

How the Desert Fathers “Meditated”

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ONE OF THE MOST frequently recommended practices among the earliest Christian monks, “the Desert Fathers” of the *Apophthegmata*, is what they called μελέτη, the verb being μελετᾶν. Thus it was the custom of John the Dwarf to dedicate himself to prayer, *meleté*, and psalmody after an absence from his cell “until his mind was restored to its former state.”¹ According to Abba Poemen: “The visible aspects of ‘to reside in your cell’ are: working with your hands, eating once a day, keeping silence, and *meleté*.”² Isaiah of Scetê advises monks: “When you are residing in your cell, pay continual attention to these three things: to working with your hands, to *meleté*, and to prayer.”³ A brother in trouble says: “I do a little fasting, praying, *meleté*, and *hesychia*, to purify my thoughts so far as I can.”⁴ An unnamed father says the monk’s life consists of work [or “good deeds”?—ἔργον], obedience, *meleté*, not judging another, and never grumbling.⁵ “Do not be anxious about anything. Keep silent, be careful for nothing, give yourself to your *meleté*, sleeping and waking in the fear of God—then you will not fear the attacks of the godless,” a

¹ John Colobos 35 (*PG* 65.216; not found in *Sys.*). For references used here see the Appendix.

² τὸ ἐργόχειρον καὶ τὸ μονοσιτίσαι καὶ ἡ σιωπὴ [not ἡσυχία!] καὶ ἡ μελέτη, Poemen 168 (*PG* 361)/*Sys.* 10.93.

³ τοῦ ἐργοχείρου, τῆς μελέτης καὶ τῆς εὐχῆς, *Asceticon* of Isaiah of Scetê, *logos* 9: *Τοῦ ὁσίου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀββᾶ Ἡσαίου λόγοι κθ’*, ed. Augoustinos monachos Iordanites (Jerusalem 1912; repr. Volos 1962: p.85); also, “Do not neglect your μελέτη and ceaseless prayer,” *logos* 1 *init.* (p.3).

⁴ Ἀββᾶ, κατὰ τὴν δύναμίν μου ποιῶ τὴν μικρὰν νηστείαν καὶ τὴν εὐχὴν καὶ τὴν μελέτην καὶ τὴν ἡσυχίαν καὶ κατὰ τὴν δύναμίν μου καθαριεύω τοῖς λογισμοῖς, Joseph of Panepho 7 (*PG* 229/*Sys.* 12.9).

⁵ Nau 225/*Sys.* 1.32.

young monk is advised.⁶ Elsewhere it is said that, if a monk succumbs to temptation and repents, he has several aids at his disposal, viz. *meletê*, psalmody, and manual labour, “which are the foundations,” ἄτινά ἐστι τὰ θεμέλια (presumably of the monastic life).⁷ Another elder taught that “taking no thought” [Mt 6:25 etc.], keeping silent, and secret *meletê* produce purity.⁸

Thus one may safely conclude that *meletê* was held to be a very important element of eremitic monachism by the authors (4th–6th cent.) and compilers (6th–7th cent.) of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. A question which needs to be asked (and which we will try to answer here by reference to the *Apophthegmata*) is: what did those authors and compilers have in mind when they spoke of *meletê*? It is a question which has not troubled modern translators of early monastic lore; they consistently render it “meditation” and the verb *meletân* “to meditate,” thereby conjuring up contemporary notions of silent recollection and contemplation.⁹ It may however be the case that, in this particular, the translators missed the mark; that they unwittingly give their readers a false impression of what the *Apophthegmata* prescribed for those early Christian ascetics, hence (presumably) of the kind of life those people led.¹⁰

⁶ Nau 274/§ys. 11.105 referring obliquely to Phil 4:6.

⁷ Nau 168/§ys. 5.22.

⁸ Nau 127/§ys. 5.29.

⁹ μελετᾶν can have this meaning too: “To a brother who asked Abba Ammonas to speak a word for him, the elder said: ‘Go and learn to think like the criminals who are in jail. They are asking the men where the judge is and when he is coming, weeping in anticipation. So too should the monk continually look into and condemn his soul, saying: ‘Ah me! How am I going to present myself at the judgement seat of Christ and what shall I be able to say in my defence?’ If you meditate in this way all the time [ἐὰν οὕτως μελετήσῃς διαπαντός] you can be saved” (Ammonas 1 [PG 120]/§ys. 3.4).

¹⁰ As the present writer is lamentably illiterate in the Hebrew tongue, Mr David Friesen of Winnipeg has kindly supplied him with a comprehensive study of the Hebrew words rendered μελετᾶν in LXX, of which this is a summary, largely in his own words: “I am aware of two words in Hebrew that carry the sense of *meditate*: (1) *hgh* : *hagah* and (2) *syh* : *siyah*. The Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon* defines (1) as ‘moan, growl, utter, speak, muse (poetic sense only)’, while George Landes, *Building Your Biblical*

The modern translators may be forgiven to a certain extent as they are following in a tradition which dates back to the sixth-century Latin translation of the *Systematic* collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* by Pelagius and John. They consistently translate *meletê/meletân* as *meditatio/meditari*, e.g. *et meditatio assidua sublivet pondus tentationum*,¹¹ while in Poemen's statement quoted above (n.2) ἡ σιωπὴ καὶ ἡ μελέτη becomes *taceat et meditetur, πρόσεχε τῇ μελέτῃ intende meditationi tuae*, etc.¹² This is by no means reprehensible, for both the Greek and the Latin words have more to them than merely to study, contemplate, etc.: *meletân* can also mean "to con over a speech, deliver, declaim," and even to practice oratory, while in Patristic Greek it can mean "rehearse,"¹³ and the same is true *grosso modo* of the Latin *meditatio/meditor*.¹⁴ But neither in French nor in English do *méditer/meditate* and *méditation/meditation* imply anything other than something which goes on silently *in foro interno*, something which cannot be detected by another person.

Yet as Dom Lucien has pointed out, other than in exceptional circumstances, *meletê* was no silent matter among the early monks, far from it! It was in fact the vocal and continuous enunciation of the Word of God, the bold proclamation by the anchorite of sacred texts he had committed to memory as he

Hebrew Vocabulary (Atlanta 2001), noting seventy-five occurrences of this word in the Hebrew Bible, offers the following range of meanings: 'to utter a sound, moan, read in an undertone, to mutter (while meditating), to speak, to proclaim'. Brown-Driver-Briggs define (2): 'muse, complain (poetic sense), tell about/sing of'. This is the word which recurs frequently in Psalm 118/119 where it is often taken to convey the sense of study, i.e. in a meditative manner. Twenty occurrences of this word in the Bible are noted by Landes who understands it to mean 'to give a loud, enthusiastic, emotionally-laden speech in praising or lamenting, taunting or teaching'. Note also Josh 1:8a, which the Jewish Publication Society translates: "Let not this Book of the Teaching cease from your lips but recite [LXX μελετήσεις] it day and night."

¹¹ Hyperechius *Sys.* 7.27 (Greek), 7.20 (Latin: *PL* 73.897A).

¹² *PL* 923B (from Poemen 168/*Sys.* 10.93) and 939C (from Nau 274/*Sys.* 11.105).

¹³ LSJ s.v. μελετάω II.5.b; Lampe s.v. 3.

¹⁴ *OLD* s.v. *meditatio* 4 and 5; *meditor* 5 and 6.

worked away in the solitary confinement of his cell.¹⁵ The evidence of this is not hard to find. “Oblige yourself to practice the *meletê* of the psalms, for that will protect you from being captured by the enemy,” says an elder.¹⁶ Now the *recitation* of psalms was the staple diet of monastic devotion; the word most frequently used for that activity, ψαλμωδία, “psalm-singing,” rules out any likelihood of this having been performed in silence. Further indication of audibility is provided by the frequent use of the verb ἀποστηθίζω,¹⁷ “to recite by heart/from memory,” as a synonym for μελετᾶν. So for example, Anthony the Great instructs his adepts to “recite from memory the precepts of the Scriptures.”¹⁸ Paternouthios, a reformed bandit, returning from a three-year retreat in the desert, announced that grace had been given him from on high to recite the Scriptures from memory.¹⁹ This case has tempted one to wonder whether the memorisation of Scripture was essentially a property of the Egyptian monks rather than of the Hellenes and, if it was, whether this was because there was as yet no written Coptic version of the Bible. Ammonius of Nitria, however, one of the very few of those early monks with any significant learning, is also said to have had the whole Bible by

¹⁵ “C’est à dire, réciter par coeur les paroles de Dieu,” and, a little later, “Habituellement quand l’Anachorète était seul dans sa cellule, il récitait à haute voix.” Lucien Regnault, *La vie quotidienne des Pères du Désert* (Paris 1990) 110, 115–116.

¹⁶ ἀνάγκασον ἑαυτὸν εἰς τὴν μελέτην τῶν ψαλμῶν, Isaiah of Scetê *Ascet. logos* 9 (p.84)/*Sys.* 5.53.

¹⁷ Not to be confused with ἐνεστερνίζω or ἐνστηθίζω, “to learn by heart.”

¹⁸ ἀποστηθίζειν τὰ ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς παραγγέλματα, Athanasius *Life of Anthony* [VA], ed. G. J. M. Bartelink, *Athanase d’Alexandrie, Vie d’Antoine* (SC 400 [Paris 1994]) 55.3 (PG 26.921). In one of the Coptic *Apophthegmes on Saint Anthony* the saint says to a brother: “Lève-toi, *récite* quelque chose par coeur,” to which the other replies: “Sur quoi veux-tu que je *médite*? Dans l’Ancien ou dans le Nouveau Testament?” This exchange is repeated three times; transl. E. Amélineau, corrected by Antoine Guillaumont, cited by Lucien Regnault, *Les Sentences des Pères du Désert: Troisième recueil et tables* (Solesmes 1976) 140–141.

¹⁹ ἀποστηθίζειν ἕξωθεν τὰς γραφάς, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* [HME] 10.6–7; Greek text and translation A.-J. Festugière, *Les Moines d’Orient* (Paris 1961–1965).

heart,²⁰ and that, in his case, would almost certainly mean the Greek text.

It should also be noted in this context that monks did not have a monopoly of such feats of memory. Eusebius tells of an aged deacon and martyr of Jerusalem named Valens who died in the Diocletianic persecution. He had so memorised the Scriptures that he had no need of a book to repeat any passage one might ask of him.²¹ It is not impossible that the practice of memorising the Scriptures was originally adopted as an antidote to the confiscation of the holy books during the persecutions; whereas, with the monks it was probably necessitated by the scarcity of books and (possibly) the illiteracy of many fathers. It is certainly a practice which some monks (who can say how many?) embraced with distinction.

The case of Paphnoutios Kephala may only be exceptional in that it is the only such case on record. This monk had the “charisma” of knowing (presumably “by heart”) and of being skilled in the interpretation of both the Old and the New Testaments, *even though he was illiterate*.²² Another recluse, Solomon by name, is said to have spent fifty years in a remote grotto committing the Scriptures to memory;²³ presumably he had a text from which to learn. It is difficult to know what Theopemptus meant when he advised Macarius the Great to recite by heart the Gospel “and the rest of the Scriptures,”²⁴ for surely not all the monks by any means would have had the *whole* Bible by heart. *Per contra*, it would have been a very rare monk indeed who could not recite the entire Psalter for, as noted above, the psalms were in continual and frequent use as the daily prayers of those who had renounced the world.²⁵ This explains why the Psalter is the second most frequently quoted

²⁰ παλαιὰν καὶ καινὴν γραφὴν ἀποστηθίσας, Pall. *H.Laus.* 11.4.

²¹ Eus. *Mart.Pal.* 11.4 (PG 20.1504).

²² μὴ ἀναγνοῦς γραφάς, *H.Laus.* 47.3.

²³ ἐκμαθὼν πᾶσαν ἁγίαν γραφὴν, *H.Laus.* 58.1.

²⁴ ἀποστήθιζε τοῦ εὐαγγελίου καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν γραφῶν, Macarius 3 (PG 264)/*§ys.* 18.13.38.

²⁵ John Climacus: ὡς ἅπαν τὸ ψαλτήριον χαμαὶ κείμενον ἀποστηθίσαι, *Scal. gr.* 4 (PG 88.700A).

book of the Bible (after Matthew) in early monastic literature.²⁶

There is then little doubt that ἀποστηθίζειν means to recite aloud, whether or not there was anybody to hear; can one say the same of μελετᾶν? The most obvious reason for a positive reply is that the writers are careful to note it as an exceptional circumstance when the *meletê* is silent. For instance:

Some of the fathers said of Abba Marcellinus of the Thebaid that, according to his disciple, when he was setting out for worship on Sunday, he would always provide himself with a passage from the Scriptures for the journey. This he would recite by heart [ἀπεστήθιζεν] until he arrived at church. Although he meditated in this way [καὶ οὕτως αὐτοῦ μελετῶντος] his lips did not move, so no one could hear him ...²⁷

It seems to have been the custom that, when a monk had visitors, he would “recite” in silence;²⁸ it might have been to this custom that the father was referring who said: “‘taking no thought’ [Mt 6:25 etc.], keeping silence, and secret meditation [τὸ σιωπᾶν καὶ ἡ κρυπτή μελέτη] bring forth purity.”²⁹ He may even have been advocating silent recitation, but he could have meant the *meletê* which was performed aloud, but out of sight and beyond the hearing of any man. The difficulty when one lived in community (rather than in a single dwelling) was that everybody knew what you were doing. An elder says: “Once I saw a brother at a convent [*koinobion*] meditating [μελετῶντα] in his cell.”³⁰ It might not be much better in an hermitage: “Abba Ammonas said: ‘I and Abba Betimes visited Abba Achilles and we heard him meditating [ἤκούσαμεν αὐτοῦ μελε-

²⁶ The Desert Fathers’ predilection for the First Gospel has yet to be explained. There are 18 occurrences of μελετᾶν in the Psalms, 11 of them in Ps. 118/119, and most of them very appropriate to the monastic life.

²⁷ Nau 567/Sys. 18.19.

²⁸ Macarius the Great 33 (*PG* 276C). It is noted of Macarius of Alexandria that “he stood *in silence*, prayer in his mouth, palm-leaves in his hands,” *H.Laus.* 18.15.

²⁹ Nau 127/Sys. 5.29.

³⁰ Nau 366/Sys. 18.38; but he had the gift of “second sight”: ἐφωτίσθη γέρον τῶ ὄραν τὰ γινόμενα, a very unusual way of saying that he possessed the διορατικὸς ὀφθαλμός.

τῶντος] this phrase: *Fear not Joseph to go down to Egypt* [Gen 46:3]; and he went on meditating [καὶ ἐπὶ πολὺ ἔμεινε μελετῶν] this phrase for a long time'.³¹ This is presumably why the monks at Kellia “have their cells far enough removed from each other for the brothers not to be able to recognise each other, indeed not even to be seen at first glance and not to be able to hear the sound of a voice, for they live in profound *hesychia*, each one on his own.” “If you stop about the ninth hour [at Nitria, ca. 394],” says Palladius, “you hear the psalm-singing coming from each monastic dwelling.”³²

This last reference is to one of the two formal “hours” of prayer, the “little *synaxis*”³³ which the monk recited alone, or with others “where two of three are gathered together” [Mt 18:20]. “Pay attention to psalm-singing before and after sleep,” says Anthony.³⁴ The little *synaxis* consisted (basically) of twelve psalms but it could be considerably longer:

Another elder visited one of the elders; he cooked a few lentils and said to the visitor: “Let us offer the little *synaxis*.” He recited the entire Psalter, then the other one repeated from memory the two great prophets [presumably Isaiah (66 chapters) and Jeremiah (52 chapters)]. The visiting elder departed when dawn broke; they forgot about the food.³⁵

There are similar examples of the “little *synaxis*” being extended by a *meletê* of this nature,³⁶ but strictly speaking the term applies to the lonesome recitation by a person secluded in a cell, keeping his hands busy most frequently by braiding reeds or weaving palm leaves. (The Psalmist says: “The *meletê* of my

³¹ Achilles 5 (*PG* 125; nowhere else).

³² *HME* 20.7; *H.Laus.* 7.2–5. Cf. “In the mountains the monastic dwellings were like tents filled with divine choirs singing psalms, reading the Scriptures, fasting, praying” (*VA* 44.2 [*PG* 26.908]).

³³ So called probably to distinguish it from the weekend (eucharistic) *synaxis* (= gathering) of all the monks in an area.

³⁴ *VA* 55.3 [*PG* 921]; in fact more or less at sun-down and pre-dawn.

³⁵ *Nau* 150/*Sys.* 4.70

³⁶ *E.g.* the fine story of Serapion and the prostitute, Serapion 1 (*PG* 415)/*Sys.* 17.34.

heart is ever before thee.”³⁷

The lone ascetic’s *meletê* would be one of two kinds: first there was the constant repetition of a single phrase (ῥητόν) from Scripture, as in the case of Abba Achilles cited above, and this may be the older practice as it is endorsed by Anthony the Great³⁸ and requires neither books nor any great feat of memory. Ammonas once told an elder: “Stay in your cell, eat a little each day, and always in your heart have the saying of the Publican” (*Lord, be merciful to me a sinner*).³⁹ Yet a curious tale indicates that the practice of constant repetition of the same phrase may not always have been carried out very intelligently:

A brother asked one of the fathers: “What am I to do, for my thoughts are always tending towards *pomeia*. They do not give me a moment’s peace and my soul is distressed.” The father replied: “When the demons sow bad thoughts in you, have no truck with them, for they are always taking the initiative. They never miss a chance, but they cannot coerce you; the choice is yours, whether to accept or not. You know what the Midianites did? They decked out their daughters and put them on display. Nobody was constrained, but those who wished to do so fell into sin with them while others treated them with disdain and slaughtered them [Num 25:1–3]. It is like that with our bad thoughts.” The brother retorted: “So what am I to do, who am weak and the victim of my desires?” “Keep a watch on them,” he said, “and do not answer when they begin to speak. Get up and pray; make a prostration saying: ‘Have mercy on me, Son of God.’” “See, abba,” he said, “I meditate [μελετῶ] but there is no compunction in my heart for I do not know what the phrase means.” “Just keep on meditating” [σὺ μόνον μελέτησον] said [the elder]; “I have heard that Abba Poemen and many of the fathers had this saying: ‘The snake-charmer does not know the meaning of the words he speaks, but, when it hears them, the serpent knows the meaning of the phrase and is obedient’. That is how it is with us; even if we do not know the meaning of what

³⁷ Ps 18:15 LXX, cited in Nau 587/Sys. 15.120.19–20.

³⁸ καλὸν τὸ τοῦ ἀποστόλου ῥητὸν μελετᾶν [1 Cor 15:31], VA 5.2 (PG 26.872); τὸ τοῦ ἀποστόλου ῥητὸν συνεχῶς μελετᾶν [Eph 4:26], VA 55.4 (PG 921).

³⁹ Ammonas 4 (PG 120)/Sys. 10.20, quoting Lk 18:13. This is very similar to the “Jesus prayer” that some eastern monks still repeat hour upon hour.

we are saying, the demons hear and retreat in fear.”⁴⁰

As we have seen, however, not all *meletê* was of this repetitive nature. There were those who added lengthy (and no doubt sometimes less lengthy) extracts from the Scriptures to the psalms at the *synaxis*. There are indications that they provided similar recitations at other times, for instance while on a journey.⁴¹ It is not unreasonable to suppose that these persons habitually repeated their lessons as an accompaniment to their handiwork; in fact this would appear to be indicated when a priest enjoins an ascetic to do his *meletê* “with much reading of the divine Scriptures.”⁴² A question one would like to be able to answer is: how were those who memorised the Scriptures enabled to do so? They probably did not all learn them “from on high” like Patermouthios, nor were they all illiterate like Paphnoutios Kephalas. For those who were, the readings in church and recitations by others in the hermitages where they served their “apprenticeship” would be a possible source; maybe there was even systematic rote-learning for some as in Indian monasticism (there may be a trace of that when Patermouthios began to learn the psalms),⁴³ but more than that cannot be said at the moment. Presumably the literate learnt from books, for books there were “in the desert,” even though some regarded them with suspicion and others as a path to vainglory. The ambivalent attitude one finds to books and reading may well be a corollary of the social discrepancy evident in a question put to Arsenius: “How is it that we who have so much education and wisdom achieve nothing while these rustic Egyptians attain such virtue?”⁴⁴ In fact we hear of books being

⁴⁰ Nau 184/*Sys.* 5.37

⁴¹ καὶ καθήμενοι ἐν τῷ πλοίῳ ἐλάλουν λόγους πατέρων καὶ ἐκ τῆς γραφῆς, Anthony 18 (*PG* 81)/*Sys.* 4.1.

⁴² *Sys.* 18.49. Occasionally the word *anagnôsis*, “reading,” actually replaces *meletê*, e.g. *Sys.* 2.35.21, 10.25 (Evagrius) and Silvanus 5 (*PG* 409C)/*Sys.* 10.99.

⁴³ “He asked if he could hear the psalms and, after hearing three verses of the first psalm, he said that this was enough for him to learn for now,” *H.Laus.* 10.6.

⁴⁴ Arsenius 5 (*PG* 88–89)/*Sys.* 10.7. Evagrius and Ammonas were not by

disposed of (e.g. sold to feed the poor) more often than read. Palladius tells of a monk he encountered at Ancyra who

had no time to devote himself to study. His almsgiving separated him from reading [*anagnôsmatôn*] for, as soon as a brother gave him a book, he sold it, saying to those who protested: “How could I convince my Teacher that I have learnt his trade if I did not sell that which is Himself to put that trade into practice?”⁴⁵

Reading is usually treated a bit suspiciously, even as an act of disobedience on one occasion.⁴⁶ Even Evagrius, probably the best-read monk in the desert, while advocating reading, watching, and prayer to stabilise the unfixed mind, cautions that these are indeed beneficial “if they are done at the right time and in due measure. For what is done excessively or out of due season is short-lasting and does more harm than good.”⁴⁷ He may have been thinking of the Messalians (or Euchites) who read all day long, avoiding work.⁴⁸ Reading Scripture is said to terrify the demons, but this almost certainly means *reciting*, for we read of a monk at Kellia who would “read” from the sixth to the ninth hour “while chopping palm leaves,” which obviously he could not do while handling a scroll.⁴⁹ Yet there were undoubtedly some monks who had read a great deal,⁵⁰ and at least one clear example exists of how one could read. Abba Gelasius possessed a copy on parchment of the Old and the New Testaments (valued at eighteen pieces of silver) which he deposited in church for all to read who cared to do so.⁵¹ One father even gives some basic instruction on *how* one is to read the Scriptures, but this could apply equally well to how

any means the only learned persons in the desert; e.g. an unnamed brother says: “I have indeed read many books but have never encountered teaching such [as they give in the desert],” Euprepius 7 (*PG* 172)/*Sys.* 10.24.

⁴⁵ *H.Laus.* 68.4.

⁴⁶ Nau 195/*Sys.* 7.34.

⁴⁷ *Sys.* 10.25, from Evagr. Pont. *Pract.* 15 (*SC* 171).

⁴⁸ Silvanus 5 (*PG* 409)/*Sys.* 10.99.

⁴⁹ *Sys.* 21.44, 20.14.

⁵⁰ Ammonas is an outstanding example; see also Euprepius 7 (*PG* 172)/*Sys.* 10.24.

⁵¹ Gelasius 1 (*PG* 145)/*Sys.* 16.2.

one is to mull over in one's mind that which is already memorised within it.⁵²

The final question is: what did *meletê* sound like? Were the texts merely "recited" in a normal speaking voice, or were they intoned or sung? For the psalms the answer is clear: it was, as we noted, *psalmôdia*, psalm-singing, although this might not have been the case in the earliest days of eremitic monachism, as the following diatribe indicates:

A brother questioned Abba Silvanus: "What am I to do, abba? How am I to acquire compunction? I am severely afflicted by *accidie*, by sleep, and by lethargy. When I rise from sleeping I make very heavy weather of the psalm singing. I cannot shake off my languor, nor can I recite a psalm without a tune." The elder replied: "My child, in the first place, to recite the psalms with a tune smacks of pride, for it puts you in mind that you are singing while your brother is not. Secondly, it hardens your heart, insulating it against compunction. So if you want to acquire compunction, leave singing aside. When you are standing in prayer, let your mind study the meaning of the verse. Consider that you are standing in the presence of the God who 'searcheth the very heart and reins' [Ps 7:10, 11 LXX]. When you rise from sleep, let your mouth glorify God before anything else; recite the Creed and the *Our Father* then calmly begin your *kanôn*, sighing as you recall your sins and the chastisement which will be inflicted on you." "But father," said the brother, "ever since I became a monk I have been singing the *akolouthia* [scripture readings?], the *kanôn* [of Psalms], and the hours [of prayer] according to the *Oktôêchos*," to which the elder replied: "Yes, and that is the reason why compunction and sorrow escape you. Think of the great fathers, how simple they were; they knew nothing of tunes and tropes, except for a few psalms, and they were brilliant luminaries in the world, such men as Abba Paul the Simple, Abba Pambô, Abba Apollo, and the rest of the God-bearing fathers who not only raised the dead but also performed mighty works, not with singing and troping and tunes, but in prayer, with a broken and contrite heart and with fasting. These are the means whereby a perpetual fear of God enters the heart of a man; by which that lamentation is affirmed which purifies one from all sin, rendering the soul whiter than snow [Ps 50/

⁵² Sisoës 17 (*PG* 397)/*§ys.* 8.21

51:9]. As for singing, it has brought many down to the lowest-most parts of the earth; not only people ‘in the world’ but even priests have been feminised by singing and have been lured into *porneia* among other wicked desires. Singing is for those ‘in the world’; it is for this that the people assemble in churches. Consider how many ranks [of angels] there are in heaven, and yet it is not written of any one of them that they sing according to the *Oktôêchos*. One rank ceaselessly [utters] *Alleluiah*, another ‘Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Hosts’, and a third rank ‘Blessed is the glory of the Lord in his place and in his house’. So if you wish to acquire compunction in your prayers, imitate the fathers, my child. To the best of your ability, keep an untroubled mind. Love the humility of Christ and, wherever you go, do not present yourself as a shrewd person and a teacher, but as a simpleton and a learner; then God will grant you compunction.”⁵³

From this it can probably be safely assumed that psalms were nevertheless generally sung, and there is good indication that this met with the approval of at least some of the fathers. Thus Hyperechius: “Let there be a spiritual song [Eph 5:19] in your mouth and let *meletê* assuage the force of the temptations you encounter. A good example of this is a heavy-laden traveller who dissipates the discomfort of his journey with a song.”⁵⁴ This juxtaposition of song and *meletê* raises the possibility that the monk in his cell *chanted* the Scripture he had in mind in much the same way that Muslims “sing” the suras of the Koran to this day. If this were the case, the hermitage, far from being a place of profound silence, would have resounded with something not unlike the cantilena in which the lections of the Tridentine mass used to be delivered or that which is still used in some orthodox churches. And this not only at the formal hours of prayer when psalms were sung, but all the waking hours of the inhabitant as he chanted the stories of the kings of Israel and Judah followed by the exploits of Saint Paul etc. But, alas,

⁵³ Paul Euergetinos *Synagogê* (Venice 1783; various modern editions, numeration varies) 2.11.5.3 (*olim* 2.11.7).

⁵⁴ Hyperechius *Sys.* 7.27. “The Roman,” an aristocrat become monk, says: “Whereas I once had music, flutes, and lutes, now I recite the twelve psalms” (καὶ πάλιν ἀντὶ μουσικῶν καὶ αὐλῶν καὶ κιθαρᾶς, λέγω τοὺς δώδεκα ψαλμούς), Romanus 1 (*PG* 388D/*Sys.* 10.110).

he has long since gone down into silence; thus we may never know whether it was in a speaking or a singing voice that he performed his *meleté*. We can, however, be reasonably sure that it was *not* usually done in silence.

APPENDIX: the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

The three major collections of *Apophthegmata* are here indicated in the following ways:

1. “Poemen 24” or “Hyperechius” etc. indicate the *Alphabetikon*, probably the oldest and certainly the best known collection, in which about a thousand items (948 + 53 Guy⁵⁵) are arranged in more or less alphabetical order by reference to the approximately 120 fathers who allegedly uttered the sayings or are mentioned in them. One manuscript of this tradition was edited by J.-B. Cotelier in 1647, *Monumenta Ecclesiae Graecae* I (Paris 1647), reprinted in *PG* 65.71–440. This text has been translated by Lucien Regnault (with Guy’s supplement), *Les Sentences des Pères du Désert: Collection alphabétique* (Solesmes 1981), and by Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo 1984).

2. “Nau 000” indicates the series of so-called “anonymous” sayings (*Anonymes*). The introduction to the *Alphabetikon* asserts that, appended to the alphabetic collection (i.e. after the names beginning with omega) there is a further collection whose characteristic is that its contents are all *anonymous* items. This Anonymous Collection is now generally thought to be represented by the (incomplete) collection of about 660 items found in the venerable *Cod. Paris. Coislin* 126 (ca 1000 A.D.) The first 400 items of this Greek text were published by F. Nau at the beginning of the last century in *ROrChr* 12–18 (1907–1913). Since then it has been customary for the items to be denominated by his name followed by the number he assigned to them. A complete French translation of the *Anonymes* (765 items) was made (using its contemporary *Cod. Sinai.* 448 [J]) to supplement *Coislin* 126) by Lucien Regnault, *Les Sentences des Pères du Désert: Série des anonymes* (Solesmes-Bellefontaine 1985). (A good edition of the Greek text is badly needed.) Clearly this is not the original appendix to which the Introduction to the *Alphabetikon* refers, for interspersed among the truly anonymous items are others which are named, of which not a few are also found in the *Alphabetikon*; hence this version of ca 1000 is an

⁵⁵ Jean-Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des apophthegmata Patrum*² (Brussels 1984).

expanded version of *Anonymes* and should probably be referred to as *Anonymes plus*.

3. Entries such as “Sys. 11.27” refer to what is known as the *Systematikon*, which is quoted here when the text differs from the *Alphabetikon*. The characteristic of this third collection (which includes a considerable amount of material found in one or both of the two collections already mentioned) is that here the items are *systematically* arranged, meaning that they are distributed under various heads (usually twenty-one in all) each pertaining to some aspect of monastic virtue, e.g. section 4 is on temperance, section 12 on prayer, while section 17 deals with charity—a distribution which is already evident in some manuscripts of the *Anonymes* (Nau) collection. The classification is however by no means rigid; items occur in one section which might very well have been placed under another head, or under several heads. As with the *Anonymes*, in the case of the *Systematikon* there is clear evidence of development, indicated here by a sixth-century Latin translation of the text as they knew it by Pelagius and John—edited by Rosweyde, *Vitae Patrum VI–VII* (Anvers 1615–1623) (“la pierre fondamentale des *Acta Sanctorum*”), reprinted in *PL* 73.851–1022, transl. Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (London 2003). Although “Pelagius and John” draws heavily on the two collections already mentioned, it still contains significantly fewer items than the surviving Greek manuscripts of the *Systematikon* (the earliest dated A.D. 970) which contain about 1200 items. There is now an excellent critical edition and translation of the Greek text by Jean-Claude Guy and Bernard Flusin, *Les Apophthegmes des Pères: Collection systématique* (SC 387, 474, 498 [1993–2005]). Theirs was preceded by the translation of Dom Lucien Regnault, *Les chemins de Dieu au désert: collection systématique des Apophthegmes des Pères* (Solesmes 1992), the latter including some items from the various “oriental versions” (Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, etc.) not found in any of the foregoing collections.

The occurrence of an item in one or more of the three collections often illustrates with amazing clarity that of which the editors of apophthegmatic material all complain: the instability of the texts. This, however, is only what should be expected of a living oral tradition of transmission and, as such, it should be valued.

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