

Saint Sabas and the Psalms

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Have you ever heard of an adult who had the entire Psalter memorized? We must confess that this would be a rare mnemonic feat. How about a young boy, even rarer? It was commonplace for monastically educated young boys in antiquity to learn all the Psalms from memory; in fact they learned how to read from memorizing the Psalter. The Psalms were consigned to memory not only for personal and educational purposes but also for liturgical reasons, such as chanting in the services. History tells us of such a boy, his name is Sabas. We know Sabas had learned all the Psalms from memory by the age of eight when he started his education in the Flaviana monastery in Cappadocia.¹ During the eleven years that Sabas lived in the coenobium of Theoctistus he would spend his days in physical labor with the other monks and his nights alone and often without sleep reciting the Psalms from memory. We have numerous sources from Palladius and John Moschus describing the exercise of monks reciting Psalms from memory during specific times of the day. In fact, the story of Sabas and the lion in a cave near the river of Gadara informs us about his practice of reciting from memory the night Psalms. As the account goes, the lion, in whose cave Sabas established as his dwelling, returned to the cave and found Sabas sleeping. Sabas arose apparently unalarmed by the lion, completed the recitation of the Psalms and went back to sleep.² As Sabas grew up he did not forget the Psalms he memorized as a boy, but meditated on them day and night. So as we later read the account of the night that a pillar of fire pointed out to him the location of the cave in which he established the Theoktistos Church, we find him wandering along the Kidron Valley reciting the Psalms from memory.³ It is only to be expected that since memorization of the Psalms was held in such high esteem by Sabas, and made up much of his daily prayers, that memorization of the book of Psalms would be one of the basic requirements for admittance to the monastery he founded. The memorization of the Psalms as a prerequisite for entrance into a monastery can be found even before Sabas in the 4th century Pachomian Community: “*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.*”⁴ Sabas likewise demanded the memorization of the Psalms from the novices who came to him at the Laura.⁵ Just how important knowing the Scriptures by heart was in the context of the monastic life is difficult for most to grasp in the 21st century printed world. Yet, every step and every move Sabas made was guided by the memorized Psalms. Sabas truly believed: “*thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee*” (Psalm 119:11).

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¹ Joseph Patrich Sabas, *Leader of Palestinian Monasticism* pg. 236

² Joseph Patrich Sabas, *Leader of Palestinian Monasticism* pg. 235

³ Joseph Patrich Sabas, *Leader of Palestinian Monasticism* pg. 236

⁴ *Pachomian Koinonia* 2:166

⁵ Joseph Patrich Sabas, *Leader of Palestinian Monasticism* pg. 229