Identity, Community, and ‘Worldly’ Society in the Apophthegmata Patrum

by

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Abstract

The tension inherent in the way that committed Christians relate to the world has been a perennial theme in the history of religious life. This tension is already present in early ascetical texts such as the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the record of sayings attributed to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Late Antique Egypt. In my thesis, I consider how the ‘world’ (κόσμος) and people who belong to the world (κοσμικοί) are treated in the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, arguing that the subjects who speak in the text negotiated a path between intentional separation from the world and ongoing engagement with the society that had formed them. Despite ascetics’ rejection of worldly influences and preoccupations, the text of the *Apophthegmata* demonstrates that the boundary between ascetic communities and secular society was permeable enough to require ongoing negotiation and to allow ascetics to interact with and influence the larger culture.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Questions about the proper way in which Christians should relate to the secular world are as old as Christianity itself. In the Gospels, Jesus faces pointed questions about how the demands of discipleship can be balanced with respect for social convention and civic duty. At times, Jesus seems to urge radical renunciation and withdrawal from worldly society, as in his advice to the rich young man to part with his wealth and possessions\(^1\) and his suggestion that another person forsake the duty to bury his father.\(^2\) On other occasions, Jesus seems to endorse accommodation to prevailing norms – as, for example, when he declines to criticize the payment of taxes to the Roman state.\(^3\) In his Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul would urge his readers to “not be conformed to this world” while nevertheless insisting that “every person be subject to the governing authorities” and that civic obligations be honoured.\(^4\) As these examples suggest, the themes of openness to the world and suspicion of its values have been held in tension since the earliest days of Christianity.

The tension inherent in the way that committed Christians relate to the world has also been a perennial theme in the history of religious life. This tension is already present in early monastic texts such as the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the record of sayings attributed to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Late Antique Egypt. This thesis will consider how the ‘world’ (κόσμος) and people who belong to the world (κοσμικοί) are treated in the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. As I shall argue, the subjects who speak in the *Apophthegmata* negotiated a path between intentional separation from the world and ongoing engagement with

\[^1\] Mt 19:21; cf. Mk 10:21, Lk 18:22.
\[^2\] Mt 8:22, Lk 9:60.
\[^3\] Mk 12:17; cf. Mt 22:21, Lk 20:25.
the society that had formed them. Though the desert ascetics offered a vision of radical rejection of worldly influences and preoccupations, the text of the *Apophthegmata* also demonstrates that the boundary between the ascetic community and secular society was permeable enough to require ongoing negotiation and to allow ascetics to interact with and influence the larger culture.

This introductory chapter will provide some background on the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, setting the work in its historical context and describing its textual development. Given our focus on the use of particular words in the *Apophthegmata*, some attention will also be given to the historical development of the monastic terminology used in the text. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary of the thesis as it will unfold in the following chapters.

1.2 The Historical Context and Development of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

Focused on a group of ascetics who lived within two or three generations of one another and spent most of their lives within the same corner of the Egyptian desert, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* have enjoyed an international reputation since the time of their compilation. Based on an oral tradition that was probably Coptic in its origins, the *Apophthegmata* were first written down in Greek in the last decades of the fifth century. Scholarly consensus suggests that the *Apophthegmata* were most likely compiled in Palestine by monks who identified, through affinity and sometimes through direct experience, with the “Scetiote diaspora” that had followed

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5 In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the term ‘monk’ (μοναχός) is often used to describe dedicated ascetics regardless of whether they lived alone as hermits or in community with others. Following the example of the text, I shall use the terms ‘ascetic’ and ‘monk’ interchangeably in this thesis in spite of distinctions that would later be made between different forms of ascetic life.

6 G. J. M. Bartelink, “Les Apophtegmes des Pères: À propos de deux études récentes,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 47 (1993), 392-93. Though the date of the composition of the first Greek text is uncertain, Jean-Claude Guy suggests that the complete version of the Systematic Collection was likely produced before 530 and that partial versions of the text may have circulated as early as the 480s. For a fuller discussion, see: *Les Apophtegmes des Pères: collection systématique. Chapitres I-IX*, trans. and ed. Jean-Claude Guy, SourcesChrétiennes 387 (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 79-84.
the destruction of the important Egyptian ascetic centre of Scete by the raiding Mazices in 407.\textsuperscript{7} Most of the sayings preserved in the \textit{Apophthegmata} are attributed to ascetics who lived as hermits or in small groups in Scete or in the nearby settlements of Nitria and the Cells (Kellia), though the inclusion of a handful of sayings attributed to figures with no personal connection to Egypt, including Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330-379) and Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373), offers a reminder of the diverse sources available to the compilers in Palestine.\textsuperscript{8}

The origins of the text of the \textit{Apophthegmata Patrum} remain enigmatic, with limitations in the manuscript tradition forcing scholars to make informed conjectures about the process by which the Egyptian oral tradition took on written form in the monastic communities of fifth- and sixth-century Palestine. As William Veder notes, the transition from oral to written transmission of the sayings may have started in earnest with an ascetic who appears within the text, Evagrius of Pontus (345-399).\textsuperscript{9} In a treatise called the \textit{Praktikos}, Evagrius offers a collection of maxims presented as having been recorded verbatim from the monks of the Egyptian desert, urging his readers to imitate the good example given in the sayings.\textsuperscript{10} Though the earliest written sources have been lost to history, Jean-Claude Guy hypothesizes that the \textit{Apophthegmata} developed from written \textit{paterika} kept by individual monasteries and made up of apothegms passed down earlier; comparing each \textit{paterikon} with others would have aided the redaction of a more comprehensive

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Chitty1999} Derwas J. Chitty, \textit{The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire} (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999), 60-61, 66-71; Graham Gould, \textit{The Desert Fathers Monastic Community} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9. As Chitty notes, some monks of Scete had already settled in Palestine in the last decades of the fourth century (Chitty 71).
\end{thebibliography}
collection of sayings, which could then become an exemplar to be copied and distributed to other communities.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite the ongoing sense of mystery regarding the origins of the text, the historical and theological context in which the \textit{Apophthegmata} were assembled can be judged with some certainty. The impetus for the writing of the text stemmed from a desire to preserve for posterity a tradition that might otherwise have been lost. The compilers of the \textit{Apophthegmata} regarded the destruction of the monastic centre at Scete in 407 and the dispersion of the ascetics who had lived there as a cataclysm of epic proportions; as one Scetiote elder said of the event, “The world has lost Rome, [and] the monks [have lost] Scete.”\textsuperscript{12} The Prologue of the Systematic Collection of the \textit{Apophthegmata} reflects this sense of loss, insisting that “the virtuous asceticism, the wondrous way of life, and the sayings of holy and blessed fathers” should be documented for the benefit of others who wish to follow their example, while also lamenting that “nobody has been able precisely to describe their virtuous life for us” and noting that surviving accounts remained “confused and disordered.”\textsuperscript{13} The transmission of the oral tradition was endangered not only by the dispersion of the monks of Scete but also by a hardening of doctrinal divisions following the Council of Chalcedon of 451, which ruptured ongoing contact between the monks of Egypt and those of Palestine. Moreover, as Douglas Burton-Christie puts it, an apparent perception among some Palestinian monks that “the ancient fervour from the early days of monasticism was being lost” deepened the desire “to revive and renew monasticism in its diaspora and in particular

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} \textit{AP Sys} 2:9.4-5 (Wortley 16). English-language quotations from the Systematic Collection of the \textit{Apophthegmata Patrum} are taken from the translation by John Wortley (\textit{The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers. Systematic Collection}, Cistercian Studies 240 [Collegeville, Minn.: Cistercian Publications/Liturgical Press, 2012]), which will be cited in parentheses in subsequent footnotes for ease of reference.
\item \textsuperscript{13} \textit{AP Sys} Prol 1.1-3, 3.1-2, 4.2 (Wortley 3).
\end{itemize}
among orthodox monastic circles” by collecting “the sayings of the greatest of the Egyptian heroes, supplemented with other heroes of the faith such as Basil, Gregory, and Epiphanius, whose names were without any trace of heresy.”

The composition of the *Apophthegmata* in Palestine also helped to ensure the spread of the text to other parts of the Christian world. Sixth-century Palestine was home to monks of various cultures and nationalities, including Armenians, Georgians, and Syrians as well as Egyptians, Greeks, and natives of the Latin-speaking West. By the time the *Apophthegmata* were compiled, Palestine – and not Egypt – was the major centre of pilgrimage for those seeking to observe and to embrace a pure and authentic form of Christian asceticism. This reality made Palestine the place where what Jean-Claude Guy calls “le trésor de l’Égypte monastique” was transmitted in such a way as to become available to Christendom as a whole. Once the text was established, the written transmission of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* from Palestine to other parts of the Christian world occurred very quickly, as attested by sixth-century translations into such languages as Armenian, Ethiopian, Latin, and Syriac as well as citations in ascetic literature in both East and West.

Based upon an oral tradition that went through multiple generations of retelling and potential embellishment before taking written form, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* are nevertheless considered to be reasonably accurate in their presentation of many features of ascetical life in fourth-century Egypt. In their studies of the manuscript tradition of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Wilhelm Bousset and Jean-Claude Guy both argue that the truthfulness of the sayings preserved

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in the text can be confidently asserted given that their rough and “non-literary” character has been consistently maintained even after extensive copying and editing of manuscripts; preserving the direct and often laconic character of conversational speech and lacking lengthy speeches or other obviously literary flourishes, the *Apophthegmata* retain a convincing air of verisimilitude.\(^{19}\) Other scholars such as Graham Gould, Nicholas Groves, and Lucien Regnault have come to the same conclusion, arguing for the reliability of the text.\(^{20}\) Even if one takes the basic veracity of the *Apophthegmata* for granted, a caveat offered by William Harmless regarding the fallibility of oral history is worth bearing in mind. “Memory can do all sorts of things,” Harmless writes, “It certainly records, but it also selects and edits; it can forget and make mistakes; it can even distort or suppress things.”\(^{21}\) For our purposes, what matters is not so much whether the *Apophthegmata* offer a verbatim record of actual sayings and stories from the Desert Fathers and Mothers but rather the values that are communicated by the text. Though the attribution of sayings to particular historical figures merits attention insofar as it helps us to acquire a sense of when the compilers of the *Apophthegmata* believed certain events to have occurred, the themes that the compilers sought to highlight are of greater interest to us than the question of whether or not the text offers a rigorously accurate documentary record of personalities and events.

Another salient feature of the textual history of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is the existence of two complementary and intertwined collections of apothegms, generally referred to as the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection and the Systematic Collection. The Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection contains two parts: the Alphabetical Collection (*Alphabetikon*), made up

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\(^{19}\) Bousset, 76-81; Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum*, 231-32.


of 1001 sayings organized alphabetically in Greek according to the name of the speaker or primary subject of each apothegm, and the Anonymous Collection (Anonyma), made up of 791 sayings whose primary speaker or subject is unidentified, for a total of 1792 sayings. Likely compiled somewhat later than the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection, the Systematic Collection (Systematikon) contains a total of 1197 sayings, including many apothegms found in the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection as well as others not present in the earlier collection, arranged by their unknown editor(s) in twenty-one chapters given thematic titles (‘Every Effort Should Be Made to Pursue Ἁςychia,’ ‘Sorrow for Sin,’ ‘One Should Pray without Ceasing,’ and so on). Despite considerable overlap in the content of the collections, the differences between them are also substantial: as William Veder notes, approximately fifty-six percent of the sayings in the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection are also found in the Systematic Collection, but the Systematic Collection also includes sixty apothegms absent from the earlier collection.\textsuperscript{22} Jean-Claude Guy argues that the many discrepancies and divergences between the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection and the Systematic Collection indicate that the latter is not a simple reorganization of the former but also reflects an intermediate phase of development incorporating other sources that have been lost.\textsuperscript{23} The fact that over forty percent of the sayings found in the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection are not included in the Systematic Collection may indicate that the compilers of the later collection did not have access to all of the material found in the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection, but it may also suggest that the editors of the Systematic Collection chose to cull the material before them in order to produce a more compact work; in either case, the dissimilar methods of organization adopted by the two collections result in marked differences in emphasis: the arrangement of the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection

\textsuperscript{22} Veder, \textit{Scete Paterikon}, 14.
stresses the variety of personalities found among the Desert Fathers and Mothers, whereas the Systematic Collection offers an arguably more explicit sense of the common concerns that motivated a diverse group of ascetics. As Jean-Claude Guy sums up the differences between the two main traditions of the *Apophthegmata*, the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection allows the reader to enter into a sort of vicarious spiritual friendship with past masters and the Systematic Collection shapes the words and experiences of those masters in an orderly spiritual pedagogy.  

The Prologue at the start of the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* helps to explain the distinctive goals that guided the editing of the text. While praising earlier collections for having “set down very many of the elders’ sayings and good deeds in narrative form, in simple and uncontrived language,” the Prologue suggests that the organization of the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection left the “meaning [of the apothegms] haphazardly spread throughout the book, which did not help the memory to keep track of it . . . [and] caused some difficulty in the reader’s mind.” Accordingly, the editors of the Systematic Collection “have moved to this arrangement by chapters, for it is able to provide very clear comprehension and ready benefit for those who wish it because a statement unanimously sustained by many virtuous persons makes no small contribution to the advance of virtue.”

Though much about its composition remains mysterious, the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* can nevertheless be seen as the culmination of a long process of textual evolution. Wilhelm Bousset compares the development of the *Apophthegmata* to the writing of the Synoptic Gospels, noting that both texts contain different strands of oral tradition woven together in written form and the contents of both were first recorded in a different language from

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25 *AP Sys* Prol 3.6-8, 4.2-4 (Wortley 3-4).
26 *AP Sys* Prol 4.4-10 (Wortley 4).
that in which they were first spoken. As Bousset observes, the role of the *Apophthegmata* as the “memorial monument” (*Erinnerungsdenkmal*) of Scetiotic monasticism is even more remarkable given the oral character of the tradition behind the text. Considering the transformation of the *Apophthegmata* from oral history to artfully curated text, Jean-Claude Guy notices a parallel movement from the particular to the universal, as maxims originally passed from elder to disciple were circulated to others for the benefit of the broader monastic community and ultimately edited and preserved for the instruction of later generations. Born out of the experience of the desert ascetics of Egypt, transmitted orally and then committed to text in the monasteries of Palestine and disseminated widely beyond, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* moved from a collection of private teachings to a treasury of spiritual maxims to be shared throughout the Christian world.

1.3 The Monastic Vocabulary of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

Any historical study of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* must be sensitive to questions of language and vocabulary. The use of terms in the *Apophthegmata* is doubly problematic insofar as the text reflects the transition of an oral tradition into writing as well as the translation of Coptic source material into Greek. The first problem is perhaps the more significant of the two, insofar as we do not know how closely the conversations recounted in the *Apophthegmata* reflect words actually spoken by the historical figures named in the text. The fact that Greek was widely spoken alongside Coptic in Late Antique Egypt makes it difficult to ascertain how Greek terms may have influenced speakers of Coptic, even if they were uneducated. For our purposes, what

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27 Bousset, 77, 90.
28 Bousset, 74.
matters most in reading the *Apophthegmata* is not the correspondence between Greek and Coptic terms but rather the way in which the Greek text would have been understood and received by its initial audience. Therefore, some attention must be paid to the monastic terminology that peppers the Greek text of the *Apophthegmata*.

A consistent textual feature of the apothegms is the adaptation of originally secular terms to a particularly religious context. A prime example of this phenomenon is the term ἀναχώρησις, as applied to the specific form of withdrawal practised by Christian ascetics. In pre-Christian authors such as Plato and Herodotus, the term ἀναχώρησις could be used to describe various forms of withdrawal, from an army’s retreat after a loss in battle to an individual’s deliberate retirement from public life. Following Jean Gribomont, Ewa Wipszycka emphasizes that in an Egyptian context ἀναχώρησις was generally understood as the flight into the desert undertaken by insolvent debtors. Wipszycka notes that ἀναχωρητής began to appear as a term designating ascetics in the middle of the fourth century, as attested by a surviving letter to an ἀναχωρητής named Paphnutius. By the time the *Apophthegmata Patrum* was compiled, ἀναχώρησις had acquired solidly religious connotations in Christian literature, with the ἀναχωρητής understood as one who had withdrawn from secular society for spiritual reasons.

The Greek word for ‘monk’ underwent a similar evolution from secular to specifically religious usage. In pre-Christian use, μοναχός conveyed the sense of an individual who was unique or alone, being used in this way by Aristotle among others (cf. *Metaphysics* 1040a29).

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35 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1143.
As Ewa Wipszycka notes, the term μοναχός was applied to ascetics before the birth of structured monasticism and was also used to describe ascetics of any type, regardless of whether they lived with others or by themselves.\(^\text{36}\) Françoise-E. Morard provides a catalogue of pre-Christian Greek texts that use μοναχός and related terms to describe forms of celibate and solitary life, further noting the term’s use in early Christian manuscripts to translate terms like the Hebrew yāhīd and the Syriac ihīdāyā, establishing continuity between celibate asceticism in early Christianity and earlier forms of solitary life which emphasized sexual continence.\(^\text{37}\) According to Morard, the defining feature of the μοναχός in its earliest usage was a chosen commitment to celibacy, rather than a sense of living apart from others.\(^\text{38}\) In this sense, the roots of the term μοναχός point to a different form of solitude than the geographic separation implicit in being an ἀναχωρητής, suggesting that the two states of life were not necessarily synonymous with one another.

Early uses of the term μοναχός in a Christian context show that dedicated ascetics had an acknowledged place in society. E. A. Judge notes that one of the earliest recorded uses of the term μοναχός in reference to a Christian ascetic comes from an Egyptian papyrus dating from 324, a legal document in which a farmer recounts how he was rescued from an assault by two neighbours thanks to the intervention of Ἀντωνίνου διάκονος καὶ Ἰσὰκ μοναχοῦ, “Antoninus the deacon and Isaac the monk.”\(^\text{39}\) As Malcolm Choat points out, the term is also used in a contract of roughly the same period, in which a μοναχός purchases a house.\(^\text{40}\) The appearance of the term μοναχός in secular legal documents reminds us that ascetics who lived at some remove from

\(^{36}\) Wipszycka, Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte, 292.


\(^{38}\) Morard, 381.


society still had a social role; as Judge puts it, “although they broke visibly with their ordinary domestic ties, they retained a place in society, and so required a name.” Indeed, a listing of uses of the terms μοναχός and ἀναχωρητής in surviving fourth-century Egyptian papyri attests to the imprint that these ascetics continued to leave upon society, as witnessed by receipts for goods bought and sold, services rendered, and responsibilities assumed.

The pattern of broadly ‘secular’ Greek terms acquiring deeper resonances in Christian usage is repeated in the case of a word that plays an important role in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, κόσμος. The term κόσμος held various meanings in the literature of Greek antiquity; it could have the connotation of ‘order’ in the sense of the order of things in general, or be applied to the ordering of objects in relation to one another or the order of institutions. Κόσμος was also used to describe the ‘world’ in a general sense, particularly as contrasted with the heavens or the underworld. A third meaning of κόσμος as ‘decoration’ or ‘ornament,’ sometimes used to describe items of jewelry, would later allow Origen to make a lovely play on words in describing the Church as the κόσμος τοῦ κόσμου, “the ornament of the world.” In Christian usage, the sense of the κόσμος as the ‘world’ became dominant, without ever completely displacing the word’s complementary meanings of ‘order’ or ‘ornament.’ As applied to the world, κόσμος could be used in various ways, from the world understood neutrally as the planet Earth to the world as the physical and temporal realm perceptible to the senses to the world as the secular sphere or the present age as contrasted with the Church. In the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the term κόσμος is invariably used to refer to the world as the secular

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41 Judge, 85.
43 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 985.
44 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 985.
sphere, a meaning which can generally be inferred from the context in which the term appears as well as from the use of other terms such as γῆς or οἰκουμένη or πόλις to refer to the ‘world’ in a physical sense or to inhabited communities outside of monastic settings.⁴⁷

In at least one instance, the text of the Apophthegmata Patrum explicitly defines the κόσμος as the secular world contrasted with the ascetic community committed to the values of the Gospel. After a disciple asks him what he means when he uses term κόσμος, Abba Isaiah of Scete explains, “The world [κόσμος] is distraction by affairs; the world is to perform what is contrary to nature and to satisfy one’s own desires of the flesh; the world is to think that one is remaining in this age; the world is to care for the body rather than for the soul and to boast of what you are leaving behind.”⁴⁸ To emphasize the scriptural basis of his teaching, Abba Isaiah cites John the Evangelist: “Love not the world [κόσμον], neither the things of the world” (1 Jn 2:15).⁴⁹ As seen here, the term κόσμος had an expansive meaning even in a specifically Christian context; Abba Isaiah’s words point to the world understood not merely as a physical place but as a collection of attitudes and behaviours which ascetics were to regard with caution and reserve.

Much like κόσμος, the related term κοσμικός acquires a fairly precise meaning in the Apophthegmata Patrum. Κοσμικός has the sense of “belonging to the world,” though the character of this belonging depends on the context in which the term appears. As Lampe’s Patristic Lexicon notes, κοσμικός could be used to refer to that which belonged to the sensate world as opposed to the spiritual realm beyond the senses, and it was also sometimes used to

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⁴⁷ For the use of γῆς in the sense of the planet Earth, see, e.g., AP Sys 3:19.10 (Wortley 28-29); for οἰκουμένη as a neutral reference to the human community, see AP Sys 4:64.9 (Wortley 49-50); the term πόλις appears in many instances and is used neutrally, e.g. in as for example when a monk who has returned from a visit to Alexandria is asked, “How are things in the city [πόλις]?” (AP Sys 4:66.3 [Wortley 50]).
⁴⁸ AP Sys 2:15.8-13 (Wortley 18).
⁴⁹ AP Sys 2:15.15 (Wortley 19).
refer to that which belonged to the entire world – that is, to what is universal.\textsuperscript{50} The use of κοσμικός to contrast the material with the spiritual anticipates somewhat its use to refer to those who were ‘worldly’ in the sense of being identified primarily with the culture of the present age, insofar as the term pointed to those who had not renounced the secular world in order to focus on the things of eternity. In the Apophthegmata, the term κοσμικός is applied particularly to human beings who belong to the world and are associated with its values.\textsuperscript{51}

\textbf{1.4 An Outline of the Present Thesis}

In this thesis, I shall analyze the ways in which the sayings contained in the Systematic Collection of the Apophthegmata Patrum treat the ‘world’ (κόσμος) and people who belong to the world (κοσμικοί). I have chosen to use the Systematic Collection as the basis for my inquiry for two reasons. Firstly, as noted above in the discussion of the history of the text of the Apophthegmata, the Systematic Collection is, in a certain sense, the ‘final’ version of the work; it does not include as many apothegms as the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection, but in contrast with the earlier collection it seeks to harmonize the diverse sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers into something approaching a common vision of the ascetic life. Though the thematic organization of the Systematic Collection imposes a greater sense of intellectual coherence upon the text than may be found in the Alphabetical-Anonymous Collection, some words of warning from Jean-Claude Guy should be kept in mind: “Les Apophthegmata Patrum . . . ne peuvent pas offrir une théologie unifiée de la vie monastique. Il faut les lire tels qu’ils sont : une multitude

\textsuperscript{50} Lampe, Patristic Greek Lexicon, 769.
\textsuperscript{51} The term κοσμικός is difficult to render elegantly in English. Benedicta Ward’s classic English translation of the Alphabetical Collection of the Apophthegmata Patrum rendered κοσμικός as ‘secular’; in his more recent translations of the Apophthegmata, John Wortley recognizes that ‘secular’ functions awkwardly as a noun in English and prefers the term ‘worldling’ instead (Wortley, The Book of the Elders, xxix).
d’expériences spirituelles particulières, parfois désordonnées, parfois même contradictoires.”

The thematic presentation of the Systematic Collection gives the text a semblance of order, but it remains a patchwork of different and often discordant voices rather than an internally consistent ascetical treatise. Beyond its particular means of organization, a second reason for my selection of the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata* is that it is the only version of the Greek text that has been presented in a modern critical edition. With the aid of earlier studies as well as my own analysis, I shall present a reading of important themes in the text that have not been emphasized in recent scholarship.

Recent studies have considered different aspects of the social context and rhetorical character of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, making a study of the treatment of the ‘world’ in the text particularly timely. The contours of relationships among desert ascetics and between ascetics and outsiders have been treated from various angles. Some studies have analyzed social interaction within the desert community and the maintenance of reputation within ascetical circles. Others have examined the impact of theological controversy and of the rhetoric of orthodoxy and heresy upon desert communities. Scholarly interest in issues related to gender has been reflected in studies of the treatment of women and children in the *Apophthegmata*

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53 Nevertheless, as Guy himself admits, the Desert Fathers and Mothers sought to instill a spiritual doctrine in their disciples even if they disagreed about the specifics. The sayings contained in the *Apophthegmata* reflect a context in which there were no monastic rules other than the ‘living rule’ of the *abba* or *amma*. As Guy writes, “À l’autorité de la Règle se substitue l’autorité de la Parole de l’ancien” (Guy, “Les Apophthegmata Patrum,” 75).


examination of the complex relationships between male ascetics in a predominantly homosocial environment. Recent articles on the place of sexuality in the *Apophthegmata* also analyze descriptions of sexual temptation in the text with attention to questions of race, gender, and personal identity. Elements of the rhetoric of the *Apophthegmata* have also been studied, including the use of scripture in the apothegms as well as in-depth analysis of particular terms and concepts that recur in the text.

Though the *Apophthegmata Patrum* has received considerable scholarly attention, the theme of the ‘world’ as such has not been treated in recent literature. This is not to say that scholars have ignored the tension between an ascetic ideal of strict separation from secular society and the reality of ongoing interaction between monks and the world; in his classic article “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” Peter Brown noted that two salient characteristics of organized ascetical life in Egypt were a conscious sense of a stark division between the desert and urban life as well as a necessary relationship between the two. As Brown wrote, “In Egypt, the antithesis between desert and settled land – between ἔρημος and οἰκουμένη


was stark enough in reality . . . and absolute in the imagination of Egyptians,” but nevertheless “[t]o survive at all in the hostile environment of such a desert, the Egyptian had to transplant into it the tenacious and all-absorbing routines of the village of the oikouμένη.” By considering how the rhetoric of the ‘world’ illuminates the ways in which desert ascetics related to the culture and society beyond their eremitical communities, my thesis will fill in a lacuna in the study of this important text. As I shall argue, the boundary between the ascetic community and secular society must be understood as an inherently porous one and the flight from the world undertaken by desert ascetics aimed not at mere escape from the world but at purification and transformation of the society from which the ascetics had ostensibly fled.

To provide essential background for the consideration of these themes, the second chapter of this thesis will consider some motives for desert ascetics’ withdrawal from the world. As seen in the text of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, many ascetics regarded physical separation both as a way to cultivate a more single-minded focus on God and as a means of distancing themselves from harmful aspects of contemporary society. Recognizing the difficulty of breaking all ties with the outsiders, some sayings also provide practical guidance on how ascetics could organize their lives in ways that helped to minimize the risks of engagement with the world.

In my third chapter, I shall examine how the world continued to exercise an influence upon the life of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Concrete signs of this influence included the role of commerce in the life of desert ascetics as well as the reception of visitors from outside the ascetic community, including members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy as well as laypeople seeking spiritual counsel. This chapter will also analyze the infiltration of external social

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influences into the desert community, particularly as seen through signs of decadence and laxity in monastic practice indicated in some of the apothegms.

The fourth chapter of this thesis will focus on how the Desert Fathers and Mothers understood their impact upon the world, particularly as this impact was expressed through interaction with outsiders. The desert ascetics’ teachings will also be analyzed with an eye to uncovering their intended impact on the life of Christians in the world. At the same time, further consideration will be given to the ascetics’ decision to withdraw from the world which they hoped to transform, with an effort to understand how the ascetics could continue to influence society from a place of separation.

The fifth and final chapter of this thesis will offer a brief concluding synthesis of the themes considered in the earlier chapters, considered through the lens of the text’s focus on asceticism as a means of personal and social transformation. For the desert ascetics who populate the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, flight from society was not an end in itself but part of an effort to create a new kind of human community shaped by a distinctive set of values. As presented in the *Apophthegmata*, the desert ascetics were not concerned solely with their own salvation but also sought to give others, including ostensibly ‘worldly’ laypeople, the tools to grow in holiness.
Chapter 2: Flight from the World

2.1 Introduction

Even after decades in the desert, some of the ascetics of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* remained intensely aware of their separation from worldly society. One apothegm recounts a meeting between Abba Macarius the Egyptian and two monks who had lived alone in the desert for forty years. The monks asked Macarius, “How is it with the world [κόσμος]? Does the water [of the Nile] rise at its appointed time? Is the world enjoying prosperity?”\(^1\) After answering their questions, Macarius asked the men how one could become a monk; he was told in reply, “A person cannot become a monk unless he renounces all that has to do with the world.”\(^2\) As the monks’ questions suggested, renouncing the world did not preclude a continuing interest in what went on there. At the same time, the monks recognized the difficulty of making a complete break with the world: when Macarius says that he feels too weak to follow their example, they urge him to “remain in your cell and weep for your sins.”\(^3\) In this apothegm, the ideal of renunciation is tempered by the awareness that ascetics may need to settle for something less than complete separation from the world.

This chapter will consider some of the motivations behind the desert ascetics’ withdrawal from the world. Many sayings in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* present physical separation from secular society as a prerequisite to spiritual progress, seeing human relationships as a distraction in the quest for God. Complementing this emphasis on separation from the world as a means of achieving greater focus, other apothegms underscore the marked contrast between monastic and worldly values; at times, suspicion of the world is tied to anxieties regarding doctrinal deviation

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\(^1\) *AP Sys* 20:4.20-22 (Wortley 362).
\(^2\) *AP Sys* 20:4.24-25 (Wortley 362).
\(^3\) *AP Sys* 20:4.27-28 (Wortley 362).
and sexual temptation. In light of such concerns and the recognition that total withdrawal from society was virtually impossible, the desert ascetics also offered concrete guidance on how to live in the spirit of renunciation even if one could not fully extricate oneself from worldly bonds.

### 2.2 Seeking God in the Desert

Many sayings in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* commend physical withdrawal from secular society as a salutary practice for dedicated ascetics. For example, Abba Isaiah maintains that flight from the world is necessary in order to “thrust oneself into the presence of God.” Asked to explain what he means by ‘the world,’ Abba Isaiah says:

> The world [κόσμος] is distraction by affairs; the world is to perform what is contrary to nature and to satisfy one’s own desires of the flesh; the world is to think that one is remaining in this age; the world is to care for the body rather than for the soul and to boast of what you are leaving behind. I do not say this on my own authority; it is the apostle John who says this: “Love not the world, neither the things of the world that are in the world” [1 Jn 2:15].

The idea that worldly distractions were a barrier to divine union is echoed in other apothegms. Offering a gloss on Christ’s injunction that “no man can serve two masters” (Mt 6:24), one elder explained that “[i]t is impossible for a man to experience the sweetness of God as long as he is experiencing the sweetness of the world [κόσμου]. But if, on the other hand, he tastes the sweetness of God, he will hate the world[]” Warning that monks “are unable to enjoy the sweetness of God as long as we long for human company and bodily repose,” the elder concluded that “if a person remains in his cell under the discipline of silence, dedicating himself wholeheartedly to prayer and work, he can be saved in this age [καιρῷ].”

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4 *AP Sys* 2:15.3-4 (Wortley 18).
5 *AP Sys* 2:15.7-15 (Wortley 18-19).
6 *AP Sys* 2:34.1-4 (Wortley 22).
7 *AP Sys* 2:34.5-11 (Wortley 22). Some desert ascetics used images from the natural world to argue for the necessity of physical separation from secular society. For example, Antony the Great observed that “fish die if they are on dry land for some time, [and] so do monks who loiter outside their cells [κελλίου] or waste time with worldlings.
salvation and flight is reaffirmed in an apothegm concerning the call to monastic life of Abba Arsenius, an erstwhile courtier who left Constantinople after being told in prayer, “Arsenius, flee from people and you shall be saved.”

For many ascetics, regular contact with others could inhibit spiritual progress even if such contact was benign. Abba Doulas urged monks to “cut off your relations with the multitude lest your mind become caught up in circumstances and disturb the mode of your ἡσυχία.” The implication given here and elsewhere is that cultivating relationships with others distracts one from the task of seeking God. As Abba Poemen put it, “Certainly he who seeks exclusively the friendship of folk distances himself from the friendship of God, so it is not a good thing to please everybody.” Wariness towards others could apply to fellow ascetics as well as outsiders; Abba Agathon suggested that monks should remain strangers to one another and avoid “familiar talking,” for such is “the originator of all the passions.” Some were ambivalent about this deliberate withdrawal; in one apothegm, Abba Mark asks Abba Arsenius, “Why do you run away from us?” Arsenius replies, “God knows that I love you, but I cannot be with God and with people.” More pointedly, another elder said, “Either make a clean break with humankind or make a fool of yourself, mocking humans and the world [κόσμῳ].” This saying could be interpreted in at least two different ways: the monk who fails to make a clean break with others

[κόσμικω] release themselves from the tensions of ἡσυχία” (AP Sys 2:1 [Wortley 15]). Similarly, Abba Moses argued that one “who flees from people [φεύγων τοὺς ἀνθρώπους] is like a bunch of ripe grapes, but he who is with people is like an unripe grape” (AP Sys 2:20 [Wortley 19]).

8 AP Sys 2:3.3-4 (Wortley 15).
9 AP Sys 2:14.1-3 (Wortley 18).
10 AP Sys 8:17.1-3 (Wortley 128).
11 AP Sys 10:11.11-14 (Wortley 145).
12 AP Sys 2:5.1-2 (Wortley 15).
13 AP Sys 2:5.2-4 (Wortley 15-16).
14 AP Sys 8:31.1-3 (Wortley 130).
seeks to balance relationships with God and with others in a way that will lead to failure; alternatively, the saying could also imply that the monk who cannot abandon the world should instead play the fool in a way that demonstrates his rejection of worldly values. On either interpretation, the underlying message remains the same: efforts to maintain relationships with other people could hinder one’s relationship with God.

Some apothegms treat flight from the world as a way for ascetics to maintain a single-minded focus on God. If the spiritual combat of the monk was an inner struggle, retreating from the company of others was an essential means of concentrating one’s attention on a vital task.\textsuperscript{15} As Antony the Great put it, “He who stays in the desert in ἡσυχία is released from fighting on three fronts: hearing, speaking, and seeing. He has only one to contend with: the heart.”\textsuperscript{16} Abba Isaiah of Scete emphasized the challenge inherent in ascetic withdrawal when he stated that, for the monk, “The first struggle of all is voluntary exile, especially in solitude.”\textsuperscript{17} After describing the intense spiritual combat and heightened temptations faced by solitary ascetics, Isaiah characterized voluntary exile as a situation in which “the goodness of God puts you to the test, to reveal your determination and your love for God.”\textsuperscript{18}

The challenge of living in solitude forced ascetics to regularly recommit to their way of life, meeting the temptation to moderate the terms of their withdrawal with the embrace of a more rigorous asceticism. In one apothegm, a disciple of Abba Sisoës urged the aging monk to move closer to an inhabited area; fearing that greater contact with outsiders would expose him to

\textsuperscript{15} Though the spiritual combat of monks was understood as a battle against external enemies – the Devil and demons – it was nevertheless carried out in solitude, with a focus on one’s own concentration and attitudes. As David Brakke puts it, “At its core the monk’s combat with the demons was an individual effort, an unrelenting struggle to maintain the integrity of one’s own self in the face of continual assault as one sat alone in one’s cell” (David Brakke, \textit{Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity} [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006], 147).
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{AP Sys} 2:2.1-3 (Wortley 15).
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{AP Sys} 7:8.1-2 (Wortley 99).
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{AP Sys} 7:8.9-10 (Wortley 99).
greater temptation, Sisoės moved further into the desert instead.\textsuperscript{19} Another apothegm recounts how an elder who lived twelve miles (\textit{μίλια}) from the nearest well and felt tempted to move closer to the water chose to move five miles further into the desert instead.\textsuperscript{20} Such actions receive implicit endorsement in one elder’s criticism of monks who refused to accept greater hardship when given the option: “If a monk knows of a place that has [the promise of] progress but where the necessities of life demand toil, and he does not go there on that account, such [a monk] does not believe that there is a God.”\textsuperscript{21}

Consistent with the text’s emphasis on withdrawal from the world, some sayings in the \textit{Apophthegmata} describe ascetics who spent years without seeing another person. One apothegm tells the story of a holy virgin who lived in a cave in the region of Scete without seeing anyone for thirty-eight years, while another recounts how a bishop who had apostatized under torture spent forty-nine years living alone in a remote hermitage, praying constantly to repent for his apostasy.\textsuperscript{22} The ability to endure long periods of physical isolation was seen as a sign of spiritual commitment, but ascetics were also urged to avoid taking excessive pride in their withdrawal from the world. Such is the apparent message of an apothegm concerning Abba Sisoės, who spent ten months in a mountain hermitage without seeing another person before meeting a hunter who had spent eleven months alone in the wilderness.\textsuperscript{23} Learning that the hunter had spent more time in solitude than he had – and that without any spiritual goal in mind – the chastened monk

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{AP Sys} 2:26.1-6 (Wortley 21).
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{AP Sys} 7:38.1-10 (Wortley 112-13).
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{AP Sys} 10:162.1-4 (Wortley 182).
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{AP Sys} 20:12.7-9 (Wortley 364); \textit{AP Sys} 20:16.35-53 (Wortley 369).
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{AP Sys} 20:5.1-8 (Wortley 362).
said to himself, “Look, Sisoës, you thought you had accomplished something, and in fact you have not yet accomplished what this worldling [κόσμικος] has done.”

2.3 The Contrast Between Worldly and Monastic Values

The emphasis given in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* to the importance of flight from the world is complemented by an attention to the contrast between monastic and worldly values. The superiority of life in the desert over life in the world was often taken for granted; as one elder asserted, “the order of monks is superior to that of the worldlings [κοσμικῶν].” Some ascetics also stressed that apparent virtues observed in the behaviour of worldlings were tainted by vice. For example, Synklētikē admitted that “[i]t is true that self-control seems to be practiced even by the worldlings [κοσμικοίς]; but thoughtlessness is present with it because they sin with their other senses[.]” Physical withdrawal from secular society also demanded a rejection of worldly values. As Antony the Great urged, “Let us hate the world [κόσμον] and all that is in it. . . . Let us renounce this life so we can live for God, for he will expect that of us on the Day of Judgment.” Abba Isaiah spoke equally strongly: “Hate everything in the world [κόσμῳ] and repose of the body, for these made you an enemy of God.” The embrace of hardship and the rejection of worldly things went hand in hand, for as one saying put it, the task of the ascetic was to “consider the misfortune; accept the pain; condemn the vanity of the world [κόσμου].”

Some apothegms move beyond a general condemnation of worldliness in order to name particular values that ascetics should reject. Worldly values were sometimes seen as synonymous

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24 *AP Sys* 20:5.9-11 (Wortley 362).
26 *AP Sys* 4:49.3-5 (Wortley 48).
27 *AP Sys* 3:1.3-6 (Wortley 25).
28 *AP Sys* 1:10.1-3 (Wortley 7).
29 *AP Sys* 3:2.3-4 (Wortley 25).
with spiritually harmful λογίσμοι such as avarice, gluttony, pride, and vainglory. The love of wealth was held up for particular scorn. Abba Isidore warned, “It is impossible for you to live a godly life if you love pleasure and money,” adding that those who desire salvation should “despise money and obtain the divine reward.” In similar terms, Amma Synklētikē advised that one should “not let the delight in worldly wealth delude you into thinking that it is of any use.” Synklētikē applied this line of criticism to other worldly preoccupations such as excessive concern for food; as Synklētikē suggested, worldlings “esteem the art of cooking for their pleasure, but [ascetics] transcend their plentiful supply of victuals by fasting and cheap commodities . . . Do not stuff yourself with bread, and you will not long for wine.” Decrying worldly gluttony, another elder warned against “indiscriminate eating and drinking,” which “generates every evil.” Grouping several worldly vices together, one apothegm warns of “the things that chase the remembrance of God from the soul: anger, contempt, the desire to teach, and the vain language of this world [κόσμου τούτου], while long-suffering, gentleness, and every godly undertaking bring love.”

An ascetic’s repudiation of worldly values was sometimes accompanied by particularly tangible signs of separation from secular society such as the severing of family ties. Willingness to forsake family relationships reflected a dedication to asceticism that superseded all other

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30 The categorization of eight λογίσμοι presented by Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345-399) originated among the ascetic communities of the Egyptian desert, where Evagrius spent the last years of his life. For a discussion of the Egyptian origins of Evagrius’s λογίσμοι, see: Columba Stewart, “Evagrius Ponticus and the ‘Eight Generic Logismoi,’” in In the Garden of Evil: The Vices and Culture in the Middle Ages, ed. Richard Newhauser (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2000), 3-34.
33 AP Sys 4:51.2-7 (Wortley 48).
34 AP Sys 4:90.1-4 (Wortley 55). Another apothegm links the control of eating to other forms of bodily discipline: “Do not eat until you are famished, do not sleep until you are nodding off, and do not speak before being asked” (AP Sys 4:95.1-3 [Wortley 56]).
commitments. Two apothegms describe parents who enter the monastic life and are commanded by elders to put their children to death; patterned on the account of Abraham’s binding of Isaac in Gen 22:2-14, these apothegms emphasize the obedience of the monks in question – once they have shown their willingness to comply with this command, they are ordered to spare their children.\textsuperscript{36} Less dramatic but equally telling are apothegms treating relationships with parents and siblings. Abba Poemen’s mother went into the desert to try to visit her son but was left weeping at the gate of his monastery when Poemen refused to see her; realizing that she would not go away until he had spoken to her, Poemen later met with his mother and persuaded her that she would need to be content not to see him in the present life if she wished to see him in the next.\textsuperscript{37} In another instance, a monk whose mother repeatedly sought to visit him was ordered by an elder to meet with her; the monk complied, but in doing so he begged the elder not to repeat the order so that he would not be compelled to disobey it.\textsuperscript{38} In all of these cases, the ascetics of the \textit{Apophthegmata} do not condemn family ties as such but instead show that a commitment to asceticism presupposes a turning away not only from harmful aspects of secular society but from all that gives a sense of worldly belonging and identity.

\textbf{2.4 The Struggle for Purity}

In various places in the text of the \textit{Apophthegmata Patrum}, suspicion of the world is linked with a concern for doctrinal purity. Elders often admonished their followers to avoid the company of heretics, sometimes listed with others whom ascetics would do well to avoid. For

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{AP Sys} 14:15.1-10 (Wortley 237); \textit{AP Sys} 14:28.1-24 (Wortley 242).
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{AP Sys} 4:40.12-22 (Wortley 46).
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{AP Sys} 14:12.11-15 (Wortley 236). Caution regarding contact between ascetics and their relatives could extend even to situations involving siblings who were also in religious life. One apothegm concerns a brother and sister who belonged to different monasteries; hearing that his sister had fallen ill, the brother attempted to visit her. Denied entrance to the women’s monastery, the monk was given a message from his sister: “My brother, go and pray for me, and by the grace of Christ, I shall see you in the kingdom of heaven” (\textit{AP Sys} 4:74.5-7 [Wortley 52]).
example, Abba Chomai told his disciples: “Do not dwell with heretics; do not become acquainted with persons in power.” Placing the threat of sexual temptation and the risk of doctrinal deviation on the same level, another elder urged: “Maintain no friendship with a woman, with a child [παιδίου], or with heretics.” Admonitions to avoid friendship with heretics could be applied even to those with whom one had a prior relationship; Abba Theodore of Phermē urged that monks should be ready to help friends who struggled with πορνεία but should sever ties with friends who embraced heretical views and could not be persuaded of their error.

Showing how concern for orthodoxy could be tied to care for personal reputation, Abba Agathon allowed himself to be falsely labeled as an arrogant gossip who slandered others and was given to πορνεία but objected to being called a heretic, reasoning that being accused of the other faults was good for his soul but that being called a heretic implied eternal separation from God. As practical helps against falling into heresy, some apothegms advise ascetics to avoid discussing doctrinal questions and not to speak about the interpretation of scripture. Though many desert ascetics enjoyed the benefits of a classical education, not sharing one’s knowledge too freely provided a means of avoiding trouble as well as a check on one’s pride.

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39 AP Sys 1:27.2-3 (Wortley 12).
40 AP Sys 1:34.4-5 (Wortley 13).
41 AP Sys 10:32.1-6 (Wortley 150).
43 For counsels against the discussion of doctrine, see AP Sys 14:16 (Wortley 237) and AP Sys 15:27 (Wortley 254). On the desire to avoid the interpretation of scripture, particularly noteworthy are apothegms in which Abba Amoun and Abba Poemen urge that discussions of “passions of the soul” (παθῶν ψυχῆς) and the words of the elders (λόγοι τῶν γερόντων) were both preferable to discussions of scripture (AP Sys 10:54.33 [Wortley 156]; AP Sys 11:56.9-14 [Wortley 201]).
44 One of the most erudite of the Desert Fathers, the former imperial official Abba Arsenius, declined to comment on scripture or to write letters, the better to avoid offering teachings that could be misinterpreted (AP Sys 15:11.1-4 [Wortley 249]). As Elizabeth Clark notes, the topos of reticence emphasized in the Apophthegmata belies evidence from other sources suggesting that many desert ascetics were learned and sophisticated exegetes (Elizabeth A. Clark, Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999], 54).
Many sayings in the *Apophthegmata* present the secular world not merely as a source of risky ideas but also as a licentious place where even experienced ascetics were liable to succumb to sexual temptation. The presence of all kinds of temptation was taken for granted even in the desert; Antony the Great famously warned that each monk should “expect temptation until his last breath.” Elsewhere, Abba Pachōn emphasized that struggles against lust would continue in the desert, even though a lack of contact with outsiders and forms of physical privation such as the lean monastic diet could also help monks to reduce the risk of sexual temptation. In itself, sexual licence was not necessarily the greatest temptation faced by monks: one elder proposed that the bearing of grudges was the worst spiritual malady to which monks were prone. Nevertheless, cautionary tales regarding monks who fell into sexual sin on account of contact with worldlings appear frequently in the *Apophthegmata*. For example, one apothegm relates how an elder who fell ill at Scete returned to the world to avoid burdening other ascetics with the task of caring for him; rejecting warnings about the risk of πορνεία, the elder moved in with a pious virgin who nursed him back to health. Following his recovery, the elder began a sexual relationship with his caregiver and conceived a child with her. Full of regret for his actions, the elder returned to Scete with his infant son and admonished the brethren to “secure yourselves, for it was in my old age that I did this [i.e., fathered a child]; and do you pray for me.”

45 *AP Sys* 15:2.3-4 (Wortley 246). A saying absent from the Systematic Collection but attributed to Antony the Great in the Alphabetical Collection treats the experience of temptation as essential: “Nobody who has not been tempted will be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, for take away temptations and nobody is being saved” (John Wortley, ed. and trans., *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers* [Yonkers, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014], 32).

46 *AP Sys* 5:54.14-22 (Wortley 54-55).

47 *AP Sys* 10:187.3-8 (Wortley 187).

48 *AP Sys* 5:40.1-9 (Wortley 74).

49 *AP Sys* 5:40.9-10 (Wortley 74-75).

50 *AP Sys* 5:40.17-20 (Wortley 75).
The pattern of the desert ascetic returning to the world and yielding to sexual temptation recurs in various apothegms. One apothegm relates how an elderly anchorite went into the city to sell baskets he has woven; “derailed by his lack of caution,” the anchorite met a woman and had sexual relations with her.\(^{51}\) Initially despairing of his fall, the anchorite later regained his spiritual insight after a prolonged regimen of prayer and fasting.\(^{52}\) A similar dynamic appears in an apothegm about an ascetic who had a brief sexual encounter with a woman he met while drawing water from a river; tempted to abandon the monastic life, the ascetic cried in despair, “There is no salvation for you anymore, so why do you deprive yourself of the world \([κόσμον]\)?”\(^{53}\) Like the anchorite in the preceding apothegm, this ascetic came to his senses and resumed his earlier way of life.\(^{54}\) Some apothegms dealing with the problem of sexual temptation in the world focus less on the sins of individuals than on the effect that their actions had on their fellow ascetics, demonstrating the ways in which some elders sought to reconcile their wayward brethren or gave them advice on how to achieve greater self-mastery.\(^{55}\) At the same time, the emphasis on the repentance of fallen monks offers an unmistakable moral lesson, sending the message that even those who lapsed into sinful ways after embracing asceticism would still do well to “deprive [themselves] of the world” instead of surrendering to the ongoing threat of temptation.

The consistent emphasis on repentance found in these sayings reveals a distinctive trait of desert ascetics which implicitly set them apart from those who remained in the world. Though

\(^{51}\) AP Sys 5:46.1-10, 18-20 (Wortley 79-80). The text lays great emphasis on the elder’s naïveté, particular as it stands in contrast with the reputation he enjoyed among others: “this hitherto greatly admired elder, [was] famous and renowned in the eyes of his visitors (even though he had no experience of the great craftiness of the trapper)” and thus easily fell into the trap set for him by the Devil (AP Sys 5:46.14-18 [Wortley 80]).

\(^{52}\) AP Sys 5:46.34-100 (Wortley 80-82).

\(^{53}\) AP Sys 5:47.1-7 (Wortley 82-83).

\(^{54}\) AP Sys 5:47.10-18 (Wortley 83).

\(^{55}\) Apothegms treating these themes include AP Sys 5:31 (Wortley 70), AP Sys 5:32 (Wortley 70-71), AP Sys 5:39 (Wortley 74), and AP Sys 5:52 (Wortley 85).
still prone to sin on account of their human weakness, monks possessed the resources to recover their spiritual equilibrium after they fell:

A brother questioned an elder, “If a monk falls into sin, he is distressed because he has gone from progressing to regressing. He labours away until he recovers, whereas a person coming in from the world [κόσμου] makes progress as one starting from the beginning.” In answer the elder said, “A monk who yields to temptation is like a house that has fallen down. If he keeps a steady watch over his thoughts and wishes to rebuild the house that fell down, he will find many materials (such as foundations, stones, and in-fill), and he can make better progress than the person who has neither excavated nor laid a foundation and has nothing that he needs but lives in hope that his work will one day be finished. This is how it is for the one engaged in the monastic endeavor if he yields to temptation then returns [to the fight]. He has many advantages: meditation, psalm singing, and manual labour – these are the foundations. The monk regains his former status while the debutant is learning these things.”

As this apothegm explains, monastic practices provided a foundation that worldlings lacked. Individuals who wished to maintain continence but lacked the spiritual grounding possessed by monks might be tempted to despair, finding that they must “progress as one starting from the beginning” each time they encountered a setback. By contrast, the practice of both common and personal prayer and shared work helped monks to “rebuild the house that fell down” when they sinned. In the battle to overcome sin, commitment to the disciplines of the monastic life served as a powerful weapon.

Beyond the sayings regarding monks’ experiences of sexual temptation in the world, the *Apophthegmata* features other material treating sexual licence as a distinguishing characteristic of secular society. A common theme is the difficulty – and frequent failure – experienced by devout laypeople seeking to live continently in the world. One apothegm relates how a pious young woman tried to support herself after the death of her parents by turning her family home into a religious hostel; running low on money, she began to accept unsavoury boarders and

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eventually became a prostitute.57 Another apothegm tells the story of a devout virgin living in the city who was raped by a neighbour and decided to forsake her virgin’s habit [σχῆμα] as a result, inconsolable at the loss of her virginity.58 Given such grim realities, flight from the world may have seemed to be the most sensible option for those who wished to live in continence. One can draw this conclusion from an apothegm concerning a pious virgin who explained her decision to live as a hermit by describing the lives of her parents: her father was a devout man who struggled with physical illness and lived a secluded existence that made him a stranger to his neighbours, while her mother engaged in excessive drinking, gossip, sexual promiscuity, and extravagant spending.59 After both of her parents had died, the virgin had a vision in which she saw her father in heaven and her mother in hell; observing the reward of the former and the punishment of the latter, the virgin resolved to become a dedicated ascetic.60 Even if one could find models of virtuous living in the world like that of the virgin’s father, these good examples still supported the conclusion that the life of the desert was preferable to the life of the city.

In a roundabout way, taking note of what they perceived as the depravity of the world sometimes led monks to examine their own consciences; one apothegm notes how Abba Pambo visited Alexandria and saw “a woman of the theatre” (γυναῖκα θεατρικὴν) whose behaviour caused him to weep; as Pambo commented, “Two things moved me: one was her destruction, the other that I do not make such an effort to please God as she makes to please shameful men.”61 Pambo’s awe at the woman’s devotion to her work and his corresponding sorrow at his own lack of zeal is all the more striking when contrasted with the unambiguously negative view of worldly

58 AP Sys 3:49.2-6 (Wortley 35-36).
59 AP Sys 18:45.44-22 (Wortley 333).
60 AP Sys 18:45.64-135 (Wortley 334-36).
61 AP Sys 3:32. 3, 4-7 (Wortley 32).
excess presented in many other apothegms. In some sense, the world could be seen not merely as a source of temptation to be avoided by monks but also as a mirror that challenged ascetics to consider their own faults and to more ardently seek the way of salvation.

2.5 Practical Advice for Living

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* is filled with practical advice on how to live in a fallen world. Awareness of divine judgment was paramount, with some apothegms treating repentance as an essential marker of the difference between dedicated ascetics and worldlings. As one elder warned, “If it were possible at the coming of God after the resurrection, for people’s souls to die from fear, the whole world [κόσμος] would die from terror and bewilderment. . . . We should therefore live as those who are required by God to render a daily account of our way of life.”

Other apothegms advise constant weeping for one’s sins and the avoidance of laughter. To encourage a spirit of recollection, some apothegms emphasize the value of remaining in one’s monastic cell. Abba Moses told a disciple that “your cell will teach you everything,” and other elders accord similar importance to stability of place.

In line with the emphasis of some sayings on the world as a place of temptation, one apothegm tells of a monk who left the desert to attend to family business and subsequently fell into sin and abandoned the monastic life; as reported, the moral of the story is one that applies more widely: “a monk should never, for any reason whatsoever, be persuaded by anybody ever to go out of his cell.”

More than merely recommending physical withdrawal from secular society, the ascetics of the *Apophthegmata* also provided practical guidance on how to persevere in monastic life.

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63 *AP Sys* 3:41.1-3 (Wortley 35); *AP Sys* 3:42.1-3 (Wortley 35); *AP Sys* 3:44.2-4 (Wortley 35); *AP Sys* 3:55.7-8 (Wortley 37).
64 *AP Sys* 2:19 (Wortley 19); *AP Sys* 7:62.1-25 (Wortley 122); *AP Sys* 8:12.8-11 (Wortley 126).
65 *AP Sys* 7:31.136-37 (Wortley 111).
One apothegm takes up the question, “How ought the brothers to be living?” The answer given is as broad as it is direct: “In great asceticism, and guarding their conscience with respect to their neighbour.”⁶⁶ Abba Poemen answered more specifically when he stated that “three things are of capital importance: that you fear the Lord; that you pray to God without ceasing; and that you do good to your neighbour.”⁶⁷ Poemen noted the importance of personal example, urging those who wished to advance in asceticism to seek virtuous mentors and to avoid unedifying companions.⁶⁸

Another apothegm directs that “each [monk] therefore [should] elect to edify each other [ἀλλήλους], and he will be considered worthy of the kingdom of heaven,” such that the task of giving a good example was not limited to teachers but rather incumbent upon all monks.⁶⁹

Recognizing that worldly attitudes could continue to influence those who had chosen to live in the desert, some elders urged an explicit inversion of values. This is particularly notable in apothegms touching on themes of education and social class. In one saying, the aristocratic Abba Arsenius was asked why a monk with “such a command of Greek and Roman learning” would seek the advice of an elder of humbler background. Arsenius replied, “A command of Greek and Roman learning I have, but I have not yet learned the alphabet of this peasant.”⁷⁰ Another saying recounts how an elder asked Arsenius why well-educated monks seemed to struggle to grow in virtue while the uneducated appeared to excel; as Arsenius explained, “We have nothing from the world’s education, but these Egyptian peasants have acquired the virtues from their own labours.”⁷¹ As Elizabeth Clark observes, this inversion in values betokened more than a mere rejection of social norms: “To claim oneself as humble, afflicted, and poor could also serve a

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⁶⁶ AP Sys 4:86.4-6 (Wortley 54-55).
⁶⁷ AP Sys 11:61.1-3 (Wortley 202).
⁶⁸ AP Sys 11:59.3-5 (Wortley 202); AP Sys 11:63.1-2 (Wortley 202).
⁶⁹ AP Sys 12:25.20-22 (Wortley 222-23).
⁷⁰ AP Sys 15:7.5-7 (Wortley 247).
⁷¹ AP Sys 10:7.4-6 (Wortley 144).
theological purpose, namely, that through cultivating this self-understanding, Christians might imitate God’s merciful condescension to humankind in the Incarnation.”72 Other scholars note that the literary image of the unlettered ascetic belies the fact that many monks came from the educated elite, and the ascription of illiteracy to figures such as Antony the Great was more a theological trope than a historical reality.73 Even if artificial, the image of the marginal monk reiterated the sense in which the desert ascetics had set themselves against worldly society.

2.6 Conclusion

In articulating the reasons for their separation from the world, the ascetics of the Apophthegmata Patrum showed a hard-nosed realism as well as a commitment to rigorous practice. The understanding of the κόσμος that prevails in the Apophthegmata is largely that presented in a saying of Abba Isaiah of Scete discussed earlier in this chapter: “The world is distraction by affairs; the world is to perform what is contrary to nature and to satisfy one’s own desires of the flesh; the world is to think that one is remaining in this age[.]”74 This sense of the world as a place of distraction underlies the desire to flee from secular society for the sake of achieving a more single-minded focus on God. At the same time, the text also presents broad concerns about the state of society, from perceptions of doctrinal deviation and sexual licence to

72 Clark, 55.
74 AP Sys 2:15.8-11 (Wortley 18).
a more general conviction that monastic values stood in tension with worldly care for material possessions and personal reputation.

The emphasis given in the *Apophthegmata* to the distinction between the desert and the world is complemented by various sayings portraying solitude and withdrawal as the surest paths to salvation. As seen in some of the sayings discussed in this chapter, those who tried to maintain their virtue in the world often failed due to apparently omnipresent temptations and negative influences. Apothegms regarding monks who succumbed to sexual temptation while away from the desert also emphasize that ascetical practices offered monks tools that helped them to regain their spiritual balance, reinforcing the view that dedicated asceticism was both distinctive and superior to life in the world. In a roundabout way, the image of the world as a sinful place also had the power to motivate monks to a more intense asceticism: such is the message of Abba Pambo’s weeping over the woman of the theatre in Alexandria, as the elder became more convinced of his own mediocrity. More generally, the many sayings that speak of the vices and problems of the world also speak to a keen awareness that the world remained an alluring place even for those who had chosen to withdraw to the desert. Told that “such and such a brother has gone back to the world’ [κόσμον],” Abba Theodore of Phermē soberly replied, “Do not be surprised at that; rather, be surprised if you hear that somebody has been able to escape from the jaws of the enemy.”

As Theodore recognized, victory in the battle with worldly temptations was an elusive goal. As we shall see in the following chapters, awareness of the impossibility of completely leaving the world led many ascetics to engage with secular society in creative and thoughtful ways that belied an emphasis on the importance of withdrawal.

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75 *AP Sys* 10:34.2-5 (Wortley 150).
Chapter 3: The World in the Desert

3.1 Introduction

Despite their efforts to separate themselves from worldly distractions, some of the ascetics featured in the *Apophthegmata* would admit the impossibility of complete separation from the world. Confidence in one’s own ability to overcome the world could be seen as a form of hubris that made one more vulnerable to the wiles of the Devil. One apothegm recounts a conversation between two elders in which one says to the other, in an apparent boast, “I am dead to the world” (Ἐγὼ ἀπέθανον τῷ κόσμῳ).

In reply, the second elder warns, “Do not be so sure of yourself until you have departed out of this body. For [even] if you say, ‘I have died,’ Satan has not died.” This admonition regarding the ongoing threat posed by Satan parallels similar warnings elsewhere in the *Apophthegmata*, such as Antony the Great’s statement that every person should “expect temptation until his final breath.”

Ascetics who sought to demonstrate their freedom from temporal things were ultimately brought to a deeper and humbler awareness of their creaturely limitations. John Colobos reportedly expressed the desire to “be free of concern just as the angels are free of concern” and consequently cast off his outer garment (ἱμάτιον) and went off into the desert alone.

Returning a week later and appearing at the gates of his monastery, John faced the reproach of one of his brethren who said that “John has become an angel and is no longer among humans.” After waiting all night outside the gates, John was

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1 *AP Sys* 11:81.2 (Wortley 206).
2 *AP Sys* 11:81.3-5 (Wortley 206).
3 *AP Sys* 15:2.3-4 (Wortley 246).
4 *AP Sys* 10:36.2-5 (Wortley 151).
5 *AP Sys* 10:36.9-10 (Wortley 151).
readmitted to the community and told the lesson that he should take from the experience: “See, you are human, so you will have to get back to work again in order to feed yourself.”

This chapter will consider how the *Apophthegmata Patrum* reveals the palpable influence of the outside world upon the lives of desert ascetics. To some extent, the ascetics who populate the text recognized the need for accommodation to the realities of secular life, especially insofar as they had to produce and sell goods at market in order to support themselves. At the same time, some sayings indicate concerns regarding the encroachment into the desert of negative influences from secular society, particularly revealed in a perceived decline in the rigour of monastic observance and in the acceptance of a worldlier lifestyle. Beyond monastic commerce, one of the most tangible ways in which ascetics interacted with the world was in the reception of visitors; the reluctance and occasional hostility with which some ascetics greeted outsiders was belied by examples of hospitality that reflected a dynamic relationship of mutual exchange between monks and guests from outside their communities.

### 3.2. Monastic Commerce

A concrete sign of accommodation to temporal realities comes in sayings of the *Apophthegmata* concerning monastic commerce. Even though they had distanced themselves from secular society, desert ascetics remained dependent upon outsiders for the provision of practical necessities like food and household implements for their cells; as a result, ascetics were often obliged to practise trades such as basket-weaving and to sell the work of their hands at market to raise money to pay for the goods that they needed to survive. The idea that monks should support themselves through their own labour finds broad acceptance in the

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6 AP Sys 10:36.13-14 (Wortley 151).
7 Wipszycka, *Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte*, 471, 475. At times, monks would also support themselves by means other than the production of finished goods; for example, some would hire themselves out as farmworkers during the time of the harvest (Chitty, *The Desert a City*, 34).
Apophthegmata, even being treated in some sayings as a vital complement to prayer. Manual labour is presented alongside such practices as fasting, meditation, silence, and the recitation of the psalms as among the foundational practices of monastic life, offering a means of overcoming temptation and recovering one’s spiritual discipline if one falls into sin.\(^8\) One elder urged that if a monk “remains in his cell under the discipline of silence, dedicating himself wholeheartedly to prayer and work [ἔργῳ], he can be saved in this age [καιρῷ].”\(^9\) Another elder put the matter more succinctly when someone came to him as he was braiding rope and asked what was essential for salvation; “not looking up from his work [ἔργον],” the elder answered, “What you see here.”\(^10\)

Though manual labour was accepted as a salutary element of monastic life, the practical necessity of engaging in commerce with the outside world led to conflicts and tensions. Even before an ascetic left his cell to go and sell his wares, he had to consider how producing goods that would be sold at market impacted his sense of vocation. The monastic practice of voluntary poverty could be taken to include a suspicion of money; two sayings attributed to Abba Isidore of Scete include an injunction to “despise money” as well as a warning that “[i]t is impossible for you to live a godly life if you love pleasure and money.”\(^11\) The need to produce goods for sale in order to procure the necessities of life may have encouraged an inversion in monastic values that led Abba Theodore of Phermē to observe that “[w]hen I was at Scete, the spiritual tasks [ἔργα τῆς ψυχῆς] were our work [ἔργον]; we regarded manual labour [ἐργόχειρον] as a hobby [πάρεργον]. But nowadays the spiritual tasks have become a hobby and the [former] hobby the

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\(^8\) AP Sys 5:22.11-14 (Wortley 66); AP Sys 10:93.3-5 (Wortley 165).

\(^9\) AP Sys 2:34.8-11 (Wortley 22). In a similar vein, an apothegm concerning Abba Serapion includes advice to a restless monk to “remain in your cell, paying attention to yourself and your handwork [τῷ ἐργασία σου]” (AP Sys 8:12.8-10; Wortley 126).

\(^10\) AP Sys 21:6.2 (Wortley 377). In another apothegm, an elder who provides a long list of practices conducive to salvation – maintaining custody of one’s senses, telling the truth, praying the psalms, and so on – ends the list by offering a similar admonition: “Oblige yourself to perform the work of your hands [τῷ ἐργασία σου] and the fear of God will live in you” (AP Sys 5:53.18-19; Wortley 86).

\(^11\) AP Sys 6:12 (Wortley 92); AP Sys 6:13 (Wortley 92).
work!” At the very least, the practice of commerce placed demands on ascetics’ time and attention that made a single-minded focus on prayer and a conscious rejection of worldly things harder to sustain.

Engaging in commerce also presented practical challenges for desert ascetics. As Ewa Wipszycka observes, returning from the disciplined life of the desert to the worldly marketplace represented a “profound shock” even if the return was brief and episodic. As demonstrated in an apothegm discussed in the preceding chapter, trips to the marketplace sometimes left monks vulnerable to the dangers of sexual temptation. The haggling over prices expected of merchants could also prove a challenge to ascetics who sought to be as self-effacing as possible. One apothegm records a conversation between Abba Pistamon and a brother who felt some scruples about engaging in commerce and asked the elder, “What am I to do, for I am embarrassed to go selling my handwork [ἐργόχειρον]? In reply, Pistamon observed that great ascetics of the past had also sold their handwork, adding the practical suggestion that “when you are selling, [you should] say the price of the item once, then if you wish to lower the price a little, it is up to you. This way you will find repose.” Still a bit uncertain, the brother pressed the point further by asking whether he should stop making goods for sale if he could obtain the necessities of life by other means. Pistamon answered in the negative: “However much you possess, do not abandon your handwork. Do what you can, only do it untroubled.”

Consistent with the emphasis given elsewhere on the importance of manual labour as one of the pillars of the monastic life, Pistamon’s counsel suggests that active engagement with the

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12 AP Sys 10:33.3-6 (Wortley 150).
13 Wipszycka, Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte, 486-87.
14 AP Sys 5:46.1-10, 18-20 (Wortley 79-80).
15 AP Sys 6:15.1-2 (Wortley 93).
16 AP Sys 6:15.5-7 (Wortley 93).
17 AP Sys 6:15.10-11 (Wortley 93).
tensions produced by monastic commerce should be preferred to a desire to abandon such commerce in order to eliminate such tensions. Given the purpose of the *Apophthegmata* to provide instruction and edification, this apothegm can be taken to offer a lesson and a word of encouragement to monks who had to live by the fruit of their toil and sought to preserve the spirit of recollection and withdrawal as they did so. With engagement with the world recognized as a practical necessity, the advice given by Abba Pistamon offers the reassurance that desert ascetics could maintain their spiritual equilibrium while remaining engaged in ‘worldly’ business.

### 3.3 Monastic Decadence and ‘Worldly’ Influences

Sayings pointing to perceptions of decline in the rigour of monastic observance are scattered throughout the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Some apothegms suggest that the teachings of earlier generations were being ignored, as exemplified by the lament of an unnamed elder: “The prophets composed the books, [and] then came our fathers. They worked at them and learned them by heart. Then there came this generation; they wrote them out, [and] then set them aside in casements, unused.”

This perceived inattention to the wisdom of the elders provoked various reactions. Abba Isidore reportedly left Scete because he no longer found the kind of austerity there that he saw as essential to the life of a monk. In another apothegm, Abba Isaac of the Cells bitterly informed his disciples: “I am not giving you any more instructions, for you do not observe them.” Some related the decline in ascetic observance to a growing worldliness, as Amma Synklētikē did when she declared, “There are many in mountains acting like city dwellers [δημοτῶν] who are perishing and many in cities [πόλεσιν] doing the deeds of the desert [ἐρήμου

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19 *AP Sys* 7:20.4-5 (Wortley 103).
20 *AP Sys* 6:10.5-6 (Wortley 92).
_changes in an ascetic’s spiritual disposition could have a far-reaching impact; one apothegm tells the story of an elder who had acquired a reputation as an exorcist but then became too devoted to earthly concerns and to the fame that came with his position, thus losing the ability to cast out demons on account of his worldliness.  

One of the most notable signs of monastic decline described in the Apophthegmata is an erosion of charity among monks. Some elders noted the apparent prevalence of gossip, which occurred even during church services and focused on such things as monks’ personal eating habits. Others lamented how the rise in gossip contrasted with the edifying conversation that once prevailed among monks, a change that eroded bonds of harmony but also weakened the spiritual fruits attained by prayer and ascetical practice. One apothegm makes the connection between the rise of gossip and the decline of holiness very explicit:

Somebody asked an elder, “How is it that nowadays there are those who labour each in his way of life but do not receive grace the way those of old did?” “There was love in those times,” the elder replied, “and each one promoted his neighbour. But now that love has grown cold, each one demotes his neighbour; that is why we do not receive grace.”

In a similar vein, another apothegm recounts an elder’s complaint that “we used to meet together with each other and used to speak of [spiritual] benefit . . . Now when we are assembled, it is for slander, and we are dragging ourselves down into the abyss.” Hearing other monks speak ill of one of their brothers, another elder exclaimed in despair, “Ah me! We come here to become angels, and we are becoming irrational, unclean beasts.”

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21 AP Sys 2:27.1-3 (Wortley 21).
22 AP Sys 11:80.11-14 (Wortley 206).
23 AP Sys 8:26 (Wortley 129-30).
24 AP Sys 17:23:1-6 (Wortley 305).
26 AP Sys 16:7 (Wortley 291).
The type and quality of clothing worn by monks was often seen as a mark of asceticism, with the wearing of garments that were considered too fine or too secular in style signalling a capitulation to worldly influences. Even at this early stage in the development of religious life, the wearing of an identifiable habit (σχῆμα) offered a visible sign of consecration. As a pious saying preserved in the *Apophthegmata* put it, “The elders used to say that the cowl is the symbol of innocence, the scapular of the cross, the girdle of courage. Let us then live a life that is consonant with our habit [σχῆμα].”

Clothing that looked too costly or mirrored secular styles was to be eschewed by true ascetics, whereas ragged garments were to be prized as a mark of poverty. This contrast is demonstrated vividly in an apothegm concerning Abba Arsenius, who had given up the life of the court at Constantinople to become a monk at Scete, of whom it could be said that “nobody of the palace used to wear finer clothing than he when he was in the palace, so nobody wore more shabby [clothing] than he did in church.” If those who dressed poorly were to be praised, those who dressed too well attracted scorn. In one apothegm, Abba Isaac of the Cells excoriated his fellow monks: “Our fathers and Abba Pambo wore old, patched-up clothes made of palm fiber; now you are wearing expensive clothing [ἱμάτια πολύτιμα]. Go away from here and turn this location [back] into a desert [ἐρήμωσα τὰ ὧδε].” In a related saying, the same Abba Isaac criticized a monk who wore secular attire: “Some of the fathers recounted how a brother once came into the church at The Cells in the time of Abba Isaac wearing a little cloak [κοσμικὸς] cannot be here.”

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27 *AP Sys* 10:192.1-3 (Wortley 188).
29 *AP Sys* 6:10.1-4 (Wortley 92).
The word used to describe the garment in question, κουσσούλιον, is exceedingly obscure, appearing only here and in a single mention in John Moschus’s *Pratum Spirituale*, where its meaning is ambiguous. In his *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, G. W. H. Lampe translates κουσσούλιον as “monastic cloak,” but Jean-Claude Guy suggests that in this passage κουσσούλιον “semble être un vêtement séculier, de qualité supérieure à celui des moines,” noting that Pelagius’ Latin translation rendered the term incorrectly as *cucullum*, confusing the secular garment with the hood of the monastic habit (κοκούλιον). Guy’s distinction between the terms κουσσούλιον and κοκούλιον can also be supported on the basis of the aforementioned apothegm urging that “the cowl is the symbol of innocence, the scapular of the cross, the girdle of courage,” where the word κοκούλιον is used to describe the monastic cowl. If the κουσσούλιον and κοκούλιον were synonymous, Abba Isaac’s invective in *AP Sys* 6:9 would make little sense. The clear message of the apothegm is that the wearing of the monastic habit serves as an essential visual sign of one’s identity as an ascetic, with the wearing of more secular garments representing an implicit rejection of that identity showing that, as a κοσμικὸς, one does not belong in the desert.

Like the wearing of distinctive clothing, the renunciation of wealth and property served as a symbolic marker of monks’ separation from the world. As noted above, Abba Isidore of

31 Cf. John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale* 151. John Moschos uses the term κουσσούλιον in relating a tale told by Abba John the Persian, who made a pilgrimage to Rome and encountered Pope Gregory the Great, who prostrated himself before the elder and then “embraced me with great humility, handed me three pieces of gold and ordered me to be given a κουσσούλιον” (John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow*, ed. and trans. John Wortley [Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1992], 124). In his translation of Moschos’s *Pratum Spirituale*, John Wortley translates κουσσούλιον as “monastic cloak,” which seems to fit the context of the story told by Abba John the Persian; in his later translation of the *Apopthegmata Patrum*, however, Wortley renders κουσσούλιον merely as “little cloak,” apparently acknowledging that the term’s meaning is imprecise.


33 *AP Sys* 10:192.1 (Wortley 188).

34 The sense in which distinctive clothing established a dividing line between the monastic community and secular society is reaffirmed by an apothegm in which a monk takes off his habit in order to go swimming and is eaten by a crocodile. When an elder reproaches the crocodile for eating the monk, the animal replies in a human voice, nodding towards the habit (στήμα) which the unfortunate monk had left on the shore: “I did not eat an abba. I found a worldling [κοσμικὸν] and ate him; the monk [μοναχὸς] is there” (*AP Sys* 18:53.1-11 [Wortley 350]).
Scete urged his disciples to “despise money” and warned that no person attached to wealth could live a holy life.\(^\text{35}\) Ascetics who remained attached to worldly things were sometimes subject to harsh criticism. An apothegm attributed to John Cassian recounts the judgment passed by Basil of Caesarea on a former senator who became a monk and gave up most of his wealth but retained some money to maintain a sense of security: “You have lost out as a senator and have not made a monk.”\(^\text{36}\)

Notwithstanding some elders’ strong words on the subject, some apothegms suggest that ascetics’ lived experience of poverty had to be considered from the standpoint of the life they had led before they went into the desert.\(^\text{37}\) Presenting a measured approach, Amma Synklētikē taught that voluntary poverty is “a very good thing for those who are capable of it,” implying that not all were capable of full renunciation.\(^\text{38}\) The nuanced relationship between austerity of life and spiritual fortitude is vividly presented in an apothegm concerning an unnamed “Roman monk” (μονάχος ρωμαίος), likely Abba Arsenius, who spent many years as an official at the imperial court in Constantinople before becoming a monk.\(^\text{39}\) Spending over twenty-five years at Scete, the Roman monk gained a reputation for clairvoyance and attracted many visitors. An old Egyptian monk who had been a poor herdsman before entering the monastic life came to visit the Roman in his cell, eager to meet an ascetic of outstanding reputation and “expecting to find an

\(^{35}\text{AP Sys 6:12 (Wortley 92); AP Sys 6:13 (Wortley 92).}\)

\(^{36}\text{AP Sys 6:14 (Wortley 93).}\)

\(^{37}\text{As Douglas Burton-Christie points out, “the differing social backgrounds of the monks meant that what appeared as poverty to one could seem like luxury to another,” such that monks who had come from wealth could sincerely seek to live in great austerity and still be considered by others of humbler origins to be living in a lavish or ‘worldly’ fashion unbecitting the monastic life (Burton-Christie, 217).}\)

\(^{38}\text{AP Sys 6:17 (Wortley 93).}\)

\(^{39}\text{John Wortley argues that the monk identified only as “the Roman” in two apothegms of the Systematic Collection is almost certainly Abba Arsenius, relying on the similarity between the account in AP Sys 10:110 and an apothegm concerning Abba Arsenius in the Alphabetical Collection (AP Alph Arsenius 36) (Wortley, Give Me a Word, 277). Jean-Claude Guy comes to the same conclusion, suggesting that AP Sys 10:110 and AP Alph Arsenius 36 are two versions of the same tale, different in their details but not in their overall thrust, though AP Sys 10:110 also appears in the Alphabetical Collection as AP Alph The Roman 1 (Guy, Les Apophtegmes des Pères: Collection systématique. Chapitres I-IX, 75 n 1).}\)
intensified bodily discipline” to accompany his spiritual gifts.\textsuperscript{40} Contrary to his expectations, the Egyptian monk was scandalized at the apparent extravagance of the Roman’s life, which included wearing sandals and relatively fine clothes, sleeping in a bed with sheets and a pillow, drinking wine and eating cooked food, and being cared for by a servant. Perceiving his visitor’s discomfort, the Roman described “the nature of his own former life in the world” \([\kappa\omega\mu\omega]\), where he enjoyed the privileges of the ruling elite, explaining the comparatively meagre comforts permitted him in the desert as a concession to the weakness of one previously accustomed to a soft life.\textsuperscript{41} Struck with compunction, the Egyptian monk noted the contrast between his circumstances and those of the Roman: “It was from much adversity in this world \([\kappa\omega\mu\omega]\) that I came to be comfortable [as a monk]; and what I lacked then I now possess. But you came from being very comfortable into affliction; you came from high honour and much wealth to lowliness and poverty.”\textsuperscript{42}

3.4 Wariness Towards Visitors

The \emph{Apophthegmata Patrum} contains a great deal of material describing desert ascetics’ treatment of visitors from outside their own monastic communities. Ascetics sometimes treated visitors with apparent disdain, dismissing or ignoring them in hopes of discouraging others from disrupting their solitude. Occasionally, ascetics would lie about their identity and gossip about themselves in an attempt to curb their own notoriety. These expressions of wariness were not reserved for laypeople alone, but could also be extended to ecclesiastical dignitaries and sometimes even to visiting monks. Far from being misanthropic, these strategies often served a positive spiritual purpose.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{AP Sys} 10:110.9 (Wortley 170).
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{AP Sys} 10:110.44-45, 67-68 (Wortley 171-72).
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{AP Sys} 10:110.69-73 (Wortley 172).
At times, the ascetics chronicled in the *Apophthegmata* dealt with visitors by deliberately ignoring them or sending them away. As presented in the text, this strategy was not motivated by callous disregard but was meant to provide an edifying lesson. This point is made most explicitly in an apothegm concerning a visit by Archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria (r. 384-412) to Abba Pambo of Scete. Pambo’s initial silence in the presence of the Archbishop led another monk to urge the elder to say something for the edification of their visitor. “If he reaps no benefit from my silence,” Pambo replies, “neither will he benefit from my word.” At times, ignoring visitors was a way of teaching them what was most essential to the ascetic life. One apothegm describes how Abba Sisoës received some visitors but said nothing to them, focusing instead on weaving baskets; asking one of Sisoës’s disciples to explain why the elder would not speak to them, the visitors were told that Sisoës wove baskets in order to be able to feed himself, after which they “joyfully went their way, edified by [Sisoës’s] humility.” Some elders ignored visitors in order to underline the sense in which they saw themselves as dead to the world. In this vein, Abba Poemen reportedly refused to speak to a group of priests who came to see him; after his visitors departed, Poemen told his disciples that his silence conveyed the fact that “I am dead, and a dead person does not speak. They are not to think that I am here with them.” The embarrassment that resulted from being deliberately ignored was also seen as spiritually beneficial insofar as it could foster a growth in humility; analogously, by deliberately “living in alienation,” monks accepted the humiliation of being rejected as strangers to secular society as a way to grow in holiness.

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43 *AP Sys* 15:59 (Wortley 262).
44 *AP Sys* 15:59.4-5 (Wortley 262).
45 *AP Sys* 15:64.7-8 (Wortley 264).
46 *AP Sys* 10:53.8-10 (Wortley 155).
47 *AP Sys* 15:83 (Wortley 267).
Monks sometimes drove away unwelcome visitors by means of deception. In at least one apothegm, an ascetic feigned insanity to drive away curious outsiders who sought to visit him.\(^{48}\) In another instance, a renowned anchorite who had been warned to expect a visit from the local governor (ἄρχων) deliberately affected a slovenly appearance and rude manner which led the governor to hastily depart shortly after he arrived.\(^{49}\) The same anchorite dismissed another visitor by denying his own identity, saying that “there is no anchorite here.”\(^{50}\) Abba Moses of Scete offered an even more passionate denial when the local governor came to see him. Meeting the elder in a marsh but not recognizing him, the governor asked where he could find the cell of Abba Moses; in reply, Abba Moses refrained from identifying himself but instead asked the governor, “What do you want with him? He is a crazy fellow and a heretic.”\(^{51}\) Relating this encounter to some priests and describing the elder who had accused Abba Moses of heresy, the governor was surprised to learn that he had met Abba Moses himself, and thus “reaped great benefit” from the realization that the monk guarded his solitude so jealously that he would willingly be regarded as a heretic in order to avoid being distracted by visitors.\(^{52}\)

In some instances, elders denied their identity or dismissed visitors in an attempt to avoid attracting greater notoriety, even when they were willing to provide the assistance that their visitors sought. For example, a certain Abba Longinus combined a reputation for healing with a marked hostility to visitors. One apothegm relates how a woman suffering from breast cancer ventured out from Alexandria to seek healing from Longinus; meeting the elder without knowing

\(^{48}\) _AP Sys_ 8:32 (Wortley 131-32).
\(^{49}\) _AP Sys_ 8:23 (Wortley 129).
\(^{50}\) _AP Sys_ 8:22.4-5 (Wortley 129).
\(^{51}\) _AP Sys_ 8:13.11-12 (Wortley 126-27).
\(^{52}\) _AP Sys_ 8:13.17-18 (Wortley 127). Abba Moses’s willingness to be thought a heretic is particularly striking given what we have seen in Chapter 2 regarding the desert ascetics’ desire to avoid contact with those they suspected of heresy as well as the apothegm in which Abba Agathon allowed himself to be called arrogant, a slanderer, a tattler, and one given to πορνεία, but chortled at being called a heretic, on the grounds that being accused of the other faults was good for his soul but being called a heretic indicated being separated from God (_AP Sys_ 10:12 [Wortley 145]).
that it was he, the woman innocently asked, “Abba, where about here is the servant of God Longinus living?”\textsuperscript{53} Bristling in reply, Longinus did not acknowledge who he was but instead said to the woman, “Do not go to him, for he is an imposter. What is the matter with you?”\textsuperscript{54} After the woman explained that she had cancer, Longinus made the sign of the cross over her and said, “Off you go. The Lord is healing you; Longinus cannot do you any good.”\textsuperscript{55} The woman went away healed, later discovering that the brusque wonderworker was Longinus himself.\textsuperscript{56} Another apothegm confirms Longinus’s gruff reputation, recounting how the elder dismissed a female suppliant with a withered hand by saying, “Go away, woman; there is nothing wrong with you,” after which the woman was healed instantly.\textsuperscript{57}

The sense in which some elders dreaded the notoriety that came with a reputation for miraculous healing is confirmed by an apothegm concerning an apparently unintentional miracle performed by Abba Sisoës. A worldling [κοσμικὸς] and his son journeyed into the desert to visit Sisoës, but the boy died along the way. Arriving at the elder’s cell, the father said nothing about his son’s death and seemingly tried instead to conceal it: prostrating himself before Sisoës, the father placed his son’s corpse beside him in such a way that it appeared as though his son was also making a prostration before the elder.\textsuperscript{58} Abba Sisoës, who “did not realize that [the boy] was dead,” imparted his blessing on both father and son and commanded them to depart, after which the dead child sprang back to life and “immediately got up and went out.”\textsuperscript{59} The boy’s father then thanked Sisoës for bringing his son back to life, to the elder’s dismay: “But the elder was

\begin{footnotes}
\item[53] \textit{AP Sys} 19:6.7 (Wortley 352).
\item[54] \textit{AP Sys} 19:6.9-10 (Wortley 352).
\item[55] \textit{AP Sys} 19:6.12-13 (Wortley 352).
\item[56] \textit{AP Sys} 19:6.15-16 (Wortley 352).
\item[57] \textit{AP Sys} 19:7.7-8 (Wortley 353).
\item[58] \textit{AP Sys} 19:17.5-6 (Wortley 356).
\item[59] \textit{AP Sys} 19:17.10 (Wortley 356).
\end{footnotes}
saddened on hearing it, for he did not want that to happen. His disciple ordered [the father] not to report it to anybody until the elder’s death." The reason for the elder’s desire that the miracle not be reported are easily surmised: if others knew that he had the ability to bring the dead back to life, he would surely receive many more suppliants seeking similar miracles, disrupting his daily regimen of work and prayer. Whereas Longinus performed miracles willingly if a bit brusquely, Sisoës was apparently surprised by his abilities and sought to avoid gaining a reputation as a wonderworker. In both cases, the miraculous power of the elders was tempered by a dislike for fame and a desire to discourage visitors.

At times, the wariness with which desert ascetics received visitors extended to members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The stony silence with which Abba Pambo greeted Archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria has already been noted; in spite of the reproach evident in this deliberate silence, Abba Pambo’s reaction to the Archbishop’s visit seems comparatively gracious when contrasted with two apothegms describing encounters between the same Archbishop Theophilus and Abba Arsenius of Scete. One apothegm recounts how Theophilus and a public official (ἀρχόντος) visited Arsenius and asked for a word, after which Arsenius remained silent for a while and asked his visitors whether they would keep any precept he gave them. After the Archbishop and the official agreed to this, Arsenius replied, “Wherever you hear Arsenius is, do not come near.” In spite of this rebuff, Theophilus came to visit Arsenius again, leading the elder to respond more firmly, “If you come, I will open to you; and if I open to you, I open to everybody – and then I am not staying here any longer.” In reply, the Archbishop

61 AP Sys 2:6.6-7 (Wortley 16).
62 AP Sys 2:7.3-4 (Wortley 16).
promises not to bother Arsenius again: “If I am going there to chase him away, I will not go to the holy one anymore.”

The apparent slighting of the Archbishop in these apothegms does not reflect a broader hostility toward the hierarchical church, but rather indicates the desert ascetics’ desire to limit the number of suppliants seeking their attention and counsel. The reasoning behind Arsenius’s decision to send the Archbishop packing seems unassailable: “If you come, I will open to you; and if I open to you, I [must] open to everybody.” Elsewhere, Arsenius justified his flight from human company by telling a disciple that “God knows that I love you, but I cannot be with God and with people. The thousands and ten thousands above [i.e., the angels] have one will, but people have many wills, so I cannot forsake God and come to people.” Indeed, Arsenius discovered his vocation when he heard a celestial voice telling him, “Arsenius, flee from people and you shall be saved.” As curt as Arsenius’s response to Archbishop Theophilus may seem, his approach reflects his desire to remain true to the ideal of fuga saeculi, in part by avoiding being overwhelmed by visitors.

Notwithstanding the desire of figures like Arsenius, Longinus, and Moses to maintain a robust sense of separation from the world at the expense of alienating or deceiving suppliants, elsewhere in the Apophthegmata one finds an emphasis on the need to maintain a sense of inner peace and recollection while remaining open to the needs of outsiders. Such is the lesson of an apothegm in which an ascetic asked an elder named Abba Peter for advice in overcoming the sense of spiritual disquiet he felt after receiving visitors and conversing about external matters; Abba Peter responded with an initially enigmatic maxim, “Your key opens the door,” which he

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63 AP Sys 2:7.5-6 (Wortley 16).
64 AP Sys 2:5.2-7 (Wortley 15-16).
65 AP Sys 2:3.3-4 (Wortley 15).
interpreted as an exhortation to vigilance, emphasizing that each monk was responsible for how he internalized the values of the spiritual life and responded to potential distractions. In other words, a monk’s ability to maintain his equilibrium depended more on his own spiritual resources than on any external influences. Alongside other apothegms witnessing to a sense of discomfort and even hostility towards visitors, the words of Abba Peter offer a reminder that extending hospitality did not need to be regarded as a threat to the sense of withdrawal from the world that monks so eagerly cultivated.

3.5 Monastic Hospitality: Welcoming the World?

In spite of the reserve many monks displayed in dealings with visitors, many apothegms speak to a vibrant culture of monastic hospitality; indeed, the Systematic Collection of the Apophthegmata Patrum contains an entire chapter on the practice of hospitality. In some cases, visitors who worried that they were disturbing the peace or recollection of desert ascetics were quickly set at ease. A guest of Abba Poemen noted his fear that “because of Lent, [the door of Poemen’s cell] would not be opened to me,” leading Poemen to reply, “We have not been taught to shut the wooden door but the [door] of the tongue.” In another instance, a visitor who apologized for distracting an unnamed elder from his rule was told, “My rule is to give you refreshment [ἀναπαύσω] and to send you on your way in peace.” The refreshment offered to visitors was often physical as well as spiritual, with many apothegms describing the sharing of meals between monks and their visitors. Some desert ascetics mitigated the severity of their rule to accommodate the needs of their guests, leading to occasional expressions of surprise or even

66 AP Sys 11:65.5-6, 18-20 (Wortley 202-03).
67 This is Chapter 13, entitled, “One Must Joyfully Practice Hospitality and Show Compassion” (Ὅτι φιλοξενεῖν χρή καὶ ἐλεεῖν ἐν ἱλαρότητι).
68 AP Sys 13:5.5-8 (Wortley 225-26).
69 AP Sys 13:8.2-4 (Wortley 226).
misunderstanding from visitors. One apothegm recounts the bemusement of some Palestinian monks who visited an Egypt elder and were fed at what they expected to be a time of fasting; recognizing his visitors’ discomfort, the elder patiently explained that the obligation of charity overrode the discipline of fasting, further noting that receiving guests as Christ obliged him to follow the teaching of the Gospel that “the companions of the bridegroom cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them” (Mt 9:15).

The demands of hospitality sometimes forced ascetics to make notable adjustments in their routines in order to accommodate guests. This could mean devoting a great deal of time and effort to providing prodigious hospitality, as demonstrated in an apothegm recounting a visit made by a group of monks to an elder who fed them until they were full. When the monks refused to eat any more, the elder admonished them by noting that he had been constrained to serve several different groups of visitors. “For my part,” the elder said, “I have now set the table six times for different brothers coming this way; inviting each one [to eat], I ate with them, and I am still hungry. Yet you, who have eaten but once, are you so full that you are no longer able to eat?”

Though the apothegms concerning hospitality generally support the relaxation of ascetic rigour to better accommodate the needs of visitors, some monks also made a point of showing their guests how harsh the life of the desert could be. One apothegm recounts a visit made by some coenobites to an anchorite in the desert; having been warned that the coenobites in question believed that anchoritic life is “more restful” than the life of the coenobium, the anchorite sought to disabuse his visitors of this notion by providing them with a hard regimen of fasting and

70 AP Sys 13:2.10-11, 13-16 (Wortley 224-25). In a similar vein, Abba Moses was subject to gossip on account of the smoke of a cooking fire seen coming from his residence during a period of strict fasting. In response, the local clergy defended Moses by pointing out that he was cooking in order to feed visiting monks and that the injunction to provide hospitality supersedes the rule of fasting (AP Sys 13:4.5-7, 10-11 [Wortley 225]).
71 AP Sys 13:3.4-7 (Wortley 225).
manual labour. At the end of the day, the anchorite provided his guests with a meal of bread and salt served with a little vinegar, the last added by way of exception because “we must make a feast in your honour,” after which the anchorite led his exhausted visitors on an all-night synaxis (one abbreviated in length, the anchorite said, on account of his visitors).72 Having learned their lesson, the chastened coenobites left quietly the next day, even though the anchorite intimated that they ought to stay for a full three days, as is “stipulated by custom in the desert.”73

In some cases, monastic hospitality had the power to move visitors to conversion. One apothegm recounts the experience of a Manichean priest – or, as the text adds, “one of those whom [the Manicheans] call priests” – who was travelling through the desert when night fell and had no place to stay; the Manichean passed by the cell of an elder but hesitated before asking for help, thinking that he might be refused because he was a Manichean.74 Finally knocking on the door, the Manichean received a surprisingly warm response: the elder “recognized him and joyfully welcomed him in,” offering him food and lodging.75 Lying awake during the night, the Manichean reflected on the elder’s hospitality and said to himself: “How come he has no suspicion toward me? This is indeed a man of God.”76 Meeting his host in the morning, the Manichean prostrated himself and said, “I am an orthodox [ὀρθόδοξος] from this day,” choosing to remain with the elder as his disciple.77 This account of hospitality leading to conversion is perhaps all the more striking given the advice which some apothegms give against willingly

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72 AP Sys 10:150 (Wortley 179-80).
73 AP Sys 10:150.23-27 (Wortley 180).
74 AP Sys 13:12.3, 6-8 (Wortley 227).
75 AP Sys 13:12.9-11 (Wortley 227).
76 AP Sys 13:12.12-14 (Wortley 228).
77 AP Sys 13:12.15-16 (Wortley 228).
consorting with those accused of heresy.\textsuperscript{78} Apparent contradictions such as this should be unsurprising in a work like the \textit{Apophthegmata Patrum}, the record of actions and opinions attributed to an array of different figures with diverse personalities. Nevertheless, a valuable distinction can be made here between the action of going out to others (when monks should perhaps be cautious about whom they approach) and that of receiving strangers and offering them hospitality; in the latter case, as seen here, the simple act of providing a bed for the night could surmount doctrinal differences and bring the heterodox to conversion.

Another apothegm demonstrates the effect that monastic hospitality could have on the powerful, notwithstanding the brusqueness with which some elders received ecclesiastical and civil authorities. Emperor Theodosius II (r. 402-450) is said to have paid a visit to a renowned Egyptian monk who was staying near Constantinople; the monk welcomed the emperor politely but made no allusion to his guest’s status, telling him about the life of the monks of Egypt over a simple meal of bread served with oil and salt. During the conversation, the emperor asked the monk if he knew who he was, and the monk replied, "God knows who you are."\textsuperscript{79} In response, Theodosius announced himself as the emperor and the monk prostrated himself and did homage. After this, the emperor expressed his admiration for the elder and for his fellow monks: "Blessed are you who do not have to worry about your lives. In truth, I was born in the palace but never had enjoyment the way I did from this bread and water today; I have eaten with great delight."\textsuperscript{80}

By receiving Theodosius as a simple man and not as a monarch, the Egyptian monk earned the emperor’s gratitude; the apothegm ends by noting that the emperor began to show great

\textsuperscript{78} For example, one may take note of the advice given by two elders who urged their disciples to avoid the company of heretics (\textit{AP Sys} 1:27 [Wortley 12]; \textit{AP Sys} 1:34 [Wortley 13-14]). Abba Theodore of Phermē similarly urged that monks should sever relationships with friends who fall into heresy (\textit{AP Sys} 10:32 [Wortley 150]).

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{AP Sys} 15:85.13 (Wortley 268).

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{AP Sys} 15:85.15-18 (Wortley 268).
reverence for the monk, who soon returned to Egypt in order to escape the attention.\textsuperscript{81} As this conclusion reminds us, unselfish displays of hospitality also had reasonable limits; having made a strong impression on the emperor, the monk also sees the need to withdraw before he begins to suffer the ill effects of greater notoriety.

During some encounters, outsiders called monks to a deeper sense of interior conversion and a more rigorous observance of the ascetical life. One apothegm recounts how Epiphanius, Bishop of Cyprus, gave a fowl to Abba Hilarion, who refused the gift on the ground that he had not eaten meat since he had taken the monastic habit. Epiphanius replied that since taking the habit he had not gone to sleep with an unresolved grievance on his conscience. Impressed by the bishop’s response, Hilarion asked Epiphanius for forgiveness and admitted that his visitor’s way of life was superior to his own.\textsuperscript{82} This apothegm values the practice of reconciliation over abstinence from meat, but it need not be taken to imply that dietary rules are unimportant.

Another apothegm makes this point in recounting a meal shared by Archbishop Theophilus and some monks, who were offered veal by the Archbishop; asked if he would take a slice, one of the elders answered, “We have only eaten vegetables until now; if this is flesh, we are not eating it.”\textsuperscript{83} The actions of Epiphanius and Theophilus in these two apothegms merit scrutiny; both bishops presumably knew that the monks they were dealing with did not eat meat, making their offers of fowl or veal into acts of provocation designed to test the monks’ fidelity to their rule of life. This approach is consistent with the attitude of an unnamed bishop who was welcomed to a monk’s cell with gifts of bread and salt during an annual visit to Scete. The monk apologized for

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{AP Sys} 15:85.19-20 (Wortley 268).
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{AP Sys} 4:15 (Wortley 41).
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{AP Sys} 4:76.7-8 (Wortley 52-53).
this humble welcome, leading the bishop to say, “When I come next year, I don’t want even to find salt.”\footnote{AP Sys 4:103.5-6 (Wortley 58).}

A visiting bishop might be expected to call ascetics to greater rigour, but pagans did the same on occasion. One apothegm recounts the visit to Scete of a “priest of the idols” (ἱερεὺς τῶν εἰδώλων), who questioned an elder about his experience of prayer. Asking the elder whether he has received any visions of God, the pagan priest was surprised to be told no; seeking to explain why the Christian monks failed to receive such visions in spite of their strict discipline, the pagan priest suggested that the monks were afflicted by evil thoughts (πονηροὺς λογισμοὺς) which separated them from God.\footnote{AP Sys 11:109.7-10 (Wortley 210).} Alarmed by this suggestion, the elder reported the pagan’s words to his fellow monks and emphasized that they needed to overcome their tendency to evil λογίσμοι in order to receive divine illumination.\footnote{AP Sys 11:109.11-12 (Wortley 210).} As Derwas Chitty observes, this apothegm reveals the different concerns of Christians and pagans as well as the humility of the desert ascetics: the “pagan desire for visions” was not shared by the Christian monk, yet the pagan’s question still led the monk to deepen his resolve to live a holy life.\footnote{Chitty, The Desert a City, 35.} In this way, the apothegm shows that desert ascetics sometimes gained as much from encounters with visitors as their visitors did, revealing that the denizens of the desert and their worldly neighbours enjoyed a fruitful exchange despite perceptions of a sharp separation between the two groups.

\section*{3.6 Conclusion}

At the end of this chapter on the impact of the secular world upon desert ascetics, it is worthwhile to recall two apothegms mentioned at the start of the chapter. The unnamed elder who confidently asserted that he was “dead to the world” and John Colobos who sought to “be
free of concern just as the angels are free of concern” were both humbled by reminders that they were still bound by earthly limitations.88 This chapter has sought to reveal some of the nuances inherent in the different ways that desert ascetics handled their ongoing relationship with and dependence upon outsiders, considering how ascetics’ desire for separation from the world belied a practical willingness to engage with outsiders. Some elders in the *Apopthegmata* lamented the intrusion of secular influences within their communities, pointing to the prevalence of gossip, the wearing of secular clothing, and an apparent inversion in values as evidence of growing laxity in monastic observance. At the same time, the recognition that some interaction with the outside world was essential for survival fostered constructive approaches to such concrete questions as how ascetics could sell goods at market without resorting to unseemly haggling. Just as John Colobos was chastened to discover that he could not be as free of concern as the angels, the young ascetic who was troubled by the realities of the marketplace was given a bracing warning about the importance of remaining engaged with the world rather than leaving it behind entirely. “However much you possess, do not abandon your handwork.”89

The dynamic interplay between the desire for complete separation from the world and the imperative of openness was perhaps most vividly demonstrated in apothegms concerning the treatment of guests and visitors: though some ascetics received pilgrims and travellers with caution and even outright hostility, others used occasions of hospitality as a basis for mutually beneficial encounters. Visitors to the desert often came away edified by the teaching and example of seasoned ascetics, even when they were not welcomed with enthusiasm (as seen, for example, in apothegms regarding Abba Pambo, who greeted Archbishop Theophilus with

88 *AP Sys* 11:81 (Wortley 206); *AP Sys* 10:36.9-10 (Wortley 151).
89 *AP Sys* 6:15.10 (Wortley 93).
silence, and Abba Sisoës who refused to look up from his work to greet a group of pilgrims). If monastic hospitality could sometimes lead visitors to conversion – as seen dramatically in the story of the Manichean who became an orthodox Christian after being impressed by an elder’s generosity and lack of judgment – the same encounters could also lead ascetics to greater compunction and a more vivid sense of their vocation, as demonstrated by the account of the pagan priest whose visit led a group of ascetics to a deeper awareness of their own λογίσμοι and their need to grow in holiness. The sense of a certain mutuality between desert ascetic and their visitors will be seen in another light in the following chapter; as we shall see, encounters by which desert ascetics influenced secular society would highlight values and principles that remained accessible to Christians in the world as well as those in the desert.

90 AP Sys 15:59 (Wortley 262); AP Sys 15:64 (Wortley 264).
91 AP Sys 13:12.12-16 (Wortley 228).
92 AP Sys 11:109.7-12 (Wortley 210).
Chapter 4: The Desert in the World

4.1 Introduction

If the Prologue at the start of the Systematic Collection is any indication, an important goal of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is to leave the imprint of monastic values upon the secular world. Though the circumstances under which the text was written and edited are uncertain, the Prologue offers an indication of how early audiences were intended to receive the work. The Prologue insists that even what is good in the world is worthless in comparison with the way of Christ, suggesting that “the holy fathers who became emulators and teachers of this blessed monastic life . . . concluded that all that is good and honourable among people [πάντα τὰ ἐν ἀνθρώπων καλά] was worth nothing, [and] made a great effort above all to do nothing for show.”1 The ascetics of the desert sought to “conceal[] the greater part of their good deeds through extreme humility,” but their followers nevertheless found it worthwhile to share edifying tales about them.2 According to the Prologue’s author, those who recorded these tales had “this one object in view: to benefit many people [ὠφελῆσαι τοὺς πολλούς].”3 The arrangement of the Systematic Collection serves this goal insofar as the organization of the contents into thematic chapters aims “to provide very clear comprehension and ready benefit for those who wish it because a statement unanimously sustained by many virtuous persons [πολλῶν ἐναρέτων προσόπων] makes no small contribution to the advancement of virtue.”4

This chapter will consider some of the ways in which desert ascetics exercised an explicit influence upon the world, looking at some concrete practices in which they engaged as well as the values they wished to impart to Christian laypeople. Though some desert ascetics served the

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1 *AP Sys Prol* 2.1-6 (Wortley 3).
2 *AP Sys Prol* 2.6-8 (Wortley 3).
3 *AP Sys Prol* 3.1-2, 5-9 (Wortley 3).
4 *AP Sys Prol* 4.5-10 (Wortley 4).
institutional Church in positions of episcopal leadership, many more sought to nourish the Body of Christ in less visible ways by giving alms to the poor and encouraging others to do the same. At the same time, as will be seen below, for the ascetics in the *Apophthegmata* the practice of almsgiving was inextricably bound up with ideas about voluntary poverty as a form of Christian witness meant to convey the priority of spiritual values over material ones. Many sayings would also emphasize the importance of refraining from judging even those whom one recognized as sinners, placing an emphasis on individual compunction and repentance as tools for one’s own conversion and the edification of others. The question of what it meant to live a holy life in the world as a layperson also receives some attention in the text, ultimately imparting the lesson that desert ascetics and committed Christians engaged with secular society were participants in the same spiritual struggle.

### 4.2 Ascetics at the Service of the Church

At times, the sayings recorded in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* suggest that monks should cultivate an attitude of indifference to the world beyond the desert. After one of the elders of Scete went into Alexandria to meet with the archbishop, he was confronted upon his return by an innocent question from one of his brothers: “How are things in the city [πόλις]?” In reply, the elder told the assembled company, “To tell you the truth, brethren, I did not see anybody’s face other than the archbishop’s.” The text notes that the elder’s companions “were amazed on hearing this and they were strengthened in their determination to keep their own eyes from wandering by what he had done.” The single-minded focus demonstrated by the elder in this apothegm is consistent with the witness of other sayings where certain ascetics are commended for their indifference to their surroundings. For example, one apothegm reports that Amma Sarah

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5 *AP Sys* 4:66.4-5 (Wortley 50).
6 *AP Sys* 4:66.5-7 (Wortley 50).
spent sixty years living beside a river without ever casting a glance at the water. Similarly, Abba Helladius of the Cells reportedly spent twenty years in monastic life without ever lifting his eyes to look at the roof of the church. This spirit of indifference could be extended to time as well as to physical space; one elder at Scete said that for over fifty years he did not know when the Lenten fast began or ended, for the simple reason that “all the year is a fast to me.”

In contrast with the examples given above, many apothegms suggest that desert ascetics were acutely conscious of their surroundings and directly engaged with secular society. One of the more notorious means by which the desert entered the world was through the participation of monks in efforts to extirpate the remaining vestiges of pre-Christian religion from Egyptian society. Under the leadership of Archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria (r. 384-412), the monks of the desert played an active role in helping to destroy pagan temples and replacing them with Christian churches. The Apophthegmata Patrum acknowledges that desert ascetics were involved in this process in an apothegm which begins by noting that “[s]ome fathers once went down to Alexandria summoned by Archbishop Theophilus to offer prayer and to tear down the [pagan] temples.” Tellingly, this apothegm does not dwell on the elders’ role in the destruction of the temples but quickly moves on to an episode that occurred at a meal with the Archbishop after the temples were destroyed, making the meal the focus of the story. The monks’ role in supporting Theophilus’s campaign against the pagans is taken for granted, reflecting a rapport

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7 AP Sys 7:26.1-3 (Wortley 106).
8 AP Sys 4:16.1-3 (Wortley 41).
9 AP Sys 4:104.5-8 (Wortley 58).
10 An emblematic episode in this process was the destruction of the Serapeum of Alexandria in 391. As Peter Brown puts it, the Serapeum was “[t]he greatest shrine in the eastern Mediterranean, unique in its design and in the devotion it inspired,” giving its loss tremendous symbolic impact (Peter Brown, Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire [Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992], 113-14). For a vivid account of the event that is unabashedly sympathetic to the persecuted pagans, see: Pierre Chuvin, A Chronicle of the Last Pagans, trans. B. A. Archer (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 66-68.
11 AP Sys 4:76.1-3 (Wortley 52).
12 AP Sys 4:76.3-9 (Wortley 52-53).
between desert ascetics and the institutional Church that belied the ascetics’ decision to live apart from the urban centres where the bishops exercised their authority.

The close relationship between monks and bishops presumed in the apothegm referenced above was the product of a gradual rapprochement between two groups that had initially viewed one another with ambivalence. As Andrea Sterk points out, both sides had reason to be wary of the other: monks were suspicious of the bishops’ political influence and worldly prestige and bishops sometimes looked askance at the arguably excessive asceticism practised by monks, even though both sides recognized the need to cooperate with the other.13 Though monasticism was initially a lay movement, the sacramental needs of ascetic communities created a demand for the ordination of some monks to the priesthood and drew the monks into a closer relationship with the institutional Church.14 As G. J. M. Bartelink notes, the archbishops of Alexandria from Athanasius onward enthusiastically promoted the monastic life and sought the support of monks in their political and theological struggles.15 The embrace of monasticism by the hierarchy came to include the consecration of some monks as bishops, sometimes as part of a strategy to purify the episcopate through the appointment of monk-bishops who were seen as models of personal sanctity and theological orthodoxy.16

Being raised to the episcopate could be a profoundly disorienting experience for a monk. On a practical level, becoming a bishop usually meant leaving the desert and going to live in the

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14 Sterk, 16-17, 19-20. The Apophthegmata contains some accounts of monks who resisted ordination out of a sense of humility or were ordained reluctantly or even against their will, with some refusing to offer the Eucharist after their ordination because they continued to regard themselves as unworthy to do so (AP Sys 15:39 [Wortley 257-58]; AP Sys 15:42 [Wortley 258-59]).
16 Sterk, 16.
In cultural and social terms, monks who became bishops moved from the periphery of society to its very centre; in Christian Egypt, the bishop’s role was both religious and political, involving the administration of public property and frequent negotiation with civil and military authorities as well as a public role as head of the local Church. In short, the move from a monastic cell to the bishop’s cathedra entailed more than a simple change in location – it meant a dramatic change in one’s responsibilities and commitments, with implications for how a monk was able to fulfill his commitment to renounce the world.

A particular problem faced by ascetics who became bishops was the need to exercise leadership in ways that seemed to violate monastic values. One apothegm describes how an elderly anchorite was named a bishop after decades in the desert; the demands of administration were challenging for the anchorite, who soon faced criticism for failing to admonish a diocesan steward who performed his duties poorly. In reply, the bishop protested that the behaviour expected of him in his new role conflicted with the spirit of patient self-abnegation he had sought to cultivate as an anchorite; as the bishop told his critics, “you want to deprive me in two days of what it took me sixty years of praying to God to get right.”

Monks who became bishops also had to adjust to a lifestyle very different from the one to which they were accustomed. In most cases, as noted above, elevation to the episcopate meant leaving the desert and the company of fellow ascetics and taking up residence in the city. One way to negotiate this transition was to embrace a more rigorous personal asceticism; such was the approach of Abba Natras, a hermit on Mount Sinai who became Bishop of Pharan. Noted for

19 AP Sys 9:23.1-5 (Wortley 140).
20 AP Sys 9:23.11-13 (Wortley 140).
the moderation he practised in the desert, Abba Natras undertook a more severe ascetic regimen as a bishop. Explaining himself, Natras said that the forbidding environment of the desert obliged him to “govern my body so that I would not fall sick and go looking for that which I did not have,” but “now we are in the world [κόσμον] and there are many temptations; therefore I cause the body to waste away in order not to lose the monk. If I fall sick here, there is somebody to care for me.”

Abba Natras found that an intensified ascetic commitment was necessary “in order not to lose the monk” while living in the world, but the reverse was true for Abba Apphy, a monk who became Bishop of Oxyrhynchus. Apphy “endured much hardship when he was a monk, and when he became bishop he wanted to practice the same hardship in the world [κόσμῳ], but he lacked the strength.”

Troubled by his lack of stamina and fearing that he may have erred in allowing himself to be made a bishop, Apphy cried out to God, “Did your grace depart from me because of the bishopric?” In response, Apphy was given a reminder that “then it was the desert [ἔρημος], and as there was nobody there, God took care of you. But now it is the world [κόσμος], and folk are taking care of you.”

Taken together, these apothegms suggest that the transition from life in the desert as a monk to life in the world as a bishop was very personal: the concrete challenges involved and the resources needed to face them depended on each monk’s own capacities and sensibility.

4.3 Poverty, Almsgiving, and Christian Witness

Many sayings in the Apophthegmata Patrum consider how voluntary poverty could be lived as a form of evangelical witness. Even at this early stage in the development of Christian asceticism, poverty was seen as an essential element of religious life. Discussing Christ’s

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21 AP Sys 10:50.7-12 (Wortley 154).
22 AP Sys 15:14.2-4 (Wortley 251).
23 AP Sys 15:14.5-6 (Wortley 251).
24 AP Sys 15:14.7-9 (Wortley 251).
admonition to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Mt 6:20), Abba Hyperechios told a disciple that “the monk’s treasure is voluntary poverty; lay [it] up in heaven, brother, for the ages of repose are limitless.”

At the same time, the sense in which poverty was freely chosen was crucially important. As Amma Synklētikē taught, poverty was “a very good thing for those who are capable of it . . . for they who endure it are afflicted in the flesh but are at rest in the soul.”

By adding qualifying language to her statement – “for those who are capable of it” – Synklētikē emphasized that not all Christians are called to poverty, even as she praised the spiritual benefits of physical affliction. At the same time, Synklētikē’s words should not be taken to suggest that the embrace of voluntary poverty would lead to unalloyed consolation. As an unnamed elder insisted in another apothegm, poverty and spiritual struggle were both integral to the monastic life. Casting off his outer garment and girding his loins, the elder told a disciple: “This is how the monk ought to be: stripped of the material of earthly goods and crucified in bouts of wrestling.”

The connection drawn in both of these apothegms between the physical and spiritual condition of dedicated ascetics highlights the essential link between voluntary poverty and the broader goals of Christian asceticism. As Douglas Burton-Christie notes, poverty was to be understood “neither as a practice isolated from other concerns of monastic life nor as a matter having to do with renunciation of material goods” but rather as a means “to help the monks cultivate that interior detachment which could lead them toward freedom from care.”

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26 AP Sys 6:17.2-4 (Wortley 93).
27 AP Sys 6:20.4-5 (Wortley 94).
Some apothegms present voluntary poverty as a matter of justice, with the corollary that those who failed to give as much as possible to the needy would be subject to judgment. Abba Serapion told a monk who possessed many books that “you took the goods of widows and orphans and set them in this casement.” Serapion’s personal example mirrored his words: one apothegm indicates that “his life was like that of one of the birds,” insofar as he wandered from place to place and never stayed in a cell, carrying nothing but a gospel book and clad only in a simple shroud. This depth of Serapion’s commitment was proven when he gave his shroud to a pauper and sold his gospel book to help a poor man pay a debt, leaving himself naked and bereft of possessions but fulfilling Christ’s command that those who wished to be perfect should sell all they had and give the proceeds to the poor (Mt 19:21). If he failed to do so, Serapion reasoned, “I shall certainly be judged to be a murderer on the Day of Judgment.”

Similar considerations of justice were raised when monks themselves benefitted from others’ generosity. One apothegm recounts a particular elder’s stubborn refusal to accept money from a generous layperson; after the elder insisted that he did not need the money, his suppliant urged him to take it and then give it to someone else in need. The elder then put his foot down, stating that to take the money “would be a double disgrace: I would be accepting what I do not need and vainly taking pride in giving away what belongs to another.” Going beyond what

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29 Despite limits in the evidence, it can be stated with some certainty that the ranks of the economically needy were very numerous in fourth- and fifth-century Egypt. On the basis of extensive study of surviving census data, papyri, and literature from the period, Roger Bagnall estimates that a bit less than half of the Egyptian population “existed in various forms of dependency,” living as rural tenant farmers and urban wage-earners. Small property owners likely made up another half of the population, with a very small group (perhaps as small as one half of one percent) of very wealthy people who controlled large landholdings or owned significant property in the cities (Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993], 225-26).

30 *AP Sys* 6:16.2-4 (Wortley 93).
32 *AP Sys* 15:117.2-6, 12-17 (Wortley 276-77).
33 *AP Sys* 15:117.5-6 (Wortley 276).
34 *AP Sys* 6:21.4-6 (Wortley 94).
might be expected as a matter of justice, another apothegm recounts how Abba Arsenius refused to accept an inheritance promised to him in a relative’s will.\textsuperscript{35} Abba Arsenius’s example reminds the reader that embracing material is a sign of spiritual detachment as well as a matter of justice: by declining to accept money owed to him in the estimation of the world, Arsenius showed the freedom from worldly concerns expected of a monk.

In the \textit{Apophthegmata}, ascetics’ reluctance to accept money from outsiders is often linked with encouragement to direct alms to others in need. One apothegm recounts how a wealthy pilgrim visiting Scete offered a basket of gold to the monks, who at first declined the gift on the grounds that they did not need it; after the donor persisted in trying to leave the gold at Scete, a priest of the community commended his generosity and told him to give his money to the poor.\textsuperscript{36} Another apothegm states that Abba Longinus responded to a donor’s offer of gold by directing the donor to give the gold to a certain beggar who needed money to pay off crippling debts.\textsuperscript{37} In some cases, ascetics declined to give specific advice but nevertheless made it clear that giving alms to the poor was the best of several options. For example, when asked him how to dispose of an inheritance, Abba Poemen listed three possibilities and their likely outcomes: if the money were to be given to the church, it might end up being squandered on feasting; if the money were to be given to relatives, “there is no [spiritual] reward for you in that,” since generosity to one’s kin was to be expected; if the money were to be given to the poor, however, the donor could rest content that “you will have no worries.”\textsuperscript{38}

In addition to advising outsiders on the practice of almsgiving, desert ascetics often gave alms themselves. Some apothegms advise ascetics to cultivate a special closeness to the needy;

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\item \textsuperscript{35} \textit{AP Sys} 6:2.1-4, 7-8 (Wortley 89).
\item \textsuperscript{36} \textit{AP Sys} 6:23.8-9 (Wortley 23).
\item \textsuperscript{37} \textit{AP Sys} 18:11.13-18 (Wortley 315).
\item \textsuperscript{38} \textit{AP Sys} 10:82.5-9 (Wortley 162-63).
\end{itemize}
as one elder urged his disciples, “If you are staying in a place and you see some people living comfortably, do not associate with them. But if there be another there who is poor, associate with him as long as he is without bread, and you will have repose.”

Amma Sarah suggested that the practice of giving alms could lead to spiritual purification even if it was initially undertaken with other motives: “It is good to give alms. If a person does it to please people at first, he will come from pleasing people to fearing God.”

The connection drawn here between almsgiving and the fear of God is consistent with other sayings we have already considered. As suggested above in the apothegms concerning Abba Serapion, giving all of one’s resources to the needy offered an expression of the voluntary poverty which was as an integral part of the monastic vocation. As emphasized in apothegms linking voluntary poverty and justice, those who failed to give alms could expect to pay the penalty at the last judgment. At the same time, acquiring the spiritual benefits associated with almsgiving required careful discernment.

In short, a rigorous approach to the monastic life necessarily included a tangible concern for the material needs of others.

The question of whether one should give alms to one’s relatives proved a thorny one for the ascetics of the *Apopthegmata Patrum*. As noted above, Abba Poemen answered a question about disposing of an inheritance by noting that “there is no reward” in giving money to one’s relatives. This form of almsgiving was disfavoured in part because it was clouded by concepts of family loyalty: a gift motivated by filial bonds lacked the disinterested character of a gift given to a stranger. Such was the reply given by an elder when someone asked, “My sister is poor; if I

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41 In one apothegm, a monk criticizes his brethren for giving an impoverished worldling more food and drink than the monks would normally consume, giving a false and potentially scandalous impression that the monks had much to spare (*AP Sys* 10:189.1-13 [Wortley 187-88]). Another apothegm describes how a particular elder was able to distribute alms more wisely thanks to a supernatural gift that ensured that he gave to each according to the person’s actual need rather than outward – and sometimes deceptive – appearances (*AP Sys* 13:13.6-14 [Wortley 228]).
give her charity, is it not like giving to one of the poor?” The elder answered in the negative, stating that “blood draws you a little” when one helps a relative.42 Monks who gave alms to their relatives could also be accused of a lack of faith in God’s providential care. A monk who set out to bring some loaves of bread to his impoverished mother during a famine heard a voice from heaven reproaching him, “Is it you or I who looks after your mother?”43 Knowing that God was speaking to him, the repentant monk answered, “It is you, Lord, who cares for us.”44 The monk returned to his cell without bringing the bread to his mother; three days later, his mother came to visit him and reported that another monk had given her some wheat with which she was able to make enough bread for herself and for the monks. Hearing this, the monk “was suffused with hope, and, by the grace of God, he made progress in every virtue.”45 In this case, the monk’s decision not to bring alms to his mother benefited both parties: the other monks’ gift helped the mother make her own food and gave her the spiritual benefit of returning the favour done for her by sharing the bread she made with the monks; for her son, the episode provided a moral lesson which not only confirmed his faith in divine providence but also helped him to “[make] progress in every virtue.” As this apothegm shows, the practice of almsgiving was crucially linked with other virtues by which all Christians could grow in faith, whether they were laypeople or dedicated ascetics.

In some cases, the attitudes of personal indifference to material goods and care for others demonstrated by voluntary poverty and almsgiving had a broader witness value that went beyond charity offered to individuals. One example concerning poverty comes in an apothegm about an

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42 *AP Sys* 10:156.1-5 (Wortley 181).
43 *AP Sys* 10:137.4-5 (Wortley 176).
44 *AP Sys* 10:137.7-8 (Wortley 176).
45 *AP Sys* 10:137.12-14 (Wortley 176).
elder whose cell was overrun by robbers (λῃσταὶ).\textsuperscript{46} The serene elder invited the robbers to take whatever they wished, after which they gathered everything they could find, intending to leave the cell empty. As the robbers prepared to leave, the elder gave them a small pouch (μαρσίπιον) which had been hidden, saying, “My sons, take this [pouch] that you overlooked in the cell.”\textsuperscript{47} As the apothegm concludes, “In their amazement at the forbearance of the elder, [the robbers] restored everything to his cell and apologized, saying to each other, ‘This is a man of God.’”\textsuperscript{48} Very different but no less striking is the example given by Abba Olympius of Scete, a former slave who returned once a year to his former masters in Alexandria to wash their feet in a gesture of humility and to give them his earnings.\textsuperscript{49} Moved by his evident sanctity, Olympius’s former masters were also embarrassed by his expressions of obeisance and unsuccessfully tried to refuse the money he gave them; in reply, Olympius told them that his actions were an expression of gratitude for having received his freedom and for being allowed to serve as “a slave for God” in the desert.\textsuperscript{50} The former masters were ultimately so edified by Olympius’s continued loyalty and sincere devotion that they began to give him goods and alms to distribute to the poor on their behalf.\textsuperscript{51} Even if his obsequiousness made them cringe, Olympius’s continued engagement with his former masters offered a means by which the “slave for God” convinced them to embrace a more generous way of life.\textsuperscript{52} Like the example of the monks in the various apothegms regarding almsgiving, the example of this former slave was thus oriented towards the conversion of others.

\textsuperscript{46} AP Sys 16:21.1 (Wortley 294).
\textsuperscript{47} AP Sys 16:21.5-7 (Wortley 294).
\textsuperscript{48} AP Sys 16:21.7-10 (Wortley 294).
\textsuperscript{49} AP Sys 15:47.1-6 (Wortley 260).
\textsuperscript{50} AP Sys 15:47.7-9 (Wortley 260).
\textsuperscript{51} AP Sys 15:47.12-16 (Wortley 260).
\textsuperscript{52} Olympius’s kindness towards his former masters is all the more remarkable given what is known about slavery in Late Antique Egypt. As Roger Bagnall notes, surviving papyri “give an unfavorable impression of master-slave relations,” with animosity and mistrust on both sides (Bagnall, \textit{Egypt in Late Antiquity}, 209-12). In light of what Bagnall writes and the example given by Olympius and his former masters, one may be all the more impressed by
4.4 Judgment, Repentance, and Conversion

Desert ascetics’ recognition of the value of Christian witness was accompanied by a nuanced view of the relationship between outward perceptions and the inward dispositions of the human heart. Concern about how monastic communities appeared to outsiders is implicit in much of the material that we have considered, from the apothegms touching upon the treatment of visitors and suppliants to those dealing with the giving of alms to the poor. The Desert Fathers and Mothers understood that the way they were viewed by others had an effect on how their message would be received, but they also knew that appearances could be deceptive. One apothegm describes how the elders of Scete received a group of visiting monks from another part of Egypt; at the welcoming meal, the visitors were initially scandalized by the “eagerness” with which the Scetiote monks “devoured their food,” not being acquainted with the rigour of the fast observed at Scete. After spending a few days at Scete and observing the fast in its strictness, the visitors became disoriented and ravenously hungry, leading them to apologize for their initial presumption. An apothegm concerning Antony the Great recounts that a hunter seeking wild game in the desert took offence when he discovered Abba Antony and some of his disciples relaxing rather than engaging in continuous ἄσκησις, which led Antony to remind the hunter that even disciplined ascetics needed to rest from their labours on occasion if they were to remain strong. Though the first of these apothegms concerns the reaction of a group of monks and the another apothegm recounting how a former slave lived a life of such edifying asceticism as a monk that his former master ultimately followed him into the desert and embraced the monastic life, living as a disciple of his former slave (AP Sys 14:31.1-5 [Wortley 244]).

53 AP Sys 10:170.2-3 (Wortley 183).
55 AP Sys 10:3 (Wortley 143-44). Retold in spiritual literature over the centuries, this saying has become one of the best-known in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* on account of the vivid analogy Abba Antony uses in explaining his
second deals with that of a worldling, both convey a similar message: one ought not to judge another’s ascetical practice on the basis of first impressions or external factors only, but make deeper inquiry and consider the broader context.

A number of sayings in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* offer similar advice on the obligation not to pass judgment, not only with respect to the praxis of dedicated ascetics but also as regards the attitudes and behaviour of laypeople living in the world. One apothegm describes a meeting between Pachomius, one of the pioneers of coenobitic monasticism in Egypt, and Abba Macarius of Alexandria56 in which Pachomius asked, “When there are brothers who are out of order, is it good to correct them?” Macarius responded by urging Pachomius to “[c]orrect those who are under your authority and judge them rightly, but judge nobody who is outside it,” citing the injunction of 1 Cor 5:12-13 to avoid judging those who are outside the Church and subject to the judgment of God.58 Similar counsel is offered in several apothegms attributed to Abba Poemen. Asked how to become a monk, Poemen said, “If you want to find repose here and in the age to come, say in every situation, ‘I, who am I?’ and do not pass judgment on anybody.”59 In another instance, Poemen told a disciple frustrated by the apparent failings of his fellow monks that not passing judgment on others, including those who are more modest in spiritual stature, is an essential prerequisite for doing good.60 In a third saying, Poemen spoke in strong terms about

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56 A monk who lived at Nitria and the Cells over a sixty-year career, Abba Macarius of Alexandria (d. ca. 393/94) is not to be confused with the Scetiote monk Macarius the Great (d. ca. 390), though some later manuscripts conflate the two figures (Wortley, *Give Me a Word*, 177, 208-09).

57 AP Sys 10:46.3-4 (Wortley 153).

58 AP Sys 10:46.5-7 (Wortley 153).

59 AP Sys 9:8.2-4 (Wortley 135).

60 AP Sys 10:70.14-17 (Wortley 161).
those who exercise judgment without sharing that judgment with others: “There is one person who seems to keep silent, while in his heart he is passing judgment on others. Such a person is speaking all the time. Another person is speaking from dawn to dusk yet maintains silence: I mean, he says nothing that is not beneficial.”

A number of apothegms reiterate the obligation to refrain from judging others in concrete situations. Two sayings concern anchorites who lived alone in the desert but regularly received visits from priests who celebrated the Eucharist for them; in different ways, these two anchorites received reports that the priests who served them were not worthy to offer the sacramental mysteries on account of their personal sinfulness. Initially tempted to reject the visiting priests on account of these reports, the two anchorites received the insight that they should receive the clerics without reservation and leave the task of judgment to God. The obligation not to judge worldlings is made more explicit in an apothegm in which Abba Paphnutius describes passing through a village where he overheard a group engaged in “shameful dealings” (ὁμιλοῦντας αἰσκρῶς). In response, as Abba Paphnutius recounted, “I quickly turned away, threw myself down, and condemned myself before God,” after which he received a visit from an angel who praised him for choosing humility and self-accusation over judgment. The refusal to judge even those whom one has witnessed engaged in sinful behaviour is commended even more explicitly in another apothegm: “Should somebody sin in your presence in any way, judge him not but regard yourself as more sinful than him. You see the sin, but you do not see the repentance.”

61 AP Sys 10:75.1-4 (Wortley 162).
64 AP Sys 9:14.3 (Wortley 138).
65 AP Sys 9:14.3-10 (Wortley 138).
66 AP Sys 9:19.1-3 (Wortley 139).
4.5 “Doing the Deeds of the Desert” in the World

Various sayings in the Apophthegmata Patrum support the view that Christians could lead holy and virtuous lives as laypeople in the secular world, without making the radical choice to go into the desert and to live apart from the remainder of society. In one apothegm, Amma Synklētikē offered a concise encapsulation of this viewpoint:

There are many [πολλοί] in mountains acting like city dwellers [δημοτῶν] who are perishing and many [πολλοί] in cities [πόλεσι] doing the deeds of the desert [ἐρήμου ἒργα] who are being saved. For it is possible to be alone with one’s spirit while in the company of many [μετὰ πολλῶν] and also to have one’s thoughts with crowds [μετὰ ὄχλων] even when one is alone [μόνον].

Amma Synklētikē’s robust insistence on the possibility of “doing the deeds of the desert” in the secular world may seem surprising given the emphasis of many apothegms on the apparent incompatibility between the preoccupations of secular society and the life of the spirit. Indeed, Amma Synklētikē is also reported to have said that “it is impossible for us to produce heavenly fruit with earthly glory all about us,” suggesting that spiritual progress could not be attained in the midst of worldly distractions. The offering of contradictory advice even within the group of sayings attributed to the same person is to be expected in a text like the Apophthegmata, which ultimately remains a collection of occasional maxims offered in different situations rather than a systematic work on ascetical theology. Despite the inevitable inconsistencies found in the text, the Apophthegmata includes a number of sayings offering examples of laypeople who had shown themselves capable of “doing the deeds of the desert” through the cultivation of spiritual attitudes and behaviours that earned the praise and admiration of desert ascetics.

67 AP Sys 2:27.1-5 (Wortley 21).
68 AP Sys 8:25.1-3 (Wortley 129).
The notion that Christians could enjoy a truly holy life in the world may seem unusual when contrasted with the various sayings in the *Apothegmata* concerned with individual conversions from worldliness to asceticism. These conversions were often brought about through the public witness of desert ascetics; the Systematic Collection of the *Apothegmata* is sprinkled with accounts of encounters between ostensibly ‘worldly’ people from various walks of life who turn to lives of renunciation and withdrawal in the desert after pivotal meetings with one or another elder. A number of apothegms recount stories of prostitutes, public officials, and soldiers who were moved to shame and repentance by an elder’s example of holiness, leading them to embrace the monastic life themselves.\(^6^9\) Some apothegms also emphasize the rigour demanded of those who wished to leave the world and become ascetics: devout laypeople who lived blamelessly in the world before entering monastic life were sometimes sternly reminded that asceticism itself was not a guarantee of salvation, and some were even subjected to serious trials, such as the imposition of a vow of silence meant to test obedience.\(^7^0\)

What it meant to “do the deeds of the desert” in the city becomes clearer when one examines some apothegms concerning laypeople living lives of exemplary holiness in the world. Two apothegms present the public mourning of laywomen as a symbol of how dedicated ascetics ought to live. Seeing “a woman sitting in a sepulchre, weeping bitterly,” Abba Poemen said, “If all the delights of this world [κόσμου] come, they will not restrain her soul from sorrow. The monk should have sorrow in himself all the time, like that.”\(^7^1\) In a related apothegm, Poemen pointed out a woman who had lost her husband, brother, and son and spent her waking hours

\(^6^9\) See, for example, *AP Sys* 10:26 (Wortley 149), *AP Sys* 13:18 (Wortley 232) and *AP Sys* 17:34 (Wortley 308-09), concerning the conversion of prostitutes by different elders, *AP Sys* 20:19 (Wortley 371-72) on the conversion of a Roman tribune by Abba Macarius the Egyptian, and *AP Sys* 15:131 (Wortley 285-86) on the conversion of a soldier.

\(^7^0\) *AP Sys* 14:13.1-18 (Wortley 236-37); *AP Sys* 14:32.1-28 (Wortley 244-45).

\(^7^1\) *AP Sys* 3:24.1-6 (Wortley 30).
beating her breast and weeping continuously. For Poemen, this widow offered a sign of how all Christians ought to live: “I tell you, unless a person puts to death all desires of the flesh and acquires that sorrow, he cannot be a monk. Her entire life and thought are sorrow.” In these two cases, the female mourner is not offered as a literal example to be followed but rather as a vivid reminder of what the spirit of compunction and renunciation ought to entail: a monk’s sorrow for his sins and commitment to asceticism should be as unshakeable as the grief of an inconsolable mourner.

Numerous sayings in the *Apophthegmata* testify to the disquiet felt by ascetics who came to realize that some worldlings lived holier lives in the world than they themselves lived in the desert. This realization sometimes came by means of divine inspiration. One apothegm tells how Abba Silvanus “went into a trance” in the company of some other monks and experienced a troubling vision which he later described to his fellows: “I was snatched away to the judgment, and I saw many wearing our habit going off to punishment and many worldlings [κοσμικοὺς] going off into the kingdom.” This revelation drove Silvanus to sorrow: for a long time he refused to come out of his cell, and when he finally did so he hid his face from the sunlight and said, “Why would I want to see this transitory light that offers no advantage?” In a similar vein, Antony the Great once heard a voice telling him, “There is somebody in the city like you, a physician by profession, who provides those in need with his superfluous income and is singing the τρισάγιον with the angels of God all day long.” Antony’s reaction to this news is unstated, but other monks reacted with a discouragement similar to that felt by Silvanus. A monk named Paul who offered three-hundred prayers each day became conscience-stricken when he learned

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72 *AP Sys* 3:25.10-12 (Wortley 30-31).
73 *AP Sys* 3:33.2, 5-8 (Wortley 32).
74 *AP Sys* 3:33.8-12 (Wortley 32).
75 *AP Sys* 18:1.2-5 (Wortley 310).
that a pious laywoman had offered seven-hundred prayers each day for thirty years, all the while fasting every day except for Saturday and Sunday. Paul subsequently sought advice from Abba Macarius the Egyptian, who replied by candidly admitting that he himself offered no more than one-hundred prayers each day and did not feel negligent, implying that Paul need not have felt badly for failing to match the number of prayers offered daily by the laywoman.

In some cases, desert ascetics responded to reports regarding the holiness of laypeople by going to see for themselves. Encountering devout worldlings, ascetics were reminded that the characteristics that made for a holy life in the world were the same ones needed for a holy life in the desert. One apothegm recounts a meeting between an elder and two laywomen whom he had sought out after learning in a vision that their spiritual stature exceeded his own; when the elder asks the women to explain their way of life to him, he learns their secret: the two had lived in harmony without any arguments for fifteen years, and having been frustrated in their goal of entering a monastery – their husbands forbade them from doing so – they had further resolved “that we would speak no worldly [κοσμικόν] thing until we died.” Another apothegm relates that two monks were led out of the desert and into a village to meet a devout married couple, Eucharistos and Maria, who were also held to have a spiritual stature exceeding that of many monks. A humble and taciturn shepherd, Eucharistos reluctantly explained to his visitors that he had lived continently with his wife since their marriage and that he shared two-thirds of what he produced as a shepherd with others, giving equal portions to the poor and to guests like the two monks. In a third apothegm, an elder who spent years in the desert learned from an angel that

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77 AP Sys 15:135.24-30 (Wortley 287).
79 AP Sys 20:2 (Wortley 358-59).
80 AP Sys 20:2.16-17 (Wortley 359).
his monastic labours were less pleasing to God than the deeds of an urban greengrocer; visiting the greengrocer, the elder learned something of his way of life: he only ate in the evening, he offered hospitality to others and fed the needy, and he prayed daily for the salvation of others and in sorrow for his own sins.81 Moreover, the greengrocer maintained a spirit of recollection amid the distractions of the city, and instead of judging those around him, he thought “that they are all entering the kingdom.”82

These accounts of meetings between desert ascetics and devout worldlings highlight certain values common to the spiritual strivings of monastics and laypeople. The elements of a life pleasing to God appear to be the same in the city as they would be in the desert: the practice of charity and lack of judgment, concern for the materially poor, frequent prayer, and sexual continence. The ability of some laypeople to master these practices and attitudes could be seen as all the more impressive given the need to overcome worldly distractions and temptations without any of the supports of organized ascetical life.83 On the other hand, many sayings in the *Apophthegmata* point to the conclusion that the spiritual challenges faced by dedicated ascetics and devout laypeople were essentially the same. One apothegm recounts the response of Abba Longinus to another elder who expressed a desire to become a hermit in order to avoid dealing with other people: “Unless you first get it right with people, you will not be able to get it right living alone either.”84 Others urged that “there is nothing so beneficial as staying put” and said that “[w]herever you are living, do not be in a hurry to move away.”85 At the same time, the

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81 *AP Sys* 20:22.20-29 (Wortley 373-74).
83 In this vein, one apothegm suggests that monks who fall into serious sin can more easily recover spiritual equilibrium because of external supports such as common meditation and psalm-singing, whereas those in the world [κόσμου] are left more vulnerable by the lack of such things (*AP Sys* 5:22 [Wortley 65-66]).
84 *AP Sys* 10:45.10-12 (Wortley 153).
85 *AP Sys* 8:12.10-11 (Wortley 126); *AP Sys* 1:1.5-6 (Wortley 7).
cultivation of inner attitudes of humility and restraint was seen as a more reliable way to God than a focus on external practices without a corresponding growth in virtue. Inner conversion and external observance ideally went hand in hand, but the value of the latter could be lost if it were not accompanied by the former; this lesson was imparted by some of the apothegms considered in the preceding chapter, including the teaching of Epiphanius of Cyprus on the primacy of the practice of reconciliation over that of fasting and the example of Abba Arsenius, who enjoyed great spiritual gifts despite a lifestyle that other monks could perceive as insufficiently austere.86

Many sayings in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* testify to the importance of keeping watch over one’s inner life, regardless of one’s external circumstances or state of life. In some sense, one’s physical environment mattered less than one’s ability to overcome distractions of any kind. “Let us be on our guard,” Amma Synklētikē warned, “for it is through our senses that thieves get in, even though we do not wish it.”87 Moreover, as Synklētikē also cautioned, one’s λογισμοί represented as great a threat to one’s salvation as any outer distraction.88 Reflecting a similar concern for keeping watch over one’s thoughts, Abba Silvanus explained his spiritual progress by stating that “I never allowed into my heart a thought [λογισμόν] that would anger God.”89 Care for one’s thoughts also entailed an effort to maintain perpetual awareness of God; as Abba Hyperechios said, “Let your consciousness always dwell on the kingdom of heaven, and soon you shall inherit it.”90 Personal effort was thus seen as crucially important in the contest for salvation; as Amma Synklētikē put it, “we all know how to be saved, but, by our own

86 *AP Sys* 4:15 (Wortley 41); *AP Sys* 10:110 (Wortley 170-72).
87 *AP Sys* 11:73.1-2 (Wortley 204).
88 *AP Sys* 11:74.5-9 (Wortley 204).
89 *AP Sys* 11:70.3-4 (Wortley 204).
90 *AP Sys* 11:76.1-3 (Wortley 205).
negligence, we fall short of salvation."\textsuperscript{91} In a similar vein, an apothegm attributed to Abba Ōrsisios holds that “if a person does not guard his own heart well, he forgets and disregards everything he has heard; thus the enemy finds a place in him and overthrows him.”\textsuperscript{92} The challenge of keeping watch over one’s heart and mind was one faced by laypeople and monks alike, offering a reminder that everyone, whether in the desert or in the city, was a participant in the same struggle.

4.6 Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, the influence that desert ascetics exercised upon secular society was felt in a variety of ways. The exercise of power by monk-bishops was an especially visible sign of this influence, but such practices as voluntary poverty and almsgiving also helped to leave the imprint of ascetic values on society at large through the personal example of ascetics themselves as well as through efforts to persuade laypeople to live more simply and to share their own resources with the needy. Many sayings in the \textit{Apophthegmata Patrum} also emphasize that an individual’s inner disposition mattered just as much as outward practices such as almsgiving and the renunciation of material goods; in emphasizing the importance of spiritual attitudes such as sorrow for one’s sins and a refusal to judge others, some elders commended an interiorization of asceticism as a complement to concern for external practices. Accordingly, Amma Synklētikē concluded her admonition regarding ascetics “acting like city dwellers” and laypeople “doing the deeds of the desert” by observing that “it is possible to be alone with one’s spirit while in the company of many and also to have one’s thoughts with crowds even when one is alone.”\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{AP Sys} 11:72.1-3 (Wortley 204).
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{AP Sys} 11:78.1-4 (Wortley 205).
\textsuperscript{93} \textit{AP Sys} 2:27.3-5 (Wortley 21).
Without discounting the importance of external observance, sayings like that of Amma Synklētikē suggested that an interior flight from the world was possible even for those who remained embedded in the life of the city. An essential part of this insight was the recognition that true asceticism demanded personal commitment, with the corollary that the success or failure of that commitment was determined on the basis of one’s unique circumstances. Thus a young monk who lamented his apparent lack of progress in the spiritual life was gently urged by an elder to “remain in your cell and do what you are able to do without getting distressed,” for “the little that you accomplish here and now is comparable to the great deeds that Abba Antony used to accomplish in the desert. I believe that he who remains in his own cell for the name of God, keeping [a watch on] his own conscience, he too is located in the place of Abba Antony.”

Whether in the desert or in the city, maintaining a sense of spiritual equilibrium was ultimately a matter of personal responsibility. Though Christian laypeople could perhaps take heart from the suggestion that they could embrace ascetic values while remaining in the world, they also had to recognize that “doing the deeds of the desert” meant embracing a life of disciplined struggle. In an ultimate sense, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* did not offer its readers simple edification but rather exhorted them to spiritual combat.

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94 *AP Sys* 7:41.6-11 (Wortley 114).
5.1 Introduction

The diverse and fragmentary character of the sayings in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* can frustrate efforts to discern a synthetic vision of ascetic life in the text. The cautious assessment of Jean-Claude Guy cited in the first chapter of this thesis remains important: as Guy urges, the sayings in the *Apophthegmata* should not be seen as articulating “une théologie unifiée de la vie monastique” but rather as “une multitude d’expériences spirituelles particulières, parfois désordonnées, parfois même contradictoires.”¹ Philip Rousseau comes to a similar conclusion: “To speak of the ‘spirituality of the desert fathers’ would be misleading. No such coherent corpus of ideas or recommendations ever existed.”² Nevertheless, as Rousseau insists, “the majority [of the desert ascetics] were intent upon creating a new society. Their spirituality reflected that aim, catering for relationships as well as personal goals.”³ This concluding chapter will briefly examine the elements of the *Apophthegmata* that have been the focus of this thesis – identity, community, and worldly society – and consider how they are bound together by the goal of giving all readers of the text the tools for personal and collective transformation.

5.2 Monastic Identity and Worldly Society

As we have seen in this thesis, the desert ascetics of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* often presented the establishment of physical distance from secular society as an essential step for those who wished to advance in the spiritual life. The view that seeking “the sweetness of God” obliged one to renounce “the sweetness of the world” reflected an awareness that the practice of Christian asceticism stood in tension with the values and priorities of secular society. For some

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³ Rousseau, “The Desert Fathers, Antony and Pachomius,” 120.
ascetics, the κόσμος was defined as the antithesis of all that ascetics strove for. As Abba Isaiah put it, “The world is distraction by affair; the world is to perform what is contrary to nature and to satisfy one’s own desires of the flesh; the world is to think that one is remaining in this age; the world is to care for the body rather than for the soul and to boast of what you are leaving behind.” The desire to reject ostensibly ‘worldly’ vices was motivated in part by a sense of apocalyptic urgency and an awareness of divine judgment, as reflected by Abba Isaiah’s warning not “to think that one is remaining in this age” as well as the exhortation of Antony the Great to “hate the world and all that is in it” and to “renounce this life so we can live for God, for he will expect that of us on the Day of Judgment.” At the same time, ascetics’ renunciation of the world also entailed the embrace of a new way of life with its own distinctive etiquette and expectations. The flight into the desert was not merely a movement away from a society perceived in negative terms but an affirmative effort to recreate society in a new image.

The way in which the desert ascetics saw their life as reflective of a distinctive identity is seen in various counsels and practical examples given in the Apophthegmata. The emphasis given in the text to the cultivation of a disciplined regimen of prayer and work is complemented by frequent consideration of how ascetics should behave in their interactions with others. As we have seen, some apothegms seem to suggest that visitors should be greeted with reserve and even hostility insofar as their presence could be a source of distraction. At the same time, awareness that contact with outsiders was inevitable and necessary led some elders to offer practical advice on how ascetics could manage these relationships. For example, the advice given by Abba Pistamon on the behaviour of an ascetic selling his handiwork at market (cited in chapter three) sought to honour the ascetic’s desire to avoid unseemly haggling over prices while conceding

4 AP Sys 2:15.7-13 (Wortley 18).
5 AP Sys 3:1.3-6 (Wortley 25).
that ascetics had to engage in commerce in order to survive. Being an ascetic had implications for how one interacted with others, obliging one to live and to act in a spirit of conscious spiritual separation from the world even as one remained engaged with worldly society.

The management of relationships with the secular world also extended to sensitivity regarding outsiders’ perceptions of monasticism and to concern for visible witness. As we saw particularly in the fourth chapter of this thesis, the desert ascetics were concerned about how they appeared to others even though they also recognized that appearances sometimes failed to reflect their inner disposition or motives. Ideally, an ascetic’s identity was manifested to others through one’s personal behaviour as well as in externals such as the manner of one’s dress: as an elder cited in chapter three urged his disciples, “Let us then live a life that is consonant with our habit.” Practices such as the wearing of distinctive clothing and the embrace of voluntary poverty symbolized an ascetic’s dedication to God, but they also served as visible markers of identity that set ascetics apart from others. Moreover, these markers of identity were intended to edify others and to lead them to God. As we saw in chapter four, the desert ascetics’ practice of poverty was closely linked to concerns regarding Christian witness and the practice of almsgiving: the ascetics not only sought to help others by sharing their own slender resources with the needy but also advised laypeople to be generous in doing the same. Ultimately, as Amma Synklētikē advised, “the deeds of the desert” that led one to salvation were the same for laypeople as they were for dedicated ascetics.

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6 AP Sys 6:15.5-7 (Wortley 93).
7 AP Sys 10:192.1-3 (Wortley 188).
8 AP Sys 2:27.1-5 (Wortley 21).
5.3 From Monastic Community to a New Society

The monastic identity assumed by the ascetics of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* had a necessarily communal dimension which came to embrace Christians living in the secular world as well as those in the desert. Notwithstanding the fact that many desert ascetics initially sought to live alone and to avoid the company of others, the need for practical forms of mutual support led them to establish bonds of community with fellow ascetics. On a deeper level, as Philip Rousseau suggests, characteristic elements of the desert ascetics’ spirituality such as charity, humility, and service to others “all made a gradual engagement with others the natural outcome of ascetic practice.”

This engagement aimed at social transformation; as Graham Gould writes, the ascetic’s “renunciation of society . . . was not an individual quest like the self-determination of the small farmer” but instead supported “the creation of a new community” and “a new social ideal.” This ideal was not meant to be realized solely by a handful of ascetics, but was offered to all Christians. Viewed in this light, the attention given in the *Apophthegmata* to laypeople “doing the deeds of the desert” in the world can be seen to serve two complementary goals. On the one hand, as the text indicates, the positive example given by devout laypeople was intended to motivate ascetics to follow their own vocation with greater zeal and rigour. At the same time, the existence of laypeople “doing the deeds of the desert” served to emphasize that the essential values of ascetical life – charity and concern for the poor, compunction and frequent prayer, voluntary poverty and sexual continence – were accessible to all Christians. In this sense, the *Apophthegmata* presents a model which could be followed in the city as well as in the desert.

As noted earlier in this thesis, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* was intended to influence a wide audience, one that implicitly included laypeople as well as dedicated ascetics. The Prologue

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of the Systematic Collection states plainly that the sayings of the desert ascetics were assembled with “one object in view: to benefit many people.” The preservation of the Apophthegmata in written form ensured that the work of edification and conversion chronicled in the text would reach far beyond the desert setting in which novices, pilgrims, would-be ascetics, and curious laypeople all sought the guidance of elders by word of mouth. The text also shows that the benefits of contact between ascetics and outsiders went far beyond the giving of advice; in acts of almsgiving and in the offering of hospitality, the desert ascetics influenced others by action and example as well as through their words. As the Prologue of the Systematic Collection notes, the sayings contained in the Apophthegmata had particular resonance for monastics, “those who are desirous of successfully pursuing the heavenly way of life” modelled by the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Nevertheless, as shown by the examples of virtuous κοσμικοί contained within the text, the Apophthegmata also demonstrates that even some who remained within the world lived lives worthy of imitation.

Meant to be shared widely, the sayings in the Apophthegmata Patrum were intended to serve as a model by which all readers of the text could more effectively strive for salvation. The Prologue of the Systematic Collection defends the thematic arrangement of apothegms in the text by observing that “a statement unanimously sustained by many virtuous persons makes no small contribution to the advancement of virtue.” These words make it clear that the editors of the Systematic Collection did not merely seek to preserve old sayings and anecdotes for posterity but instead wished to present the material in a manner that would clarify the essential values offered

11 AP Sys Prol 3.1-2, 5-9 (Wortley 3).
12 The power of hospitality as an instrument of positive ascetic influence may be seen particularly in two apothegms discussed in chapter three: the story of the Manichean who is moved to conversion by an elder’s hospitality (AP Sys 13:12) and the account of an Egyptian elder’s reception of Emperor Theodosius II (AP Sys 15:85).
13 AP Sys Prol 1.3-4 (Wortley 3).
14 AP Sys Prol 4.5-10 (Wortley 4).
in the text and to ensure that they had the strongest possible impact on the reader. The variety of voices in the *Apophthegmata* make it difficult to present the teachings of the desert ascetics in a ‘systematic’ light, but by highlighting certain themes – ἡσυχία, compunction, poverty, humility, hospitality, and so on – the editors of the Systematic Collection sought to articulate the essential elements of the ascetical life and to defend them through the testimony of “many virtuous persons” who had persevered in that life in the past. The *Apophthegmata* can thus be seen as a guide for action that all readers could aspire to put into practice. For some, this would mean following the literal example of the desert ascetics by fleeing from the world. For others, the text provided a collection of precepts that could be followed even within the city. The goal of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is ultimately a very ambitious one: to leave the imprint of ascetical values on worldly society as well as upon the communities of the desert.
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