

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Outstanding among the scholars who advanced apophthegmatic studies in the second half of the last century was Dom Lucien Regnault (1924–2003), monk of Solesmes. The excellent translation of the major Greek collection of apophthegms that he and his colleagues published as *Les sentences des pères du désert* opened that corpus to a vast audience, while his *Table de la collection alphabético-anonyme* with its exhaustive indices¹ furnishes scholars with invaluable tools for further investigation. But, as Regnault was well aware, widely though the compilers of the major collection cast their nets, they did not succeed in catching all the extant *apophthegmata*. Nor of course could they have included sayings that were generated after their time. He and his colleagues at Solesmes therefore diligently applied themselves to identifying and translating items found in other collections, in other languages, that do not appear (or only appear in a very different form) in the major Greek collections. The fruits of their labours appeared as *Les sentences des pères du désert, nouveau recueil*, Solesmes, 1970, 2nd ed., 1977.

The present volume is not merely an attempt to make Dom Lucien's work available to English readers; there are a number of important differences. Thus (e.g.) the first section of *nouveau recueil*, 'Apophthegmes traduits du grec (Ms Coislin 126)' (pp. 13–162) has been wholly omitted here. That section provided translations of items in *APanon* not then available elsewhere. As both the Greek text and an English translation of the whole of *APanon* have now been published,² it would have been redundant to reproduce those items here.

Dom Lucien further developed the third section of his book, 'Apophthegmes traduits du Latin', in a subsequent publication, *Les*

¹ *Les sentences des pères du désert, troisième recueil et tables*, Solesmes, 1976, 201–308, 309–81.

² John Wortley, *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Cambridge, 2013.

sentences des pères du désert, troisième recueil et tables, Solesmes, 1976 (pp. 123–38), by taking advantage of José Geraldes Freire, *A Versão Latina por Pascásio de Dume dos Apophthegmata Patrum*, 2 vols., Coimbra, 1971. We have also profited from the same author's *Commonitiones Sanctorum Patrum*, 2nd ed., Coimbra, 2010, and brought Dom Lucien's two parts together.

However, the most important difference is that, whereas in several cases the monks of Solesmes were obliged to make their translations from translations of the original (usually into Latin), the translations appearing in the following pages have been made directly from the languages in which they have been preserved by persons familiar with those languages, working from the best available texts.

It will readily be appreciated that there is an obvious (and lamentable) omission in the list of languages from which translations have been made: Arabic. While it is well known that a considerable amount of apophthegmatic material has been preserved in Arabic, nobody has yet had the *courage* to determine how much of that material has not been preserved in any other language. That is a task which must await a future generation.

To facilitate reference to the sayings in this volume, the contents of each section have been numbered successively and provided with a letter identifying the language of the section, e.g. L24 is item 24 in the Latin section, S10 item 10 in the Syriac section, etc. (though see the note on p. 146 regarding numbering in the Ethiopic section).

The expression 'sayings (apophthegms) of the Desert Fathers' is a little misleading; 'sayings *and tales*' (or 'and anecdotes') would be more appropriate, and it would be good to add: 'of the monks associated with Antony the Great (ca. 260–356) and with the Nitrian Desert' (located in the northwest of what is today Egypt). For there was another and probably even more numerous monastic movement associated with Pachomius (290–346), further south, in the Thebaid, whose literary debris is negligible in comparison with the huge legacy of tales and sayings associated with the northern community.

The origins of the tales and sayings are obscure. Athanasius' *Life of Antony* [VA], written before 380, includes about 20 brief anecdotes about

Introduction

3

the saint: these are the earliest monastic tales on record. About half of them record visions seen by Anthony, the Ascent of Amoun (c. 60) being the best known. In many of the visions, demons appear in various guises, e.g. the Great Giant impeding souls that would fly upward (c. 66, see also *HL* 21). Most of the remaining anecdotes are miracle stories, usually about healings, but two at least are examples of Anthony's ability to be aware of what was happening elsewhere, or of what was about to happen (cc. 59, 62). There are also a few tales about the man himself: his aversion to cleanliness, how he ate, what he wore, how he created a garden to feed himself (cc. 45, 47, and 50). There are however no *sayings* in *VA*, which is odd considering how many sayings would eventually be attributed to Antony.

The earliest mention of sayings is by Evagrius Ponticus [*ob* 399]. At the end of *Practicus* [cc. 91–100] he writes: 'It is necessary also to interrogate the paths of the monks who have travelled rightly before us and set ourselves right by reference to them. There is much for us to discover that they spoke and did well' (ῥηθέντα τε καὶ πραχθέντα καλῶς, i.e. sayings and tales: theory and practice.) There follow nine sayings, one attributed to Antony, two to Macarius the Egyptian.³

But while Evagrius wrote in Greek, it is beyond doubt that the earliest monks spoke Coptic and that many of them knew no other language (including Antony himself). They were not sophisticated people, fellahin for the most part, yet their fame attracted visitors, two of whom left accounts of their experiences. One was an anonymous monk of the Mount of Olives who wrote *A History of the Monks in Egypt* [HME] recounting the experiences of himself and his brothers in the winter of 394–395. The other was Palladius, Bishop of Helenopolis, who had considerable experience of being a monk in Egypt. His exquisite *Lausiac History* [HL], written 419–420, is the most sophisticated of the extant monastic writings. Both works are in Greek, and both record a wealth of anecdotal material, but neither provides evidence of any sayings of the fathers.

By the end of the fifth century, however, there existed the comprehensive record of tales and sayings (apparently not the first of its kind)⁴ the

³ See the appendix to this Introduction.

⁴ 'Those who have diligently labored on their account have set down in writing a few of their righteous sayings and deeds [. . .] Most have set out these sayings and righteous deeds of the holy elders in narrative form from time to time, in simple and uncontrived language, with only this one end in view: to benefit many [folk].' Prologue to *APalph*, PG 65:73B–C.

first part of which is known as the ‘Alphabetic’ collection [*APalph*].⁵ This is thought to have been compiled by members of a group of monks who had fled increasingly dangerous conditions in the Nitrian desert and religious controversy in Egypt. Taking refuge near Gaza, they sought to fix in writing the oral tradition they cherished of what the fathers of old had done and said. Whether they retained that tradition in Coptic or in Greek (or a little of both) we may never know: what is certain is that they set it down in Greek; and that they did it in an orderly fashion. The first part of their work is called ‘Alphabetic’ because its ca. 1000 items⁶ are arranged in more or less [Greek] alphabetical order, by reference to the ca. 125 fathers⁷ who allegedly uttered the sayings or are mentioned in the tales, ranging from Abba Antony to Abba Ōr (A–Ω).

However, by no means all the material they had collected lent itself to such a distribution: hence the compilers proceeded to assemble what is now known as the ‘Anonymous’ part of the collection [*APanon*], as the *Prologue* to the first part explains:

Since there are also other words and deeds [λόγοι ... καὶ πράξεις] of the holy elders that do not indicate the names of those who spoke or performed them, we have set them out under headings [ἐν κεφαλαίοις] after the completion of the alphabetic sequence. But, after searching out and looking into many books, we set down as much as we were able to find at the end of the headings.⁸

There is little doubt that subsequent copyists added other material, some of which cannot be dated any earlier than the seventh century.

While a published version of *APalph* has been available since 1647, *APanon* remained virtually unknown until, at the beginning of the last century, François Nau transcribed the first 400 items of that collection from the venerable Cod. Paris. Coislin. 126 and published them, together with a partial French translation.⁹ Subsequently Dom Lucien Regnault

⁵ One version of the text of *APalph* has been available since the seventeenth century in the well-known edition with Latin translation by Jean-Baptiste Cotelier, *Monumenta Ecclesiae Graecae*, vol. 1, Paris, 1647, reprinted in *PG* 65:71–440, tr. Lucien Regnault (with Guy’s supplement), *Les sentences des pères du désert: Collection alphabétique*, Solesmes, 1981; tr. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Kalamazoo, 1984; tr. John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Yonkers, NY, 2014 (which includes Guy’s additions).

⁶ There are 948 items in the edition; a further 53 were identified as such and printed in Guy.

⁷ Three of the ‘fathers’ are female: Theodora, Sarah, and Syncletica.

⁸ Such is the conclusion of Guy, pp. 182–4. Prologue to *APalph*, *PG* 65:73B–C.

⁹ *ROC* 12 (1907)–18 (1913), *passim*.

Introduction

5

published a translation of the entire collection, apparently working directly from five manuscripts of the text.¹⁰ Recently an edition of the complete Greek text with English translation has appeared¹¹ containing 765 items.

There is no reason to imagine that the compilation of the Alphabetic-Anonymous collection brought the oral tradition to a halt. Each manuscript represents the oral tradition at a different stage of its development. In fact, there is good reason to suppose that the oral tradition continued to grow and to diversify as the monastic movement spread beyond Egypt (which it did very rapidly) and as people speaking different languages visited and settled in the Wadi Natrun, where, in due course, monasteries were established (e.g.) for Ethiopians (Saint Elijah's) Armenians and Syrians (Deir el-Surian).¹²

One outstanding visitor to the Nitrian Desert was Rufinus of Aquileia [340–410], who not only became acquainted with some of the desert fathers (including Macarius the Egyptian, the founder of Scete) but also translated a large amount of monastic lore into Latin. There is no doubt that others did likewise, for many of the extant manuscripts of sayings in other languages show clear evidence of a Greek original. But they also contain many items not yet known to exist in any Greek manuscript, most of them bearing a striking resemblance to the material already known in Greek. Thus (e.g.) many sayings are attributed to the known pioneers of the monastic movement; many are references to Scete, and an equally large proportion of items is associated with the enigmatic Abba Poemen. And these 'additional' items are not few in number; there are almost 600 of them in this volume; others will probably come to light in due course. Already these items constitute about one quarter of the totality of the known apophthegms, and (as the reader will quickly discover) they are in no way inferior to ones he/she already knows. The same questions of authenticity arise with these as with any other sayings, but the truly important questions do not concern who really said what and so forth. They ask whether these sayings add anything to our understanding of the remarkable phenomenon we call the rise of Christian monachism. Those who have worked on these new translations of the sayings that

¹⁰ *Les sentences des pères du désert, série des anonymes*, Solesmes–Bellefontaine, 1985, mainly from Cod. Sinait 448 and Cod. Paris. Coislin. 126.

¹¹ John Wortley, *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Cambridge, 2013.

¹² Mario Cappozzo, *I monasteri del deserto di Sceti*, Todi, 2009, passim.

Dom Lucien and his colleagues patiently isolated clearly believe that they do. They are offered here in the hope that they will somewhat enhance the English reader's appreciation of the Wisdom of the Desert Fathers.

Appendix to the Introduction

The earliest known sayings of the Christian monastic tradition are found at the end of the work called *Practicus* [Λόγος πράκτικος], written by Evagrius Ponticus, who died in AD 399, Greek text ed. A & C. Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique, Traité Pratique*, SC 171, Paris, Cerf, 1971, pp. 482–715, tr. here John Wortley.

Sayings of the Holy Monks

[91] It is imperative that we learn from the journeys of those who have travelled the strait and narrow way before us, [Mt 7:14] keeping ourselves on the right path by their example. There is much to be learned from the excellent things they said and accomplished; among such things one of those people says this: that when it is combined with love, a rather dry and restrained diet brings a monk fairly quickly into the haven of *apatheia*.

The same [elder] released one of the brothers who was being troubled by nocturnal visions by commanding him to wait upon the sick while fasting. When asked, he said that passions like those are suppressed by mercy.

[92] One of the learned men of those days approached Antony the righteous and said: 'Father, how do you survive without the comfort of books?' 'O philosopher', he said, 'my book is the nature of [all] that exists and it is always there whenever I wish to read the word of God.'¹³

[93] Macarius the Egyptian, that elder who was a choice vessel, asked me: 'Why is it that we diminish the soul's ability to remember by bearing grudges against men – but remain unharmed when we bear grudges against demons?' At a loss how to answer, I sought to learn the explanation. 'It is because the first is contrary to nature', he said, 'whereas the second is in accordance with the nature of wrath.'

¹³ Cf. VA 3.7.

Introduction

7

[94] I visited the holy father Macarius in the heat of the midday sun. As I was burning with thirst I asked for some water to drink. 'Be satisfied with shade', he said, 'for there are many on the road now or sailing along who are deprived of [shade].' Then, when I had recited some sayings about self-control, he said: 'Be of good courage my son; for all of 20 years I never took my fill of bread, of water or of sleep. I used to eat my bread by weight and drink water that was measured out. I used to snatch just a little sleep leaning my person against the walls.'

[95] One of the monks was apprised of the death of [his] father. To the person who reported this he said: 'Stop your blaspheming: my father is immortal.'

[96] One of the brothers enquired of one of the elders whether he would allow him to eat with his mother and his sisters when he visited [their] home. 'Eat not with woman', he said.

[97] One of the brothers was in possession of a copy of the Gospels [and nothing else]. This he sold and gave the proceeds to feed the hungry, making a memorable declaration: 'I have sold the text that tells me: "Sell your possessions and give to the poor".'¹⁴

[98] There is an island adjacent to Alexandria, in the northern part of the lake known as Maria [sc. Mareotis]. On it there lives a monk, a member of the gnostic sect, a well tried and tested monk who declares that everything done by monks is done for five reasons: for God, because it is natural or customary or necessary, or because it constitutes physical labour.

The same [monk] also said that virtue is one by nature but that it takes different forms in the powers of the soul. And sunlight is without form (he said) but is given form by the windows through which it shines.

[99] Then another of the monks said: 'I restrain [my] pleasures in order to restrain pretexts for anger, for I know that [anger] is always fighting for pleasures: that it troubles my mind, chasing away knowledge.'

One of the elders said that love does not countenance the hoarding of food or of money.

¹⁴ Mt 19:21, cf. *APanon* 392, *APsys* 6.6.

The same elder said: ‘I am not aware of having been taken in twice by demons.’

[100] It is impossible to love all the brothers equally, but it *is* possible to encounter them all dispassionately [*apathôs*], free of grudge-bearing and hatred.

Priests are to be loved next after the Lord for they cleanse us through the holy mysteries and they pray for us.

Our elders are to be revered like the angels for it is they who anoint us for the combat and heal the bites of wild beasts.