

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

School of Theology and Seminary Graduate
Papers/Theses

School of Theology and Seminary

2007

"You Can Become All Flame": Do the Desert Fathers Have Anything to Say to Us Today?

Arlen M. Hanson

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hanson, Arlen M., "You Can Become All Flame": Do the Desert Fathers Have Anything to Say to Us Today?" (2007). *School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses*. 753.
https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers/753

This Graduate Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Theology and Seminary at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

“You Can Become All Flame:”
Do the Desert Fathers Have Anything to Say to Us Today?

by

Arlen M. Hanson

P.O. Box 7066 Emmaus 156
Collegeville, MN 56321

A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,
Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
Saint John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota

July 31, 2007

This Paper was written under the direction of

Steven D. Driver

Arlen M. Hanson
has successfully demonstrated the use of
French
in this paper.

Steven D. Driver

(date of signature goes here)

Description of the Project:

This paper will examine *Apophthegmata patrum*, the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, in a critical manner, along with selected works from scholars of the *Apophthegmata*, in the light of recent “popular” treatments of the *Apophthegmata*, to discuss whether and what the *Apophthegmata patrum* might have to say to 21st century Christians in the way of timeless truth despite apparent harshness, extremism found in the *Apophthegmata*, and the fact that approximately seventeen hundred years have fundamentally given us a vastly different way of seeing the world and ourselves in it.

This paper may not be duplicated.

Signature of Student Writer

Date

“You Can Become All Flame:”
Do the Desert Fathers Have Anything to Say to Us Today?

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and mediate, I live in peace and as far as I can, purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, if you will, you can become all flame.”¹

In recent years there has been a popular surge of interest in so-called “desert spirituality,” and in the *Apophthegmata partum*, the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, in particular. Popular books of selections from the *Apophthegmata*, with introductions and commentary by well known spiritual writers, have made their appearance upon bookstore shelves. Their common theme is that the Desert Fathers (and Mothers) can “speak to us today.” Often these books “sound bite” the *Apophthegmata*, giving us the sayings that are most accessible for today’s reader and portray the “spirituality” of the Desert Fathers in a very selective (and therefore distorted) light. More difficult sayings that may strike us as harsh or extreme, that may offend our sensibilities, or simply defy our understanding, are often passed over.

This paper will take a critical view of the *Apophthegmata partum*, though ending with the assertion that the Desert Fathers do have something worthwhile to say to our times, a message that we need to hear. We should not, however, “sound bite” them, or read them uncritically as though their “spirituality” could “whole cloth” be translated into the 21st century. It must be taken in to account that their understandings of the world, of the way in which the body functions, of gender and gender relations, and of the scriptures—to name only a few—were fundamentally different than ours, and in fact

¹ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Benedicta Ward, S.L.G., translator. Kalamoazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975. Joseph of Panephysis 7.

incompatible at points. If we are to take deep and crucial spiritual instruction regarding ourselves in our own times from the Desert Fathers, it must be because we have identified a timeless core of truth in the sayings *despite* harshness, extremism, probable misogyny, and the fact that approximately seventeen hundred years have fundamentally given us a vastly different way of seeing the world and ourselves in it, and not because we have selectively ignored problematic aspects of the *Apophthegmata*.

Origins, Transmission, and Collection: Some Important Considerations for Reading the *Apophthegmata*

One issue that needs address at the outset in studying the *Apophthegmata* is the fact that they do not speak with a unified voice, and therefore most likely do not represent what could be considered to be a unified “theological understanding.” It is certain that the *Apophthegmata* were passed on through a long oral tradition before they were collected, and there was most certainly a set of criteria for their selection and an editing process. Although the sayings themselves date from monastic leaders of the 330s to the 460s, the text of the *Apophthegmata* as it has come down to us dates from much later, probably the late fifth or early sixth century.² It must therefore be acknowledged that they represent multiple ascetical understandings or degrees thereof, and also that they may actually more accurately represent the views and attitudes of their collectors and editors than they do the views and attitudes of the actual fathers and mothers. In the twentieth century, a number of scholars, Wilhelm Bousset, Jean-Claude Guy, Derwas Chitty, Antoine Guillamont, and Lucien Regnault among them, carefully and

² William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Christian Monasticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 19.

painstakingly tried to trace the origins, transmission, and collection of the *Apophthegmata*. There appears to be general agreement that the sayings that now constitute the *Apophthegmata* come primarily from the monastic settlements of Lower Egypt and especially from the monastic settlement of Scetis.³ All of these considerations notwithstanding, if one regards the *Apophthegmata* as the authentic pronouncements—edited and selected or not—of some of the earliest monks of the Egyptian desert (and there appears to be little or no reason to dispute such authenticity), there exists in them such an overwhelming bent towards an extreme asceticism that I would maintain that one can arrive at some general conclusions regarding the spirituality which is represented therein.

The Extreme Asceticism of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, and Some Reasons Why

I will call the examples that follow “extreme” because to the mind of the 21st century reader of the *Apophthegmata*, the asceticism portrayed in these sayings will probably seem extreme. To be fair, it would not have been considered extreme in the view of those practicing it, but that will be addressed in due course later in this paper. Consider the tone of the following sayings as they may be heard through the filter of a 21st century ear.

Abba Longinus said, ‘If you are ever ill, say to your body, “Be ill and die; if you ask me for food outside of the agreed time, I will not bring you even your daily food anymore.’⁴

Abba Bessarion said, ‘For fourteen days and nights I have stood upright in the midst of thorn bushes, without sleeping.’⁵

The same Abba Bessarion said, ‘For fourteen years I have never lain down, but have always slept sitting or standing.’⁶

³ *Desert Christians*. 171.

⁴ *Sayings*, Longinus 2.

⁵ *Sayings*, Bessarion 6.

“...he is a monk who does violence to himself in everything.”⁷ ~Abba Zacharius

“All bodily comfort is an abomination to the Lord.”⁸ ~Abba Poemen

Such expressions seem harsh and extreme to today’s reader, that is, they seem to exceed the bounds of moderation and go to the utmost lengths of action. They may seem to us to indicate self-hatred and a hatred for the body. Such statements are not isolated or rare in the *Apophthegmata patrum*. The sampling above contains only a few of the more extreme examples. They are jarring, and it may be difficult for us to know what to make of these sayings at first glance. We may wonder how such severe treatment of the body can be connected to the quest for holiness and purity of heart in the thinking of these monks. Unless we can find some understanding of what these monks may have been up to, these sayings could seem to today’s reader to indicate insanity rather than holiness.

Christians of 4th and 5th centuries did not understand “salvation” or “grace” or a host of other “theological concepts” in the way that Christians of the 20th and 21st centuries do. These differences become jarringly evident, if not understood, in a more than cursory or selective reading of the *Apophthegmata*. It is debatable as to whether the Desert Fathers and Mothers would have even understood the goal of a Christian life, or even an ascetic life, in the same way as many of their popularizers of today. For example, one of the “modern” understandings of one the goals of the spiritual life might be termed “peace with God.” One does not see this as being within the thought categories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Achieving “peace with God” is not

⁶ *Sayings*, Bessarion 8.

⁷ *Sayings*, Zacharius 1.

⁸ *Sayings*, Poemen 38.

something that they are about through their ascetic efforts. In fact, as seen in the following saying it would appear that any hint of arrival at anything resembling an inner peace is to be distrusted and suspect:

Abba Poemen said of Abba John the Dwarf that he had prayed God to take his passions away from him so that he might be free from care. He went and told an old man this: "I find myself in peace, without an enemy," he said. The old man said to him, "Go, beseech God to stir up warfare so that you may regain the affliction and humility that you used to have, for it is by warfare that the soul makes progress." So he besought God and when warfare came, he no longer prayed that it might be taken away, but said, "Lord give me strength for the fight."⁹

Today's reader might wonder how, after a lifetime spent in prayer and work in mostly solitude and silence, at least a measure of inner peace would not be achieved. If not, then what has the quest been about, and what has all of the asceticism of the monk achieved in the end? Abba Theodore of Pherme said, "I have worn the habit seventy years and on no day have I found peace."¹⁰ And more than once in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* we come to the end of a monk's life and do not see peace; instead, we see what appears to be a craven fear of death. Here's what happened to Abba Arsenius: "When his death drew near, the brethren saw him weeping and they said to him, 'Truly, Father, are you also afraid?' 'Indeed,' he answered them, 'the fear which is mine at this hour has been with me ever since I became a monk.' Upon this he fell asleep."¹¹

One must consider when "peace" is scheduled to arrive. Abba Elias said, "Whoever loves tribulation will obtain joy and peace later on."¹² The expectation that "inner peace" is a goal of Christian (and more specifically ascetical) life, and that it should arrive during this life is a modern idea. As much as a way to live one's life, the

⁹ *Sayings*, John the Dwarf 18.

¹⁰ *Sayings*, Theodore of Pherme 2.

¹¹ *Sayings*, Arsenius 40.

¹² *Sayings*, Elias 6.

Desert Fathers and Mothers would have seen their asceticism as a preparation for the next life. The next life is the life of peace. This would also explain, in part, some of the severity of their asceticism upon their bodies. The body is not to continue into the *eschaton* (the ultimate end and summation of all things), and the extreme mortification, essentially “killing” the body now through asceticism, comes about from a profound understanding that the body needs to be disciplined in order to correct it.

What has all the asceticism of the monk achieved in the end? Well, heaven. That would have been their understanding. The reason they are still not at peace when the hour of death approaches is because they are still striving, and there is not an “assurance” of “peace,” or even of salvation. These are modern understandings that we are in danger of imposing upon the *Apophthegmata*, and so we misread and misunderstand their motivations. Though nowhere is it specifically stated in the *Apophthegmata*, it is difficult for a careful reader today to conclude otherwise than that the early desert monastics are practicing a “works righteousness” (though it is acknowledged that this is a modern term). They are achieving their salvation through their asceticism. Historically it can be seen that wherever and whenever a “works righteousness” is practiced, it tends to lead to extremes—especially bodily ones—in practice. If one is never sure right up until the end, then can one ever have done enough...?

And so the monk was in a permanent state of striving, in both body and soul/spirit. William Harmless, in his book *Desert Christians: an Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* has pointed out that while the desert fathers often seem harsh in the practice of penance, in many cases they may actually have been more tolerant than the

“rigorous public penitential process” of the larger church of their day.¹³ Harmless suggests that this is because the desert monks saw themselves as “permanent penitents.”¹⁴ This “permanent penance” was a prominent feature of the religious understanding not only of monks in the fourth and fifth century Mediterranean world, but of the church at large. Harmless counts it as a virtue of the desert monastics. This is *penthos* (“sorrow,” “compunction”), and Harmless considers it to be “a core element of desert spirituality.”¹⁵ Further, Harmless considers this attitude of *penthos* to spring from “an eschatological sense, of the coming kingdom of God, with its reckoning judgment.”¹⁶

Some of the *Apophthegmata* utterly offend the sensibilities and defy the understanding of today’s reader with some of the apparent attitudes they express and seem to enjoin. An example would be in the attitude towards family found in the sayings of Abba Poemen (bold emphasis is mine):

One of the Fathers related this about Abba Poemen and his brethren: “When they were living in Egypt, their mother wanted to see them and was not able to do so. So she took note of the time when they went to church and went to meet them. But when they saw her, they made a detour and **closed the door in her face**. But she beat on the door and cried with tears and groans, saying, “I must see you, my beloved children!” Hearing her, Abba Anoub went to Abba Poemen and said to him, “What shall we do with this old woman who is weeping against the door?” From inside where he was standing, he heard her weeping with many groans and he said to her, “Woman, why are you crying out like this?” When she heard his voice, she cried out even more, weeping and saying, “I want to see you, my children. What will happen if I do not see you? **Am I not your mother? Was it not I who suckled you?**”¹⁷

Today’s reader might ask what could possibly be the point of, or benefit from, this extreme position taken towards one’s own mother? One might perhaps cite the verse

¹³ *Desert Christians*. 238.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 239.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 240.

¹⁷ *Sayings*, Poemen 76.

from Luke as a biblical precedent for this extremity of “renunciation:” “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother...cannot be my disciple”¹⁸ as a possible rationale. One might ask if this is how literally Poemen and his brothers expected that the words of Scripture be taken. The answer would most certainly be yes. They saw what they were doing as direct obedience to Jesus’ injunction to “take up your cross and follow me,” and “whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” Some version of these injunctions—with very similar wording--are found in all four canonical Gospels. John’s version may be the most fitting for what we see in the lives and asceticism of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. John uses the word “hate” rather than “lose:” “whoever *hates* his life will find it.”¹⁹ So then, if we find such extreme literalism in these desert monastics to be disturbing, why then do we not find it disturbing in the Gospels? We may be guilty of glossing over or even ignoring difficult or inconvenient portions of the Scriptures. John Cassian is the only Latin selected for inclusion among the Abbots of the *Apophthegmata*. Many years after his monastic sojourn in Egypt, Cassian would attempt what is essentially a theology of the ascetic life in his *Institutes*. He wrote to his novices, liberally quoting the words of Scripture:

Hence, according to the words of Scripture, now that you have set out ‘to serve the Lord, remain in the fear of God, and prepare your soul’ not for peace or security or pleasure but for trials and difficulties. For ‘we must enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations,’ inasmuch as ‘the gate is narrow and the path is strait which leads to life, and few there are who find it.’²⁰

¹⁸ Luke 14:26

¹⁹ John 12:25, my paraphrase. The references in each the other three canonical Gospels where this saying of Jesus can be found are as follows: Matthew 10:38, 39 and also 16:24, 25; Mark 8:34, 35; Luke 9:23, 24.

²⁰ John Cassian, *Institutes*, Book Four, Chapter XXXVIII, in *John Cassian: The Institutes*. Boniface Ramsey, O.P., translator. New York: The Newman Press, 2000. 99.

All this is not to say that from a modern perspective the extreme treatment of the family—or other extreme practices—that we see in the *Apophthegmata* are acceptable or encouraged. But we must at least honestly acknowledge then that we interpret these things through the lens of present perspective. These things may indeed be extreme and even wrong from our perspective, but the “sound bite” or “cafeteria” approach to them is not an intellectually honest wrestling with the problems presented. Consider this “extremism” from Abba Silvanus regarding attitudes toward the creation:

One day while Abba Silvanus was living on the mountain of Sinai his disciple Zacharius went away on an errand and said to the old man, “Open the well and water the garden.” The old man went out with his face hidden in his cowl, looking down at his feet. Now at that moment a brother came along and seeing him from a distance he observed what he was doing. So he went up to him and said, “Tell me, Abba, why were you hiding your face in your cowl while you watered the garden?” The old man said to him, “So that my eyes should not see the trees...in case my attention should be distracted by them?”²¹

This same sensibility is echoed in a saying about Amma Sarah: “It was said concerning her that for sixty years she lived beside a river and never lifted her eyes to look at it.”²²

Distracted by trees. Never looking at the river outside your door for sixty years. This is an odd spirituality to us. We seem to see here a total inward focus to the complete exclusion of the outward, be it one’s own mother or even what beauty may be found in a tree. Again, we cannot attempt to understand such sayings through the lens of present day sensibilities and understandings of the “spirituality” nature. We may gain something by, and think positively about, the contemplation of creation, but the early desert monastics would not have had the same ideas. I hesitate to label the Desert Fathers and

²¹ *Sayings*, Silvanus 4.

²² *Sayings*, Sarah 3.

Mothers as full-blown dualists, but in their worldview the physical, the natural, the corporeal were, if not utterly rejected, at the very least held as suspect or in low esteem.

As already mentioned above, these things are not part of the *eschaton*, and so they are not a part of the pursuit of salvation. They are distractions to the quest at best and serious hindrances at worst. They are not a part of the spiritual pursuit, and possible aids to it, as they might be in the present understanding of many who would want to appropriate the *Apophthegmata* for their spirituality. Consider this saying from Abba Antony, that most famous and “prototypical” of the early desert monastics. They seem to bear out a world and matter hating orientation and spirituality. But it must also be remembered that they echo Scripture (as noted above) and represent an attempt to take it with absolute seriousness, however radical a proposal that may be:

Hate the world and all that is in it. Hate all peace that comes from the flesh. Renounce this life, so that you may be alive to God.... Suffer hunger, thirst, nakedness, be watchful and sorrowful; weep and groan in your heart...despise the flesh, so that you may preserve your souls.²³

“Despise the flesh, so that you may preserve your souls.” This statement could almost seem as a condensation of the entire spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. But this would be too easy a dismissal of them, too simplistic a reading. There is another side, and we must turn to looking more at what they were up to as well as to a defense of them.

A More Positive View: A Defense

“When Athanasius said that Antony was ashamed to be seen in the act of eating or of sleeping, this is a trait reprised from the *Life of Plotinus* who was, said Porphyry,

²³ *Sayings*, Antony 33.

“ashamed to be in a body.”²⁴ So wrote Lucien Regnault, the 20th century French Cistercian and monastic scholar, in his study of the lives of the Desert Fathers. We have already seen hints of this “body hating” theme or tendency in some of the sayings above. Regnault, however, goes to pains throughout his study to refute any suggestions of the earliest Egyptian monastics as being extremists. William Harmless does much the same in his study *Desert Christians*. When Harmless explains *penthos* (see discussion above), today’s reader may begin to find the seemingly extreme emphasis upon sorrow and tears over one’s sins to be neurotic. One begins to picture an atmosphere of pervasive gloom and “depression” among the desert monastics. Harmless stresses that this is a misunderstanding of the fathers, and indeed a wrong reading of the sources. Depression or gloom (*lupe*) is classified in the desert literature as one of the eight “thoughts” (*logismoi*) to be carefully avoided.²⁵ Harmless suggests that it was a deep concern for dealing with the present *logismoi* which brought ever renewed conviction to the soul and recognition of oneself as a sinner. This process was not a scrupulous and neurotic “cataloguing” of one’s past sins.²⁶

We have thus far focused upon the jarring and the harsh in the *Apophthegmata*, but one can also find balance and compassion in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Although these quotations are not nearly as numerous as the type of sayings we have been considering thus far, they are nonetheless an important part of this literature. Perhaps the quotation

²⁴ Lucien Regnault, *La Vie Quotidienne des Peres du Desert en Egypte*. Paris: Hachette Livre, 1990. 93. “Quand Athanase dit qu’Antione etait honteux d’etre vu en train de manger ou de dormir, c’est un trait repris de la Vie de Plotin qui etait, dit Porphyre, “honteux d’etre dans un corps.” (Translation in the text above is mine.)

²⁵ *Desert Christians*, 240

²⁶ *Ibid.* 239.

that follows sums them all up nicely. Consider the behavior of the very same Abba

Antony:

A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself with the brethren and he was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man said to him, “Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it.” So he did. The old man said, “Shoot another,” and he did so. Then the old man said, “Shoot yet again,” and the hunter replied, “If I bend my bow so much I will break it.” Then the old man said to him, “It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch the brethren beyond measure they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs.”²⁷

Two important things should be noted at this juncture. The first is to note is the use, in Antony’s quote above, of the word “measure.” This is a key to understanding the enigma of the Desert Fathers and Mothers ascetic rigor. Though I think, after a thorough study of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, that there certainly *were* extremists among the ranks of the early desert monastics, their asceticism was, on the whole, a very measured one, that is taking place over the long haul, and deliberate, patient, and persistent. A second consideration to be noted at this juncture, and which illustrates the “measure” of the Desert Fathers lives, is a word about the manner in which the Sayings functioned in the day to day lives of the monks. Jean-Claude Guy notes that often in Sayings we see the monks asking the *vieillard* (“old man”) for *une parole qui sauve*²⁸ (“a word which saves). The *vieillard* then speaks such a “word.” The *Apophthegmata* do not come to us from the early cenobites, the Pachomians, but from the desert anchorites, those essentially “following” in the footsteps of Antony. According to Guy, these sayings functioned for

²⁷ *Saying*,. Antony 13.

²⁸ “Remarques sur le texte des *Apophthegmata partum*.” Jean-Claude Guy, in *Recherces de science religieuse* 43 (1955): 255

the anchorites in a similar way to which a “rule” would function for the cenobites. These “words which save” became the “rule,” in a rough sense, of the desert anchorites.²⁹

It was noted above that the “measured” asceticism of the Desert Fathers and Mothers took place “over the long haul,” and was “deliberate, patient, and persistent.” The historian Peter Brown would add the adjective “positive” to that list. Brown’s assessment of the vision of the Desert Fathers and Mothers is ultimately a positive one, because according to Brown, they believed that through the patient disciplines of their way of life, the strongest and deepest urges—even the sexual urge—could be transcended.³⁰ It would appear that to Brown, the severe ascetic rigor we find in the *Apophthegmata* is the actual road to a true spiritual freedom, where the only governing force of the soul is the holy desire and pursuit of God, unhindered by vices, compulsions, and weaknesses of body as well as of the soul and spirit. This indeed seems to have been

²⁹ “Remarques sur le texte des *Apophthegmata partum*.” Jean-Claude Guy, in *Recherches de science religieuse* 43 (1955): 253, 254. “*S’il en est ainsi, on voit quelle est l’importance de l’apophtegme dans la formation monastique, et comment, essentiellement, il convient à l’anchorese. Le cénobite, en effet, possède la règle du monastère: en vivant conformément aux principes et aux ordonnances qu’elle édicte, il se formera et atteindra progressivement à la perfection.... Mais le novice-anchorite, lui, n’a pas de Règle; ce n’est même que de loin qu’il rencontrera le vieillard sous l’influence duquel il s’est placé, et aucune de ces activités communes ne lui permettra d’éprouver sa vocation. Il doit vivre solitaire, attentif à lui-même et à Dieu. Le véritable instrument de sa direction spirituelle, c’est donc la cellule dans laquelle il doit vivre.... Seul, celui qui en a fait l’expérience peut le lui enseigner; c’est donc la la question fondamentale pour le débutant, et à laquelle se rattache, plus ou moins directement, toutes les autres—c’est la question qu’il va poser au vieillard. La “parole” qu’il reçoit, c’est en la méditant longuement dans sa cellule qu’il arrivera à la mettre en pratique....*” Thus, one sees what was the importance of the sayings in monastic formation, and how, essentially, it suits the anchorite. The cenobite, in effect, possesses the rule of the monastery: living in conformity to the principles and ordinances of that edict, he is formed and progressively attains perfection.... But the novice-anchorite does not have the Rule; this is not the same as the line on line which one finds in the old man under whose influence one is placed, and each one of the communal activities is not permitted in his vocation. He must live alone, listening to God for himself. The true instrument of his spiritual direction is therefore the cell in which he must live.... Alone, this is the way in which experience can teach him. This is therefore the fundamental question for the beginner, and the way in which he attaches, more or less directly to all others—this is the question which he poses to the old man.... The word which he receives, this is the long meditation in the cell which he puts into practice.... (translation mine)

³⁰ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 373.

the goal of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Thomas Merton, perhaps a modern day exemplar of this pursuit wrote in his own assessment of the Desert Fathers,

They neither courted the approval of their contemporaries nor sought to provoke their disapproval, because the opinions of others had ceased, for them, to be matters of importance. They had no set doctrine about freedom, but they had in fact become free by paying the price for freedom.³¹

In answer to the commonly leveled charge that the Desert Fathers and Mothers were body hating dualists, Peter Brown contends that it was actually a very integrated vision of body and soul/spirit that led them to choose the desert environment for the struggle. By moving to the desert, with its harsh conditions and more urgent demands of survival, the ascetic mobilized the person as a whole.³² So the monk not only reduced the intake of the senses by the solitude of the desert, but also decreased the stimuli and “intake” for the body as well. It was in this way that the body was made a partner with the soul and spirit in the ascetic enterprise. According to Brown, “the ascetics imposed severe restraints on their bodies because they were convinced that they could sweep the body into a desperate venture.”³³ Brown argues that rather than confirm the charge of “contempt for...and hatred of the body as the principal motivation that let the monks to undergo so much physical privation,...the mood prevalent among the Desert Fathers implicitly contradicts it.”³⁴

Brown, in his defense of the extremes of ascesis in the desert monastics, does not deny these extremes. He admits that “self-mortification” was a part of the plan because

³¹ *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*. Thomas Merton, translator. New York: New Directions Books, Abbey of Gethsemani, 1960, 10, 11.

³² *The Body and Society*, 218.

³³ *Ibid.*, 222.

³⁴ *Ibid.*.

of late antiquity's understanding of the body as an "autarkic" system. Brown notes that (bold emphasis mine)

In ideal conditions it [the body] was thought capable of running on its own "heat"; **it would need only enough nourishment to keep that heat alive. In its "natural state...the body...acted like a finely tuned engine**, capable of "idling" indefinitely. It was only the twisted will of fallen men that had crammed the body with unnecessary food, thereby generating in it the dire surplus of energy that showed itself in physical appetite, in anger, and in the sexual urge.³⁵

Consider also what Antony is supposed to have "written" (The dispute as to whether he actually wrote the letters or not is a matter beyond the scope of the present discussion.) in his first letter:

I believe that there are three movements in the body. There is a natural, inherent movement, which does not operate unless the soul consents, otherwise it remains still. Then there is another movement as a result of stuffing the body with a multitude of food and drink. The heat of the blood, caused by excessive eating, stirs up the body, which is now moved to gluttony. Because of this, the apostle says: *Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess*. And the Lord enjoined his disciples in the Gospel saying: *Take heed lest at anytime your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness and pleasures*. Especially since they seek the level of sanctity they should say: *I castigate my body and bring it into subjection*.³⁶

Note this integration of the workings of the body with the workings of the soul/spirit/behavior. According to Brown then, the view of the desert monks was quite "holistic," to use a contemporary term much in vogue, despite their mistaken notions about the "autarkic" nature of the body.

The desert monks knew exactly what they were doing, and they did it with the utmost of intention. It is neither by accident, nor simply religious decoration that one finds crosses painted all over the walls of the excavated ruins of the Cells, one of the

³⁵ *The Body and Society*, 223.

³⁶ Antony, *Letter I*, 35-40, in Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of Saint Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint*, Vol. 2. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. 199.

most ancient and famous of the monastic centers in Egypt. They sought “to imitate a crucified God.”³⁷ Cassian writes to his novices in Institute Four of monastic life as an act of self-crucifixion:

Renunciation is nothing else than a manifestation of the cross and of a dying. Therefore you should know that on this day you have died to the world and to its deeds and desires and that, according to the Apostle, you have been crucified to this world and this world to you. Consider, then, what the cross implies....³⁸

The desert monastics were retraining their bodies, “fine-tuning” them, and thus, as Brown contends, making them “a partner with the soul and spirit in the ascetic enterprise.”³⁹ In the intense struggle of retraining his body, the monk also retrained the will. This is why, for Brown, the Desert Fathers and Mothers cannot rightly be called “dualists.” Seldom in the ancient world “had the body been...more deeply implicated in the transformation of the soul.”⁴⁰

Context may help us to understand the more extreme and radical seeming of the *Apophthegmata*. It helps us to know something of the life of these desert ascetics, and not just their sayings. As an example consider the context of the life of the most famous of the Desert Mothers, Amma Syncletica. *The Life of the Blessed and Holy Syncletica*, written within fifty years of her death in the mid-fifth century.⁴¹ Syncletica was from Alexandria and her family was of some means. Early in her life, Syncletica began a disciplined ascetic life of prayer while still living in her parent’s home. After the death of her parents, Syncletica gave all of the family wealth to the poor of Alexandria. Then, in a

³⁷ Lucien Regnault, *La Vie Quotidienne des Peres du Desert en Egypte*. Paris: Hachette Livre, 1990. 23. “...les ancoretes chretiens cherchent d’abord a imiter un Dieu crucifie.” (Translation above is mine.)

³⁸ Institutes, Book Four, Chapter XXXIV.

³⁹ *The Body and Society*, 222.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴¹ David G.R. Keller, *Oasis of Wisdom: The World of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005, xiv.

gesture of radical commitment to God, she cut off her hair in the presence of a priest. She then took up residence with her blind sister and only remaining family member, in a tomb outside of Alexandria.⁴² David Keller, in his book *Oasis of Wisdom: The World of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, admits that in examining the life of Syncletica—as with many of the desert monastics—“*It is tempting to interpret...actions as a renunciation of the natural goodness of earthly life and human relationships.*”⁴³ A renunciation of the natural goodness of earthly life and human relationships might be what comes to mind when reading the aforementioned tale of Abba Poemen’s mother. The interpretation that the lives and behaviors of the desert monastics were a renunciation of much of human life seems a perfectly natural interpretation. But of course, just because an interpretation is perfectly natural does not mean that it is correct.

Although it may seem reasonable to assume that the motivation for much of the harshness of the Desert Fathers and Mothers asceticism was just such a renunciation of the “*the natural goodness of earthly life and human relationships,*” David Keller argues that the real motivation of the Desert Fathers and Mothers was “an intentional desire for a more authentic human life grounded in a disciplined life of prayer, self-knowledge, humble dependence on God and love of neighbor.”⁴⁴ For Keller, we must not make the mistake of thinking that the desert monks saw their austere lifestyles as ends in themselves.⁴⁵ In this, he is substantially in agreement with Brown, seeing an integrated vision of body, soul, and spirit mobilized in the spiritual pursuit. Keller stresses that we must look at a bigger picture than that of merely going to the desert and punishing

⁴² *Oasis of Wisdom*. xiv.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* xv.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, xviii.

yourself. The Desert Fathers and Mothers did not just withdraw *to* the desert; “they withdrew from the misuses of human relationships, material goods, power, and labor that they judged as inhumane and a desecralization of life.”⁴⁶

The minimalism and austerity of the Desert Fathers and Mothers stands in stark relief to the culture they fled. If and when one intentionally curbs the pursuit of pleasure to equally intentionally become more aware of God’s presence, some of the original goodness of life unclouded by the din of the shallow and the superficial can begin to be restored. If and when one reduces one’s needs to the point where they are easily satisfied, then one finds out what the truly fundamental values and realities of human life are. David Keller puts it well:

Their goal was to experience God’s presence in each moment and activity through a disciplined pattern of prayer, reflection on Scripture, and labor. This awareness released them from a dependence on the limited and narrow desires of the ego and widened their horizons to see the sacred dimension of labor, food, relationships, time prayer and their neighbors.⁴⁷

No doubt the manner of their lives made more sense to the minds of the culture and society from which they came than they ever could to our own. It is important to try to hear the Desert Fathers and Mothers, as much as possible, as they spoke to their own world, even as we try to ascertain what it is they can speak to our world. Perhaps what can (or should) be said without dispute, however, is that the Desert Fathers and Mothers represent, and are an early post-New Testament example of, an attempt to take the call and message of the Gospel with the utmost seriousness, without rationalization of any kind, though it be at times a harsh and narrow path. They represent, in their own distinctive way, the “taking up of the cross” and the “losing of one’s life,” without which

⁴⁶ *Oasis of Wisdom*. xviii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Jesus said that one could not be his disciple (Matthew 16:23-25, and Mark 8:33-35). They are a radical vision of the Christian life. In this, their lessons and value to us are timeless and to be heeded. Certainly we cannot simply attempt to duplicate what they did. We can, however, learn from and imitate in our own contexts their ruthless determination “to break all spiritual chains, and cast off the domination of...compulsions, to find our true selves....”⁴⁸

In his book, *La Vie Quotidienne des Peres du Desert*, Lucien Regnault claims a single saying from Abba Alonius as “le cle qui nous ouvre l’univers des Peres du desert” (the key which opens to us the universe of the Desert fathers):⁴⁹ “Abba Alonius said, “If a man does not say in his heart, in the world there is only myself and God, he will not gain peace.””⁵⁰ For Regnault, this saying

...explique leur retrait du monde, leur renoncement total, leur amour de la solitude et du silence, leur vie en cellule, leurs preoccupations secretes. Toutes leur existence était comme polarisé par cet objet unique: disparaître aux yeux des hommes pour vivre simplement et constamment sous le regard de Dieu seul.⁵¹

Here we see a single-hearted, radical vision of the pursuit of God. A century earlier before the Egyptian anchorites would be brought to a widespread audience through Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*, Clement of Alexandria, while writing of his “Christian sage” in the *Stromata*, would chide his opponents and their lukewarm Christianity:

They proudly say that they are imitating the Lord, who neither married nor had any possessions in this world, boasting that they understand the Gospel better than anyone else.... Which of them goes about like Elijah, clad in a sheepskin and a leather girdle? Which like Isaiah, naked except

⁴⁸ *The Wisdom of the Desert*. 24.s

⁴⁹ *La Vie Quotidienne des Peres du Desert en Egypte*. 139.

⁵⁰ *Sayings*, Alonius 1.

⁵¹ *La Vie Quotidienne des Peres du Desert en Egypte*. 139. “...explains their retreat from the world, their total renunciation, their love of solitude and silence, their life in a cell, their secret preoccupations. All of their existence was as though polarized by a unique objective: to disappear from the eyes of men in order to live simply and constantly under the gaze of God alone” (translation mine).

for a piece of sacking and without shoes? Which of them will imitate John the Baptist's awesome way of life?⁵²

And Peter Brown comments: "Yet, a century later, the life of Saint Anthony made Clement's taunt irrevocably out of date. Anthony understood the Gospel in just that drastic way...."⁵³

Let's call this radical understanding of the Gospel a "holy desire." Perhaps the saying from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* that best sums this desire is the one with which we began this paper, and it is the one with which we shall conclude:

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, purify my thoughts. What else can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, if you will, you can become all flame."⁵⁴

If not the exact letter of their practice, let us catch the motivating spirit of these men and women who were intoxicated with God.⁵⁵

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

John Cassian: The Institutes. Boniface Ramsey, O.P., translator. New York: The Newman Press, 2000.

Jean-Claude Guy, "Remarques sur le texte des *Apophthegmata partum*." *Recherches de science religieuse* 43 (1955): 252-258.

William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Christian Monasticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁵² Clement of Alexandria. *Stromata*. 3.6.49.I and 653.5:2. Quoted in Brown, *The Body and Society*, 137.

⁵³ *The Body and Society*, 137.

⁵⁴ *Sayings*, Joseph of Panephyis 7.

⁵⁵ *Oasis of Wisdom*, xvii.

David G.R. Keller, *Oasis of Wisdom: The World of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*
Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005.

The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century.
Thomas Merton, translator. New York: New Directions Books, Abbey of
Gethsemani, 1960.

Lucien Regnault, *La Vie Quotidienne des Peres du Desert en Egypte.* Paris: Hachette
Livre, 1990.

Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of Saint Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint,*
Vol. 2. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers. Benedicta Ward, S.L.G., translator. Kalamazoo,
MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975.