Driven to Move into the Wilderness to Pray: The Fourth-Century Desert Tradition

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Abstract: This study examines fourth-century spiritual elders who responded to the command of Christ by migrating into the desert hills outside their home-towns in order to seek the presence of God in solitary prayer; and finds that their deep spiritual askesis, handed on from elder to disciple from generation to generation, produced a rich treasury of wisdom Sayings (Apophthegmata) treasured in the heritage of the Orthodox Church.
Keywords: migration, asceticism, Apophthegmata, early Christianity, spirituality

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> "In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."—Mark 1:35[1]

In examining the phenomenon of Church Fathers driven to move out into the wilderness throughout the fourth century in order to fulfill the command of Christ, it may be helpful to look at the Early Christian Desert Tradition through the lens of three fluid perspectives—as an ongoing historical event; and as a type of spirituality, a modality; and as a locus, an actual destination of migration. From the first generations of early believers responding in faith to follow the Way of Jesus, there were always people who withdrew into the desert to pray in solitude. The number of desert elders, however, moving on from their home-town to pray in the hills above the Nile, and throughout Cappadocia and Palestine as well, grew so remarkably through the next generations that the fourth century has been characterized as "the age of Christian asceticism."[2]

It was natural for the Desert Tradition to build up after Christianity was no longer outlawed and in fact became the religion of the state. The same kind of rebellion from the prevailing society continued into the next age. After it was no longer necessary to consider the persecution and martyrdom carried out by the Roman Empire as a valid component of living out the imitation of Christ, there was a natural tendency for some to still rebel against the developing institution of the Church, and to move away from the locus of the prevailing society, to withdraw (*anachoresis*) from their home-towns and move into the desert in order to truly follow Christ. Christianity becoming legal was a gradual process, but the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E. by the Emperor Constantine marks a sign-post on the Christian time-line.

Scripture casts the desert (*eremos*) as an important destination for the progressive movement of the soul; migration to the desert becomes a testing ground and a place of spiritual transformation. Both the Old and New Testaments cite moving out into the wilderness. We hear in Matthew 24 about people driven to flee out of town to the desert mountains at the End of the Age, and other references to the wilderness—and it is good to be reminded that Scripture was in earlier centuries far more often interpreted in its symbolic and allegorical function than in the literal manner in which modern-day man often struggles to understand it now.

Isaiah as well heralds a time of the coming Messiah, citing migration out to the desert: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Is. 40:3). All four Gospels quote Isaiah as messianic scriptural warrant (Mt. 11:10; Mk. 1:3; Luke 7:27; John 1:23); and Jesus himself is reported to have experienced being driven into the desert to spend time in solitary prayer as part of his formation for ministry, fulfilling that vision. And he is remembered being tempted there. We envision the Devil, the Tempter much less literally today—but this personification of temptation at work out in the wilderness was an essential component of the Early Christian experience of being driven to withdraw from society and moving into the desert, striving there for God with singleness of heart, alone in prayer.

A desire for the continuation of the Resurrection experience may have also drawn people to migrate into the wilderness, and they withdrew into the desert to seek the Spirit of Christ

alive in prayerful solitude via meditation upon the Word of God, undistracted by the comforts of the childhood home. Note that movement into the desert made possible heightened development of ancient modes of prayer; migration toward solitude in the wilderness favored honoring the value of silence in the pursuit of the presence of God. The writings of the desert elders demonstrate that this prayer was based on both the Old and what we now have as the New Testaments, making constant use of the Psalms, often from memory.

Prayer in the desert was often quite physical—more physical than our usual image of praying as a contemporary parishioner. Short repeated prayer filled the days and nights of the sojourner to the desert. Often deployed was the Jesus Prayer with its roots in the parable of Jesus which contains the Prayer of the Publican (Lk. 18:13). "Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" Prayer in the wilderness may have involved oft-repeated full prostrations to the ground and full use of the arms as a cross-like gesture, in familiar repeating patterns, as the praying of the Psalter progressed.

This unceasing prayer in combination with desert silence, as well as work periods and exercises of rigorous austerity, made up the ascetical life in the wilderness, often with several hermits who had each moved out of the village gathered around a desert elder. Even as early as the *Didache*, we are reminded that the discipline of asceticism, even to the extent of migration into the desert, was expected as part of the life of faith in Jesus Christ: "If you are able to bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect." (*Didache* 6)

The heritage of the fourth-century Christian elders who experienced the necessity of moving away into the desert provides us today with sacred recommendations for spiritual self-care modalities: in the encouragement of regular prayer, in time set aside to focus on the love of God in silence, and often, the critical need to move away from the comfort and familiar habits of home life, and travel to local monasteries and to holy sites on pilgrimage in order to facilitate deeper union with the presence of God.

Furthermore, Early Christian Desert-Dwellers moving away from home in order to seek God praying in the wilderness call into focus the time-honored practice of Spiritual Elder in deep pastoral relationship with a Disciple, striving together toward union with God, and following the pattern of Jesus the Rabbi and his disciples. After all, before the cherished sayings of Christ Jesus were gathered into Gospel narratives, they were handed on by word of mouth, with hopefully a faithful spark of the initial memory carrying forward in each living parable. And so it is with the sayings of the Desert Elders; they were remembered by their followers who in turn became elders themselves.

"Give me a word!" "Abba! Give me a word that I may live!" This traditional request for a word of daily guidance from a desert elder is based on Ps. 119:116, and it has continued to be associated with both Eastern and Western monastic initiation services down through the centuries to today. Like the remembered sayings of Jesus—abrupt and radiant in essential wisdom—many of the sayings of the Desert Elders which we now have in collections undoubtedly trace back to an individual follower's memory of receiving advice from the generosity of a wise spiritual guide—a short jewel of instruction writ large upon the heart of the disciple receiving it, and then handed down to generations of spiritual seekers. It may be the spark of living wisdom still at work in these teachings which has kept alive a vast literature of Sayings from the Desert. Two examples of this rich spiritual treasury from Early Christians inspired to move into the desert are: the "Life of Antony" (*Vita S. Antoni*) and the "Sayings of the Fathers" (*Apophthegmata Patrum*), both present in the *Patrologia Graeca*.

In the kind of transformation story already familiar to ancient believers, and perhaps to many reading this as well, it happened that the Gospel was being read, and young Antony found Jesus speaking to him personally: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mt. 19:21). Antony immediately "gave the towns-people his possessions" (*Life* 2),[3] and driven to migrate into the desert hills outside his village along the Nile, he placed himself in spiritual direction with a local ascetical elder, who had migrated there long before Antony.

Although throughout the chapters of his life, he moved again and again deeper into the wilderness, St. Antony's story demonstrates one of the realities of the Desert Experience which has resonance for today. Even though there are deep desert ranges in the Middle East, and even though the hermit's journey of the heart may be through the savage wilderness of temptation, the Christian Desert Experience was most often—and is still most often—navigated moving into wilderness that is, as it was for Jesus, not that far from home. And in addition, as with many Desert Elders, the more Antony sought out solitude in prayer, the greater his appeal became to those seeking to visit him in the desert, learn from his wisdom, and follow his precepts.

Abba Antony's witness of faith, having moved into the desert to pray, was venerated in his own lifetime, and was written down almost immediately after he died, and made tremendously popular by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria. Like the demand for Gospel narratives which built up quickly after the life of Jesus, the *Life of Antony* was written in response to people's desire to know about Antony's early days, and how he managed to live when he migrated to the desert, and how he died. This important document has become the role-model for much of the descriptive text written ever since then about the lives of saints—it can be considered the ur-text for hagiography. The genre of hagiography has suffered several centuries of ill-repute, because it is often not founded in surviving epigraphical and archeological evidence; however, in the last few generations, it has seen an uptick in appreciative acknowledgement and reputation, as scholars have found in it a valid glimpse of myriad facets of authentic history and deep truth.

St. Antony taught: "Let us hold to the discipline and not be careless. For we have the Lord for our co-worker…and in order that we not become negligent, it is good to carefully consider the Apostle's statement, 'I die daily.' For if we so live as people dying daily, we will not commit sin" (*Life* 19). St. Antony's teachings are also recorded in the *Sayings of the Fathers*, a collection of wisdom teachings of the desert elders which built up in stages over the fifth century. "Pay attention to what I tell you," says Antony among the *Sayings,* "Always have God before your eyes. Whatever

you do, do it according to the testimony of Scripture. Keep these precepts and you will be saved." (*Apoph. Patrum*, Antony 3)[4]

As a young man, the "golden-mouthed" Constantinopolitan Patriarch, John Chrysostom was also fascinated by the Christian ascetics who were migrating out into the hills near his Antioch home-town to follow Jesus in monastic practice. Much as he was drawn, however, to move into the wilderness to explore the ascetical life, his mother Anthusa begged him not to abandon the house in her lifetime; so, St. John waited to leave home for the desert until after she died. Then, he apprenticed himself to an ascetical teacher from among the well-known Syrian desert-dwellers, and he even spent a few years along as a hermit, having moved out of the world.[5]

Another Desert Father, Macarius the Great, was also known for moving into the Egyptian desert near his home town soon after his parents died. His Sayings and Sermons are spiritual jewels of our Orthodox heritage: "If you are stirred to anger when you want to rebuke somebody, you are just gratifying your own passion. Don't lose yourself in order to save another." (*Apoph. Patrum,* Macarius 17) Wise Abba Arsenius is another example of an Early Christian elder driven to migrate into the hills—outside Rome, in this case, where he was born—after his parents died, in response to a call from the Holy Spirit. His Sayings are beloved among the Fathers: "Why, words, did I let you get out? I have so often been sorry that I spoke; never, that I was silent." (*Apoph. Patrum*, Arsenius 40)

Abba Poeman is the most quoted Father in the *Sayings* collection. His early experience of faith in Jesus Christ drove him to flee from his Egyptian village, moving out to the desert monastery at Scetis. He taught: "These three things are most helpful of all: fear of the Lord, prayer, and doing good to one's neighbor" (*Apoph. Patrum*, Poeman 160). These are the core messages transmitted to the faithful from the Desert Tradition. Note that the elders quote one another in the sayings. They ask each other questions, so that sections of the Sayings sound like Q & A. They remember the favorite sayings of their beloved teacher—the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is a delightfully interrelated living web of wisdom teaching.

Abba Poeman remembers Blessed Antony saying, "Our great work is to lay the blame for our sins upon ourselves before God, and to expect to be tempted to our last breath" (*AP*, Poeman 125). From the desert experience of individual Christians driven to move away from the comfort of their family homes and home-towns in order to follow the command of Christ, the growth of monasticism developed naturally, both as the starkly individual *eremitic* life, such as that of Abba Antony, and as a communal *coenobitic* lifestyle, fostered by the experience and life-work of Pachomius—and this progress led by stages to the organization of Orthodox monasticism familiar today.

Learning from the fourth-century elders who were driven to move into the desert, the need continues to obtain that each Christian seek to find his own inner stillness, his own desert. It could be a monastery visited twice a year, or a clearing in a wooded place that speaks of God's beauty, or even a beautiful, secluded corner where the holy ikons are clustered in the home. With one's spiritual life co-existing with the contemporary digital age, it may be necessary to invest concerted effort in cultivating personal inner stillness with scheduled time for withdrawing from texting and browsing and making the potentially costly choice to set aside time for sacred meditation—to migrate to stillness. A modern-day confessor teaches: "When the turbulent mind is fed with the name of Jesus, it cannot help but repent and become enlightened by the Beauty of God."

In an ongoing examination of Early Christian writers driven to move away from their home-towns and into the desert in order to fulfill their spiritual vocation, an interesting question arises about whether there were any women among the Desert Fathers. Certainly, most of them were men, and there can be no doubt that the desert environment, even in the hills close to town, was forbiddingly challenging. And it is evident as well that the Desert Sayings and other Early Christian teachings which have survived were produced and handed on in a time when the remembered contributions of women tended to be minimized and often deleted. And yet, the voice and recorded wisdom of the women Desert Elders in the ancient sources endures to this day.

Indeed, a trio of Desert Mothers still survive in the *Sayings of the Fathers*, women who moved away from the comforts of hearth and home to encounter Christ in the wilderness and are remembered for their teachings—Sarah, Theodora, and Syncletica. As one encounter the witness of a woman's voice in an Early Christian text, including the New Testament, note that it is often the tip of the iceberg in terms of what it represents about women's contributions. And it is possible that the radical austerities of movement into desert asceticism and years of deep prayer practice there may have burned away many of the distinctions of gender; so that, for example, consider how icons of John the Baptist often look quite similar to those of the fourth-century ascetic, Mary of Egypt.

Many of the Sayings or *Apophthegmata* from two of the Desert Mothers who are collected among *The Sayings of the Fathers*, the *Apophthegmata Patrum,* are quite short and provide brief instruction to inform one's prayer and meditation throughout the rest of the day after meeting with the Spiritual Elder. Blessed Theodora said: "This present age is a storm and it is only through many trials and temptations that we can obtain an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven." (*Apoph Patrum*, Theodora 2)

Blessed Syncletica said: "Just as one cannot build a ship without some nails, it is impossible to be saved without humility." (*Apoph Patrum*, Syncletica 26) Here is one of the teachings from Mother Syncletica which is a little longer and sounds as though it may have slowly evolved into a narrative story through centuries of re-telling, one which was later redacted from several remembered Sayings:

> "It is dangerous for someone not formed by the experience of a deep prayer life with a spiritual teacher to try to teach. It is as if someone whose house is unsound was trying to welcome guests, but causing them injury by the collapse of the building. By not first securely building their own way of life, they endanger themselves and those who have come to them. Teaching that is

based on practical ascetical experience, on the other hand, not even
all eternity can destroy. By chiseling away the rough edges
of the soul, the Word of God bestows on the faithful
Christ's everlasting image." (*Apoph. Patrum*, Syncletica 12)

Some Sayings are startling miniature short stories about the explicit details of Spirit-inspired migration, like this one from Mother Theodora:

"There was once a follower who decided in desperation to leave the desert and stop trying to pray—the whole thing was too frustrating,
trying to fight bad thought and habits. And he put on his sandals to go.
And just then, he saw another follower, who was putting on his sandals,
who said to him, 'Is it on my account that you are leaving?—because
I go before you, where ever you are going'." (*Apoph. Patrum*, Theodora 2)

One of Amma Syncletica's most famous sayings describes the mystical experience seeking deep prayer by moving into the solitude of the desert. Even though it can be frustrating at first, approaching union with God is like Divine Fire:

"There is struggling and great toil at first for all those advancing toward God; but afterward, inexpressible joy. Indeed, just as those seeking to light a fire at first are engulfed in smoke and teary-eyed, thus they obtain what they seek to experience. As it is said,
'Our God is a consuming fire' (Heb. 12:29). So, we ought to kindle
the divine fire in ourselves with tears and toil." (*Apoph. Patrum*, Syncletica 1)

Divine Fire is a theme taken up by both the Desert Mothers and the Desert Fathers. Here is a much-beloved saying from Abba Joseph, who answered a follower's questioning plea:

"'As far as I can, I pray, I fast, I meditate,
I live in peace; as far as I can, I purify my thoughts—what else can I do?'
The old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven.
His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said,
'If you will, you can become all flame'." (*Apoph. Patrum*, Joseph 7)

Leaving the last word for Mary of Egypt, she was remembered praying this in the Desert, willing to migrate anywhere the Spirit called:

"Now therefore, lead me, Lord Christ, lead me wherever you please.
Lead me to salvation, teach me what is true, and go before me in the way of repentance." (Keller, *Desert Banquet*, Sept 28)

Notes:

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is quoted in the NRSV. Michael D. Coogan (ed.). *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: with the Apocrypha*, 4th edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
2. "Asceticism and the Monastic Movement in the Fourth Century," in W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), 188.
3. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Vita S. Antoni,* Patrologia Graeca, J.-P.Migne, ed.,vol. 26, Part 2 (Paris: 1854); English translation, Athanasius, *The Life of Antony,* R.C. Gregg, trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). Hereafter, *Life* 2.
4. *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Sayings of Antony, 3, Patrologia Graeca, J.-P.Migne, ed.,vol. 65 (Paris: 1857); English translation, John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2014). Hereafter, Apoph. Patrum, given with Father and number; e.g., *Apoph. Patrum*, Antony 3.
5. J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom—Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd.), 30-34.

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