Preface

Small is the image. Great is the fear.

Among the scores of rock-cut churches that punctuate the landscape of Cappadocia in central Turkey, one of the oldest is a small, sixth-century monastic church known today as the Pancarlık Kilise. The church's present apse painting, which dates to the ninth or tenth century, features a scene found in apses across the eastern Mediterranean from late antiquity onward: Christ enthroned, seated within a circular field and surrounded by an array of angelic figures and saints (see fig. 1).[1] In the case of the Pancarlık Kilise apse, however, viewers encounter an additional feature in the form of a dipinto, or painted text, centrally integrated within the painting. Running beneath Christ's throne in capital letters is a set of simple phrases in alliterative Greek, informing the apse's viewers of how they ought to feel as a result of viewing the painting: "Small is the image. Great is the fear. Seeing the image, honor the place."[2]

For many viewers today, the juxtaposition of image and text in the church's apse might seem jarring or even alien. The dipinto's blunt, impersonal labeling of the image's emotive force contrasts sharply with the contemporary, Western assumption that emotions are the internal prerogative of the individual. There is no room here for a range of emotional responses from viewers, still less for an aesthetic that privileges intellectual appreciation over emotive impact. Equally jarring is the painter's specific choice of emotions. It is "fear" (*phobos*)—not "joy," or "love," or even "hope"—that the image evokes. Such an identification sits uneasily alongside more positive present-day emotional ideals.

FIGURE 1. Detail of apse painting of Christ enthroned, with central text running beneath the throne. Pancarlık Kilise, Cappadocia (Turkey). Ninth or tenth century. Photograph: Marlena Whiting/Manar al-Athar.

Indeed, one can see something of this unease at work in the attempts of scholars today to gloss the apse's *phobos* as "reverential fear" or "awe"—translations that work to bring it closer to contemporary pieties by differentiating it from the basic meaning of *phobos* (and of fear) as distress at future harm.[3]

Would the apse's tenth-century viewers have shared, or even understood, the discomfort of its twentieth-century viewers? Perhaps some would have. For most, however, there would have been nothing unusual about the apse's juxtaposition of text and image. Byzantine worshippers lived in a world populated by icons, media of divine presence whose emotive power was widely acknowledged, indeed celebrated.[4] Moreover, when it came to naming the emotions that icons of Christ invoked, *phobos* ranked among the more common contenders. As one tenth-century writer put it, for those who desired to be "led into fear from the sight" of a painting, no image was better than that of Christ, returning in glory to judge the world.[5]

This book is about the cultural processes that enabled that identification. Why did fear come to be privileged as a fundamental, normative

orientation of monastics (and indeed Byzantine Christians more broadly) toward their God?[6] How did it become not just a reaction to divine presence but a set of *practices* to be cultivated in everyday life? And finally, how did those practices inflect not only the emotional relationships of monastics with their God but also their emotions with respect to one another? In addressing these questions, this book focuses on the long tradition of Christian emotional piety that developed, above all, in the monastic communities of the eastern Mediterranean world in late antiquity—encompassing roughly the fourth through seventh centuries of the Common Era. Monastics did not invent the concept of "fear of God" from scratch; it was already held up as a pious ideal in Christian scripture. By reinterpreting it around the person of Christ and centering it as the sine qua non of emotional piety, however, monastic writers transformed it from an ideal into a practice—in the process reshaping their own emotional lives and those of the communities they guided.

The present work thus aims to bring fear of God in late antiquity into the history of emotions. While the concept of fear of God in the Hebrew Bible has been well explored by scholars, its translation and practical development among subsequent Christian communities has received less attention. A number of studies in recent years have shown how the inculcation of fear in Christian audiences was an important facet of some Christian education and preaching in late antiquity, albeit without focusing specifically on fear of God.[7] In the realm of late antique monastic studies, probably the most sustained attention to fear of God has been that of Paul Dilley, who has described it as a "cognitive discipline" that was both pursued by monastics themselves and enforced by the communities in which they dwelt.[8] The environmental factors that shaped this emotion stand at the heart of the present work. As this book argues, how monastics felt, and in particular how they felt toward and about their God, was deeply shaped by three variables only partially within their control: the *emotion words* that they knew and used, the *cultural patterns for relating to others* that they had at their disposal, and the *physical environments* in which and through which they prayed. All three variables played a part in monastic attempts to understand, and put into practice, fear of God.

Hence the primary arguments of this book. First, when it came to the emotional vocabulary of monastic piety, no text was more fundamental than the psalter. In their daily recitation of the psalms, monastics in late antiquity found an *emotional lexicon*—a set of core emotion words that literally set the terms for how monastics named both their feelings

toward God and God's feelings toward them. As chapter 2 shows, no human emotion is more frequently extolled in the psalter than "fear of God," and no divine emotion is more commonly invoked than God's pitying "mercy" for humanity. These terms are in turn mirrored in much late antique monastic discourse, which likewise holds up fear and mercy as paradigmatic emotions for humanity and God. The book also breaks new ground through its discussion of variations across the terminologies of emotional piety in Greek, Coptic, and Syriac-speaking monastic communities. For, while nearly all monastics knew the psalms, not all knew them in the same language. Greek *phobos,* Coptic *hote,* and Syriac *deḥltā* are today all commonly rendered by the English word "fear," but in late antiquity their semantic fields outside the psalms varied significantly—a fact that led to divergences in how monastics reading the psalms in these languages understood and tried to enact "fear of God."

To know *what* to feel was not the same as feeling it. In order to put the emotion terms that they inherited from the psalms into practice in their lives, monastics needed to make sense of them within the context of their own worldly experiences—to understand, that is, their emotional relationship with the divine through analogy to their emotional relationships with other people. As I will argue in chapter 3, in the case of human fear and divine mercy, many monastic writers found a connecting relational paradigm in the theme of divine judgment. Scholars of late antique monastic literature in Greek and Coptic have noted this literature's strong and recurrent foregrounding of God's role as judge and, to a lesser extent, monastics' understanding of this role through the lens of contemporaneous conceptions of criminal punishment.[9] What has been less noticed is the connection of this trend to monastic emotional piety. Many writers described the fear that they felt (or should feel) toward their God as analogous to the fear felt toward worldly judges—whether Roman magistrates or monastic superiors. Equally significant was the tying of divine mercy to the theme of divine judgment: just as monastics feared the condemnation of a just (and in some cases wrathful) God, so they also hoped for acquittal from a pitying, merciful God. Human fear and divine mercy thus sat uneasily together as reciprocal halves of a relationship between monastics and their God, balanced on the fulcrum of divine judgment: to emphasize one was to deemphasize the other.

Powerful as they were, the emotional norms pushed by monastic writers were not the be-all and end-all of emotional piety for monastic

communities, nor is late antique monastic literature the only source for recovering the emotional lives of monastics. The built environments of monasteries in late antique Egypt, on which chapter 4 focuses, provide a counterpoint witness to the lexical and literary evidence. At the Red Monastery in Upper Egypt and the Monastery of Apa Jeremias at Saqqara, spaces of prayer were both formed by and formative of the emotions of their occupants. These spaces at once supported and nuanced the practice of "fear of God." On the one hand, to stand as a community beneath the image of Christ enthroned in the church of the Red Monastery and listen to a homily that described that same scene in vivid detail was to invite the communal relationship with Christ as a fearful judge that the homily evoked. Regardless of whether every monastic in the space was receptive to such a relationship, there can be little doubt that the context did much to support it. On the other hand, when monastics prostrated themselves in prayer at the Monastery of Apa Jeremias surrounded by the inscribed and painted prayers for divine mercy of their monastic family—even kneeling in the imprints in the floor formed by the repeated prostrations of bygone monastics—they encountered a more nuanced set of emotional options afforded by their physical surroundings. As this book argues, monastics in these spaces were not just practicing fear of God; they were also participating in communal networks shaped by the practice of mutual intercession and the promise of divine mercy that it offered. Such networks were both social and material—sustained across generations of monastic bodies guided by the physical spaces of the monastery.

Ultimately, like any history of emotions, the history of fear of God is as much about how people *tried* to feel—and how they tried to get others to feel—as it is about how they felt. Indeed, what emerges from this book is the great effort that monastics put into understanding and enacting an emotion that, in antiquity as today, was not regarded as pleasant—even as that very enactment was conditioned by the variables of language, culture, and environment. To center fear of God as the through-line of monastic piety is not to discount the emotional complexity of monastic life—for example, the humility that monastics sought to enact with respect to each other, the listlessness or boredom that they struggled against in their daily routines, or even the love that some writers named as the ultimate aim of their relationship with God. It is, however, to take seriously the attention that many monastic writers accorded to this emotion as the bedrock of their relationships not only with the divine, but also with one another.