematize their views, which reveals their views on such doctrinal issues as the origin, nature, and consequences of sin, show their specific focus and approach and demonstrate how complex this issue was in their times.

In this paper, I will trace the positions of early Eastern monks in the two theological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, particularly in the Messalian controversy in the East and the Pelagian controversy in the West. In both controversies, the problem of sin was especially prominent. The main question of the Pelagian controversy was whether a person can be good and sinless by his/her own will and efforts? (Pelagius argued that it was possible; Augustine denied the possibility and argued instead that a person needs divine grace to do good and cannot achieve sinlessness in this life). Messalianism dealt with a somewhat different question: "How can one become sinless (free from sin)?" The Messalians believed this state can only be achieved though individual prayer; consequently, they denied the efficacy of the sacraments and disregarded church authorities. Although both Messalianism and Pelagianism came to be regarded as heresies, they greatly influenced the ascetic environment of the fourth and fifth centuries.

The Messalian movement occasioned vivid discussions among ascetics, and some of these can be traced in the writings of Pseudo-Macarius, Mark the Monk, and Diadochus of Photice. The Pelagian controversy about the effects of Adam's sin on his posterity drew the attention of John Cassian, who dedicated several of his conversations to the problem of sinlessness and to the relationship between sin and grace. The two controversies were studied extensively from different perspectives[2] but the synthetic studies of the contri-

[2] On Messalianism, see Baker 1974; Dörries 1966, 1970, 1978; Gribomont 1972; Guillaumont 1976, 1979. On the Pelagian controversy, see Ferguson 1956;

bution of Eastern ascetics to the Church doctrine of sin is lacking. The analysis of the Eastern monastic engagement in these controversies will reveals the variety of monastic approaches to the problem of sin and its definition, their terminological discrepancies, and the direction that the Christian doctrine of sin took in its development by marginalizing alternative views.

1. Discussions about Messalianism: Pseudo-Macarius Reconsidered

1.1 The Messalian controversy

There have been many attempts to define Messalianism.[3] Because everything we know about the Messalians comes from their antagonists, that material reflects the opinion of ecclesiastical authorities and the reaction of these authorities to Messalianism rather than the Messalians' own self-understanding.[4] The term "Messalians" (*mesalleyânê*, μεσσαλιανοί) is of Syriac origin and means "those who pray," "the praying ones." The Messalians were also given other names: the Euchites (εὐχῖται), the Enthusiasts (ἐνθουσιασταί), the Adelphians, the Eustathians, the Lampetians, the Marcianists, and other names. They identified themselves as the "spiritual ones" (πνευματικοί). Arising in Mesopotamia or Syria, the movement spread to Asia Minor (Pamphilia, Lykaonia) and Thrace, and reached not only Egypt but also the region of Carthage. In Syria the movement persisted up to the eighth century.

The first mention of the "Messalians who are debauched" is found in Ephrem's hymn *Against heresies* written not later than 373 (*Hymni contra haereses* 22:4–5). A fuller exposition of their

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Evans 1968, 2010; Bonner 1972; Louth 1982; Beck 2007; Bonner 2018; Brown 1968; Squires 2013, 2019; Wilson 2018; Brown 2019; Volker 2023.

[3] See, for example: Hausherr 1935; Gribomont 1972; Guillaumont 1976, 1979; Fitschen 1998.

[4] For the collection of the documents concerning Messalianism, see Kmosko 1926, CLXX–CCXCIII. For the lists of condemnations, see Theodoretus Cyrrhensis, *Comp.* 4:11; *HE* IV, 11; Timotheus Constantinopolitanus, *De receptione haereticorum*, PG 86:45–52; John of Damascus, *De haeresibus*, 80.

devotional practices was given by Epiphanius of Salamis, who characterized the Messalians as a foolish, entirely stupid, wholly ridiculous sect that was inconsistent in its doctrine and composed of deluded men and women:

> […] they sleep in the public squares, all together in a mixed crowd, men with women and women with men, because, as they say, they own no possession on earth. They show no restraint and hold their hands out to beg, as though they had no means of livelihood and no property. […] They have no notion of fasting. If they get hungry at their time of prayer, if you please, whether it is at the second hour or the third hour or nighttime, they do anything without restraint, and eat and drink. (*Panarion* 80:3.4–5)[5]

The Messalian errors were considered and condemned at the synods of Side and Antioch, summoned by Amphilochius of Iconium (373–394) and Flavian of Antioch (381–404), respectively. The elderly leader of the ascetics, Adelphius, was excommunicated and expelled. The synods identified various doctrinal errors of the Messalians: they believed that each person inherited from Adam enslavement to demons, which can be driven away only by zealous prayer; they regarded holy baptism and the Eucharist as useless and relied only on prayer; they shunned all manual labour as a vice; they abandoned themselves to sleep and declared their dreams to be prophecies (*HE* IV, 11:7; *Comp.* IV, 11). This new "doctrine" that captured so many monastic minds did not disappear. As Jerome noted, Messalians "were heretics of nearly all Syria" (*Adv. Pel.* Prol. 1).

The issue of Messalianism was raised again at the Synod of Constantinople in 426, and the movement was finally condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. The Messalian propositions discussed at Constantinople and Ephesus have been preserved in the writings of Timothy of Constantinople (*De receptione haereticorum* 10) and

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[5] Similar practices are described in Gregory of Nyssa's treatise *On Virginity* (375–78) where the bishop warned the beginners against such misleading practices. See *De virginitate* 23:3, pp. 534–36.

John of Damascus (*De haeresibus* 80). The specific beliefs attested in the propositions concern the nature of sin, as well as demons, the efficacy of prayer and the sacraments, and a broad spectrum of irregular social behavior deriving from these beliefs:

> Just as everyone born inherits his nature from his first parents, so also does he inherit a state of servitude to the demons. But, when these demons are driven out by earnest prayer, then the all-holy Spirit enters in, revealing its own presence in a sensible and visible manner, freeing the body from the movement of the passions, and entirely releasing the soul from its evil inclinations. Thus, nothing else is needed – whether it be that fasting which oppresses the body, or that discipline which restricts and teaches to walk rightly. And he who has attained this state is not only freed from the impulses of the body, but clearly foresees the future and with his eyes contemplates the Holy Trinity. (*De haeresibus* 80)

The Messalians believed in a demonic presence in every person from birth; they also believed in an irrevocable state of perfection after reception of the Holy Spirit. They were convinced that only unceasing prayer could drive out the indwelling demon and lead to the coming of the Spirit; as a consequence, they denied (or, better said, were indifferent to) ecclesiastical discipline and the sacraments, which they regarded as useless for the purification of the soul; similarly, they disdained ascetic practices and manual labour (Guillaumont 1979, 1080).

The Messalians were accused of immoral and asocial behaviour, such as laziness, excessive sleep, debauchery, disdain of manual labour, irresponsible mendicancy, the refusal of almsgiving and acts of charity, the avoidance of paying taxes owed to state, acceptance of runaway slaves, a tendency toward self-mutilation, the deception of their opponents and the betrayal of their own followers, along with perjury, prevarication, and the destruction of marriages and the bond between parents and children, along with other violations of social and ecclesiastical norms (Plested 2004, 26).

In the writings of various scholars, Messalianism has acquired many faces: it has been regarded as a heresy, a movement, a current of thought, or a tendency, as well as a social, historical, cultural, devotional, and theological phenomenon, and so on. Jean Gribomont presents Messalianism as "a polemical construction not a reality" (Gribomont 1955). Antoine Guillaumont considered Messalianism to be a tendency always present in traditional Syrian pneumatism, a temptation inherent in spiritual mysticism as such (Guillaumont 1974, 315–20). Klaus Fitschen tried to distinguish between the heresy as a historical phenomenon and the tendency as a devotional one (Fitschen 1998, 342–45). Columba Stewart defined Messalianism as a theological rather than a historical phenomenon and argued that the controversy was a result of the linguistic and cultural clash between Greek and Syrian ascetic traditions (Stewart 1991, 7). Daniel Caner characterises Messalianism as "the heretical profile constructed by the Eastern church authorities" (Canerm 2002, 84). Alexey Muraviev expresses a similar view, stating that Messalianism is "simply the experience of the unsuccessful contact of the Greek world with the asceticism of the Syrians" (Muraviev 2010, 163).

In fact, during the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Greek ecclesiastical authorities encountered a phenomenon originating in the Syrian milieu and manifesting itself in unusual forms of wandering asceticism, in ideas about the influence of demons on the soul, and in a certain ascetic relativism with regard to the church organization and its sacraments. With their systematic approach, the Greeks treated such forms of asceticism as heretical (Muraviev 2010, 156). The term "Messalians" became a pejorative name for the groups of ascetics who wandered around cities and monasteries, led a chaotic life, and were prone to irregular mysticism. In order to isolate and eliminate this amorphous and hardly controllable ascetic phenomenon, the ecclesiastical authorities formalised it into a heresy by systematising its traits and condemning it at the Council of Ephesus (Plested 2004, 26).

1.2 The teaching of Pseudo-Macarius on indwelling sin

Traces of the Messalian controversy appear in some ascetic writings, especially in the spiritual homilies preserved under the name of Macarius of Egypt. The author of these writings, often referred to as Pseudo-Macarius, was active as around the time Messalianism was spreading in Syria and Asia Minor. Due to close parallels between his spiritual homilies and John of Damascus's citations from the Messalian *Asceticon* (Villecourt 1920), Pseudo-Macarius was long considered a Messalian by scholars, but in the late twentieth century he was rehabilitated as Orthodox (Stewart 1991, 172–73). Nevertheless, a certain connection between Pseudo-Macarius and Messalianism remains. Some scholars consider Pseudo-Macarius to be the forerunner of Messalianism and its *Stichwortgeber* (Fitschen 1998, 218). Others view him as belonging to the same Syrian tradition of pneumatic mysticism from which Messalianism arose (Gribomont 1972; Guillaumont 1974, 1976, 1979). Still others consider him to have been engaged in a debate with the Messalian views that were popular and widespread in the ascetic circles among which he lived and worked (Burns 2002). In one way or another, his works contain traces of debates with enthusiasts and criticism of their views. One can also detect certain similarities in the terminology of Pseudo-Macarius and the Messalians, and it is these similarities that initially gave scholars reason to suspect Pseudo-Macarius of being a Messalian. This is particularly true of his doctrine of sin, which has often aroused suspicion and distrust on the part of ancient Orthodox authors as well as later scholars of his corpus.

Sin was a personal problem in a monk's inner life, a problem that hindered him on the path to holiness and thus had to be solved at all costs. Therefore, the question of how to get rid of sin was one of any monk's main preoccupations. To achieve this goal, he had to find the source of the evil, and learn the ways of its influence on the soul, as well as how to resist them. Then, if possible, he had to eradicate the sin. This knowledge was gained through the daily experience of spiritual struggle, frequent falls and rises, attacks of various temptations, and periods of rest from all of these. Through such struggles and spiritual enlightenment by grace, Pseudo-Macarius developed

an original teaching, strongly marked by the Semitic mentality and expressed in the language of images.

Pseudo-Macarius associated sin with the power of Satan as a spiritual being. The major questions for him were two: where does evil come from, and why does it have power over humankind? He identifies two causes of evil: Satan and the transgression of Adam. When Satan rebelled against God and fell from heaven, evil entered the world; when Adam transgressed, evil got access to the human soul. From that time on, "within the man, there is one who captures and wages war, namely death and destruction of the soul" (I, 3.4.5); all descendants of Adam find themselves enslaved to Satan (III, 13:1) and under the power of wicked thoughts and passions (III, 4:3). As a result, "the whole human race has received into its nature, into its soul and body, a bitter poison of death, darkness, and sin, and it has inclined towards sin; and nobody can drive this disease off and cure it, heal humanity and slay the one who kills us save the Spirit of God" (III, 18:1).

The experience of daily temptations, evil thoughts and suggestions led Pseudo-Macarius to develop his teaching on indwelling sin, which is not removed by the sacrament of baptism and continues to trouble a person even after receiving God's grace. Indwelling sin operates in the fallen human race as an objective reality (ἐνυπόστατον), and its root and cause lie in the power of Satan over human nature. This opposing power produces vice, entices people to sin, and never stops waging war against them. The result is that no one but God alone can bring this power under control. Pseudo-Macarius argues that indwelling sin persists in the baptized and coexists with grace in the soul:

> But if you insist that through the coming of Christ sin was condemned and that after baptism evil has no more power of suggestion within the human heart, then you ignore the fact that from the coming of the Lord up to this day the many who have been baptized, have they not thought evil things at some time? Have not some of them turned to vain desire for glory, to fornication, or to gluttony? Moreover, are all those who live in the Church, men of the world, are they endowed with the pure and blameless

> heart? Or do we not find after baptism that many commit many sins and many live in error? So even after baptism the thief has a holding (pastureland, νομήν) and can freely enter and do what he pleases. (I, 32.3.2; II, 15:14)

According to Pseudo-Macarius, then, alongside grace evil is present, albeit hidden, in the soul, and the two spirits – that of light and that of darkness – vie for dominance within the same heart (I, 16.1.7).[6] So the soul finds itself between two beings (ὑποστάσεων) – God and Satan – and the thoughts from both come into the heart (I, 18.4.10).

Such ideas raise questions as to whether baptism cleanses fully from sin, and whether a demon remains active within a person even after baptism. Pseudo-Macarius does not, in fact, speak much of baptism. One of the expressions that we do see combined with baptism in his vocabulary, however, is "spiritual renewal" or "birth from the Spirit." In a discussion with one ascetic, Pseudo-Macarius explains the difference between birth and perfection in the following way: "It is one thing to be born (γεννηθῆναι), another to wage war (πολεμισής), another to win (νικητής), and another to be free (ἐλεύθερος)." Pseudo-Macarius understands sin not as original sin that is removed in baptism but in a much broader sense. Sin in his writing is a synonym for evil, which includes all kinds of temptations, passions, and attacks on the soul. Sin is associated with the wicked activity of the Evil One, who has freedom to afflict and distress people, even people born from the Spirit. Baptism does not prevent evil attacks but does give grace to overcome them. Baptism opens the way, but a long spiritual struggle and much effort is necessary before one reaches perfection and becomes truly free (ἐλεύθερος). It is not baptism but the state of perfection that removes sin. Therefore, we see that the main concern of Pseudo-Macarius is not the relation between sin and baptism, but between baptism and perfection and between sin and perfection.

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[6] Cf. Collection II, 17:4, where the "two spirits" are corrected into "the two ways of existing, namely according to the principles of light and darkness."

Pseudo-Macarius's teaching about sin was practical rather than dogmatic, and was intended to help ascetics in their daily routine of fighting evil. When that teaching was transferred to the level of dogmatic discussion, it began to arouse suspicion. Therefore, the teaching was revised in the next generation, by two ascetic writers of the fifth century, Mark and Diadochus. Both were also involved in the struggle against Messalianism and had to rework and adapt Pseudo-Macarius's teaching in such a way that it could fit into the teaching of the fifth-century church and not arouse suspicion.

At the time when Pseudo-Macarius developed his teaching, the Church's doctrine of sin was still in the process of formation: bishops were still debating the necessity of baptism for salvation, the terminology of sin was not yet established, and the concept of original sin did not even exist. By the next generation, however, all these issues had been clearly defined, and the Council of Constantinople condemned Messalianism in 431. In these new circumstances, Pseudo-Macarius's broad understanding of sin as various manifestations of evil in a person hardly accorded with the established ideas of original and personal sin. And since Pseudo-Macarius's teaching was quite popular, it began to pose a problem that had to be solved. This task was taken up by Mark the Monk and Diadochus of Photice. On the one hand, both authors had been greatly influenced by Pseudo-Macarius, but on the other hand, they introduced some revisions to his theology of sin, adapting his thoughts and terminology to their own contexts.

1.3 Mark the Monk's revision

Mark the Monk is an enigmatic figure; almost nothing is known about him except his name and writings. Scholars have made numerous attempts to fix the milieu of his activity, but the proposed solutions remain on the level of hypotheses.[7] A bit more can be said about the time of Mark. His writings allude to anti-Nestorian and

[7] For a good survey of the different theories and hypotheses concerning the origin and milieu of Mark the Monk, see the introduction to G.-M. de Durand's critical edition (Durand 1999, 13–35) and the introduction by K. Ware to a French

anti-Messalian discussions, which points to the time of the Council of Ephesus (431). The question of Mark's relation to Pseudo-Macarius is also open to discussion. Among Mark's writings, of particular interest is a treatise in defence of baptism, written in the form of a dialogue between Mark and an anonymous antagonist. It is hardly possible to identify this antagonist with certainty. Nevertheless, it is clear that his treatise on baptism has an anti-Messalian character.

In this polemical treatise, Mark tries to refute the Messalian belief that it is not baptism but personal effort (mainly prayer) that liberates a person from the "sin of Adam." An apology for baptismal grace[8] brings Mark to discuss the problem of post-baptismal evil thoughts. He criticizes his opponent for identifying these evil attacks with Adam's sin:

> We acknowledge evil action to be our own sin, and the thought which precedes it to be the action of someone else. But it is impossible for those who attribute this action (ἐνέργειαν) not to themselves but to someone else to be free from it. For we by our own will preserve some seeds of evil in ourselves, and therefore, the Evil One settles in us. (*Bapt*., p. 326)[9]

Mark argues that the sin experienced after baptism is not the sin of Adam but a result of our own fault: weak faith, love of pleasure, or carelessness in keeping God's commandments is to blame. He explains that an evil attack is neither sin nor truth but rather an exposure of a person's will and inner disposition, of what that person prefers: labour and commandments for the sake of God's grace or evil thoughts for the sake of pleasure (*Bapt*., pp. 328, 366). What his opponent considers to be Adam's sin, Mark attributes to human free will: "Not to experience the attacks of evil belongs

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translation of Mark's works (Ware 1985b, ix–li, x–xv). See also Grzywaczewski and Nieścior 2019.

[8] More on Mark the Monk's teaching about the consequences of baptism, see Kamczyk 2021; Czyżewski 2021.

[9] Translation is my own.

to the unchangeable nature, not to the human one. Since we are of the same nature as Adam was, we are similar to him. So just as Adam was accessible to the attacks of Satan and could obey or disobey, so are we" (*Bapt.*, p. 362). The ideas that Mark criticizes in the treatise are not explicitly found in the Macarian corpus, for Pseudo-Macarius neither denied the efficacy of baptism nor believed that human effort suffices for acquisition of the Holy Spirit. Mark's argumentation, however, does reveal some disagreement with the theological views of Pseudo-Macarius.

The first point of discrepancy concerns Macarian terminology. While Pseudo-Macarius freely interchanges such terms as Satan, sin, evil suggestions, and passions, Mark adopts a more careful approach and defines each term such that their meanings do not overlap. He uses the Macarian expressions in a more precise way so that they not sound heretical to a Greek-speaking audience. Thus, Mark introduces a clear distinction between Satan and different notions of sin, such as suggestion (προσβολή), Adam's sin (transgression), evil thoughts, and personal sin, giving a clear definition for each. According to Mark, Satan is the person of the devil himself, who tried to tempt even the Lord; the sin of Adam is the first man's transgression against the commandment; the satanic attack or suggestion (προσβολή) is a sinless image, which presents the appearance of an evil thing and tests our volition to see whether it inclines to God or to pleasure; and evil thoughts demonstrate our passion for pleasure. A person is not responsible for the former, but fully responsible for the latter (*Bapt.*, p. 364).

Mark usually uses the term "sin" in a very narrow sense of personal sin and explains it as due to our neglect of the commandments. So, when we experience the activity of evil, we are responsible, since the attack is a consequence of our voluntary inclination to forbidden pleasure and our post-baptismal sins. The Macarian concept of indwelling sin is much broader: it is not just a sinful action for which one is responsible, but a state, a post-lapsarian reality that extends far beyond human responsibility. Although people are not responsible for this evil inheritance, they do have to deal with persistent evil, which has established itself in the human soul as if it belonged to human nature, and it operates from within, through

suggestions, thoughts, and passions, which "are not ours, but another's" (I, 40.1.10). Since he finds it necessary to balance the objective reality of evil in the human soul with the idea of its alien nature, Pseudo-Macarius insists on the otherness of the passions. Since Mark considered thoughts to be "ours" and not "another's," he could not accept the idea that evil thoughts can proceed from the faithful heart; for Mark, they could proceed only from a heart that is conceited and vainglorious (*Bapt.*, p. 332). Therefore, when we have evil thoughts, we must grieve as sinners and not be proud as though we are struggling with an alien evil in us (*Bapt.*, p. 384). After baptism, it is not Adam but we ourselves who are responsible for our evil thoughts (*Bapt.*, p. 324).[10]

One more disagreement between Pseudo-Macarius and Mark concerns the question of the possibility of human sinlessness. Both locate the cause of human sinfulness in human free will and agree that it is impossible to stand without God's grace. Pseudo-Macarius, however, believes that all people sin even after baptism, while Mark presumes that it is possible, at least theoretically, to refrain from sinning if one has good will and unashamed faith in the grace that one received in baptism (*Bapt.*, p. 370). Mark teaches that in baptism a person is renewed to the blessed state of Adam, and baptismal grace provides all the power that is necessary to refute evil suggestions. Contrary to Mark, Pseudo-Macarius posits a certain imperfection that remains even after baptism. He teaches that baptism only opens the way to the blessed state of Adam, but it does not immediately renew a person to this former state. After baptism a person is like an innocent child: renewed and cleansed from sins, but still imperfect and inexperienced. This baptized person has to grow in grace, knowledge, and experience in order to become a perfect Christian.

In fact, the discussion which Mark the Monk conducts with his opponent is not about beliefs, but rather theological premises, terms, and expressions. Mark tries to impose his terminology on his interlocutor. What he contradicts is not the Macarian teaching itself but

[10] More on passions and the struggle against them according to Mark the Monk, see Nieścior 2021.

rather an inaccurate presentation of that teaching, a misunderstanding or misinterpretation due to the lack of terminological precision. So, he specifies some Macarian formulations and expresses them in a way that is more acceptable to the Hellenic mind and the official Church doctrine of his day. In short, Mark reformulated and elaborated the teaching of Pseudo-Macarius within the framework of Greek theological thinking.

1.4 Diadochus of Photice's reconsideration

If it remains open to question whether Mark intended to engage the Macarian corpus, there is not much doubt that the criticism of Diadochus of Photice was indeed directed against Pseudo-Macarius. Diadochus became "the bishop of Photice in ancient Epirus" (Northern Greece) shortly after the council of Chalcedon (451). The internal evidence of his writings alludes to his ascetic background. Prior to his episcopacy, he was probably a superior or a spiritual master of a monastic community. His writings present a synthesis of the Evagrian and Macarian traditions. From Evagrius, Diadochus borrows technical vocabulary and a manner of theologising. With Pseudo-Macarius, he shares an affective emphasis, an experiential language of feelings, perception, and intoxication with love.[11] His main work – *One Hundred Chapters on Spiritual Perfection* – presents a short system of ancient asceticism and includes some criticism of Pseudo-Macarius's teaching on the coexistence of sin and grace in the human heart.

Pseudo-Macarius often speaks of such coexistence and portrays the idea with different images. For example, the sun and the wind coexist and do their own work, yet they do not agree with each other. The sun, being warm by nature, does not borrow the wind's coldness, nor does the wind participate in the sun's warmth; rather, each of them is its own hypostasis (I, 18.5.1). The same is true in spiritual matters: "Just as Satan is in the air and God, who is also

[11] Diadochus used this phrase eight times. See *Cap.* 40, 44, 68, 90 (twice), 91, 94, 95. This phrase was also used as a technical expression by the Messalians. See Ware 1985a, 558–59.

there, is not harmed by being there, so sin is in our souls and God's grace also, with the latter suffering no harm" (I, 46.1.11–2.1; II, 16:6). Pseudo-Macarius deploys two arguments to support this idea of coexistence. One argument is taken from the daily experience of evil thoughts arising in the heart, another is taken from the Scriptures, which say that *the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend* (οὐ κατέλαβεν) *it* (John 1:5).

Diadochus dedicates a part of his treatise (chapters 75–89) to the idea of grace coexisting with sin, and he rejects both arguments of Pseudo-Macarius. Denying the Macarian exegesis of John 1:5, he proposes his own interpretation:

> Those who allege that the two personalities (δύο πρόσωπα) – that of grace and that of sin – are present together in the hearts of the faithful, quote the words of the Evangelist who says: *And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend* (οὐ κατέλαβεν) *it* (John 1:5). In this way, they try to justify their opinion and say that the divine radiance is in no way defiled by its contact with the Evil One, no matter how close the divine light may be to the demonic darkness. But the very words of the Gospel show that they have deviated from the Holy Scriptures. When the Theologian wrote in this way he meant that the Word of God, this *true light*, chose to reveal Himself to the creation in His flesh, in his immeasurable mercy, inflaming His light of holy knowledge within us, but the wisdom of this world did not comprehend (οὐ κατέλαβε) the will of God, that is, it did not understand (οὐκ ἔγνω) it, since *the carnal mind is enmity against God* (Rom 8:7). […] Thus, the Evangelist does not say it is Satan who did not receive (μὴ κατειληφέναι) the true light, for he was stranger to it from the beginning, since it does not shine in him. Rather, by this word the Evangelist is justly censuring men who hear of the powers and wonders of the Son of God and yet refuse to approach the light of His knowledge because of the darkness of their hearts. (*Cap.* 80)

An important nuance should be noticed in this criticism: where Pseudo-Macarius speaks of "wicked thoughts" and "sin," Diadochus

speaks of the Evil One and a demon. This is an important terminological shift, which shows that the bishop of Photice is presenting a distorted version of Macarian thought.

The key word for interpreting John 1:5 is the polysemantic verb καταλαμβάνω, which Pseudo-Macarius understands literally as "to comprehend," "to overcome" or even "to defile." Diadochus interprets this word in the context of John 1:9–12 and Phil 3:12 and considers it to be a synonym for the verbs γιγνώσκω (to learn, to know) and παραλαμβάνω (to receive). Pseudo-Macarius argues as follows: "The sun being a material, created thing, shines down also upon swampy places full of mud and slime and yet is not affected or defiled. How much more the pure and Holy Spirit that is joined to the soul which still is afflicted by evil, without himself being tainted by evil. For *the light shines in the darkness and darkness did not comprehend it* (John 1:5)" (I, 46.1.6; II, 16.3).

By this argument Pseudo-Macarius intended, on the one hand, to defend the omnipotence and omnipresence of God against Manichean dualistic views, and, on the other hand, to combat the false view of some ascetics that the acquisition of the Holy Spirit would provide them with impeccability. Pseudo-Macarius argues that even if "a man is rich in grace, there still remains inside of him a remnant of evil" (I, 46.1.7; II, 16:4), implying that there is always the possibility of a fall. Here the "remnant of evil" means neither the very person of Satan, nor any kind of sin as a committed or intended act, nor any stain as a result of previous sins, but simply a temptation to which everybody is disposed in any state.

In the fifth century, however, when the notion of sin became a technical term with a concrete definition (personal, original, ancestral, etc.), the following generations failed to comprehend the Macarian idea of sin. As a result, the Macarian expression "indwelling sin" was either identified with the person of Satan or misunderstood as original sin. The Macarian concept of sin as temptation could hardly fit the baptismal teaching of Diadochus, who was convinced that God and Satan were two unreconciled opposites, and their

simultaneous action in the human mind was mutually exclusive.[12] According to Diadochus, before baptism the devil is deeply rooted in the human soul, but after baptism he is expelled from the soul and can act only from the outside, through the recklessness (licentiousness, looseness) of the body (εὐχέρεια τοῦ σώματος). It is clear that Diadochus understood the δύο πρόσωπα in a very narrow personal sense as "two beings" (δύο ὑποστάσεις), fighting one another in the mind. When Pseudo-Macarius speaks of δύο πρόσωπα, he has in mind two alien factors or elements that act alongside each other and between which a person can choose. This idea is not so much a doctrine as an observation of the human condition, a way to describe the tension between different spiritual impulses of the human soul.

It should be pointed out that Pseudo-Macarius usually locates the δύο πρόσωπα in the heart, while Diadochus locates them in the mind. This shift shows Diadochus's debt to Evagrius and the Alexandrian (Platonic) tradition, which considered the term "heart" to be a synonym for "mind" and "soul." This ambiguity in Diadochus's anthropology played an unfortunate role in the alteration of the Macarian idea and resulted in a revision of his teaching. Reducing the concept of heart to the intellectual sphere, Diadochus judged the idea of grace and sin coexisting within the heart to be incorrect and erroneous, and thus he tried to reinterpret it.

Like Mark, Diadochus also rejected the Macarian idea of evil thoughts arising in the heart, though his explanation for the experience of evil thoughts is more sophisticated than Mark's. Diadochus argues that the heart produces the evil thoughts not by nature but for two other reasons: the first is our remembrance of our former transgressions; and the second is our double mode of thinking (εἰς διπλῆν τινα ἔννοιαν). Diadochus explains that at the time of Adam's disobedience our mind fell into a state of duality with regard to knowledge (τὸ διπλοῦν τῆς γνώσεως), and ever since it has been forced to produce both evil and good thoughts, even against its own

[12] A good remark concerning this idea was made by Krivocheine who estimated such a distinction between the manner of the demonic action before and after Baptism as unclear one "for, Satan being a spirit, it is not easy to locate him in space." See Krivocheine 1985, 40.

will (*Cap.* 78, 88). For although the washing of sanctity removes the stain of sin, it "does not immediately remove the duality of will (τὸ διπλοῦν τῆς θελήσεως), neither does it prevent the demons from attacking us or speaking deceitful words" (*Cap.* 78).

These two examples of figures who sought to reconsider Macarian teaching on indwelling sin show that both Mark the Monk and Diadochus of Photice read Pseudo-Macarius with Greek eyes. In an effort to make the thought of Pseudo-Macarius palatable to a Greek audience, they evidently felt compelled to revise and reformulate his theological ideas; in this way, they could make Macarian teaching more acceptable to the Greek ear and mentality. In other words, they clothed the Macarian, Semitic ideas in Greek technical terms and thus incorporated those ideas into mainstream ecclesiastical doctrines on baptism and sin. Since the Macarian vocabulary and imagery was not really suitable to these frameworks, these two Greek exponents of Macarian ideas either had to "correct" some Macarian teachings that seemed inappropriate (as in the case of Diadochus's teaching on baptism), or develop and elaborate Macarian ideas by introducing new terms in order to define his teaching more accurately (as in the case of Mark the Monk). This revision also marks a step forward in Greek theological thought, which began to distinguish between various aspects of sin (ancestral sin, its effects, personal sin, suggestion, etc.).

2. The Pelagian Controversy: The Eastern Perspective of John Cassian

2.1 The Pelagian Controversy

The debates about Messalianism were not the only instance in which monastic circles were actively involved in dogmatic controversies about the issue of sin. Another eloquent example is the Pelagian controversy, which unfolded primarily in the West in the early fifth century. Whereas the Messalian debate revolved around the question of how a person could get rid of sin and be free from the attacks of evil, the Pelagian controversy concerned whether it was possible

for a person to live without sin and, by that same person's own will, avoid falling after baptism.

Although the Pelagian debate touched on a wide range of issues, such as the relationship between divine grace and human agency, the necessity of infant baptism, the holiness of marriage, free will and original sin, predestination and judgement, and although at various stages of the debate one or the other of these topics came to the fore, nevertheless the possibility of human sinlessness is the issue that underpinned all others. The two camps clashed with irreconcilable force, and the main protagonists of the debate were again monks: on the one hand, Pelagius, who denied that human nature had been corrupted by sin and who asserted that everyone had the power to avoid sin and keep God's commands; and on the other hand, Jerome, as well as Augustine and his followers, who opposed such views. It is in the midst of this controversy that Augustine developed his teaching on original sin, God's grace, and predestination.

The controversy developed in two stages. The first period (411–418) ended with Augustine's victory and the condemnation of Pelagius's doctrine at the Council of Carthage in 418. The debate, however, did not end there but instead moved to Gaul. In the second period (419–430), Augustine and his followers, such as Prosper of Aquitaine, continued to fight, defending their views against Pelagian accusations and criticisms.[13] Julian of Aeclanum accused Augustine of undermining the sanctity of marriage with his doctrine of original sin and the concupiscence of the body and of denying human free will with his doctrine of predestination.[14] After the death of its main protagonists, the debate continued for a century,[15] until the Council of Orange in 529.[16]

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[13] On the further course of the Semipelagian debate, see Chadwick 1968, pp. 127–35; Weaver 1996; Hwang, Matz, Casiday 2014; McQueen 1977; O'Keeffe 1995, 157–62; Ogliari 2000; Taranto 2003.

[14] On the second period of the Pelagian controversy, see Wermelinger 1975; Ogliari 2003.

[15] See Mathijs Lamberigts 2000, 2002; Karfíková 2012; Barclift 1991; Chadwick 2001, 464–72 (ch. 47); Flasch 2008; Lössl 2001; Montcheuil 1956.

[16] See the canons of the council of Orange in: Gaudemet and Basdevant 1989, 154–85 (Latin text and French trans); English translation: Woods, 1882. The Council

Although this debate developed mainly in the West,[17] there was also a voice from the East. It came from John Cassian, a disciple and follower of Evagrius Ponticus. Although scholars disagree about the sources that influenced Cassian, the parallels between Cassian and Evagrius are so striking that the role of Evagrius in Cassian's life and teaching should be recognized as indisputable. Cassian was not, however, an uncritical translator of his master's teachings; on the contrary, he developed and somewhat reworked the main Evagrian ideas, adapting them to the needs of Cassian's time and place, sometimes changing terminology and emphases, and thus erasing and hiding traces of this influence (Sheridan 1997). We will discuss this adaptation in more detail below. For now, we are interested only in Cassian's approach to the question of sinlessness in the Pelagian controversy. And here he had something to say not only to Pelagius, but also to the opponents of Pelagius, such as Augustine and Jerome.

Rather than joining any of the opposing sides, Cassian developed his own views on the matter. On the one hand, he vigorously rejected Pelagius's teaching regarding the possibility of human sinlessness; on the other hand, he did not fully agree with the other camp, represented by Jerome, as well as Augustine and his followers. Cassian choses instead a middle way between these opposing camps. Although his voice was neither as loud nor as influential as that of the controversy's major opponents, Cassian's contribution merits attention as an example of the different perception and understanding of this issue in the tradition of the Eastern Fathers, who always considered human salvation a matter of cooperation between the human and divine will, between, that is, human effort and divine grace.[18] Although the Augustinian view prevailed in the West, and the Council of Orange condemned as semi-Pelagian Cassian's ideas about synergism, recent research has shown that semi-Pelagianism is an inaccurate label for Cassian's teaching (Stewart 2001; Squires

was led by Caesarius of Arles. On his activity on the Council of Orange and after it, see Klingshirn 1994, 137–43; Mathisen 1999, 250–51.

[17] On the course of the controversy in the East, see Malavasi 2022.

[18] There was also another eastern voice, that of Theodore of Mopsuestia, but I do not consider it here, focusing mainly on the ascetic context. For Theodore's response, see Malavasi 2014.

2013a). In fact, it would be more appropriate to refer to Cassian as semi-Augustinian rather than semi-Pelagian, for he was a zealous opponent of Pelagius and criticised him no less vociferously than Augustine or Jerome.

2.2 Cassian versus Pelagius

First of all, Cassian sharply opposed Pelagius's teaching that a person can be sinless. He devoted two of his conferences, 22 and 23, to this issue. Because Pelagius is nowhere mentioned in these discourses, earlier scholars overlooked their anti-Pelagian character, considering them instead an integral part of Cassian's ascetic teaching. Now, however, Stuart Squires has demonstrated that Cassian "most certainly was referring to Pelagius" (Squires 2013b) when he wrote: "Whoever [*quisquis*] dares to say that he is without sin, therefore, claims for himself, by a criminal and blasphemous pride, an equality in the thing that is unique and proper to him alone" (*Coll.* 22:12).[19]

Cassian's anti-Pelagian views are more obviously expressed in his anti-Nestorian treatise *On the Incarnation of the Lord*, in which he closely connects the doctrine of Nestorius with the "wicked heresy of Pelagius," accusing Nestorius of "belching out the poison of Pelagianism, and hissing with the very spirit of Pelagianism" (*Inc.* 5:2). In this treatise, Cassian sharply criticises the Pelagians for two errors. The first was their extremely optimistic anthropology, which brought the Pelagians to a flawed understanding of sinlessness: "they actually went so far as to declare that men could also be without sin if they liked. For they imagined that it followed that if Jesus Christ being a mere man was without sin, all men also could without the help of God be whatever He as a mere man without participating in the Godhead, could be" (*Inc.* 1:3). The second error of the Pelagians concerned their Christology. Cassian alleges that they do not

[19] Cassian's conferences are quoted from the English translation by Edgar C.S. Gibson (1894), with the exception of Conference 22, which has not been translated in this volume. Conference 22 is quoted from the translation by Boniface Ramsey (1997).

distinguish between the Lord and any other human person. In Cassian's view, therefore, they deny the good of Christ's sacred advent and the grace of divine redemption, declaring that "men can (as they say) reach the heavenly kingdom by their own exertions" (*Inc.* 1:3). Both errors trouble Cassian because they presuppose the possibility of human sinlessness, which he could not accept. Cassian gives two arguments against these views.

The first argument concerns Pelagian anthropological optimism, which excluded the concept of original sin and held that the human will was able to attain salvation by itself, without God's constant assistance. Cassian clearly shows his disagreement with such views when he refers to a "profane notion of some who attribute everything to free will and lay down that the grace of God is dispensed in accordance with the desert of each man" (*Coll.* 13:16). Contrary to Pelagius, Cassian argues that only Christ, who came into this world "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3), was sinless (*Coll.* 21:11). The rest of humanity is subject to sin. According to Cassian, all humans inherited from their forefather an inner damage (*Coll.* 4:7) that affected their will. As a result of the fall, the will was seriously weakened, and in its post-lapsarian condition it "is grossly defective and in constant need of divine support and correction"; it "is incompetent and must be healed so that it can be controlled" (Casiday 2007, 111). Though it still preserves its natural ability to choose good and desire salvation, it cannot do good and attain perfection by its own efforts, without divine grace. Therefore, Cassian insists that "we ought to believe not merely that we cannot secure this actual perfection by our own efforts and exertions, but also that we cannot perform those things which we practice for its sake… without the assistance of the divine protection, and the grace of His inspiration…" (*Inst.* 12:16).

To demonstrate these claims, he gives the example of a farmer who tills the earth: just as a laborer accomplishes nothing, and all his toil is useless without adequate rainfall and a peaceful winter, so also human effort is in vain unless assisted by God's mercy. The human will is thus utterly dependent on divine grace and avails nothing without God's mercy. On the other hand, just as God does not grant a rich crop to idle farmers who do not till their fields, "so also God's

mercy is not operative for those who do nothing for themselves (*Coll.* 13:3). This image of a farmer clearly shows that Cassian believed that the human will is inadequate to achieve salvation and that divine grace is necessary at every stage of life (*Coll.* 13:6). He avoids the temptation to speak of human effort in terms of merit, as if human effort "can be the cause of Divine bounty" (*Coll.* 13:6), but he still considers such effort necessary, as "the prevenience of the first grace" (McQueen 1977, 23).[20]

Cassian's second argument against the Pelagians stems from his understanding of sinlessness as the state of contemplating God, the highest goal of the monastic life (Byrne 1987). Cassian can describe that contemplation as "the perpetual and constant tranquillity of this theoria and purity" (*Coll.* 23:13). This understanding of contemplation is clearly indebted to Evagrius. Unlike Pelagius, who believed that a person could do good by the choice of his own will, Cassian argues that only Christ who came into the world "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3) was sinless (*Coll.* 21:11), while all other humans are subject to sin. The post-lapsarian condition of humanity does not allow humans to be in permanent contemplation of God, for the law of sin, inserted into human nature, "wars against the law of our mind and keeps it from the divine vision" (*Coll.* 23:11). After the fall, we all became carnal and were "compelled to have thoughts that are human and frail" (*Coll.* 23:13). Since no one, however holy, can avoid anxiety, and since everyone is compelled to abandon contemplation and submit to earthly things, it is impossible to live without sin (*Coll.* 21:11). Such an understanding of sinlessness, as a synonym for the permanent contemplation of God, would hardly be accepted by the Church as too radical, but in monastic circles with high moral and spiritual standards it was taken for granted.

2.3 Cassian versus Jerome

It is not only Pelagius whom Cassian criticizes in his writings. In Conference 23, he also criticizes Jerome, albeit in a disguised way,

[20] See also Jaros 2020, 182; Fach 2001, 62.

without mentioning his name. Scholars have accordingly put forward a variety of proposals regarding the purpose and addressee of this conference. Éric Rebillard places it in a core of texts that concern the Pelagian controversy (Rebillard 1994, 198). Columba Stewart considers it a reaction to Jerome's anti-Pelagian *Epistula* 133 (Stewart 2001, 28, 159n4). Stuart Squires argues that it was written against both Pelagius and Jerome (Squires 2013a, 63), while Raúl Villegas-Marin states that it is a subtle correction of Jerome's malpresentation of the Evagrian concept of *apatheia* and that "behind the anti-Pelagian appearance of this conference lies an implicit apology for Evagrius Ponticus, whose spiritual teaching was cleared of the charges of 'Pelagianism' filed against it by Jerome" (Villegas-Marín 2017, 671, 681). Because these opinions are not incompatible, we can say that in Conference 23, Cassian presents his own ascetic doctrine, based on Evagrius, against the backdrop of the views held by Pelagius and by Jerome. Indeed, the teaching is presented in the context of abba Theonas's discussion with his interlocutor Germanus concerning the possibility of sinlessness, a discussion that focuses on the Pauline words: "For I do not the good which I would" (Rom 7:19). First, Germanus raises the Pelagian view (that Paul was speaking about sinners)[21] and then Jerome's teaching (that Paul was speaking about the faithful who resist carnal sins and strive for virtue but are still carried away by the lust of their passions),[22] but abba Theonas refutes both interpretations and presents his own understanding of these Pauline words, referring them instead to Christians who are already perfect (*Coll.* 23:14). Cassian's criticism of Jerome concerns the latter's misunderstanding of the Evagrian concept of *apatheia*, and Jerome's teaching about the possibility of temporary sinlessness.

Jerome viewed the Pelagian debate as a continuation of the Origenist controversy, in which he was actively involved (Clark 1992, 221). He placed Pelagius's doctrine of impeccability (ἀναμαρτησίας, *impeccantia*) in direct relation to the teachings of Origen and his disciples, in particular to Evagrius's doctrine of dispassion (ἀπαθείᾳ,

[21] See Johannes Cassianus, *Coll*. 22:15. Cf. Pelagius, *Exp. in Rom*. 7:7, 7:25.
[22] See Johannes Cassianus, *Coll*. 23:14. Cf. Jerome, *Adv. Pel.* 2:2–3.

apatheia), and considered the Origenists to be the forerunners (*principes*) and associates (*socii*) of the Pelagians (*Ep.* 133:3). For this reason, in the prologue to his *Dialogue against the Pelagians*, Jerome attacks Rufinus, a follower of Origen, and Palladius, a disciple of Evagrius (*Adv. Pel.* Prol. 2). In Letter 133, he criticizes Evagrius's teaching on dispassion (ἀπαθεία), saying: "Evagrius of Ibera in Pontus, who sends letters to virgins and monks (Evagrius Ponticus 2012) and, among others, to her whose name bears witness to the blackness of her perfidy,[23] has published a book of maxims on apathy (περὶ ἀπαθείας), or, as we should say, impassivity (*impassibilitas*) or imperturbability (*imperturbatio*); a state in which the mind ceases to be agitated and – to speak simply – becomes either a stone or a God" (*Ep.* 133:3). In applying the Stoic idea of apatheia to the ideas of Evagrius, Jerome significantly distorted Evagrius's teaching on dispassion.[24] Identifying Evagrius's apatheia with ἀναμαρτησία and the Pelagian *impeccantia* (*In Hier.* 4:1), Jerome denied the possibility of such sinlessness.

It was, then, important for Cassian to show the difference between the Evagrian concept of apatheia and the Pelagian idea of *impeccantia* and to prove that the former is achievable while the latter is not. He argues that Jerome misunderstands the concept of dispassion, since even those who achieve this state are not free from sin, and further that one can be passionless and "holy (*sanctus*) but still not sinless (*immaculatus*)" (*Coll.* 20:12). With respect to Paul's teaching about the struggle of the body and the mind in Rom 7:19–25, Cassian argues that Paul, in addressing the experience of the law of sin, was speaking about himself and about perfect Christians who have been cleansed from sin. Contrary to Jerome, who believed that no human being could escape the sins listed in Matt 15:19–20, at least in thought, Cassian insists that there are people who can avoid such vices and be free from passions, carnal concupiscence, and evil thoughts. Examples of such people include the Apostle Paul and other perfect ascetics who have tasted

[23] Here he refers to Melania.

[24] On the Evagrian teaching on *apatheia*, see Driscoll 1999; Nieścior 1996–97; Somos 1999; Tobon 2010; Misiarczyk, 2021; Sheridan 1997.

the experience of contemplation, though they are not without sin; that sin, however, does not deprive them of holiness and even makes them aware of their limitations and of their complete dependence on God's grace. Despite recognising Jerome's intellectual genius (*Inst.* Praef.), Cassian believed that Jerome lacked true spiritual knowledge and experience, which is attained not by intellectual efforts but ascetic practice (Goodrich 2007, 84). Therefore, Jerome was, in Cassian's view, "unable to fully understand the sinful nature of the daily lapses of the *perfecti* who have attained *apatheia*" (Villegas-Marín 2017, 681). By contrast, Cassian had practiced ascetic discipline throughout his life, and it is his monastic experience that sharpened his understanding of sin.

This critique of Jerome is evident in Cassian's disagreement with him regarding the possibility of short-term sinlessness. Whereas Jerome believed that "he who is cautious and wary may avoid sin for a while" (*Adv. Pel.* 2:24), "according to local and temporal circumstances, time, and the state of human frailty" (*Adv. Pel.* 3:12), Cassian was convinced that even saints who have eradicated all their sins cannot be free from the stain of sin for a single hour (*Coll.* 23:20). Jerome viewed the state of sinlessness as limited to a short time, lasting "as long as his mind is set on righteousness and the string is well stretched upon the lute. But if a man grows a little remiss it is with him as with the boatman pulling against the stream, who finds that, if he slackens but for a moment, the craft glides back and he is carried by the flowing waters whither he would not" (*Adv. Pel.* 3:4). Cassian, however, for whom such a teaching was unacceptable, wanted to show that Jerome's idea of sin was too superficial and excluded the sins of the perfect, that is, of those who had savoured the state of contemplation and hence experienced even the slightest deviation from that state as a grave sin (*Coll.* 23:6). Cassian's understanding of sin is much broader than Jerome's and includes any (even the slightest) deviation from true contemplation of God. Since all people are subject to the law of the flesh and cannot keep their mind fixed on God, it is impossible even for the saint to be sinless (*Coll.* 23:5–6, 8).

2.4 Cassian versus Augustine

In contrast to his harsh criticism of Pelagius, Cassian discusses Augustine's views in a gentle, conciliatory tone. He understood Augustine well and agreed with him in many respects. In his treatise *On the Incarnation*, Cassian even cites Augustine favourably, as a great authority among the Church Fathers (*Inc.* 7:27). As far as Pelagius is concerned, Cassian and Augustine are on the same side. They both sought to defend the faith but disagrees on several issues such as the problem of sin and the relationship between the will and grace. It was to discuss these issues that Cassian wrote Conference 13, in which he tries to correct the ideas of Augustine (and his followers) about the operation of God's grace and to impose certain limits on human apprehension of God's mysteries. Cassian argues from the perspective of a friend, not an enemy, when he says: "Many, in dealing with this question, have transgressed the boundaries, and have fallen into contradictions and errors" (*Coll.* 13:11). Refusing to judge Augustine's teaching from the perspective of doctrine, Cassian appeals to no authority other than Scripture (Chadwick 1968, 120). He agrees with Augustine that salvation depends on grace, but unlike Augustine, he does not oppose grace and the human will, regarding them instead as two complementary elements, both necessary to our salvation (*Coll.* 13:2). Whereas for Augustine the question of their relationship is, according to Cassian, a difficult matter for human logic, Cassian himself sees the relationship as a great mystery of God, incomprehensible to human reason, (*Coll.* 13:18). He is dissatisfied with an overemphasis on divine grace (as with Augustine) or on human agency (as with Pelagius) and denies any attempt to rationalize the issue. Instead, he tries to balance the extremes (Augustinianism and Pelagianism) by showing that grace cooperates with human will in a mysterious way, which is incomprehensible to the human mind.

Cassian's discussion about the relationship between the human will and grace sheds light on how Cassian saw the consequences of original sin. Though such terminology is not typical of his thought,[25] he undoubtedly accepts that Adam's sin has brought

[25] He mentions this term only once in *Coll.* 13:7 ("original and actual sin").

about grave consequences for humanity[26] and shares with Augustine the idea of the transmission of original sin through carnal generation. Cassian, however, does not go so far as to espouse belief in the inheritance of guilt. He simply states that the fall made humans carnal and subject to the *lex peccati* as a result of God's condemnation (*Coll.* 23:11).

Neither does Cassian accept the Augustinian claim that the human will is so damaged that it is dead and, without grace, incapable of doing any good. He does acknowledge that the human will is inadequate and "more readily inclined to vice either through want of knowledge of what is good, or through the delights of passion" (*Coll.* 13:12), but he maintains that the will has not perished utterly. Contrary to Augustine, he believes that even after the fall, seeds of virtue (*semina virtutum*) remain in humans, for the fall did not deprive Adam of the knowledge of the good, which he already possessed, but it did give him the knowledge of evil, which he had not previously possessed (*Coll.* 13:12). Unless these seeds of goodness "are quickened by the assistance of God, they will not be able to attain to an increase of perfection" (*Coll.* 13:12). In Conference 13, Cassian introduces a series of examples from Holy Scripture to argue that grace and the human will cooperate in a mysterious way. On the one hand, he insists that the will depends on God's grace and, on the other hand, he argues that God's mercy and grace are granted only to those who strive and make efforts, following John Chrysostom who said: "Grace springs from the desire of it" (*nn.* 4:1).[27] It was important to Cassian as a monk to take ascetic practices seriously and avoid any kind of laxism.

His thought focuses not on original sin but on the struggle between the flesh and the spirit. For Cassian, a person's fleshly desires,

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[26] John Cassian does not specify whether this condemnation is a direct inheritance or an indirect inheritance (i.e., because of individual/personal sins). On Cassian's understanding of original sin, see Koch 1895, 24–34; Villegas-Marín 2013; Jaros 2020, 188–95.

[27] See Chadwick 1968, 114; also Koch 1895, 111. On John Chrysostom's influence on Cassian's understanding of original sin, see Jaros 2020, 180–81. On Chrysostom's views, see Juancey 1925; Boularand 1938; Kenny 1960; Bradshaw 2015. For a broader background, see Wiles 1967, 106–8; Wilken 1990, 123–40.

which are a result of the fall, do not make that person incapable of doing good. Rather, there is a tension in human nature between fleshly desires and spiritual desires. In fact, Cassian considers the struggle between the flesh and the spirit "not merely harmless, but actually extremely useful to us" (*Coll.* 4:14). For as these desires vie with each other, the soul's free will is tempered and makes "a sort of equitable balance in the scales of the body which marks out the limits of flesh and spirit most accurately" (*Coll.* 4:14). The struggle between fleshly and spiritual desires secures us from slothful carelessness, incites us to desire virtue, and brings about a due equilibrium, which in turn opens "a safe and secure path of virtue between the two, and [teaches] the soldier of Christ ever to walk on the King's highway" (*Coll.* 4:12).

Cassian also disagrees with Augustine regarding the issue of concupiscence. Augustine considers the very law of sin that dwells in the flesh to be sinful, and therefore argues that sinlessness and perfection are impossible, since perfection implies that desires should not be opposed to the spirit (*Contra Iul.* II.5.12). As long as a person has carnal concupiscence (*Nupt. et conc.* I.29.32), perfection is not available to him, and he must be content with a lower grade of holiness, which consists in not consenting to the desires of the flesh. Concupiscence, which remains even in the elect, gives rise to shameful desires, despite the absence of consent. Disordered desires are not only evil, but also entail guilt that requires forgiveness, even if there is no conscious consent to sin (*Nupt. et conc*. I.27.30).

Cassian agrees that the presence of carnal desires prevents a person from being sinless, but he disagrees that a guilt requiring forgiveness attaches to such desires. He asks: "For what other thing does it mean to be taken captive by the law of sin if not to continue to perform and commit sin? Or what other chief good can be given which the saints cannot fulfil, except that in comparison with which, as we said above, everything else is not good?" Cassian himself answers that "the persons of saints who day after day falling under this law, which we described, of sin not of crimes, are secure of their salvation and not precipitated into wicked deeds, but, as has often been said, are drawn away from the contemplation of God to the misery of bodily thoughts, and are often deprived of the blessing of that true

bliss" (*Coll.* 23:15). Such saints complain about the loss of happiness, not the loss of innocence; they are wretched (Rom 7:24) but not impure or wicked. Cassian believes that whatever anxiety the law of sin produces is at once removed by the law of grace, according to the words of the apostle: "For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death (Rom 8:2; *Coll.* 23:15). Such sin does not entail guilt and is not an obstacle to communion, although it clearly shows the weakness and imperfection of human righteousness (*Coll.* 22:12).

If Augustine considers carnal desires to be manifestations of sinful concupiscence and sinful in themselves, though after baptism they do not result in guilt, Cassian's distinction between the guilt and weakness of sin is not connected with baptism, but with the state of holiness, which is a watershed between sinners and saints. For Augustine, carnal desires are associated with the passions, and therefore they remain sinful even after baptism, since such desires lead to vice; for Cassian, carnal desires are not sinful, since they do not have a passionate nature and do not necessarily lead to vice. This line of division is evident in Cassian's view of nocturnal emissions: when they result from gluttony or negligence, they defile a man, but when they are a diabolical attack, they do not defile him and do not deprive him of righteousness and holiness, nor are they an obstacle to communion. Unlike Augustine, Cassian does not reduce the problem of sin to carnal concupiscence but instead interprets it more broadly, as any activity caused by the bodily needs that distracts one from contemplation. He sees post-lapsarian human reality not merely as a punishment for Adam's fall, but also as God's pedagogical tool for teaching humanity the correct attitude: the natural weakness of the mortal body and the presence of changeable thoughts do not allow a person to achieve the depths of purity, and this experience of the law of sin keeps that person humble before God.

The disagreement between Cassian and Augustine grew not only out of different theological starting points but also out of distinct spiritual experiences. Augustine looks at the problem of sin from the perspective of Adam's fall, which results in condemnation that requires baptism. Cassian looks at the problem of sin from the perspective of each person's future destination and the ascetic

ideal of perfection, which he understands to be contemplation (*theoria*) without distraction. For Augustine sinlessness is impossible because the curse fell upon all people after Adam's transgression, and that curse is expressed in lust and concupiscence. For Cassian, sinlessness is impossible because of the ontological gulf between the Creator and His creation, which mere creatures cannot overcome. An awareness of the ontological gulf between God and humanity and an acute sense of the difference between God's righteousness and human righteousness, which is weak and imperfect, both prompt Cassian to speak of human righteousness as impurity and sin. In comparison with God's goodness and righteousness, all human righteousness is so unclean and disgusting that the prophet could find nothing fouler or more unclean and chose to compare such righteousness to filthy rags (Isa 64:5–6, *Coll.* 23:17).

2.5 John Cassian on sin

From the preceding discussion, we can see that Cassian speaks about two kinds of sin. One is sin as an action or thought that is contrary to God's laws and precepts; such sin can be called a capital offence. The other is sin that is not an offence but is nevertheless recognised by Cassian as sin; recognition of this latter kind of sin is why he could not agree with Jerome about the possibility of sinlessness even for a short time. In making that denial, Cassian is not thinking about small shortcomings or minor lapses of thought, but rather about the natural human inability to perpetually contemplate God without being distracted by earthly thoughts or pursuits. As long as one is in the body, it is impossible to keep one's spirit burning and fervent.

Cassian's understanding of sin is far removed from Augustine's idea of original sin and concupiscence. For Cassian sin is not a tendency inherited from Adam, but rather a result of the simple changeability and impermanence inherent in human nature. For one who has tasted the delight of contemplating God, deviation from that contemplation becomes burdensome and is perceived as a defilement and a fall, so that "the very fall becomes death to the faller" (*Coll.* 23:9).

Cassian is well aware that there is a big difference between these two kinds of sin. The first kind makes us transgressors of the law and carries with it a penalty. Such sin is either purified in this age by repentance and sorrow or punished in the next age by eternal torment and fire. Grace alone is insufficient for remission of this sin (*Coll.* 23:15). The second kind of sin is described by the apostle Paul in Rom 7:15–24 and by the prophet David in Ps 18:13 [19:12], who says: "who can discern his own errors? Forgive my hidden faults." We cannot avoid them, and we fall into them every day, either voluntarily or against our will (*Coll.* 20:11–12). Responsibility for such fleshly thoughts and distractions arises only when such things happen not merely out of bodily weakness, but out of a person's free choice and consent. When Cassian speaks of natural weakness, he is referring to a wide range of lapses that lead a person away from the highest perfection. He distinguishes seven kinds of such lapses: they occur either because of ignorance and forgetfulness, or thought, or word, or surprise, or necessity, or weakness of the flesh, or defilement in a dream (*Coll.* 22:13). Such sins, however small and light, hinder a person from being sinless, and make it so that there is something to repent for every day.

In the first kind of sin, a person is a slave to that sin, serves the law of sin, and does what sin commands; in the second kind of sin, a person is simply captive to the law of sin (*lex peccati*) and remains under this law's power, but not under the power of its vices. While the first sin makes us wrongdoers and slaves, the second only makes us wretched. Despite being in bondage to the law of sin, the saints do not fall into transgressions, though they are still distracted by earthly thoughts, when the mind descends to lower things (that is, anything that does not belong to progress in virtue on the way to perfection) rather than ascending to God. In this way, the body of sin and death forces the saints to move away from God (*Coll.* 23:16). When Cassian speaks about the impossibility of sinlessness, he actually says that one can keep himself clean from sins of the first kind, but he denies that one can be free from sins of the second kind, which can be cleansed only by constant repentance and daily grace.

Cassian also instructs his readers how to approach sins of the first and the second type. Capital and grave sins should be destroyed and forgotten; in the case of such sins, one ought to get rid of the occasion and opportunity that led to them being committed, and by this curative treatment one can attain forgetfulness of the sins themselves (*Coll.* 20:10). The penance for these sins is temporary and ends as soon the inclination to them is destroyed by a good life, which is the proof that they have been forgiven: one not only restrains himself from unlawful acts, but urges himself forward to the virtues. As to the minor offenses, in which *the righteous falls seven times a day* (Prov 24:16), penitence for them should never cease, for it is a sign of our pure and perfect aspiration for virtue (*Coll.* 20:11). For Cassian, sinlessness is perfection, and since perfection is not achievable as long as a person lives in the body, sinlessness is impossible in this life.

Cassian is no dreamer or utopian striving for the impossible. He knows that as long as people are in the body, constant contemplation is impossible. Consequently 'sin' (or rather, imperfection) is excusable for humans, unlike incorporeal beings, who have no excuse for evil thoughts, since they are not harassed by incentives of the flesh but are inflamed simply by the fault of a perverse will. Therefore, their sin is without forgiveness, and their weakness without remedy (*Coll.* 4:14). Cassian considers the law of sin not only a punishment for Adam's transgression, but also a positive pedagogical aspect and the expression of God's love and mercy. After all, the awareness of human fragility prompts the ascetic to realise his bodily limitations and total dependence on divine grace. This *lex peccati*, the war of the flesh against the spirit, leads the ascetic to a humility that protects him from falling into Adam's sin of pride, and does not allow the ascetic to relax but rather incites him to continual spiritual advancement (Villegas-Marín 2013, 292, 294–95).

Cassian's doctrine of sin derives from his high ascetic ideals and his striving for a perfection that has no limits. He defines sinlessness as a state of contemplation (*theoria*) and as the ultimate goal of monastic life (Byrne 1987). His doctrine of sinlessness is "more than a part of his critique of Pelagius, it was also central to his ascetic

agenda" (Squires 2013a, 125).[28] And since, in his view, "no one can rest content with the stage to which he has advanced, and however much a man may be purified in mind, so much the more does he see himself to be foul" (*Coll.* 23:19), it is evident from the perspective of such lofty goals that no one can claim to be sinless. This hamartiology was the fruit of the monastic environment in which Cassian lived and wrote, a well-organised coenobitic community where ascetic practice and discipline were essential. His own monastic experience of human fragility convinced him of sin's inevitability and humanity's total dependence on divine grace. Yet he refused to accept the pessimistic Augustinian view of original sin and its consequences. Instead, he defended the idea that there were some seeds of goodness in fallen humanity and spoke of the *lex peccati* as the means which God uses to educate the human will and direct it toward contemplation.

The whole discussion between Cassian and Pelagius, Jerome, and Augustine, and the later Massillian controversy that continued in the monastic community of Gaul for a century, shows that in the fifth century the concept of sin was not clearly defined. Cassian's understanding of sin was determined by his own ascetic experience of effort and struggle, of will and discipline, and his understanding of sinlessness was determined by the lofty ideals of contemplation (*theoria*) and the ultimate goal of monastic life – purity of heart. For Augustine and his followers, such as Prosper of Aquitaine, sin was the result of the Adam's curse, and sinlessness was the result of irresistible grace. Although the Councils of Carthage and Orange adopted a moderate version of Augustine's doctrine as the Church's faith, the long duration of those discussions indicates that a diversity of views persisted and, more generally, that in the fifth century the theological differences between East and West were already quite deep. Though monks sometimes engaged in theological discussions, such controversies have never been the seedbed of their theology; monastic theology was rather a manifestation and defence of monastic practice. Because monastic hamartiology developed

[28] See also Rousseau 1975, 114; Stewart 2001, 47; Ramsey 1997, 20.

from the ascetic life, it is to a consideration of this life that we now turn.

Conclusion

By the late fourth century, monastic hamartiology had developed to the point that the ascetics felt confident enough to engage in theological controversy. On the one hand, the growth of Messalianism in Syria and Asia Minor prompted Pseudo-Macarius to enter into discussion with the enthusiasts who overemphasized the role of prayer in conquering sin. Sharing the same spiritual tradition and context, he could speak to them in understandable terms with the goal of diverting these adepts from their erroneous views. Pseudo-Macarius associated sin with a certain power of Satan, which could hardly be overcome by human efforts alone and humans needed additional help of a stronger defender, namely, the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he emphasized the role of prayer as the necessary means for obtaining God's aid in combating sin which he understood in a very broad sense as the unavoidability of temptation. Such a broad understanding of sin found expression in his teaching about the coexistence of sin and grace in the human soul. However, his images and emphases were sometimes misunderstood and misinterpreted, so that his teaching became suspicious to ecclesiastical authorities. The next generation of the ascetics therefore took it on themselves to adapt and reformulate the teachings of Pseudo-Macarius in more acceptable terms. The revision, undertaken by Mark the Monk and Diadochus of Photice, brought about a further development of terminology. To avoid confusion, Mark the Monk clearly distinguished such terms as "sin of Adam," "suggestion," "thought," and "passion." His work established a vocabulary of sin that became normative and underwent further development by the ascetics of the Palestinian and Sinaitic schools.

On the other hand, the controversy in the West between the prominent ascetic leaders Pelagius, Augustine, and Jerome induced John Cassian to defend the monastic belief in the impossibility of sinlessness both before and after reception of God's grace. This view resulted from a radical understanding of sin as deviation from

the contemplation of God, together with the inevitable lapses from the monastic goal of a pure heart. Such lofty standards were not within the reach of many. Therefore, the Church adopted a moderate view; it never recognized the goal of perfection as normative but did acknowledge that it was worth striving for. The polemics in which Cassian actively engaged revealed even greater variety in the monastic theology of sin: each ascetic milieu formed its own understanding of sin, and these understandings could differ significantly. For example, in Cassian's view Pelagius, fighting Christian laxity in Roman society by emphasizing the role of human will and agency, overestimated the human ability to resist evil and remain good and sinless. Augustine explained sin from the perspective of Adam's fall and its consequences for all humanity. Jerome, for his part, was able to accept the possibility of temporal sinlessness only by limiting his understanding of sin to actual personal sins. If Pelagius and Jerome had a rather narrow idea of sin, Augustine and Cassian considered the problem on a global scale, and both agreed on sin's profound persistence; despite that agreement, their ideas of sin and explanations for the impossibility of sinlessness were very dissimilar. While Augustine looked at sin as an unhappy corollary of inherited Adamic guilt and sinful concupiscence, Cassian considered sin to be any failure to attain the lofty goal of Christian perfection.

Fighting against sin on a daily basis, the early monks developed an acute sensitivity to sin and its various aspects, but they were still far from being able to give a clear definition of sin that would win widespread acceptance. Every ascetic environment forms its own idea of sin based on the actual context, methods of formation, prominent leaders, and the personal experience of the monks. And since these ideas about sin were frequently incompatible or even irreconcilable, there were clashes even among the proponents of a single camp (as in the case of the Pelagian controversy). In an attempt to unify this mosaic of concepts and voices, subsequent generations felt compelled to revise and correct previous teachings (as in the case of Pseudo-Macarius's revision by Mark and Diadochus) in order to harmonize them with emerging ecclesiastical doctrine. Despite these efforts at reconciling different ideas, whether by denying

or revising alternative views, early monks did not come to unified definition of sin and left this task to the following generations.

Tworzenie monastycznej hamartiologii I – Wschodni asceci w poszukiwaniu definicji grzechu

Abstrakt: W artykule podjęto dyskusje prowadzone wśród wschodnich ascetów w IV i V wieku na temat pojęcia grzechu. Skoncentrowano się na dwóch studiach przypadków, które charakteryzują głos wschodnich ascetów w kontrowersjach teologicznych i ich wkład w kościelną doktrynę grzechu. Pierwsze studium dotyczy debaty między Pseudo-Makarym a Messalianami, wraz z późniejszymi przeróbkami Pseudo-Makariusza przez Marka Eremitę i Diadocha z Fotyki. Drugie dotyczy dyskusji Jana Kasjana z obozem pelagiańskim z jednej strony i obozem augustiańskim z drugiej. Oba te studia przypadków ujawniają dużą różnorodność ascetycznych poglądów na temat grzechu i znaczną rozbieżność w terminologii używanej do jego omówienia w różnych środowiskach ascetycznych. Podjęte rozważania pokazują rozbieżność podejść i brak definicji grzechu wśród ascetów.

Słowa kluczowe: hamartiologia monastyczna, grzech, messalianizm, pelagianizm, Pseudo-Makary, Diadoch z Fotyki, Marek Eremita, Jan Kasjan, Augustyn, Hieronim

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