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Desert Silence

Why the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is Reticent about Christology

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Introduction

In every musical score, one finds these squiggly little symbols called “rests.” Rests remind us that silence is integral to music, that composers of music consciously weave threads of silence into the very heart of their compositions, that what is *not* sung and *not* played can be nearly as important as what *is* sung and *is* played. In a similar way, threads of silence wind their way through early Christian texts. As scholars of early Christianity, we

¹ Editors’ note: This paper had been completed, peer-reviewed, and further revised, but remained unpublished when Bill died on October 14, 2014. It is being published here for the first time; it has been revised and formatted to conform to the journal’s style.

have “well-tempered” theological ears and are highly attuned to discerning hidden or missing voices within the ancient texts we study. One of the outstanding achievements of monastic studies over the last century has been the discovery of missing voices, or more precisely, the recovery of silenced voices, voices whose ascetical and theological “melodies” have been consciously suppressed from the monastic “scores” that have come down to us. I think especially of the remarkable recovery of and complex excavations into the works of Evagrius Ponticus. His case is but one example of many. Others include the rediscovery of Meletian monasticism in Egypt and of Messalian spirituality in Syria; the reassembling and editing of brilliant, but long-ignored texts such as the sermons of Shenoute of Atripe and the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza; the renewed appreciation of the monastic innovations of Euthathius of Sebaste and of the robust ascetical leadership of Melania the Elder (see, further, Harmless 2008).

In this essay, I wish to explore a theological silence of a different sort. This silence is not that of an excluded author or a suppressed voice. It is the self-conscious silence of the editor (or, more likely, editors) of one of the best-known and most influential texts of early monasticism, the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.² I wish to focus on a simple question: Why does the *Apophthegmata* say almost nothing about the very center of Christian faith, namely, the person of Jesus Christ? And, what is more, it says almost nothing when we know that the text was composed at the very moment when the person of Jesus was at the forefront of fifth-century theological debate and when monks themselves were leading, and sometimes raucous, voices in that debate. The *Apophthegmata*'s christological silence, I will argue, is *no* accident.

I am conscious that what I explore here is inherently risky. Arguments from silence can be a methodological minefield. There are many, many reasons why important things may be missing from any given text. Discerning why an author, ancient or modern, says little or nothing about a topic must be inferred with modesty and judicious care. Furthermore, uncovering the history of and the history behind the *Apophthegmata* is notoriously difficult. What follows is thus a speculative piece, a setting out of tentative hypotheses and of circumstantial evidence. Like any case built from such evidence and such inference, the fragility of any conclusions must be acknowledged from the outset. I expect and, indeed, welcome challenges. By temperament, I am ill-disposed to such speculation, but believe in this case that at least raising the question and venturing the hypotheses may shed some light on (and perhaps spark others to explore) why the *Apophthegmata*'s editors composed as they did, what their beneath-the-surface concerns may have been, and why over the centuries this classic of Christian spirituality has left such a profound impress on the history of monasticism. The argument involves four steps: (1) naming the *Apophthegmata*'s silence by examining its few, sparse christological references; (2) bringing the *Apophthegmata*'s christological silence into higher relief by contrasting it with the christologies embedded within other early Egyptian monastic texts; (3) exploring the *Apophthegmata*'s origins, namely, that while its oral roots and narrative focus are Egyptian, its textual origins are likely Palestinian; and (4) suggesting that its Palestinian editor(s) consciously chose christological silence as a strategy for encouraging a measure of monastic ecumenism.

² For a detailed overview of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, see Harmless 2004, esp. 167-273. See the bibliographies that accompany each chapter (183-86; 215-16; 255-57) for details on texts, translations, and studies.

Naming the Silence

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* is an anthology of terse anecdotes about and memorable sayings of mostly Egyptian monks active from c. 300 to c. 460 CE. It survives in two basic recensions: the Alphabetical Collection and the Systematic Collection. The Alphabetical gathers approximately 1000 sayings or brief narratives under the names of 130 “abbas” (and, in three cases, “ammas”) and arranges these by name according to the Greek alphabet.³ Attached to certain manuscripts of the Alphabetical Collection are additional sayings and stories that had been passed down without names. This appendix, known as the Anonymous Collection, has some 240 sayings as its original core, but some 400 more would gradually be added to it.⁴ The Systematic Collection contains the vast majority of these same sayings and stories, but gathers them under twenty-one different headings or themes.⁵ In the mid-sixth century, an early version of this Systematic Collection was translated from Greek into Latin by two Roman clerics, the deacon Pelagius and the subdeacon John. This work, the *Verba Seniorum*, became diffused widely across the Latin West and was a mainstay of medieval monastic lore.⁶

The *Apophthegmata* has had an incalculable effect on Christian monasticism over the centuries in the Greek East and Latin West and Syriac Middle East and beyond. Unlike so many other early Christian texts, it has a peculiar ability to connect with people today. Readers who are not specialists in early Christian studies tend to struggle mightily when asked to work their way through the average patristic biblical commentary with its dense collages of biblical citations. But the *Apophthegmata*, with its clever parables and pithy wisdom, seem peculiarly accessible to and appreciated by a broad popular audience today. It is a work of genius on many scores, but one is its ability to cross times and cultures and to speak with an uncanny immediacy to audiences far removed from its original one. Derwas Chitty, who pioneered twentieth-century monastic studies on so many fronts, once remarked that the *Apophthegmata* “is timeless in its concerns with our common humanity. It is difficult to open it without quickly finding something poignant for ourselves” (1977: 67).⁷ This quality, I believe, bears investigation. It is important to ask and explore what it is about the *Apophthegmata* that has made it so capable of being read and appreciated in so many circles across so many centuries.

³ The Greek Alphabetical Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (abbreviated here “AP”) was published by Jean-Baptiste Cotelier in 1647 from a 12th-century manuscript (reprinted in Migne); it contains 948 sayings. Jean-Claude Guy discovered 53 other sayings in other Greek manuscripts; see Guy 1962. For a translation, see Ward 1984.

⁴ The first 396 sayings from the Anonymous Collection were edited by F. Nau (1907-13). Citations are abbreviated here as “AP N.” For a translation of AP N 1-132, see Stewart 1986; for AP N 133-396, see Ward 1986.

⁵ For the Greek Systematic Collection (abbreviated here as “AP Sys.”), see Guy, ed., 1993-2005.

⁶ The *Verba Seniorum* of Pelagius and John (abbreviated here as “VS”) was edited by Heribert Rosweyde in 1615 and is reprinted in Migne 1879; for a translation, see Ward 2003.

⁷ In an essay he left incomplete at the time of his death, Chitty similarly noted that the *Apophthegmata* is “a collection in which one can hardly open a page without finding something pungent for our own lives: how human those monks were!” (1974: 17).

Because of its hodge-podge character as an anthology, the *Apophthegmata* talks about many matters. One gets a rough sense of its core themes by looking at the headings around which the editor(s) of the Systematic Collection gathered sayings and stories: progress in perfection (Book 1), interior peace (*hesychia*) (Book 2), compunction (*penthos*) (Book 3), self-mastery (Book 4), combating fornication (Book 5), poverty (Book 6), discernment (Book 10), unceasing prayer (Book 12), hospitality (Book 13), humility (Book 15), and charity (Book 17). These headings give a clue to what the early monks numbered as critical issues in monastic living.

But something important is curiously absent from its pages. For a text that takes great pains to pass on how best to live as a monk – and that, of course, includes how best to live as a Christian – there is rare mention of Jesus of Nazareth.⁸ In the Greek Alphabetical Collection, the name “Jesus” is cited only eight times⁹; the title “Christ,” twenty times¹⁰; a few other references appear under locutions such as “the Lord” or “Son of God.”¹¹ By way of comparison, the Alphabetical Collection speaks of “angels,” 32 times, and “demons,” 84 times; “church,” 60 times, and “cell,” 182 times; “anchorite,” 22 times, and “monk,” 128 times; “heart,” 60 times, and “soul,” 107 times; and “God,” over 350 times.¹² Nearly all mentions of Jesus appear in brief, passing turns-of-phrase. A few examples: Abba Poemen and his friends had dinner at “the home of a friend of Christ (*philochristou*)” (*AP* Poemen 170; Migne 1864: 364; Ward 1984: 190)¹³; Abba Ammonathas dealt with a tax dispute between his monastery and a local magistrate by praying “with the grace of Christ” (*AP*

⁸ For the sake of brevity and clarity, I have limited this overview to the two earliest and most influential versions of the *Apophthegmata*, namely, the Greek Alphabetical Collection and the Latin *Verba Seniorum*. For the parallels in Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, as well as less influential Latin compilations (such as Ps.-Rufinus) and later Byzantine compilations (such as Paulos Evergetinos), consult the helpful tables in Regnault, ed., 1976: 201-308.

⁹ *AP* Daniel 7 (twice); Elias 5, 7; Cronios 4; John Colobos 40; Sisoës 5. Jesus’s name is cited also in a story of a certain Abba Milesios (*AP* Milesios 2; Migne 1864: 297) is described as “living with two disciples on the borders of Persia” and being tortured by “two of the king’s sons”; he confesses: “I adore Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” He is described as “all hairy and like a wild man,” a description that better fits the Syrian holy men celebrated by Theodoret of Cyrus. This story seems a late addition, very different from the Egyptian (and Palestinian) orientation of much of the text. There is also in Guy’s supplement an additional brief admonition that cites Jesus’s name: *AP* Paul the Great S1 (Guy 1962: 32): “Keep close to Jesus.”

¹⁰ *AP* Antony 9; Arsenius 33; Ammonas 1, 2; Anoub 2; Apollo 1; Ammonathas 1; Gelasius 4; Daniel 3, 7; Epiphanius 5; John Colobos 16, 18, 39; Cassian 1, 5; Xanthias 2; Moses 10; Sarah 2; Or 13. Note that Ward’s translation does not always reflect the precise terminology in the Greek.

¹¹ *AP* Antony 22 (“Lord”); Evagrius 1 (“Son”); John of the Cells 2 (“Lord”); Isidore the Priest 5 (“Son of God”); Poemen 30 (“body and blood of the Lord”); Hyperechius 8 (“Crucified Lord”). Note that while “Lord” is not uncommon, especially in prayers, only a few times does it unambiguously refer to Jesus (as opposed to the Father).

¹² I did an initial manual count of the Greek Alphabetical Collection in Migne 1864, then confirmed these numbers using word searches via the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (<http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/>).

¹³ No parallels in other Greek or Latin versions.

Ammonthas 1; Migne 1864: 136-37; *chariti tou Christou*)¹⁴; and Abba Elias once remarked that “People have their minds on their sins or on Jesus or on human beings” (*AP* Elias 5; Migne 1864: 184; author’s translation).¹⁵ There are a few brief admonitions. Abba Antony once remarked: “if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ” (*AP* Antony 9; Migne 1864: 77; Ward 1984: 3).¹⁶ Similarly, in a well-known story about Abba John the Colobos, a prostitute named Paësia lies seductively on her bed as John comes into her room; he sits down, then asks, “What have you got against Jesus that you behave like this?” and begins weeping (*AP* John Colobos 40; Migne 1864: 217-20; Ward 1984: 94).¹⁷

One finds a scatter of other mentions. Abba Ammonas, in speaking of the monastic virtue of *penthos*, notes how condemned prisoners wait anxiously and tearfully for the coming of a judge, and so, he says, should monks await the coming of Christ the judge (*AP* Ammonas 1; Migne 1864: 120).¹⁸ Abba Arsenius once had a vision of two horsemen carrying a crossbeam that blocked their entrance into a gate and interpreted it as symbolic of a pride that does not follow “the humble way of Christ” (*AP* Arsenius 33; Migne 1864: 100-101).¹⁹ When the demon of fornication complained that Amma Sarah had defeated him, she responded that this power came not from her, but from Christ (*AP* Sarah 2; Migne 1864: 460).²⁰ When a monk worried that his frequent consultations with John the Colobos were distracting the abba from prayer, he assured the monk that nothing could “separate me from the grace of Christ” (*AP* John Colobos 18; Migne 1864: 209-12; author’s translation).²¹ One odd, but influential, story puts forward a hyper-literal interpretation of the eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ (*AP* Daniel 7; Migne 1864: 156-60).²² While the Alphabetical Collection does, on occasion, quote or paraphrase Jesus’s words in the gospel, only on five occasions does it name the teaching as Jesus’s or “the Lord’s.”²³ For example, Abba Daniel tells the story of a demon-possessed woman who slapped a monk in the face. The monk immediately turned and offered the other cheek “according to the Lord’s command.” The

¹⁴ Ward has “grace of God” (1984: 37). No parallels in other Greek or Latin versions. This phrase, “grace of Christ,” appears mostly in such passing phrases in the Alphabetical (*AP* Xanthias 2; Or 13) as well as in *VS* (see below).

¹⁵ No parallels in other Greek and Latin versions.

¹⁶ Parallels: *VS* 17.2 (Migne 1879: 973) = *AP* 17.2 (Guy 1993-2005: SC 498: 12).

¹⁷ Parallel: *AP* Sys. 13.17 (Guy 1993-2005: SC 474:244-248); no *VS* parallel.

¹⁸ Parallels: *AP* Sys. 3.4 (Guy 1993-2005: SC 387:150) = *VS* 3.2 (Migne 1879: 860).

¹⁹ Parallels: *AP* 18.3 (Guy 1993-2005: SC 498:38-40) = *VS* 18.2 (Migne 1879: 978).

²⁰ No parallels in other early Greek or Latin versions.

²¹ Parallels: *AP* Sys. 11.41 (Guy 1993-2005: SC 474:154-156) = *VS* 11.15 (Migne 1879: 935).

²² Parallels: *AP* Sys. 18.4 (Guy 1993-2005: SC 498:40-44) = *VS* 18.3 (Migne 1879: 978-80). This story became a favorite anecdote in the early medieval debate on real presence; e.g. Paschasius of Corbie, *De corpore et sanguine domini* 14. See Ward 1982: 15-16. Cf. *AP* Poemen 30, which speaks of the “body and blood of the Lord” providing refreshment after battling the venom of demons.

²³ *AP* Antony 22; Daniel 3; John Colobos 39; John of the Cells 2; Moses 10. One finds some other passages quoting or paraphrasing Jesus’s sayings using locutions such as “the Gospel says” or “it is written”: e.g. *AP* Antony 19; Agathon 8; Joseph of Panephrisis 1; Psenthasius 1.

demon then fled the woman crying out: “What violence! The commandment of Jesus drives me out” (*AP* Daniel 3; Migne 1864: 156; Ward 1984: 52).²⁴

Two stories mention Jesus’s name in a phraseology that foreshadows the later Jesus Prayer. In one, Abba Sisoës remarks that “for thirty years I have not prayed to God about my faults, but I have made this prayer to him: ‘Lord Jesus, save me from my tongue’” (*AP* Sisoës 5; Migne 1864: 393; Ward 1984: 213).²⁵ A second instance appears in a brief narrative about Abba Elias, who lived in an abandoned pagan temple, notoriously haunted by demons. The demons ordered Elias, “Leave this place which belongs to us,” but he rebutted them saying: “No place belongs to you.” At one terrifying moment, a demon tried to evict him physically. Elias grabbed the door’s lintel and cried out: “Jesus, save me.” Immediately the demon fled. The narrator adds that Jesus then asked Elias: “Why are you weeping?” Elias complained: “Because the demons have dared to seize a man and treat him like this.” Then Jesus said: “You have been careless. As soon as you turned to me again, you see, I was beside you.” Elias adds a moral to the story: that a person cannot “without great pains . . . come to his God” because “he himself was crucified for our sake” (*AP* Elias 7; Migne 1864: 184-85; Ward 1984: 71-72).²⁶ In this story’s close, we glimpse the ever-so-faint hints of a christology: being a monk means sharing in the sufferings of a crucified God.

A similar, though equally faint, hint appears among the sayings of Abba Cronios, who reportedly served as translator for the Coptic-speaking Antony. In terms of the Alphabetical Collection’s general narrative style, Cronios’s sayings are unusual in that he self-consciously addresses queries from visitors with exact quotes from scripture. Once, for example, when a monk asked Cronios why monks do not make progress without bodily affliction, he replied: “Truly it is written: ‘Look to Jesus, the Pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy which was set before him, endured the cross’” (*AP* Cronios 4; Migne 1864: 248-49; Ward 1984: 116).²⁷ In quoting Hebrews 12:2, Cronios implies that monastic living means imitating Christ who, as pioneer, leads the monk to and through suffering. Here again, we see hints of a christology that links Christ’s suffering with monastic life, a view developed at length in other contemporary monastic texts (as we will see in a moment).

If one turns from the Greek Alphabetical Collection to the Latin *Verba Seniorum*, one finds Latin parallels of some of these same sayings and stories.²⁸ There are also a few more references, though this should be no surprise given that the *Verba Seniorum* also includes the large body of sayings from the Anonymous Collection. Trends noted earlier in the Greek Alphabetical Collection reappear among these anonymous sayings in the Latin. One finds a couple more allusions to Christ as judge (*VS* 3.2 [Migne 1879: 860]; *VS* 3.20 [Migne 1879:

²⁴ Parallels: *AP* Sys. 15.15 (Guy 1993-2005: SC 474:298) = *VS* 15.14 (Migne 1879: 957). Other stories also refer to the exorcistic power of Christ: *AP* Ammonas 2; Xanthia 2.

²⁵ Parallels: *AP* Sys. 4.47 (Guy 1993-2005: SC 387:210) = *VS* 4.39 (Migne 1879: 870).

²⁶ No parallel in other early Greek or Latin versions.

²⁷ *VS* 4.33 parallels the first half of the logion, but not its citation of Hebrews 12:2.

²⁸ *VS* 3.2 = *AP* Ammonas 1; *VS* 3.3 = *AP* Evagrius 1; *VS* 4.39 = *AP* Sisoës 5; *VS* 5.11 = *AP* Sarah 2; *VS* 7.12 = *AP* Milesios 2; *VS* 13.1 = *AP* Joseph of Panephris 1; *VS* 13.2 = *AP* Cassian 3; *VS* 15.9 = *AP* Arsenius 40; *VS* 18.14 = *AP* Moses 10.

863]),²⁹ a couple more passing mentions of the “grace of Christ” (*VS* 4.61 [Migne 1879: 872]; *VS* 11.46 [Migne 1879: 939]; *VS* 11.48 [Migne 1879: 939]) and a couple more prayer petitions that resemble the Jesus Prayer (*VS* 5.16 [Migne 1879: 877]). In one instance, however, the Jesus Prayer is given a more expansive discussion. When an unnamed abba encouraged a monk to pray “Son of God, have mercy upon me,” the monk complains, “I do not know the meaning of the words on which I am meditating.” So the abba appeals to an analogy he had heard from Abba Poemen. Poemen reportedly claimed that snake-charmers do not know the meaning of the magical words they use, but the snakes they deal with understand and obey; so too the monk: He need not understand the words of his prayer formulae, but the demons hear his words and flee in fear (*VS* 5.32; Migne 1879: 883; Ward 2003: 44).³⁰ The story is striking: Why would a monk not understand what it means to call Jesus “Son of God”? What would make such a basic theological phrase so unintelligible, something a monk might have to anguish over? Whatever the answer – and I believe there is one – Poemen and the unnamed abba who quotes him encourage sidestepping the theological. Both want to keep the focus on practice: Just pray to Jesus.

As we have seen, Christ, if mentioned, is mentioned mostly in passing; deeper christological perspectives may be hinted at, but as the texts stand, those perspectives remain undeveloped. But there are two stories in the *Verba Seniorum* in which Christ is the focus or moral of the story. In one, a monk is discouraged by fellow monks abandoning the desert and returning to the world. To encourage him, his abba suggests an analogy: A dog, the moment it spies a rabbit, runs headlong in pursuit, undeterred by thickets or thorns; other dogs instinctively join the chase but can just as readily get tired and drop out. Just so, the abba advises, the monk should be like the lead hound and “run after the Lord Christ and aim unceasingly at the cross and leap over every obstacle in his ways until he comes to the Crucified” (*VS* 7.35; Migne 1879: 901-2; Ward 2003: 71-72).³¹ Here again, we see the accent on the monk following Christ crucified. In a second story, a demon appears before a monk and announces: “I am Christ.” The monk shuts his eyes and responds: “I do not want to see Christ in this life but in the next” (*VS* 15.70; Migne 1879: 965).³² This could be read simply as sound practical advice. Experienced monks knew the dangers of desert life, the perils of self-delusion and of madness. And so the editor advises readers that the monk presume any vision, even a vision of Christ, is demonic. But might there have been something more at play? Could monks have been having conflicting visions of Christ and been using them to seize on conflicting interpretations of him as “Son of God”? If so, then the logion implies that one may hope for christological answers not in this life, but in the next. Interestingly, the editor of the Systematic Collection places this logion not in Book 18 on visions, but in Book 15 on humility.

²⁹ *VS* 3.3 (Migne 1879: 860-61), which parallels *AP* Evagrius 1, refers explicitly to Christ as Judge in a way that the Greek version does not.

³⁰ Parallels: *AP* N 184 (Nau 1907-13: *ROC* 13: 271-72) = *AP* 5.37 (Guy 1993-2005: *SC* 387: 276-78).

³¹ I have adjusted Ward’s translation which gives “*dominus Christus*” as “Lord Jesus.” Parallels: *AP* N 203 (Nau 1907-13: *ROC* 14: 369) = *AP* Sys. 7.42 (Guy 1993-2005: *SC* 387: 374-76).

³² Parallels: *AP* N 312 (Nau 1907-13: *ROC* 17: 206) = *AP* Sys. 15.89 (Guy 1993-2005: *SC* 474: 342).

What are we to infer about these sparse, passing references to Jesus? Silence of this sort once led church historian Hans Lietzmann, in a widely-read textbook from the 1950s, to belittle monasticism as un-scriptural and to argue that “the only genuine Christian element in monasticism” was its sense of sin; “otherwise [monasticism] has nothing more than external relations with the Christian religion” (138; 153). Lietzmann’s notorious judgment has been thoroughly refuted by Douglas Burton-Christie in his book *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*. Burton-Christie explores in depth and detail the many-sided and often subtle ways Scripture functioned within the ecology of the life of the desert fathers. So, while Lietzmann’s jab is patently off the mark, I do think that we need to inquire why mention of Jesus Christ remains so fleeting and so muted in this text. Why is there is so little discussion of Jesus in this self-consciously Christian book, a book that has had incalculable influence on the way Christian monks have sought to live their Christian lives through the centuries?

Christology in Early Egyptian Monastic Literature

The issue of the *Apophthegmata*’s muted christology comes into sharper focus once one compares it with other early Egyptian monastic texts. The earliest and most widely read work of early Christian monasticism, Athanasius’s *Vita Antonii*, teems with christological claims and themes. One core theme is Christ’s victory over the demons. Antony announces it as a central thread in his long admonition to the crowds of monks who gathered to “make the desert a city”: “Since the Lord made his sojourn with us, the enemy is fallen and his powers have diminished” (*Vita Antonii* 28; Bartelink: 212; Gregg: 52). The Antony of the *Vita* argues with a buoyant cosmic optimism that Christ has decimated Satan’s kingdom and that the devil finds himself a dethroned tyrant, noisy but powerless. Later Antony is portrayed as a spokesman of Athanasius’s own christology of deification against Arian detractors. In a famous scene, Antony tells some philosophers: “The Word of God was not changed, but remaining the same, assumed a human body for the salvation and benefit of humankind so that by sharing in human birth he might enable humankind to share the divine and spiritual nature” (*Vita Antonii* 74; Bartelink: 324; Gregg: 85).³³ One might dismiss such carefully crafted christological claims by attributing them to Athanasius’s own highly literate theology and his urban-centered ecclesiological interests and argue that while such passages tell us a lot about Athanasius, they tell us little of Antony and the monks of Egypt and their own christological commitments.

Such a dismissal, I believe, is off the mark. The monks of Egypt may not have shared all the careful precisions of Athanasius’s christology, but christology mattered to them. Look, for example, at the rediscovered and reevaluated *Letters of Antony*.³⁴ While the *Letters* are full of the type of parenentic admonitions so commonplace within the pages of the *Apophthegmata*, the *Letters* also set out and work from a definite and self-conscious christology. The Antony of the *Letters* repeatedly refers to Christ as the “physician” who heals the human race of the “great wound” of sin and death:

³³ Athanasius’s Antony not only preached Athanasius’s theology of deification; he embodied it. On this, see Harmless 2004: 90-93.

³⁴ For the text, see Garitte; for a translation and detailed analysis, see Rubenson.

But the Creator saw that their wound was great and needed care. He who is himself their Creator and healer, Jesus, thus sent forerunners before himself . . . Those invested with the Spirit saw that no one among the creatures could heal this great wound, but only the goodness of God, his Only-begotten, whom he sent as the salvation of the entire world. In his benevolence, and for the salvation of all, the Father of creation did not spare his Only-begotten, but delivered him up for our sins. He was humbled by our iniquities and by his stripes we were healed. Through the word of his power he gathered us from all lands, from one end of the earth to the other, resurrecting our hearts from the earth and teaching us that we are members of one another (*Ep. Antonii* 3.15-24; Garitte: CSCO 148: 13-14; Rubenson: 207).³⁵

The christology of the *Letters* may differ in emphasis from the christology of Athanasius's *Life*, but the Antony of the *Letters* is certainly capable of articulating a broad vision of Christ's place within salvation history and is capable of linking that evangelical perspective to the ordinary life and daily struggles of the monks he writes to. It is noteworthy that while the editor(s) of the *Apophthegmata* knew of and even drew excerpts from both Athanasius's *Vita* and the *Letters of Antony*, those excerpts do not draw upon either work's christological themes.³⁶

This linking of christology to a coherent spirituality of the monastic life appears even more vividly in the works of John Cassian, who lived at the monastic settlement of Scetis in Egypt from the mid-380s to around 399 and who sought to pass on the spirituality he learned in Egypt in two masterworks, *Institutes* and *Conferences*.³⁷ Cassian describes Egyptian monasticism as profoundly Christ-centered in its spirituality. In Book IV of *Institutes*, Cassian quotes an initiatory instruction given to monk-novices, or "renunciants" (*renuntiantes*), as he calls them. Cassian places the instruction in the mouth of an old friend of his, Abba Pinufius. Pinufius stresses that monastic life is Christian life and that Christian life means following Christ crucified: "Renunciation is nothing else than a manifestation of the cross and of a dying. Therefore you should know that on this day you have died to the world and its deeds and desires and that, according to the Apostle, you have been crucified to this world and this world to you" (*De institutis* 4.34; Guy 1965: 172; Ramsey 2000:97). Pinufius quotes Jesus's saying in Matthew 10:38 ("Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me") and explores how this saying is to be lived out:

Our cross is the fear of the Lord. Just as someone who has been crucified no longer has the ability to move or to turn his limbs in any direction by an act of his mind, neither must we exercise our desires and yearnings in

³⁵ See also *Ep. Antonii* 2.9-19; 5.18-27; 6.5-13 (Garitte: CSCO 148: 8-9; 32-33; 38).

³⁶ Two sayings are drawn from the *Vita Antonii*: *AP* Antony 10 = *Vita Antonii* 49; *AP* Antony 30 = *Vita Antonii* 59. Two other sayings that *AP* attributes to Antony come from the *Letters*: *AP* Antony 22 = *Ep. Antonii* 1.35-41; *AP* Poemen 87 = *Ep. Antonii* 7.60.

³⁷ On Cassian, see Harmless 2004: 373-413; Stewart 1998. See also Casiday: 215-58, which gives special attention to the christology of Cassian's final work against Nestorius, the *De incarnatione*.

accordance with what is easy for us and gives us pleasure at the moment but in accordance with the law of the Lord and where it constrains us. And just as he who is fixed to the gibbet of the cross no longer contemplates present realities or reflects on his own afflictions; is not distracted by worry or care for the morrow; is not stirred up by the desire for possessions; is not inflamed by pride or wrangling or envy; does not sorrow over present slights and no longer remembers those of the past; and, although he may still be breathing in his body, believes himself dead in every respect and directs on ahead the gaze of his heart to the place where he is sure that he will go; so also it is necessary for us who have been crucified by the fear of the Lord . . . to have the eyes of our soul set upon the place where we must hope that we shall go any moment (Cassian, *De institutis* 4.35; Guy 1965: 174; Ramsey 2000: 97-98).

According to Cassian, being a monk means maintaining a single-minded focus in following the Crucified, that one must keep one's gaze always fixed upon one's coming death. The crucified Christ is thus the icon and paradigm of monastic life.

This passage in the *Institutes* represents one side of Cassian's several-sided christology. Other threads are developed in the *Conferences*. Cassian there presents – though not directly, but through the mouths of a series of Egyptian abbas – a wide-ranging and coherent theology of the monastic life. Abba Moses, Cassian's spokesman in Conferences 1 and 2, notes that while “the end” (*telos, finis*) of all Christians is the same, namely, the Kingdom of God, the monk's unique “goal” (*skopos, destinatio*) is purity of heart (*Collationes* 1.4.1-4; 1.5.2; Pichery: SC 42: 80-82). This overarching conception of the monastic life is rooted, as Cassian notes, in Jesus's teaching and promise: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8; *Collationes* 1.10.4; Pichery: 42: 89. Cf. *De institutis* 8.20, *Collationes* 14.9.1). In Conferences 9 and 10, Abba Isaac discusses how such purity of heart and, by implication, such seeing of God may be found and recommends that the monk pray ceaselessly by constantly repeating Psalm 70:1 (“God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me”). This, in turn, opens the monk to and makes possible, even on earth, a graced vision of Christ (*Collationes* 10.10.2-14; Pichery: SC 54: 85-90). Cassian stresses that the monk can hope to experience here and now what the apostles experienced on the mountain of Transfiguration, that the monk goes off “with Christ to the lofty mountain of the desert” and there “see Christ's Godhead with purest eyes”; there Christ “reveals the glory of his face and the image of his brightness to those who deserve to look upon him with the clean gaze of the soul” (*Collationes* 10.6; Pichery: SC 54: 80; Ramsey 1997: 375). Cassian's Christ is the Christ of the Transfiguration, and this self-conscious christology undergirds and guides his specific recommendations on monastic living and monastic prayer.

Here again one might protest: Cassian is not an Egyptian, but a Scythian who first became a monk in the Holy Land and eventually spent the last twenty years of his career in southern Gaul. Well and good, but Cassian explicitly attributes these christological claims to his Egyptian abbas. Cassian has certainly recast their words into his own long-lined elegant Latin, and certain emphases were inspired by concerns for (and jabs at) his Gallic context, but I think it is fair to accept Cassian's claim, at least in broad terms, that he is articulating Egyptian concerns and views. Again, it is noteworthy that the editor of the *Apophthegmata*

knew of and drew upon Cassian's work. Interestingly, when he quotes Cassian, he quotes not from passages on following the Crucified Christ or seeking Christ of the Transfiguration. Instead, the editor selected an anecdote about monastic hospitality: that the monk should treat each guest as Christ.³⁸

A fourth monastic author who had deep christological interests and who appears also in the *Apophthegmata's* pages is Isaiah of Scetis (on his life and teaching, see Chitty 1971; Regnault 1970, 2004; Chryssavgis 2001). Abba Isaiah was apparently a native of Egypt who spent his early monastic life at Scetis until sometime in the 430s. He may have left because of Scetis's (second) destruction in 434. Whatever the reason, he ended up making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, accompanied by a fellow Egyptian named Peter, who served as his amanuensis. Eventually Isaiah settled in Beit Daltha, near Gaza, and headed up a community of monks there until his death in 491. Isaiah's surviving work, the *Asceticon*, offers the most thought-provoking points of comparison and contrast to the *Apophthegmata*.³⁹ The work is an anthology of the most diverse materials, mostly recorded and edited by his disciple Peter. It is organized into 29 *Logoi* ("Essays"), and these encompass a wide mix of genre: brief addresses, letters, sermons, and collections of sayings. *Logos* 8 is entitled "Apophthegmata," and this and several other *Logoi* are collections of aphorisms and apodictic remarks similar in literary cast to the sayings found in the *Apophthegmata* itself. The *Asceticon* not only mirrors *Apophthegmata* in terms of genre; it also shares the same constellation of themes and issues: the joys and rigors of the life in the cell, the labors of fasting and manual labor, the need to forgive one's neighbor and to rein in one's tongue, the quest for unceasing prayer and the goal of peace (*hesychia*).

It is striking, therefore, that this text, so like the *Apophthegmata* in genre and theme, has a distinctive and clearly developed christology. Isaiah self-consciously links christology with monastic spirituality, notably in the *Logos* entitled "Apophthegmata." For Isaiah, as for Cassian, monastic life centers on the cross of Christ. Isaiah begins by noting that "before the Lord came in the flesh, humanity was blind, dumb, paralyzed, deaf, leprous, lame, and dead on account of everything that was contrary to nature." But Christ healed all these maladies during his earthly ministry; only then did he "ascend the cross" (*Asceticon* 8.2; Migne 1863: 1130; Chryssavgis and Penkett: 88).⁴⁰ This phrase, "ascend the cross," is Isaiah's catchphrase, the thumbnail summary of his christology. Isaiah, in this passage, goes on to expound how monks are healed of the spiritual equivalents of each disease, of spiritual blindness, of spiritual muteness, of spiritual paralysis, etc. The monk is to imitate Christ and "ascend the cross." Here, and at several other junctures within the *Asceticon*, Isaiah offers "spiritual" exegeses of the Passion narrative. He notes, for instance, that Jesus was crucified alongside

³⁸ *AP* Cassian 1 (Migne 1864: 244) = Cassian, *De institutis* 5.24 (Guy 1965: 232-34). Parallels: *AP* Sys. 13.2 (Guy 1993-2005: SC 474: 230) = *VS* 13.2 (Migne 1879: 943-44). This principle would become a mainstay of Benedictine traditions of hospitality; see Benedict, *Regula* 53.7.

³⁹ For the text of the *Asceticon*, see Migne 1863. See also Draguet (CSCO 289-290 for the Syriac text; 293-294 for the Greek and Latin texts and French translation. For an English translation, see Chryssavgis and Penkett. I have found it helpful to consult the French translation and commentary by de Broc.

⁴⁰ For Isaiah, the pivotal biblical text is Matthew 11:4-6 (= Luke 7:22-23). In *Asceticon* 13, he explores the spiritual implications of Christ's healing each of these diseases.

two thieves, one who glorified him and the other who blasphemed him. “This means,” Isaiah notes, “that before the intellect comes to its senses from carelessness, it is with the enemy, and if our Lord Jesus Christ resurrects it from its carelessness, granting it to see and discern all things, it will be able to ascend the cross” (*Asceticon* 8.2; Migne 1863: 1130-31; Chryssavgis and Penkett: 88-89).⁴¹ According to Isaiah, the events and words of Christ’s passion “do not only belong to those [first] disciples, but to *all* who fulfill the commandments” (*Asceticon* 17.10; Migne 1863: 1151; Chryssavgis and Penkett: 128).⁴² The way of the cross is the way of the disciple, and as Isaiah insists: “The one, therefore, who wishes to eat and drink at his table, will journey with him to the cross, for the cross of Jesus is abstinence from every passion” (*Asceticon* 17.10; Migne 1863: 1152; Chryssavgis and Penkett: 128).

I have scanned here only four monastic authors who have roots in the Egyptian experience and who consciously link christology to their conception of the monastic life. Other authors and other texts could be brought forward, such as the *kephalaia*, *scholia*, and letters of Evagrius Ponticus, or the sermons of Shenoute of Atripe.⁴³ My point is simply that christology forms a vital – indeed, a central – thread in Egyptian monastic literature. This all-too-brief survey is intended to highlight more acutely the central question: Why is the *Apophthegmata* apparently so tight-lipped about what is so central to Christianity and to the monastic life, namely, the person of Jesus of Nazareth?

From Scetis To Palestine

The answer, I believe, lies in the setting where the *Apophthegmata* assumed its final written form. Scholars who have worked with the *Apophthegmata* know how hard it is to try to sort out the history recorded by the text, to figure out who all those abbas are, to chase down possible sources (whether oral or written) that lie behind the text, let alone to decipher what its theology (or, rather, theologies) may be. It is a bit like dealing with a giant jigsaw puzzle with thousands of pieces and nothing to indicate what the final picture looks like. It is easy to get lost in its labyrinth of details, yet it is only by immersion in those details that one can begin to sort out its origins.

Authors of books on popular spirituality and other non-specialists routinely quote the *Apophthegmata*’s memorable sayings and stories as if they belonged in some vague way to “early monks.” That is simply not accurate. The bulk of the text tells stories about or quotes monks from one very specific locale: the monastic settlement of Scetis. As we saw, both Cassian and Isaiah considered this venue their monastic home. Scetis was founded by Abba

⁴¹ Note that PG 40 has only an early Latin version of Isaiah; for their translation, Chryssavgis and Penkett worked from various unpublished manuscripts of the Greek text; they also, I gather, had access to collations by Derwas Chitty that exist only in typescript. See their comments on 33-35.

⁴² Note that the numbering of discourses differs between the text found in PG 40 and the Greek text used by Chryssavgis and Penkett. Their translation lists this passage under Logos 16.

⁴³ On Evagrius’s Christology, see Dysinger, esp. 152-71, 199-211. As for Shenoute, because of the disheveled state of surviving manuscripts, critical evaluation of his theology is still at an early stage. On the reconstruction of the texts, see Emmel; on elements of Shenoute’s Christology (incarnation, resurrection of the body) and its implications for monasticism, see Schroeder: 139-57.

Macarius the Egyptian around 330, in an area of what is now Wādī al-Natrūn, west of the Nile, a site that remains a major center of Coptic monasticism (on the monastery, see Harmless 2004: 173-80; see also Evelyn-White). If one scans the text, one finds that nearly all the most-quoted monks, except Antony, spent a major portion of their careers at Scetis. This includes not only Macarius himself, but also Arsenius, Daniel, Isidore the Priest, Moses the Ethiopian, John the Colobos, Sisoës, Silvanus, and, most important of all, Poemen.⁴⁴

Abba Poemen dominates the *Apophthegmata's* pages. In the Alphabetical Collection, 187 of its approximately 1000 sayings are listed under Poemen's name, while 25 other sayings of his are listed under other abbats' names. The Systematic Collection has 16 others which are unique to it; another 21 sayings are attributed to him in other Greek versions. Thus, some 249 sayings, nearly one-quarter of the *Apophthegmata*, are attributed to Abba Poemen. Surveying those sayings, one finds Poemen portrayed in various ways: as a kindly "shepherd" (playing on his name), as a man of *penthos*, as a spokesman for moderate asceticism (against certain desert extremes), as a gifted teacher, as an exegete with a fondness for allegory, and most importantly, as a collector of desert wisdom. Again and again, the *Apophthegmata* portrays Poemen passing on wisdom gleaned from earlier generations. Its stock formula is: "Abba Poemen said that Abba so-and-so used to say such-and-such . . ." One finds Poemen telling stories about earlier monastic figures on at least 47 occasions. And in these he quotes a remarkable range of figures, at least 23 different abbats, including Antony, Ammonas, Macarius the Egyptian, Pambo, Sisoës, John the Colobos, and Moses the Ethiopian.⁴⁵

In a detailed study entitled "Remembering Poemen Remembering: The Desert Fathers and the Spirituality of Memory" (2000), I argued that Poemen and his circle of friends and disciples were the great collectors responsible for what became the core of the *Apophthegmata* (see also Driscoll 1995). It was not a new thesis per se, but new perspectives come to light when one compares the portrayal of Poemen in the standard Greek and Latin collections

⁴⁴ On Scetis as the primary source for sayings in the *Apophthegmata*, see Guy 1993-2005: SC 387: 35; Guy 1964. The following is a listing of those who are explicitly noted in the *Apophthegmata* for having lived at least part of their monastic careers in Scetis: Arsenius, Agathon, Ammonas, Achilles, Anoub, Apollo, Bessarion, Benjamin, Daniel, Eudemon, Zeno (though a Palestinian lived for a time at Scetis), Zacharias, Isaiah, Theodore of Pherme, Theodore of Scetis, John the Colobos (whose sayings also appear under the name of "John the Theban"), Isaac the Theban, Ischyron, Isidore the Priest, Carion, Copres, Moses the Ethiopian, Mark (disciple of Silvanus), Xanthias, Poemen, Paësius, Paphnutius, Paul the Barber, Sisoës, Silvanus (who was a Palestinian), Phocas (later of Jerusalem). Other possible figures include Abraham who was Agathon's disciple and who knew Poemen; Mius who reports a saying from Scetis; and Nisterius the Cenobite whose sayings are reported by Poemen. For a basic prosopography of Scetis, see Guy 1993-2005: SC 387: 47-79.

⁴⁵ A basic list is as follows: Antony (*AP* Poemen 75, 87, 125); Adonias (*AP* Poemen 41); Ammonas (*AP* Poemen 52, 96); Alonios (*AP* Poemen 55); Ammoës (*AP* Ammoës 4); Bessarion (*AP* Poemen 79); Copres (*AP* Copres 1); Dioscorus (*AP* Dioscorus 2); Isidore the Priest (*AP* Isidore the Priest 5, 6, 10; *AP* Poemen 44); John the Little (*AP* John Kolobos 13, 43, *AP* Poemen 46, 74, 101); Joseph of Panephrisis (*AP* Joseph of Panephrisis 2, *VS* 10.30); Macarius the Egyptian (*AP* Poemen 25); Moses (*AP* Moses 12; *AP* Poemen 166, *VS* 10.63); Nisterius the Cenobite (*AP* Nisterius 1 and 2; *AP* Poemen 131); Paësius (*AP* Poemen 65); Pambo (*AP* Poemen 47, 75, 150); Paphnutius (*AP* Paphnutius 3, *AP* Poemen 190); Pior (*AP* Poemen 85); Simon (*AP* Poemen 137); Sisoës (*AP* Poemen 82, 187); Theonas (*AP* Poemen 151); Timothy (*AP* Poemen 79); Zacharias (*AP* Zacharias 5).

with the little-studied but remarkable Ethiopic version known as the *Collectio Monastica*.⁴⁶ We know from the *Apophthegmata* itself that Poemen's circle fled Scetis after its first destruction in 407. They first took refuge in an abandoned pagan temple at Terenuthis on the Nile. To decide what they were to do, they spent a week in silent retreat. During this time of silence, one of the circle, Abba Anoub, behaved in a bizarre fashion. Each morning he threw rocks at the temple's stone statue, and each evening he knelt down and asked it to forgive him. He did the same all week. At week's end, after silence was lifted, Poemen asked Anoub to explain himself. He answered: "I did this for you. When you saw me throwing stones at the face of the statue, did it speak? Or did it get angry?" "No," Poemen replied. "Now there are seven of us. If all of you want to live together, let us be like this statue, unmoved whether one beats on it or flatters it. If you do not wish to live like this, there are four doors here in the temple. Let each one go out the one he wishes." The group accepted Anoub's proposal and bound themselves to one another (*AP* Anoub 1; Migne 1864: 129; author's translation). This decision proved momentous, for they not only stayed together; they became the great rememberers of Scetis, what one might call the "Brothers Grimm of Egyptian monasticism." While Poemen himself took great pains to preserve and pass on the *oral* wisdom of Scetis, he is clearly not the author of the written text since it quotes him (in the third person) as the source for so many traditions through the text.

The question is where the *written* version comes from, at least the version we now have. In a pivotal essay, Lucien Regnault, the great French editor and translator of the *Apophthegmata*, argued that while the text itself is dominated by Egyptian abbats, there are strong indications that the received text comes not from Egypt but from Palestine (Regnault 1981). First, one can pinpoint a wide range of Palestinian monastic documents from the mid-fifth to early-sixth centuries that self-consciously quote or allude to specific stories and specific sayings found in the *Apophthegmata*. For example, in the *Life of Saint Melania the Younger* (c. 439), Gerontius portrays Melania giving an exhortation on obedience, and within it she cites a "story of an old holy man" who ordered his disciple to scourge and to throw rocks at a statue, a story like the one I just cited above about Anoub and Poemen (*Vita Melaniae Junioris* 44; Gorce: 213; trans. Clark; cf. *AP* Anoub 1; Macarius 23). Even more striking is Cyril of Scythopolis's *Life of Saint Euthymius*, composed before 557. In one episode, Euthymius has a vision that allows him to ferret out the secret plans of two monks planning to sneak out of the monastery. He summons the monks and gives them an admonition citing a story "told me by some Egyptian elders." He proceeds to tell a story about a monk who, in a moment of rage, smashes a water jug that keeps falling over and by this discovers his own deeper propensity to anger. This story appears in the pages of the Anonymous Collection (Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Saint Euthymius* 19; Schwartz: 29-32; R. M. Price: 25-27; the original story is *AP* N 201 = *VS* 7.33). On each side of this story of the angry monk, Euthymius sprinkles advice. That advice appears to be drawn from four desert apothegms, but the quotes themselves are left implicit, as if they were Euthymius's own words.⁴⁷ Even

⁴⁶ For the Ethiopic text, see Arras. Regnault has translated the key chapters 13 and 14 into French (Regnault, ed., 1970: 287-338). For an analysis, see Harmless 2000: 499-512; see also Regnault 1989; Sauget.

⁴⁷ Of the four, two appear in the Anonymous Collection (*AP* N 378 and N 204) and are paralleled in the Latin Systematic (*VS* 11.54 and 7.36); two others appear in the Alphabetical Collection and are paralleled in the Latin: *AP* Agathon 1 = *VS* 10.8; *AP* Bessarion 11 = *VS* 11.7.

more numerous and more striking examples are found in the massive correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza.⁴⁸ These two sixth-century Gazan recluses had the sayings and deeds of the desert fathers at their fingertips and could cite individual abbots often word for word. And, I should add, that same ability is found in the monks who sent them questions and asked their advice.⁴⁹ Regnault reports finding in Barsanuphius's and John's works more than 80 citations from the *Apophthegmata* (1981: 324).⁵⁰

Second, Regnault points to the large number of sayings in the Alphabetical Collection ascribed to monks of Palestinian origin. One leading figure was Abba Silvanus who had become a monk at Scetis and eventually led a circle of twelve disciples, including Zacharias, Mark, Zeno, and Netras. The group first moved from Scetis to Sinai and eventually on to Gaza. The Alphabetical Collection attributes 26 sayings and stories to this group (12 sayings by Silvanus himself, 8 by Zeno, 5 by Mark, and 1 by Netras) (Regnault 1981: 325-26).⁵¹ Beside Silvanus's circle, the Alphabetical Collection cites a number of other Palestinian monks (some Palestinian by origin, others by adoption). These include: Gelasius, Epiphanius, Theodore of Eleutheropolis, Hilarion, Phocas, Philagrius.

Third, there are several small-scale prototypes for what eventually became the *Apophthegmata*. In the late fourth century, Evagrius Ponticus put together two of these, one at the end of his *Praktikos*, the other within his *De oratione*.⁵² A similar mini-collection is found in the work of Cassian (*De institutis* 5.24-41; Guy 1965: 233-59).⁵³ All named figures in these early prototypes quote only Egyptian abbots, not Palestinian ones. There is one other very intriguing early collection preserved in the Ethiopic *Collectio Monastica*.⁵⁴ This collection preserves memories of mainly Scetis monks from the first half of the fifth century. Two aspects make this collection stand out. First, whereas the Greek *Apophthegmata* typically gives sayings in the third person ("Abba so-and-so said . . ."), the Ethiopic *Collectio* gives sayings either in the first person ("I talked with Abba so-and-so and he said: . . .") or record the

⁴⁸ For the Greek text, see Neyt, Angelis-Noah, and Regnault; for a translation, see Chryssavgis 2006-07; for a recent analysis, see Hevelone-Harper.

⁴⁹ For example, *Ep.* 237 (Neyt et al.: SC 450: 172-76; Chryssavgis 2006-07: FC 113: 241-43). The questioner who writes Barsanuphius quotes *AP* Poemen 162, but without naming Poemen; Barsanuphius in his response notes that he is explicitly quoting Amma Sarah (*AP* Sarah 5). Examples of citations in which Barsanuphius or John name the figure from the *AP*, see *Epp.* 123, 126, 140, 191, 237, 256, 385 (name given by questioner), 654, 693; examples in which the citation is left implicit and the figure from the *AP* is left unnamed, see *Epp.* 45, 77, 96, 96, 123, 166, 340, 342, 369, 371, 410, 433, 458, 469, 492, 500, 596, 613, 698.

⁵⁰ As I have worked through the corpus of Barsanuphius and John, I think that it is a very conservative estimate.

⁵¹ Most of these reappear in *VS* (e.g. *AP* Zeno 1 = *VS* 8.5; *AP* Silvanus 1 = *VS* 4.40).

⁵² The earliest written collection of apophthegms appears in Evagrius's *Praktikos* 91-99 (Guillaumont and Guillaumont: SC 171: 692-711; Sinkewicz: 112-13). Evagrius's *De oratione* 106-12 (Migne 1865: 1189-92) has additional apophthegms.

⁵³ Five of these would make their way into the Alphabetical Collection as *AP* Cassian 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

⁵⁴ Regnault consciously avoids dealing one other important but hard-to-sort-out mini-collection, namely apophthegmata attached to certain manuscripts of the *Asceticon* of Abba Isaiah, given as "Logos 30" in the Greek and "Logos VI" in the Syriac. For a detailed discussion, see Chitty 1971: 49-60.

genealogy of a saying back to its original first-person form (“Abba so-and-so said about Abba so-and-so who said: ‘I . . .’). Second, the stories preserved in this Ethiopic version have almost no parallels with stories found in the standard Greek and Latin recensions; in other words, it seems to record an independent oral tradition. The point is that the Ethiopic *Collectio* knows nothing of non-Egyptian abbas (see Harmless 2000: 499-502). That a number of Palestinians are cited in Greek and Latin recensions of the *Apophthegmata*, but *not* in these early prototypes, indicates that the sayings of monks of Palestinian origin are likely later additions inserted thanks to the *Apophthegmata*’s Palestine-based editor(s).

Regnault makes one last point: The fact that versions of the *Apophthegmata* exist in virtually every language of Christian antiquity, not only Greek and Latin, but also Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, and Arabic. Such a remarkable spread of texts and early translations can best be explained by its origins in the Holy Land, with its large traffic in monk-pilgrims who came to and from the sacred sites. A Palestinian origin would do much to explain this wide diffusion of texts around the wider ancient Christian world.

Why is all this relevant to the question of the *Apophthegmata*’s christological silence? Given the Egyptian focus of the *Apophthegmata*, one’s first instinct might be to presume that any christological silence says something about Egypt and its monks. That is certainly one possibility. But I think it likely says more about the later Palestinian editors of the written text than it does about the original Egyptian collectors of the oral traditions behind it. As we saw, other early Egyptian monastic texts make christology a central theme and use it to undergird their understanding of monastic life. In any case, this Palestinian layer implies that the *Apophthegmata* has a text-history similar to the text-history of Isaiah of Scetis’s *Asceticon*. The *Apophthegmata*, like Isaiah himself, may have had roots in Egypt and specifically in the monastic settlement of Scetis, but the written form of the *Apophthegmata*, like Isaiah’s *Asceticon*, came into being on the far side of an immigration from Egypt to Palestine. And both texts emerged in roughly the same period, namely, in the latter half of the fifth century.

An Ecumenical Silence

While the *Apophthegmata* is curiously silent about christology, the wider monastic world it came from was not. Christology moved to the forefront of the theological agenda in the clash between Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius before and at the Council of Ephesus in 431 (see especially McGuckin; Wessel; O’Keefe). It continued on the front burner for the next century (and beyond) and ended up bitterly dividing segments of the ancient Christian world, most acutely after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (see Price and Whitby; Daley; Meyendorff). There are indications that the editor(s) of the *Apophthegmata* moved in anti-Chalcedonian circles. While the vast majority of its sayings record memories of Egypt from the 300s to the 450s, there are a handful that go beyond that time. The Alphabetical Collection includes the sayings of Longinus, abbot of the monastery of Enaton outside Alexandria and an outspoken opponent of the Council (*AP* Longinus 1-5; Migne 1864: 256-57). Also, one of Poemen’s sayings was preserved by a certain Abba John, who was exiled by

the Emperor Marcian, presumably because he opposed the Council. I will turn to this saying in a moment (*AP* Poemen 183; Migne 1864: 365).⁵⁵

Given the christological noisiness of the monastic world at the time of the *Apophthegmata's* editing, its christological silence makes enormous sense. Christology was dividing monk against monk. And that was most vividly the case in Palestine – as Cornelia Horn's detailed portrait of Peter the Iberian, one-time monk and later the anti-Chalcedonian bishop of Mayyuma in Gaza, makes clear.⁵⁶ This divided monastic world was the milieu where the monk-editors of the *Apophthegmata* evidently created the text we now have, the text where they put into writing all those treasured stories and sayings of the monks of fourth- and fifth-century Scetis that Poemen and his circle had collected and passed on. I do not think that its editors simply recorded memories. They seem to have had an eye on the present, on all those acrimonious divides between monks.

Let me articulate this using the categories of this era, namely, the terminology of Evagrius Ponticus, who spent the bulk of his monastic career in Egypt and who was widely read among the monks of fifth- and sixth-century Palestine.⁵⁷ In the opening dictum of his influential *Praktikos* (*The Monk*), Evagrius defines Christianity this way: “Christianity is the dogma of Christ our Savior; it is composed of ascetic practice (*praktikē*), physics (*physikē*), and theology (*theologikē*)” (*Praktikos* 1; Guillaumont and Guillaumont: SC 171: 498; author's translation). If one divides up Christian teaching within such a framework, then the issue that so bitterly divided the fifth-century monks of Palestine against one another was *theologikē*, theology. The editors who created the *Apophthegmata's* text knew that whereas theology divided monk from monk, *praktikē*, ascetic practice, united them. Scan the contents of the *Apophthegmata*. What holds it together? *Praktikē*, ascetic practice. Its *praktikē* is not simply the physicality of asceticism (fasting, celibacy, poverty); it is especially the deeper interior asceticism of heart that makes monastic community – and Christian community – possible (on the centrality of this theme in the *AP*, see esp. Gould). Asceticism of heart requires an inward turn that gets one to face the tangled passions which underlie the tangled conflicts that were then pitting monk against monk. Asceticism of heart makes possible both *penthos*, an honest sorrow for sin, and *agapē*, an honest self-effacing compassion, and both of these virtues were required if monks were to have any hope to live together in some measure of peace. The *Apophthegmata*, I would argue, is the work of a peacemaker (or a circle of peacemakers). It should be noted that a deep tolerance for human frailty and an emphasis on peacemaking were hallmarks of Abba Poemen himself, and so one has to ask how much his

⁵⁵ *AP* Phocas 1 (Migne 1864: 452-53), mentions a time after Chalcedon when the monastic settlement of Kellia had two churches, one for Chalcedonians and one for anti-Chalcedonians; while *AP* Gelasius 4 (Migne 1864: 149) speaks supportively of Juvenal of Jerusalem and the Council and pointedly speaks of Gelasius offering himself as “holocaust for Christ.” Note that both the saying by Phocas and by Gelasius are missing from *V/S* and *AP* Sys., which suggests that they may be later additions to the text.

⁵⁶ See 152-70 for her account of the relationship between Peter and Isaiah. For a survey of the clashes among Palestinian monks from the Council of Chalcedon to the reign of Justinian, see Chitty 1977: 90-142.

⁵⁷ On the history of the Evagrius corpus in Palestine and beyond, see Guillaumont. On possible links between Poemen and Evagrius, see Driscoll 2000.

personality and his spirituality shaped the outlook of the *Apophthegmata* as a whole as it came to assume its written form.⁵⁸

In other words, the editors of the *Apophthegmata* were concerned about what might be termed “monastic ecumenism.” Ecumenical dialogue in the modern sense works when one begins with and keeps at the forefront those core concerns that unite Christians as Christians. Focusing on common ground provides the foundation by which one discusses in a Christian way fundamental Christian differences. That modern ecumenical impulse was not common in the ancient world. But it did exist here and there. It existed, notably, in the world of fifth-century Palestinian monasticism, and it existed specifically in the person of Isaiah of Scetis. Isaiah had deep roots in anti-Chalcedonian circles. One of his closest advisees was anti-Chalcedonian stalwart Peter the Iberian. Yet Isaiah, unlike Peter, was no ideologue. When Isaiah was consulted by two Chalcedonian monks, he passed on a message that would have horrified Peter: “There is no harm in the Council of the Catholic Church; you are well as you are; you believe well” (Paris BNF gr. 1596, f. 610 [eleventh century]; for this, see Nau 1911: 164). Isaiah, as we saw, did put forward a clearly delineated christology in his *Asceticon*: that the task of the monk is to follow Christ by “ascending the cross.” But this was not a christology that divided monk from monk. As Isaiah’s recent English translator, John Chryssavgis, has insisted, “in Isaiah we see the positive spirituality of the monophysite tradition, stripped of all negations and anathemas . . . [A]lthough non-Chalcedonian by confession, Isaiah is ecumenical by conviction” (2001: 30-31; this assessment is shared by Horn: 152ff). And as Derwas Chitty once noted, “in the time that followed, Chalcedonian and Monophysite and Nestorian alike preserved [Isaiah’s] works and profited from them” (1971: 70).

I would argue that the editors of the *Apophthegmata* were also ecumenists. Their approach was not Isaiah’s. They chose, for the most part, silence. I say “for the most part” because, as we saw, close analysis revealed very faint remnants of a christology, one much like Isaiah’s: that being a monk meant following the Crucified. It is important to add that there are indications within the text itself that its broader strategy of christological silence was a self-conscious one. Let us close by looking at two stories. Both, interestingly, concern Abba Poemen. Both express his attitude toward monks interpreting scripture. The first, strikingly, was preserved by an Abba John who had been exiled by the Emperor Marcian, presumably for his commitments to the anti-Chalcedonian cause. According to John, a brother journeyed to see Abba Poemen in order to get his advice on the quest for purity of heart. Unfortunately, the monk only spoke Greek, and Poemen’s command of the language was shaky. Since no interpreter could be found, they had to muddle through the interview. Poemen wanted to find a way to talk about the mystery of the hardness of the human heart. So he noted that if one puts a bottle of water above a rock and lets it drip, it slowly but surely wears down the rock. In the same way, the word of God slowly touches and saturates the heart of all who listen to it. In time it softens our hard hearts, opening them to the fear of God (*AP* Poemen 183; Migne 1864: 365-68 = *VS* 18.16; Migne 1879: 983).

⁵⁸ E.g. *AP* Poemen 156 lays out a complex grievance process: first, ask pardon, then take two brothers as witnesses, then five, then a priest; if all else fails, simply pray to God. On Poemen as a peace maker, see Harmless 2000: 489-90; 503-5.

In a second story, a famous hermit had heard of Poemen's reputation for holiness and traveled a long distance to see him. When the hermit met Poemen, he immediately began discussing scripture. At this, Poemen turned his face away and remained silent. The visitor left, deeply hurt by Poemen's silence. Poemen's disciple asked him why he had been so unkind to such a famous ascetic who had traveled so far to speak with him. Poemen replied: "He is great and speaks of heavenly things, and I am lowly and speak of earthly things. If he had spoken of the passions of the soul, I would have replied, but he speaks to me of spiritual things and I know nothing about that." The disciple passed on Poemen's comments to the visitor. And so the visitor returned, and admitted that he too was controlled by passions, and Poemen spoke with him gladly (*AP* Poemen 8; Migne 1864: 321-24); Ward 1984: 167).⁵⁹

These stories, I suggest, name the editorial message that quietly guides the *Apophthegmata*: that it is better for monks not to speak about the "heavenly matters" of scripture and of Christ, theological matters so liable to divide monk from monk; that they, instead, need to speak with one another about "earthly things," about the human heart and the passions that control it and the fallout it causes in monastic community; that while they do need scripture, they need it to let its slow drip-drip gradually soften their otherwise hard, harsh hearts. The *Apophthegmata* came from monks who had deep roots not only in the monastic experience of Scetis but also in the contentious landscape of fifth-century Palestine. This led them, I would argue, to seek to mark out ecumenical common ground by consciously remaining silent about christology and by focusing instead on what united monks in their common quest for purity of heart. I said at the outset that I believed that we need to think about the *Apophthegmata*'s peculiar ability to cross time and cultures, its knack for speaking to many audiences across the centuries. We need to appreciate the success of the monastic editors of the *Apophthegmata*, of their editorial strategy. Over the centuries, the *Apophthegmata* has been read and treasured – far more than even the works of Abba Isaiah – by monks of all manner of theological persuasions in the Syriac Middle East, the Coptic South, the Greek East, and the Latin West. Silences matter. So does naming them.

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⁵⁹ Cf. *AP* Antony 17 (Migne 1864: 80) = *VS* 15.4 (Migne 1879: 953), in which Antony questions a group of monks on scripture; Joseph wins Antony's praise for saying that he does not know what scripture means.

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