

# HIDDEN IN THE HEART

By Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

"In my heart have I hid Thy sayings that I might not sin against Thee."  
(Psalm 118:9)

Did members of the early Church really know the entire Bible by heart? Author Tom Meyer asks this question in his article, "Memorization and the Early Church" (*Jerusalem Post, Christian Edition*, June, 2010).

This is what he writes:

Let's look through the history of the early Church and see if they indeed emphasized memorization.

Jesus used a style of preaching that was easily memorizable — as we can see clearly if we read his words in Aramaic or Hebrew. The poetic structure that becomes clear in those languages helped keep them intact for future transmission. The Gospels say Jesus taught his listeners much in the form of brief parables. More than half of the parables are no longer than two verses! The aphoristic ones consist of brief words, one or two sentences long! And 60% of the narrative ones are not more than four verses long. The most characteristic feature of Jesus' sayings is their brevity.

These sayings were transmitted from memory by his followers in the Jewish parable tradition. The unique authority of Jesus among his followers ensured their attention, while his use of various mnemonics aided their memorization.

Were the Gospels as we know them originally crafted to be written down? Eusebius speaks of the traditional view that Matthew and John were committed to writing only because of an emergency. Other references describe the way in which the evangelists eventually copied down that which they had memorized from Jesus. Concerning the Gospel of Mark, Papias (A. D. 2<sup>nd</sup> century) said Mark copied

down what he had memorized of Peter's teaching. Clement of Alexandria said Peter's listeners exhorted Mark, as one who had long been a follower of Peter, to write down what he had said. John published his Gospel at the end of his life only at the request of his friends. Like Judaism, Christianity stressed that what can be learned from the written page cannot be compared with what can be learned from the lips of a living person.

### **Memorization and the church fathers**

As we enter the Byzantine Period, we see a continuing emphasis on memorization. St. Anthony in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century learned the whole Bible by heart merely by hearing it read aloud. John Chrysostom in the 4<sup>th</sup> century employed many devices to stimulate the memory of his congregation while preaching. Key among these was repetition. He repeated Bible verses up to seven times for a memorable effect. He believed the Bible itself was structured to aid memorization and was meant "to rivet the sacred truths in our mind by repetition."

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, it is said, Augustine had an immense memory for Scripture: "In one sermon, he could move through the whole Bible, from Paul to Genesis and back, via the Psalms."

### **Memorization and the Monastery**

Those Christians who sought a monastic life in the 4<sup>th</sup> century came together in huge numbers to the discipline of the Pachomian community in Upper Egypt. Pachomian monasticism was a significant model for later Christian practice.

The founder, Pachomius, gave himself the task of memorizing complete books of the Bible. One of the rules of the Pachomian monastery deals with the reception of the novice monk: "...there shall be no one whatever in the monastery... who does not memorize something of the

Scriptures. One should learn by heart at least the New Testament and the Psalter."

Memorization was the first step toward realizing scripture's guidance in one's life. Pachomius said: "If then an impure thought rises up in your heart...and if you want all these thoughts to diminish...then recite in your heart without ceasing what is written in the scriptures."