

# JOURNEYING INTO GOD: THE DESERT FATHERS

## Transforming musical harmony into spiritual melody

**T**he *Historic\* Monachorum in Aegypto* narrates how God sent an angel to inform Paphnutius of a virtuous flute-player who equalled the hermit's own desire for holiness. The holy man quickly went to pay a visit to this *virtuoso* and found a former brigand who had completely emended his former lifestyle. As an antidote to his former, extravagant and unbridled existence, he preferred flutes and their music. Declaring himself a sinner, a drunkard and a fornicator, the former robber understood that he had greatly abused God's creation; consequently, he had taken the decision to play creation's melody on his flutes and try to put right his former wrongdoings.

Still unsatisfied with this answer, the holy Paphnutius asked the musician to name the good deeds he had done. The flute-player could only remember two! Once, he rescued a nun from certain rape at the hands of robbers. Another time, he paid off the taxes and their arrears - some three hundred gold coins in all - that a married couple had to contribute but could never do so; he thus rescued the man from prison and his wife from despair. At last, the hermit understood why the angel of the Lord sent him to the flute-player: the latter could illustrate God's mercy and providence better than he. The

wise abba then compared his own "ceaseless training" - or *ascesis* - with the former brigand's conversion and invited the latter to take another step forward:

"So, brother, if God thinks so highly of you, do not be negligent and leave your soul's fate to chance." The man, who was holding his flutes in his hand, immediately threw them away, and transforming musical harmony into spiritual melody, followed the father into the desert. After practicing *ascesis* for three years with all his strength and occupying all the time remaining to him with hymns and prayers, he departed on the journey for heaven, and numbered with the choirs of saints and the companies of the just, took his rest.

Going through the accounts and narratives of the Desert Fathers, the contemporary reader has to decide whether one wants to jump into some kind of phantasy world and enjoy "improbable" tales that emphasised and underscored the aura of ascetics long gone by.<sup>3</sup> The reader can also choose to shudder at the strange and reckless lifestyles, to which these pioneers of religious life committed themselves. But, after some reading, deeper questions start crossing one's mind: were they just religious extremists? Or were they something more? Were they merely frustrated at having lived too late, to be able to merit martyrdom? Or were they truly opening up new paths and devising new approaches that led them on toward the God they loved so much?

A cultural divide separates their world from ours. If one were to breach that divide and delve into their motivations, rather than their spiritual practices, their stories could become as meaningful as they had been in the first millennium of Christianity. They have shaped the spirituality of many a believer, left an unmistakable imprint on the nascent mendicant orders, and inspired many at the time of the Reformation and the Council of Trent. All of a sudden, colourful and down-to-earth individuals come back to life, with all their dreams and their failures, their desires and their pitfalls, their affections and their quests. As they journeyed through life and challenged the human spirit, they could also say "There is never a dull moment to life."

Like that flute-player, they were not afraid to scrutinize their own limitations and assess them as the possible source of musical harmony. With

Paphnutius, they turned them into some spiritual melody, as they embarked on haphazard paths that did eventually lead them to God.

### Seizing God

In the above story, Paphnutius could have been using God as his own "magic mirror", as something that came out of a Hans Christian Anderson's tale. Like the wicked witch, he wanted to know if somebody was holier than he but unlike her, he exercised humility and desired to keep on growing. Through visiting a holier person, he himself could learn some better approach to God. On another occasion, he went to a village chief who, after three years of married life and the birth of three children, had to separate from his wife. Notwithstanding the difficulties a single parent did encounter, he continued practicing justice and hospitality; he welcomed strangers in God's name and incarnated God's providence toward all. Though the chief accepted Paphnutius' praise, he also welcomed the latter's call and embraced the life of a hermit; it meant choosing a path that led to a greater union with God. Shortly afterwards, God called the village chief to share his glory in heaven, and left Paphnutius to continue with his own quest.

The holy man also ran into a merchant from Alexandria, as the latter was sailing down the Nile sharing his wealth with the poor and the monks he encountered. Once again, the latter followed Paphnutius' example but, after a short while in the desert, God again chose that merchant - rather than the holy man - to become a citizen of heaven. The old hermit almost came to the verge of despair! There he was helping others on their way to holiness, and to God, while he himself was left high and dry, unable to seize heaven he desired so much.

It was then that the toughest lesson of his life hit hard. Despair could have led him away from the sure paths of humility and, through pride, could have induced him to miss his life's goal. He still had to understand that holiness

cannot simply be the object of a deliberate pursuit, or the end-result of some headstrong commitment. It is God's grace, a gift which God graciously bestows on his chosen ones at the time and in the way God himself chooses. While no one can capture or take possession of heaven, every one can be seized by God in a loving embrace.

Patermuthius himself had been a robber by profession, and by today's standards, got the strangest of callings. One night, he was trying to breach and rob the house of an anchoress. To do so, he climbed on the roof but came to a point where he got stuck: he could go neither forwards nor backwards. In that unenviable position, he had to wait till the next morning; he dozed off and dreamt of an emperor calling him to a special military service and serve with angelic hosts. The next day, the anchoress he had tried to rob, woke him up. Without losing time, he asked her for directions to a church. He went there at once and requested to become a Christian; he wanted that God give him a chance to repent from all his past misdeeds.<sup>5</sup>

And the robber turned ascetic continued to try and take heaven by storm, his whole life.

#### Many ways to holiness

The Sayings of the Fathers tell of a certain shepherd and his wife. The shepherd's name, Eucharistos, was quite a program. Two monks came to the couple to inquire about the couple's holiness, but had to wait till the shepherd came back for the night. The couple accorded the two seekers a welcome that could compare with the one Abraham gave the three young men in Gn 18. When the strangers explained the reason for their journey, Eucharistos became quite apprehensive; God, it seemed, was demanding an account of the couple's life. In all honesty, he explained how he had inherited his sheepfold. He and his wife kept dividing their profits in three equal parts: one they gave to the poor; the second they reserved for hospitality; the third they kept for their own needs. They also chose to live as brother and sister; by day, they behaved as husband and wife while, by night, they mortified their bodies and gave glory to God.

The gatekeeper at Abba Isidore's monastery was an intriguing type. He functioned as a sort of bottleneck that joined two different worlds: that of the monks and the one they had left behind. He "never allowed anyone to go out

or to come in unless he wished to stay there for the rest of his life without ever leaving the enclosure". He was generous with all, whether they went in one or in the other direction; he showered his gifts and shared God's peace with both groups. And yet, he would insist, individuals were making a choice never to cross that gate again ... in the other direction.

Holiness and God's love could therefore be encountered in the desert, as much as in cities and villages, provided that individuals lived fully God's calling and carried out with resolve their response to God. In her down-to-earth way, Amma Syncletica could compare the town-dweller with the solitary of the desert:

There are many who live in the mountains and behave as if they were in the town, and they are wasting their time. It is possible to be a solitary in one's mind while living in a crowd, and it is possible for one who is a solitary to live in the crowd of his own thoughts.

Many a time, indecision or lack of determination, rather than sin, could account for the loss of a seeker's path to God. And that really meant losing the one chance in life of encountering fulfilment within one's unique lifestory.

Carion had been a married man with two children and a wife, when he got the call to the desert. After some time, a famine hit the land and his wife came to the desert with their two children; she sought her husband and asked him to take care of his offspring. While the girl chose to stay with her mother, the boy ran to his father. Thereafter, Carion did the best he could to educate his son. But he could not stomach others gossiping about his having a youth at his disposal. Three times, he changed residence to escape slander. Then his son, Zecharias, took matters in hand: he threw himself in nitre and came out looking like a leper. He thus tried to save his father's reputation and eventually become holier than the one who had twice given him life: through birth and through monastic education.<sup>10</sup>

Macarius the Egyptian, one of the pioneers of Skete, was crossing Nitria with a disciple. As the latter walked ahead, he ran into a priest of some pagan temple and called the latter a devil. To avenge his anger and hurt, the offended priest beat the monk to the best of his abilities. As the priest walked on, he caught up with Macarius who greeted him heartily and drew his attention to his fatigue. The priest agreed, but asked Macarius to explain the

rationale of such a greeting. The saint added: "I have seen you wearing yourself out without knowing that you are wearing yourself in vain!" The priest was taken off balance by Macarius' kind words and gentle approach; he thus encountered God in the abba, expressed his desire to become a Christian, and chose to follow Macarius's example by becoming a monk.

Macarius explained the attitude he took as follows: "One evil word makes even the good evil, while one good word makes even the evil good."

As Apollo's reputation grew, many monks left their hermitages and joined him, "making gifts of their own souls to him as if to a true father". He discerned their specific calling, asking some to dedicate themselves to contemplation and others to the exercise of practical virtues as they learned to master their passions and their appetites.

Describing the location of a monastery in Skete (Wadi Natrun), the desert to the northwest of Cairo, the author of the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* commented: "It was a very perilous journey for travellers. For if one makes even a small error, one can get lost in the desert and find one's life in danger. All the monks there have attained perfection. Indeed, no one beset with imperfections could stay in that place, since it is rugged and inhospitable, lacking all the necessities of life."<sup>3</sup> The same author - probably a visitor from 4<sup>th</sup> century Palestine - had this to say about the monks he visited across Egypt:

I saw many fathers living the angelic life as they advanced steadily in the imitation of our divine Saviour. ... They do not busy themselves with any earthly matter or take account of anything that belongs to the transient world, but while dwelling on earth in this manner they live as true citizens of heaven."

The Desert Fathers became living witnesses to the fact that there is more to the world - and to faith - than met the eye. With their poverty, simplicity and dedication, they constituted a shock and a challenge to believers who heard their accounts. They silently questioned the complacency of contemporary

Christians and invited them to make God the first and foremost concern of their lives. If abbas and ammas embarked on a life of virtue-hunting, they did so to incarnate a major ideal of Greek *paideia* - formation or "virtue-building" - and thus attain human perfection. All the time, though, they kept their watch not fall into the traps of presumption or vainglory.

One day, two Roman officers - both well-dressed and very well-equipped

- ran into two monks with the same name: Macarios. One of the officers offhandedly told the monks: "Blessed (*.makarioi*) are you who have mocked this world". When the two holy men saw through his pride, he quickly got the retort: "We have mocked the world, but the world mocks you." At those words, the pious tribune was moved to compunction, abandoned his career, gave generous alms, and became a monk.<sup>1</sup>

### Life as Hard Work

Mobility - both physical and spiritual - among hermits must have been a common phenomenon. From time to time, they undertook a journey to a "father" or a "mother", to obtain some wisdom or some special advice that could help them on their way to God.<sup>7</sup> Both the Lives (*Historic\* Monachorum*) and the Sayings of the Fathers (*Apophthegmata Patrum*) propose such quests under the form of one-liners, or anecdotes, or narratives. They can all be summed up in the word, that one such monk addressed to Abba Elias: "Abba, give me a way of life".<sup>1</sup>

Till God called them to cross serenely the threshold of life and join his joyful rest, they knew they had to keep on going, groping, and growing. No single hermit could ever hit on the one, right formula: a sort of one-size-fit-all affair; God provided as many paths as the individuals he called. In God's hands, all could become excellent tools and could help believers mature and, in turn, become God's fully-fledged gift to his Church. One only needed to take the plunge. Serapion, therefore, chided a brother for persistently stating that he was a sinner and unworthy of the monastic habit; the latter though was using such a ploy as a means to avoid change. "My son," Serapion told him, "if you want to make progress ... and be humble, learn to bear generously what others unfairly inflict on you and do not harbour empty words in your heart".

One visitor - a hunter - was shocked at seeing the great Antony wasting away his time and enjoying himself with his brethren. The Abba took that fellow aside and asked him to shoot an arrow. The holy man repeated his request, till the other complained that the bow could break under continued stress. That would be the fate of pious people, the ascetic hastily added, were they to stretch themselves and their abilities beyond measure. On the other hand, Abba Arsenius - a well-educated Roman patrician - could continue praising the hard work of Egyptian peasants as the model for a monk's commitment, just as he went on despising the excellent education he had received in Rome as if it were some great effort that had led him to nothing.

An inhabitant of the Thebaid went to Abba Sisoës and expressed his desire to become a monk. The holy man asked him if he still had some close relation. When the man replied that he had a son, the abba told him to throw that son into the river and get rid of him. When that man went off to carry out Sisoës' order, the saint quickly sent another monk to stop him from any ill-advised action. The man twice obeyed Sisoës: (a) in wanting to get rid of his son and (b) in refraining from doing so; through obedience, he prepared himself to dedicate his life to God. The parallel with Abraham's sacrificing his son, Isaac, is more than evident. Sisoës wanted to teach his visitor that, if he held on to important relations, his union with God could be one among others, lose in value, and fall behind other relations to some secondary (or less important) place.

#### Joy, a Treasure Hard to Come by

Three fathers used to visit Antony regularly, every year. While two would have many questions to refer to the abba and went to him for spiritual direction, the third simply looked on in silence and never asked anything. After a long time, even Antony himself desired to fathom why the third kept his place, and his silence. As an answer, he just heard these many words: "It is enough for me to see you, Father!"

Arsenius heard that Abba Daniel of Alexandria, full of sorrow and in utter desolation, was lying in bed, staring at nothingness. He visited Daniel and asked him who was that layman who just lay on the bed and looked at nothing. Daniel immediately took the cue, did penance, and continued living

his life to the full.<sup>3</sup> There was only one thing that the holy man Apollo could not stand: and that was gloom and melancholy. He invited all those he met to rejoice at the salvation the God promised those who seek him. Pagans - he explained - could afford to be gloomy and Jews could lament; even people in cities rejoiced at the success of their earthly concerns. Monks should automatically make manifest the fact that God has shared with them - and made them worthy of - a great hope.<sup>2</sup>

One day, a visitor came to Arsenius. On being left alone with the recluse, that man felt uneasy and simply went away. Visiting Abba Moses, the same person felt welcomed; he thus stayed and enjoyed himself. Another monk was looking at both scenes and, by the end, was deeply puzzled. The latter dreamt of both Arsenius and Moses on different boats sailing down the Nile; on his boat, Arsenius enjoyed the presence of God's Spirit in peace and solitude, while Moses relished honey-cakes with many of God's angels. Solitude and hospitality can both guide the individual on his lifelong journey and ultimately lead toward the same God.

Abba Apphy became bishop of Oxyrrynchos, after an austere life as a monk. The new office turned out to be more of a burden than the monk had thought: he could no longer lead the same kind of life dedicated to God. Prostrated before him and bemoaning his afflicted heart, he received from the Spirit the following answer: "When you were in solitude and there was no one else, it was God who was your helper. Now that you are in the world, it is man.<sup>26</sup>

Monks and ascetics knew too well that the issue of joy was the same as that of centering one's whole being and person in God. In Abba Alonios's words, "if a man does not say in his heart, in the world there is only myself and God, he will not gain peace." Poemen formulated Alonios' idea negatively. One day, when the hegumen (or abbot) of a monastery asked Poemen the way to acquire the fear of God, he answered: "How can we acquire the fear of God when our belly is full of cheese and preserved roods?<sup>27</sup>

Austerity and abnegation are quite different from self-abasement. Two anchorites went to visit Amma Sarah and thought of forewarning her that she should not think more highly of herself after their visit. They did so to test and humiliate her. With great dignity she answered that, if by nature she was a

woman and society expected her to be subservient to men, "according to her thoughts" (and, consequently, to her spiritual life) she was free of society's dictates and on par with both visitors. The message she wanted to convey was loud and clear: they should not have come to seek her, but to encounter the Lord through her. To other monks, who could do better, she even added: "It is I who am a man, you who are women."<sup>28</sup>

It is said that a brother visited Abba Joseph asking his blessing to leave the monastery and lead a solitary life. Joseph led him through the rudiments of discernment by asking him which of the two options gave his soul its peace. At the answer that both options left him in peace and apparently led him to God, Joseph added: "If you are at peace both in the monastery and in the solitary life, put these two thoughts as it were in the balance and wherever you see your thoughts will profit most and make progress, that is what you should do." To explain discernment, Abba Poemen referred to Ammonas' image: it is like an axe. While the inexperienced hand spends a long time using the axe without succeeding in cutting down a tree, the expert needs only a few blows to do the job. Amma Synclitica could sum up her life as a recluse as follows:

In the beginning there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing towards God and, afterwards, ineffable joy. It is like those who want to light a fire; at first they are choked by the smoke and cry, and by this means obtain what they seek (as it is said: "Our God is a consuming fire" [Heb. 12:24]): so we also must kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work.<sup>31</sup>

#### Dedication and Hardship

For the Desert Fathers, perseverance and dedication to their calling were never a given: they were an important goal to be gained at a great expense! St Antony told Abba Poemen that the great work humans could and should take up is "always to take the blame for [one's] own sins before God and to expect temptation to [one's] last breath". Amma Sarah described as follows her calling: "I put out my foot to ascend the ladder, and I place death before my eyes, before going up it."<sup>33</sup> Amma Synclitica compared life in the

desert to a boat that sailed with a favourable wind; after some time adverse winds hit and the waves started tossing the uncontrollable vessel. After the tempest died down, the ship could sail on again. "So it is with us", she concluded, "when we are driven by the spirits against us; we hold to the cross as our sail and so we can set a safe course."<sup>3</sup>

John of Lycopolis told of a monk who had been a paragon of holiness and dedication. At one point, that recluse started relaxing his commitment and, one day, imagined himself going through the motions of a coitus. Desperation took over and forced him to abandon his calling. As he fled to the city, he casually ran into some monks who offered him shelter and asked him to speak about God. His ensuing experience of duplicity shook him: he was

saying great things about conversion and mortification, knowing that he was going the opposite way. The unease he felt at such a "spiritual" double-dealing was God's grace. He abandoned his plans, went back to the desert, and chose a more demanding mortification; he even had to live with the fact that God was no longer assisting him as he had done. One day he heard the words: «God has accepted your repentance and has had mercy on you. In future take care that you are not deceived."

The two great concerns of the monks in the desert were (a) that of fighting the sins of gluttony and pride through their constant self-mortification and (b) their sexuality by abhorring all forms of physical contact. Many a time, hermits would talk to their visitors through a window and try to keep eye-contact to a minimum.<sup>3</sup> They wanted God to be the unique object of those conversations and the one they encountered, even as they welcomed visitors for advice, intercession, and assistance.<sup>37</sup>

As he addressed his disciples, Sopatros delivered some unparalleled advice. He placed side by side sexual offences and possible heresy. In one and the same breath, he admonished his own to avoid any contact with women and with apocryphal literature. Could both be strange "bedfellows" for the monk or the anchorite who sought God with one's whole self? He

even asked his followers not to get involved in theological discussions about the human person created in God's image. It seems, Sopatros believed, that the topic could be mishandled ("there is too much ignorance", he ventured). He also knew - maybe from direct experience - that theological disputes could degenerate into something worse. His disciples would have erred, lost their inner peace, and put themselves in the danger of losing the one thing they wanted: union with God.<sup>3</sup>

### Passions and Despair

In the first centuries, Christianity had often considered the body a weaker creation, subservient to the soul. The worst thing that could happen to an ascetic, they thought, was placing one's interiority at the service of one's bodily existence or its passions. Abba Theonas put it succinctly: "When we turn our spirit from the contemplation of God, we become slaves of carnal passion".<sup>39</sup> Pityrion, Antony's second successor, exhorted his visitors to drive out demons by mastering the passions, while Eulogius openly chided monks who, after entertaining some obscene thoughts, received the blessed sacrament and became unworthy of the Communion of Christ. Renouncing the world while still pursuing its attractions, rapidly converted the monks' interior peace into turmoil; it wrecked their one-purpose lifestyle over the shoals of spiritual instability, as distractions and passions pushed individuals away from God. For Amma Theodora, the wife of a tribune turned ascetic, life could only be a continual struggle:

It is good to live in peace, for the wise man practices perpetual prayer. It is truly a great thing for a virgin or a monk to live in peace, especially for the younger ones. However you should realise that as soon as you intend to live in peace, at once evil comes and weighs down your soul through [depression and listlessness], faintheartedness and evil thoughts. It also attacks your body through sickness, debility, weakening of the knees, and all the members. It dissipates the strength of soul and body, so that one believes one is ill and no longer able to pray. But if we are vigilant, all these temptations fall away.<sup>40</sup>

When Antony's disciple, Paul "the Simple", caught his own wife in adultery, he fled his marriage to seek Antony's counsel. He then asked the saint's permission to join him in the desert and be saved from committing sin. Was he asking Antony to redeem from himself and his disappointment?

The devil often tempted virtuous monks to some sexual act and tried to imprison ascetics within the clutches of sin. An old monk caught another red-handed, as the latter abused a boy who came to ask for spiritual healing. But the old monk thought: "If God who has made them sees them and does not burn them, who am I to blame them?"<sup>2</sup> Temptation could lead hermits - male and female - to forgo their dedication to God and plunge into the dark abysses of habitual sin. Often it resulted from self-hatred and despair. How could they ever redeem themselves in the eyes of the God who had loved them so much, that he took care of all their needs?<sup>43</sup>

The worst thing that could ever happen to a monk was despair, an unredeemable loss of hope. The great Antony, the father of monasticism, had to pray that God free him from depression and listlessness (*.accidid*). Boredom came next to despair. Some monks went to Ammonas, Antony's disciple, to ask for guidance as, where they had been staying, life had become quite difficult. Ammonas read their hearts, comforted them and sent them back. His diagnosis turned out to be quite accurate: they only needed the encouragement of a brother and a friend, rather than the concern of a father or the care of a doctor. On another occasion, Ammonas, by then a bishop, was called to judge a monk of evil reputation who harboured a woman. The monk hid her in a cask as the bishop came to investigate. Ammonas, aware of the monk's trick, sat on the cask as he ordered the other monks to search the whole place. Ammonas left last; as he was going out, he secretly called the evildoer to repentance.

Apparently, monks could even go through life without properly seeking repentance from past sins. Amma Theodora insisted that "neither asceticism, nor vigils nor any kind of suffering are able to save, only true humility can do that". On visiting a dying brother (possibly either a former disciple or a monk who had gone to live in some village), Paternuthius openly chided him for daring to appear before God unprepared. The abba then interceded on the latter's behalf, and led him into the desert for three years. When the

time was over, the holy father came to fetch the old man. After Paternuthius had led him back to his village, he met a saintly death.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

While the *Historia* and the *Apophthegmata* tell of monks and hermits who sought some special word that could assist them on their way to God, they multiplied the accounts of magnificent deeds and miracles the Fathers wrought. Both books meant to show, God truly was with them. Abba Peter summed it all up, in a low key: "We must not be puffed up when the Lord does something through our mediation, but we must rather thank him for having made us worthy to be called by him." John the Dwarf compared ascetic life to an oasis: monks are like different trees, each bearing different fruit. But all get their water from the one source. "The practices of one saint differ from those of another, but it is the same Spirit that works in all of them."<sup>48</sup>

Spiritual melody does not ever look for, or seek, applause and favourable reception. It merely fills the world with the beauty of musical harmony that catches on, if one dares to listen. So were the Desert Fathers: they wanted to be the flutes in the hands of the greatest musician of all, God himself.

Abba Matoes' words condense a great deal of practical wisdom as they outline the good monk's lifelong effort: "I prefer a light and steady activity, to one that is painful at the beginning but is soon broken off."

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### NOTES

1. The contemporary reader tends to associate *ascesis* with ascetical practices that are carried out by individuals seeking God through prayer, or personal perfection through the practice of virtue. In ancient and modern Greek, it stands for the workouts that are usually associated with athletes and with sport centers.

John of Lyocopolis believed that through ascesis the monk aims at a peaceful transition to union with God heaven, by freeing the appetites from passion. Monks simply wanted to be the athletes that harken after God, the prize of their lives. See B. Ward (ed.), *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, I: 29.62; *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (translated by N. Russell), Cistercian Publications, Calamazoo MI: 1980, pp. 56.62; cf. footnote 17, pp. 125-126.

On the *Historia*, see G. A. Frank, "Miracles, monks, and monuments : the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* as pilgrim's tales." in D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in late antique Egypt*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998, pp. 483-505; id., "The *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* and ancient travel writing," E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica XX*, Peeters: Louvain 1997, pp. 191-195; C. P. Hammond Bammel, "Problems of the *Historia Monachorum*," *Journal of Theological Studies* 47 (1996) 92-104.

2. *Historia*, XIV: 8-9; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 95-96. On the theological significance of the desert, see B. C. Lane, "Desert Catechesis: the landscape and theology of Early Christian Monasticism," *Anglican Theological Review* 75 (1993) 292-314.

3. We will deal with two foundational documents, the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, inasmuch as they do represent a broader literary tradition. On the lifestyles of the Desert Fathers, see C. Dauphin, "The Diet of the Desert Fathers in Late Antique Egypt," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 19/20 (2001/2002) 39-63.

4. *Ibid.*, X: 4-5; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 82-83. After a long journey, the weary Paphnutius ran into a gang of robbers. Their chief knew him and forced a cup of wine on him thinking, the ascetic will never drink the wine. When the holy man did drink, the chief robber asked the saint's pardon, as he had misjudged him. Paphnutius quickly rose to the occasion and was instrumental in the chiefs and in his gang's conversion. *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Paphnutius: 2; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (translated by B. Ward), Mowbrays: London 1975, p. 170.

On the *Apophthegmata*, see W. Harmless, "Remembering Poemen Remembering: The Desert Fathers and the Spirituality of Memory," *Church History* 69 (2000) 3, 483-518.

5. *Historia*, X: 4-5; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 82-83.

6. *Apophthegmata*, Eucaristos: 1; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 51.

7. *Historia*, XVII: 1-2; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 101.

8. *Apophthegmata*, Syncretica: 19; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 196.

9. Cf *Historia*, XVII: 1-2; B. Ward(ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 101.
10. *Apophthegmata*, Carion: 2; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 100.
11. Ibid., Macarius the Great: 39; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 116.  
Serapion visited a prostitute and, during the length of the night, prayed in her room. After each Psalm, he added a special prayer on her behalf. Before it was morning, she repented and wanted to change her lifestyle. He took her to a monastery for virgins where she pleased God the rest of her life. Ibid., Serapion: 1; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 190.
12. *Historia*, VIII: 8.15; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 71-72; cf J. T. Lienhard, "On discernment of spirits in the early church," *Theological Studies* 41 (1980) 505-529.
13. Ibid., XXIII: 1; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 113.
14. Ibid., Prologue: 5; B. Ward(ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 49-50.
15. Ibid., I: 22; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 55.
16. Ibid., XXIII: 3-4; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 113. Many of the desert fathers were living icons of people who had abandoned even dissolute lives and , through resolve and dedication, did become living examples of union with God. Cf *ibid.*, I: 37-44; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 57-59.
17. Amma Syncletica warned of the dangers that changing monasteries or hermitages could entail: "If you find yourself in a monastery do not go to another place, for that will harm you a great deal. Just as the bird who abandons the eggs she was sitting on prevents them from hatching, so the monk or the nun grow cold and their faith dies, when they go from one place to another." *Apophthegmata*, Syncletica: 6; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 194.
18. Ibid., Elias: 8; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 61. Abba Theodore, though, refused one such word to a monk who collected words of life: "I did not speak to him for he is a trafficker who seeks to glorify himself through the words of others." Ibid., Theodore: 3; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 63.
19. Ibid., Serapion: 4; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 191.
20. Ibid., Antony: 13, and Arsenius: 5; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 3 and 8.
21. Ibid., Sisoës: 10; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 179.
22. Ibid., Antony: 27; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 6.

23. Ibid., Arsenius: 23; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 10.
24. *Historia*, VIII: 53; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 78.
25. *Apophthegmata*, Arsenius: 38; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 15.
26. Ibid., Apphy: 1; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 30-31.
27. Ibid., Alonios: 1, and Poemen: 181; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 30 and 161; cf B. C. Lane, "Desert attentiveness, desert indifference: countercultural spirituality in the desert fathers and mothers", *Cross Currents* 44 (1994) 193-206.
28. Ibid., Sarah: 4.9; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 193. She was the one -who informed her vanquished tempter, the devil, that Christ - not she - has won over all the devil's attempts levelled against her.
29. Ibid., Joseph of Panephrisis: 8; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 88.
30. Ibid., Poemen: 51; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 148.
31. Ibid., Syncletica: 1; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 193.
32. Ibid., Antony: 4; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 2.
33. Ibid., Sarah: 6; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 193.
34. Ibid., Syncletica: 9; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 195.
35. *Historia*, I: 58; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 61.
36. In his rendering of the *Historia*, Rufinus wrote of John of Lycopolis: "To those who came to him he let himself be seen at the window and from there either gave them a word of God for edification or, if encouragement was needed, his answer. No woman, however, had been there, not even within his field of vision; even men he saw rarely and at certain times." *Historia*, I: 1; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 142.
37. A monk asked Apollo to intercede on his behalf, that God may grant the former the gifts of humility and gentleness. The locals came to him at the time of a famine, and asked Apollo for food, he repeatedly gave them what they needed to survive. Ibid., VIII: 42.44; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 76. It seems to have been a common practice that farmers would ask monks living in the area to pray for a good harvest: *ibid.*, X: 26-29; B. Ward (ed.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 80.
38. *Apophthegmata*, Sopatros; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 189.
39. Ibid., Theonas: 1; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 69.

40. *Ibid.*, *Theodora*: 3; The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, p. 71.
41. *Historia*, XXIV: 1; B. Ward (ed.), The Lives of the Desert Fathers, p. 114.
42. *Apophthegmata*, *John the Persian*: 1; The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, p. 91.
43. *Historia*, I: 36; B. Ward (ed.), The Lives of the Desert Fathers, p. 57.
44. *Apophthegmata*, *Antony*: 1; The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, p. 1.
45. *Ibid.*, *Ammonas*: 5.10; The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, pp. 23-24.
46. *Ibid.*, *Theodora*: 6; The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, p. 72.
47. *Historia*, X: 15-19; B. Ward (ed.), The Lives of the Desert Fathers, pp. 84-85.
48. *Apophthegmata*, *Peter the Pionite*: 4, and *John the Dwarf*: 43; The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, pp. 169 and 81 respectively.
49. *Ibid.*, *Matoes*: 1; The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, p. 121.