The Book of the Elders
Sayings of the Desert Fathers

The Systematic Collection
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Translated by
John Wortley

Foreword by
Bernard Flusin
All the quotations from Scripture in this book are presented in translation exactly as they are found in the Greek text of *The Book of the Elders*. Quotations from *Psalms* are identified by reference to the Septuagint numbering.

The punctuation used throughout this book is the publisher’s, not the translator’s.

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Foreword

Writing in the 850s, the future patriarch Photios took note in his celebrated Bibliotheca of a collection of apophthegms very similar to the one John Wortley has translated here: "This is a book especially useful to those who organise their lives with a view to their heavenly legacy. There is clarity in its style and moreover it is what a book ought to be that is in tune with people who are not thinking of exercising their talent but who have devoted all their effort and zeal to the doing of good works."¹ Thus are specified both the nature of the collection (this is ascetic literature) and that which above all makes it attractive to the eyes of the modern reader: its clarity and the absence of rhetoric.

The Sayings of the Fathers is first and foremost an ascetic work assembled by monks primarily for their own use. It brings together the sayings of "the fathers," meaning the great monks (the "elders") who were responsible for training disciples living in the semianchoretic communities of Egypt in the fourth and fifth centuries of this era. So these very short texts, presented in large collections, are firmly rooted in a very precise milieu, and they ought to be read in the way they were originally intended to be received: each one as the charismatic utterance of a spiritual father, addressed to his familiar disciples or, on occasion, to visitors who came asking for a saying that would help them in their quest for salvation.

This is why the apophthegms make such an impression on us. The reader is directly confronted by the person of Antony or of Poimen with nobody in between, and the elder speaks to him as to a disciple, guiding him along the steep and narrow path of asceticism. And yet this is not the teaching of only one father or mother: numerous monks speak with many voices. The editors of the collection gathered up what they could find of the sayings of the fathers and mothers of old time and in

this way tried to show that while in one way the elders proclaimed a single message, each person could doubtless find what was appropriate (even intended) for him in the diversity of the advice that was given.

The apophthegms are nothing other than what the elders said or the brief, edifying tales they told. It is in their simplicity that the sayings convey a sense of freshness and immediacy: it is Antony himself or Arsenius who is speaking to us or of whose life we catch a brief glimpse. Yet it is important not to lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with a literary work. A considerable space of time separates the monks of the apophthegms and the text that we read now. After the age of the great anchorites who inspired them to do so, more than a century went by before the refugee monks from Scete assembled their collections of sayings—in the Gaza region or elsewhere in Palestine. And there was a difference of language. Most of the Desert Fathers spoke Coptic, while the collections were written in Greek. Literary elaboration has played its part too; extracts from written works (e.g., of Evagrius or of Doulas) might be included under cover of a small collection of sayings. It is also possible to detect some variation in spiritual sensibilities lurking behind the apparent consensus of teaching when certain dossiers are subject to intense scrutiny. The apophthegms were essentially conceived to give the impression of direct contact between a disciple and his spiritual master. They are nothing other then the transformation of that contact into writing, and their greatest success (due to the exclusion of all rhetoric) is their ability to recapture the irreplaceable element in the saying that is heard and in the example that is seen.

The apophthegms are addressed, as Photios says, “to those who organise their lives with a view to their heavenly legacy”; hence, this is a literature of an essentially ascetic nature; or, to use the categories popularized by Evagrius at the end of the fourth century, it restricts itself to the praktika. So nothing is to be found in it of the theoria: no theology, no teaching on the difficulties arising from Scripture. Even though the apophthegmatic collections (in their original form) were put together at a time when the Eastern churches were being disturbed by serious christological dissensions, they are silent on this subject. This characteristic assured them of a wide distribution. First edited in Greek (the alphabetic/anonymous collection perhaps at the end
of the fifth century, the systematic, translated here by John Wortley, probably at the beginning of the sixth), they were quickly diffused in Latin and Syriac. Then they were translated back into Coptic and, subsequently, into all the languages and confessions of medieval Christianity. In the Greek-speaking world they never ceased to be recopied, and from the second half of the sixth century they figured among the favorite readings of Eastern monks.

Lacking the protection of an author’s name, the collections are defined by their function, which is to concentrate the teaching of the Fathers (insofar as this can be done). Hence, their contents are of many kinds and (especially in earlier times) always susceptible to modification and enrichment. This is why, although the collections are well known, they are still very badly edited. Their value for the history of monasticism or of spirituality became ever more clearly recognized in the course of the second half of the twentieth century when the fascinating and diversified world they bring back to life was more fully explored. But the immense effort they demand of the philologist has so far only very imperfectly been accomplished. Following in the footsteps of Wilhelm Bousset (1923), Jean-Claude Guy was able to unravel the manuscript tradition of the systematic collection (1962), and before his death he produced an edition of that collection, which Bernard Meunier was able to bring to completion.

For many years John Wortley has taken an interest in monastic literature, having produced some work on the related genre of the spiritually beneficial tale: a Repertoire that can be consulted online, an edition of the Tales of Paul of Monembasia, and an English translation of John Moschos’s Spiritual Meadow. Now, going back in time, he has turned to the older texts. With his linguistic abilities and his familiarity with early monastic literature, he has focussed his attention on the apophthegms, and in this volume he offers a precise

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3 The Spiritually Beneficial Tales of Paul, Bishop of Monembasia, and of Other Authors, intro., trans., and commentary John Wortley, CS159 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1996).

translation into simple English of Jean-Claude Guy’s edition of the systematic collection.

Bernard Flusin
(translated by John Wortley)
Introduction

The early part of the fourth century of our era was a time of many changes. It saw the Roman Empire itself gradually transformed from a loose federation of provinces administered from Rome on the Tiber into a tightly controlled monarchy ruled (after 329) from the new capital on the Bosporus, Constantinople. It experienced the first shock waves from the movements of the so-called barbarian peoples who would eventually dominate a large part (and overshadow even more) of that Empire. It saw a new religion scarcely three centuries old gain the ascendancy over the many old religions that Rome had cheerfully tolerated, eventually to exclude them. It was in this context that certain devotees of the new religion, many men and some women, began to withdraw from “the world” (as they called society as we know it) to retreat into the desert, there to practice their new religion more seriously. They may have felt that its recent legalisation and the subsequent influx of people who merely liked to be on the winning side threatened its purity. Or they may have feared that the Hellenism of urban society was too strong for the new, largely Semitic faith to challenge without being compromised. They may simply have been trying to escape the increasing demands, fiscal and other, that the centralization of government was placing on all levels of society with increasing vehemence. But, whatever the reasons, out into the desert they went; and they did so in ever-increasing numbers.

These “withdrawers” (anchorites) were the first Christian monks; their luminaries were the so-called Desert Fathers. It was in what is now called Egypt that this great withdrawal first occurred. Most of the land there is desert, relieved only by the fertile valley of the Nile and its great estuary where sits that jewel of the Mediterranean, Alexandria. The earliest monks, however, were not from the Hellenized, urbanized delta; they were simple Coptic-speaking peasants (fellahin) from the smaller towns and villages of the Nile valley. We cannot say with certainty when their withdrawal first began, but we can say what
was the *immediate* cause of many taking the desert road. According to Athanasius, the contemporary and the biographer of Antony the Great (ca. 250–356), when Antony was still a very young man, he was reflecting on

> how the apostles abandoned everything and followed the Savior; how others sold their goods “and brought the prices of the things that were sold and laid them down at the Apostles’ feet” [Acts 4:35] to be given to those in need and what a great hope awaited them in heaven. While thinking about these things, he went into church just when the Gospel was being read and he heard the Lord saying to the rich man: “If you wish to be perfect, go and sell all your belongings; give [the proceeds] to the poor. Then come and follow me and you will have treasure in heaven” [Matt 19:21].

In response, Antony promptly embarked on a long and highly influential monastic career. Largely on account of Athanasius’s chronicle of that career, Antony is traditionally hailed as “the first monk” and the founder of the monastic tradition. Certainly many others heard the dominical challenge “If you wish to be perfect . . . ,” sold up, and retreated into the desert; but it is clear from Athanasius’s words that Antony was not exactly a pioneer:

> Now there was at that time an elder in the adjacent village who followed the ascetic, solitary life from his youth. When Antony saw him, he imitated him well and truly. At first he began himself living in the area outside the village. Then if he heard of anyone seriously [doing likewise] he would go and search him out like a wise bee and would not return to his own place until he had seen him and received from him provisions (as it were) for the road to virtue.

We may never know who first embraced the desert “road to virtue,” but it is clear from this passage that one who would do so had first to *learn* from another. The word “monk” does indeed mean “a loner,” but the person who aspired to “renounce the world” must first find an “elder” (*gerōn*)—meaning a person advanced not necessarily in

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6 VA 3.3.
age but certainly in monastic practice—who would accept him as a disciple and apprentice. To his elder (whom he would address as abba, “father”) the neophyte owed complete obedience; from his abba (and other elders) he would receive “provisions (as it were) for the road to virtue.” This provender came in two forms: first, there was the practical example of the abba’s own way of life; second, there was the verbal teaching of the elders in sayings and tales, setting out the theory and practice of the eremitic life.

Characteristically, the saying was a short, laconic statement expressing some vital point—for example, “Humility effaces many sins” [1.9; Isaiah of Scete]. On receiving a saying, the disciple would memorize and meditate upon it until his abba judged him ready for another piece of instruction. (For the early monks, “meditate” seems to have meant repeating something out loud, over and over again.) After some considerable time and only in some cases, the abba might suggest that a disciple go and set up his own hermitage elsewhere. And if, in due course, that brother (now an “elder”) were to receive disciples of his own, to these he would impart the tales and sayings he had learned from his abba. They in turn would teach them to others, all by word of mouth, and in this way an ever-increasing folklore of the desert was created and diffused.

In this desert lore, tales and sayings are intermixed like sand and gravel, and, as with sand and gravel, it is not always easy to say which is which. A mere glance at the surviving material reveals that there are several narratives or tales interspersed with the sayings, showing the sort of life an elder led and the actions he performed. Thus one can say that while the sayings define the theory, the tales describe the practice of desert monasticism (eremitic monachism). There are exceptions, but on the whole the distinction is a valid one. In due course the tales achieved an existence independent of the sayings and circulated freely outside the monastic community as “spiritually beneficial tales.” There are already some tales in the present collection whose monastic connection is by no means evident.

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From an early date an important transition began to take place in the nature of the monastic community as the rough, Coptic-speaking first monks were joined by increasing numbers of the more sophisticated, Greek-speaking denizens of Alexandria, other cities of Egypt, and even further afield. With their arrival the tales and sayings began to circulate in Greek as well as in Coptic. In due course they began to be written down; that is, they were written in Greek, and it is in Greek that they have come down to us. Those who composed the extant collections may have been refugees from Scete, the monastic location that features most prominently in the tales and sayings, known to have been devastated by barbarians from the Libyan desert three times at least. Scete had been the main, the most remote, and the most advanced center of monastic activity. At some point the displaced community of Scete and its hinterland seems to have been partially reconstituted in Palestine, in the wadis of the West Bank; and it was probably there that, at the end of the fifth century, refugee monks made the first attempts to record the lore of the Desert Fathers (gerontika, paterika) in writing. Their object was almost certainly to fix for posterity the memory of a land and a life they had been forced to abandon. Thus so many of the tales and sayings begin with the nostalgic phrase “Abba N. used to say” back in Scete, at The Cells, on the Mountain of Nitria, or simply “in the desert.”

The earliest attempts to codify tales and sayings are lost; we only know of their existence because they are mentioned by the editor(s) whose work has survived. Those editors, presumably to impose some sort of order on the confusing mass of oral material in circulation, adopted the very sensible principle of gathering all the known sayings or activities of a certain abba under one head; then, by reference to the initial letter of the abba’s name, they set the heads in the order of the letters of the Greek alphabet. They started with Antony the Great, Arsenius, and Agathon and (about a thousand items later) concluded

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8 It is alleged that even Poemen, to whom an enormous number of sayings is attributed, did not speak Greek: “Abba John who was exiled by [the Emperor] Marcian [450–57] used to say: ‘Coming from Syria, we once visited Abba Poemen and we wanted to ask him about hardness of heart. The elder did not speak Greek and there was no interpreter to hand. Perceiving our dismay, the elder began speaking in the Greek tongue, saying . . .’” Poemen 183, APsys [see n13 in this introduction] 18.21.
with Cheremon, Psenthaisius, and Ór (Χ, Ψ, Ω). Incidentally, it was those editors who first employed the word “apophthegms” (apophthegmata) to describe the tales and sayings; hence the collection just described is known as apophthegmata patrum alphabetica, the Alphabetic Apophthegms of the Fathers (APalph).

The same editors realized, however, that there was still a large amount of material in circulation that, for some reason or other, had not been incorporated into APalph. Much of this consisted of tales and sayings with no name attached—for example, “An elder was asked . . .” or “One of the fathers used to say. . . .” This material they gathered into a supplementary collection now known as the Anonymous Apophthegmata (APanon) and also as Nau after Frédéric Nau who first published the items 1–400 at the beginning of the twentieth century.9 The second half remains unpublished, but a complete edition and translation will shortly appear.10 It is clear from the extant manuscripts that the editors attempted to impose some sort of order on these anonymous items too. They did this in the earlier part of the collection by grouping items of similar import with each other—for example, items dealing with humility, those on the subject of Christian charity, and so forth.

It would appear from the introduction to APalph that the two parts of the collection just described were made by the same person(s) at more or less the same time. Another major collection, the text of which is presented in this volume, probably began to emerge a generation or so later. It is easy to see why it was made: those attempting to live the monastic life needed to be able to consult all the available tales and sayings on any one topic without having to search through the two huge parts of the former collection, contained no doubt in several scrolls. The partial attempt of the editors of APanon to sort by topic was apparently appreciated; now that procedure was extended to the entire corpus. Thus there was generated the systematic collection (APsys). Twenty-one chapter heads were identified, each of them a monastic virtue or desideratum; then much of the

extant material was arranged under those heads. A typical chapter of APsys as it now stands contains, first, a selection from APalph (often preserving the original alphabetic order of the items), then maybe some extracts from the Spiritual Discourses of Isaiah of Scete11 and/or sundry other items, mainly anonymous (for instance, the curious “medical” items in 16.17–20). Finally, each chapter reproduces a considerable number of selections from the anonymous apophthegms [APanon], to which some additional matter may have been appended.12 Some of the chapters are quite short: no. 19, on miracles, has only twenty-one items, while no. 10, on discrimination, is the longest with almost two hundred. The entire collection now contains about 1,200 items compared with about one thousand in APalph and more than eight hundred in APanon.

While everything that has been stated so far is correct generally speaking, there is a complicating factor that must be taken into consideration: the instability of the texts. Until the invention of printing (and well beyond it in some cases), texts were transmitted in manuscript form; they were written out by hand. For the most part, copyists made it a point of honor to reproduce the exemplar before them as accurately as possible, so that (apart from the inevitable mistakes of human frailty) all the extant manuscripts of a given text tend to resemble each other fairly closely. Such, however, is not by any means the case where apophthegmatic material is concerned. The actual sayings of the fathers seem to have suffered least, maybe because these are usually short and therefore could be easily memorized verbatim. But alternative wordings, amplifications, additions, and changes in emphasis are not by any means uncommon even in the sayings. Some variations in sayings could also be due to a variety of translation from the original Coptic, a fortiori in the case of tales.

11 Isaiah was a Monophysite monk who died at Gaza in 488. See Abba Isaiah of Scetis: Ascetic Discourses, trans. John Chryssavgis and Pachomios Penkett, CS 150 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2002).

12 Chap. 21 exceptionally has no selections from APalph and only three pieces from Isaiah of Scete. Nearly all the rest of the contents are from APanon.
Here there can be such a breadth of variation that in extreme cases no more than the basic structure of the tale remains unchanged. This variation in sayings and tales may be explained by the coexistence over several centuries of the oral and written forms, which constantly contaminated each other. Thus a scribe might well set down not the dead text found in his exemplar but the living word he had received from the mouth of a charismatic abba. And if he had heard other tales not found in his exemplar, these he might not hesitate to include; or he might regroup material the way his teachers grouped them—and even omit items for which he had no oral authority. Thus the collections themselves vary in content almost as much as the tales vary in form, to the extent that it is rare indeed to find two manuscripts of apophthegmatic material that contain the identical contents in the same order as each other.

These variations present a great problem for today’s scholars; doomed to disappointment are they who attempt to establish the Ur-text of this material, for it is a structure based on the shifting sands of hearsay. The one thing that can be said with a degree of confidence is that the individual items, just like the collections in which they are found, do tend to expand (rarely to contract) with the passage of time. This tendency is clearly discernible when one examines an item at subsequent stages of its transmission: first in APalph or APanon, again in APSys, and then in the great eleventh-century Synagogê of Paul Euergetinos. Indeed, the tales in particular are so skeletal and laconic when they first appear that one is led to suspect that the intention of the earliest editors may have been to present no more that the bare bones of a tale, never intended to be more than notes or even mere mnemonics for a story-teller who was expected to tell it in his own words and, of course, at his own length. If such were the case, then it was almost inevitable that the role of raconteur would begin to impinge on that of scribe.

When was APsys created? Clearly later than the two parts of the former collection, since it draws heavily on both: hence (roughly) after AD 500. A terminus ante quem is established in the third quarter of the sixth century by the existence of a Latin translation of the text made by the deacon Pelagius and the subdeacon John (P&J), each of whom subsequently became pope of Rome (556–61 and 561–74, respectively). However, whereas the modern critical edition of APsys contains about 1,200 items, there are only 737 in P&J. Examination of the extant Greek manuscripts of APsys suggests that P&J is the earliest surviving evidence of a text in a state of evolution, two further stages of which are discernible. As there are no extracts from Isaiah of Scete in P&J, this would appear to represent the most primitive extant version of the text. A second version is characterized by the incorporation of a little material by Isaiah of Scete, while a third one not only includes a large amount of Isaiah but also presents evidence of the other contents having been somewhat rearranged to accommodate it.

It is this third version that is translated in this volume. A terminus ante quem is established by the oldest extant manuscript of the text, Athos Lavra B 37, copied in AD 970. One might suspect that the process of the evolution of the text had more or less come to an end some considerable time before that date, but it might nevertheless have been a long process. It should be noted in passing that APalph may well have also undergone a similar process of evolution, for it now contains material that the editors of APsys appear not to have known. But these are thorny problems; there appears to have been hardly anything fixed about the apophthegmatic texts, with the exception, that is, of the alphabetic system in one case and the twenty-one heads in another. “The philological problem of the Apophthegmata Patrum is one of the most complex problems posed by the editing of patristic texts,” wrote Père Guy, citing Wilhelm Bousset, who wrote,


15 Such is the conclusion of Guy, Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum, SH 36 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1962), 182–84.
“The transmission of the Apophthegmatic literature is astonishingly complicated considering the extraordinarily varied nature of the source materials.”\textsuperscript{16} The difficulties are by no means reduced by the absence of reliable editions of both the alphabetic and the anonymous series.

Fortunately this is no longer the case so far as \textit{APsys} is concerned. Of this there is an excellent critical edition and French translation, the work of the late Father Jean-Claude Guy\textsuperscript{17} and (to a certain extent) of Bernard Flusin and Bernard Meunier; the present translation is based entirely on their Greek text. Needless to say, given the instability of the text, the editors had to make some arbitrary choices; these have been neither challenged nor altered in this translation. Yet here, as ever, the translator has to serve two masters. On the one hand, he is bound to express the meaning of the text as precisely as possible; on the other hand, he is obliged to do so in English that is smooth to the ear and easily understood. How far he can compromise in reconciling these two aims is a matter of choice for each translator. If the present writer has offended or confused the English reader, he apologizes; if he has dismayed the Hellenist, he begs forgiveness. His aim was to make the wisdom of the Desert Fathers as widely available as the English language is read. Not all of this book will appear to be wisdom to every one of its readers; some of it may indeed appear to be foolishness, for it speaks of an arcane wisdom to which we may have partly lost the keys. Nevertheless, every reader will find something in the apophthegms of the fathers that will ring true for him or her. For those who, like those fathers, strive to lead the Christ life but “in the world” (as the fathers would have said), the hope is that they too will find in this book abundant “provisions (as it were) for the road to virtue,” as does your translator,

\begin{flushright}
John Wortley
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Winnipeg, mmxi
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\textsuperscript{16} Jean-Claude Guy, 7: “Die Überlieferung der Apophthegmata-Literatur ist eine erstaunlich verwinkelte, und das in Betracht kommende Quellenmaterial ungemein weitschichtig”; Wilhelm Bousset, \textit{Apophthegmata; Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchstums} (Tubingen: Mohr, 1923) 1.

Acknowledgments

The translator wishes most gratefully to signal and acknowledge the unstinting aid and encouragement he has received throughout the preparation of this volume from his colleague and friend Dr. Robert Jordan of Belfast. Without his eagle eye and wise scholarship, more than a few infelicities would have slipped through in this translation. It is thanks entirely to his diligent reading of the manuscript that this treasury of early monastic wisdom can now be presented to the public with a degree of confidence that it fairly represents what the Desert Fathers bequeathed to posterity.

The translator and his publisher both wish to warmly thank Sources Chrétiennes for the generous permission to translate the text of Guy’s edition (cited in note 13 above) of the collection systématique of apophthegms and to publish it.

JW
Abbreviations

Items found in other collections are identified either by a name and a number (e.g., Arsenios 14) or by N and a number (e.g., N 253). In the former case the reference is to *Apophthegmata patrum, collection alphabetica* [APalph], ed. Jean-Baptiste Cotelier, in *Monumenta Ecclesiae Graecae*, vol. 1 (Paris: 1647), re-ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, *PG* 65:71–440, English translation by B. Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975). In the latter case the reference is to the appendix of the above, the so-called anonymous collection of apophthegmata (APanon), first partially edited by Frédéric Nau (hence “N”), “Histoires de solitaires égyptiens,” *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien* 12 (1907) through 18 (1913). The first complete edition and translation (by John Wortley) is about to be published by Cambridge University Press.


**CPG** *Corpus Patrum Graecorum*


LXX Septuagint

N (Nau) = APanon

PG *Patrologia Graeca*

PL *Patrologia Latina*

PO *Patrologia Orientalis*


Evagrius Ponticus, *Practicus*


Glossary

Non-English Words Retained in the Translation

**abba.** Father, a senior monk but not necessarily an old one; see 15.57.

**accidie (akēdía).** “Sloth, torpor, especially as a condition leading to listlessness and want of interest in life” (*OED*), probably akin to depression.

**agapē.** Literally “love,” used to designate a common meal shared by monks on special occasions (hence “love feast”), possibly originally made possible by some freewill offering.

**amma.** Mother.

**apatheia.** Literally “unfeeling”; indifference to physical conditions; a term found rarely in the *Apophthegmata* but common in later monastic writing.

**askēsis.** Literally “a formation,” usually meaning the practice of asceticism; the discipline associated with the monastic way of life.

**askētēs.** One who practices *askēsis*.

**coenobion, adj. coenobitic.** Here transliterates *koinobion*, “common life,” meaning wherever persons live together in community (a convent) under the supervision of a *koinobiarch*, here translated “superior” or rendered *higoumen*, q.v. A place or a community in which monks live together with shared worship, meals, and responsibilities.

**dynamis.** The healing “power” believed to be given off by holy persons and their relics and effects, as in Mark 5:30.

**higoumen (hēgoumenos).** The head of a monastic community.

**hēsychia (hēsuchia).** Not merely (or necessarily) silence [*siōpē*; see 2.4 and 2.12] but an interior silence characterized by a tranquil acquiescence in the will of God, producing a “profound calm and great peace within” (2.22).
leviton. (That is, “Levite’s.”) The monk’s garment for prayer, usually white.

logismos, pl. logismoi. A word of many meanings. It can simply mean one’s thinking process, but it can also mean everything that goes on in that process—good, bad, and indifferent—from a mere whim to a serious temptation.

porneia. Any illicit sexual movement of body, mind, or spirit.

synaxis, pl. synaxes. Literally “a congregating”; it means an act of worship, either of one or a few monks (the “little synaxis,” also called “liturgy”) or of an entire community (e.g., at weekends and festivals) at a central location. The Holy Eucharist (“Offering”) is also called synaxis.

English Words Used with Specific Meanings

act of obeisance. A prostration; to throw oneself at somebody’s feet.

alienation. Translates Greek xeniteia and Latin perigrinatio; making oneself a “stranger and sojourner” [1 Pet 2:11], usually in an uninhabited place (but see 4.52).

anchorite (anachorētēs). One who withdraws; one who has abandoned “the world” for the desert or (more usually) has left a community to live alone. See 10.172; N 243.

ascetic, asceticism (askētēs, askēsis). The practitioner and practice of monastic discipline, perceived as a training or formation in travelling the way to perfection.

burnt-faced one (aithiops, from which “Ethiopian” derives). A devil or demon.

dried loaf (paxamas). “Biscuit,” named after the baker Paxamos; a bread roll that has been sun dried or baked hard.

Egypt. Only the inhabited part of what is now known as Egypt, mainly the valley of the Nile and its delta region.

elder. Here translates gerōn, often misleadingly rendered “old man,” but age is not necessarily implied (compare “elder” among North American Indians). An elder is one advanced not so much in age as in experience; hence a senior monk, as opposed to a junior (brother).
expatriation. See alienation.

loose talk (parrhēsia). “Outspokenness,” “familiarity,” also in a good sense; “freedom of access” (e.g., to the Deity, as at 1 John 2:28).

Lord-and-master. Translates despotēs.

monastery. Here means any place where monks live, from the smallest hermitage to the vast Pachomian establishment.

poverty. Here inadequately translates aktēmosynē, literally “without possessions.” In the Apophthegmata the word means not only the voluntary abandonment of material possessions but, a fortiori, indifference to possessions even when they are accessible.


sorrow for sin. Here translates katanyxis, sometimes rendered “compunction.”

voluntary exile. See alienation.

worldling. “One who is devoted to the interests and pleasures of the world” (OED). This obsolete English word has been resurrected to represent the Greek kosmikos, a person “of the world” as opposed to one “of the desert” (that is, a “non-monk”), sometimes translated “layman” or “non-clergyman” (although very few monks were clerics); also sometimes translated “secular,” but that usually means a cleric who is not a monk—almost no worldlings were clerics.

Where words are found in square brackets in the text, these are words that are not found in the Greek but are desirable to make the meaning clear.
The Book of the Elders
Prologue to
The Book of the Elders
Called Paradise

1. In this book the virtuous asceticism, the wondrous way of life, and the sayings of holy and blessed fathers are recorded to school those who are desirous of successfully pursuing the heavenly way of life and willing to travel the road to the kingdom of heaven by emulating and imitating them.

2. Now it has to be known that the holy fathers who became emulators and teachers of this blessed monastic life, once they were enflamed with divine and heavenly love and had concluded that all that is good and honorable among people was worth nothing, made a great effort above all to do nothing for show. They traveled the way prescribed by Christ while concealing the greater part of their good deeds through extreme humility.

3. So nobody has been able precisely to describe their virtuous life for us. Those who labored most painstakingly at the task have bequeathed to us in writing a few examples of [the elders’] achievements in word and deed, not in order to flatter [the elders] but to rouse those who came after to emulation. At different times they set down these very many of the elders’ sayings and good deeds in narrative form, in simple and uncontrived language, with only this one object in view: to benefit many people.

4. But since the relating of many of the things was confused and disordered—their meaning haphazardly...
spread throughout the book, which did not help the memory to keep track of it—it caused some difficulty in the reader’s mind. That is why we 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.

5. For when Abba Antony says that “humility evades all the snares of the devil” [see 15.3, Antony 7], another [elder] that “humility is a tree of life, raised up on high” [see 15.67, Hyperechios, N 699], another that “humiliation neither angers anyone nor gets angry” [see 21.34; N 115], while yet another says that “if one says to another in humility, ‘Forgive me,’ he burns the demons” [see 15.98], from all these the mind of the reader receives confidence to make every effort in pursuit of humility. And you will find the same in the other chapters; for the arrangement of the chapters all together and each one of them separately is beneficial in the highest degree to him who undertakes the reading of the book.

6. Since each chapter contains the various sayings of fathers, named and unnamed, one should know that we have first set out in alphabetical order those whose names we were able to discover, unless of course the initial letter has disappeared with the disappearance of the name.

7. The general sequence of the chapters is not arranged without plan or haphazardly; it too is very convenient for him who is willing to apply his mind.

8. For after the exhortations, it begins with the practices most particular to, and primarily for, monks: ḥēsychia, sorrow for sin, self-discipline. Then, going somewhat deeper, it describes the more perfect practices a little at a time, finally proceeding to those that are generally
beneficial, both integrating and perfecting those that have been enrolled in and are components of the common life, which are obedience, humility, love. For what is more beneficial or greater than obedience? What [is] more perfect than love? What [is] more elevated than humility?

9. To these are added some other great things, but these are charismata rather than correct forms of behavior; for revelations and explanations of divine sayings, the workings of miracles and powers would be donatives of God rather than human pursuits. But if someone adds to such things [the practice of] totally alienating himself from men or always going naked or feeding on wild herbs, he will not fall short of what is appropriate. For such practices are set out here so that we might practice them in every way in order to know in what relationship our holy fathers stood with God and with what distinctions he glorified those who were sincerely devoted to him.

10. Providing a final ornament, the entire book concludes with the sayings [apophthegmata] of the fathers that teach the task of monks in brief.

11. The chapters are as follows:¹

   i. An Exhortation of Holy Fathers on Advancing toward Perfection  7

   ii. Every Effort Should Be Made to Pursue
       Hēsychia  15

   iii. Sorrow for Sin [Katanyxis, “Compunction”]  25

   iv. Self-Control [Egkrateia] Should Be Achieved
       Not Only in the Case of Food but Also in
       Other Movements of the Soul  38

¹The arabic numerals have been added for the convenience of the reader.
v. Various Narratives for Security in the Wars Arising against Us from *Porneia* 59

vi. Poverty [*Aktēmosynē*] and That It Is Necessary to Guard against Covetousness 89

vii. Various Narratives Preparing Us for Patience and Courage 98

viii. One Should Do Nothing for Show 123

ix. One Should Guard against Judging Anybody 133

x. Discretion [*Diakrisis*] 143

xi. One Should Ever Be on Watch 189

xii. One Should Pray without Ceasing 216

xiii. One Must Joyfully Practice Hospitality and Show Compassion 224

xiv. Obedience 233

xv. Humility 246

xvi. Forbearance [*Anexikakia*] 289

xvii. Love [*Agapē*] 300

xviii. Those Who Have Second Sight [*Dioratikoi*] 310

xix. Wonder-Working Elders 350

xx. Virtuous Living 357

xxi. Sayings [*Apophthegmata*] of Those Who Grew Old in the Ascetic Life, Briefly Demonstrating Their Supreme Virtue 376
An Exhortation of Holy Fathers on Advancing toward Perfection

1. Somebody asked Antony, “By observing which [precept] shall I be well pleasing to God?” The elder answered, “Observe what I am telling you: Always have God before your eyes wherever you go. Whatever you are doing, have the testimony from Holy Scripture to hand. Wherever you are living, do not be in a hurry to move away. Observe these three [precepts] and you will be saved.”

2. Abba Pambo asked Abba Antony, “What am I to do?” The elder said to him, “Have no confidence in your own righteousness; have no regrets about a past action; get your tongue and your belly under control.”

3. The blessed Gregory said, “God requires these three things of every person who has received baptism: correct faith of the soul, truth of the tongue, self-control of the body.”

4. Somebody else said that one of the fathers said, “A dry and monotonous diet coupled with love speedily bring the monk to the haven of apatheia.”

5. He also said, “When one of the monks was informed of the death of his father, he said to the messenger, ‘Stop blaspheming, for my father is immortal.’”

6. Abba Macarius said to Abba Zacharias, “Tell me, what is the task of the monk?” “You are asking me, father?” he said, and Abba Macarius said, “I have full
confidence in you, Zacharias my son, for there is one who is goading me to question you.” Abba Zacharias said to him, “In my opinion, to coerce oneself in all things, that is [the task] of the monk.”

7. Abba Isaiah the priest said, “One of the fathers used to say that a person ought before all things to acquire belief in God, a ceaseless yearning for God, guilelessness, not returning evil for evil, mortification and humility, purity, clemency and love for all, submission, gentleness, long-suffering, patience, a desire for God, and [the practice of] constantly calling upon God with a painful heart and genuine love, with a view to not paying attention to what is past but attending to that which is to come, having no confidence in one’s own good works and service, and ceaselessly invoking the help of God in the things that happen to one each day.”

8. A brother asked Abba Isaiah for a saying, and in answer the elder said to him, “If you want to follow our Lord Jesus, observe his word, and, if you are willing for your old man to be crucified with him, until you die, you ought to cut off those who bring you down from the cross. You have to prepare yourself to tolerate being set at naught; to repose the hearts of those who do you wrong; to humble yourself before those who would have dominion over you; to maintain silence of the mouth; and to refrain from judging anybody in your heart.”

9. He also said, “Toil, poverty, voluntary exile, fortitude, and keeping silent produce humility, and humility effaces many sins. The renunciation of one who does not observe these [practices] is in vain.”

10. He also said, “Hate everything in the world and repose of the body, for these made you an enemy of God. As a person who has an enemy fights with him, so we ought also to fight against the body to allow it no repose.”
11. A brother asked Abba Isaiah about the phrase of the prayer in the Gospel: “What is this ‘Hallowed be thy name’?” “This is for the perfect,” he answered, “for the name of God cannot be hallowed in us who are dominated by a passion.”

12. They used to say of Abba Theodore of Phermē that he exceeded many in these three points: poverty, asceticism, and fleeing from folk.

13. Abba John Colobos said, “Personally, I would like a person to participate in all the virtues. So when you arise at dawn each day, make a fresh start in every virtue and commandment of God with greatest patience, with fear and long-suffering, in the love of God, with all spiritual and physical fervor, and with much humiliation; enduring affliction of the heart and prevention, with much prayer and intercession, with groans, in purity of the tongue and custody of the eyes; being reviled and not getting angry, living peaceably and not giving back evil for evil; not noticing the faults of others; not measuring oneself, but for you to be beneath the whole of creation, having renounced material goods and the things that pertain to the flesh; on a cross, in combat, in poverty of spirit, in determination and spiritual asceticism; in fasting, in repentance, in weeping, in the strife of battle, in discretion, in purity of the soul, in generous sharing, [doing] your manual labor in ἡσυχία, in nightly vigils, in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in toils, closing your tomb as though you were already dead, so that death seems to be near to you every day.”

14. Abba Joseph the Theban said there are three things that are precious in the sight of the Lord. When a person is sick and temptations come upon him, he accepts them gratefully. The second is when someone renders all his deeds pure in the sight of the Lord, with no human element in them. The third is when someone is living in
submission to a spiritual father and renounces all his own desires.¹

15. Abba Cassian recounted of one Abba John, superior of a *coenobion*, that he was great in his lifetime. “When this man was about to die and was migrating to God joyfully and eagerly,” he said, “the brothers gathered around him, asking him to leave them some concise and salvific saying as a legacy by which they would be able to advance toward perfection in Christ. But he sighed and said, ‘I have never done my own will, nor did I teach anyone to do that which I did not first do myself.’”

16. A brother asked Abba Macarius the Great about perfection, and in answer the elder said, “A person cannot be perfect if he does not acquire great humility in his heart and in the body, declines to measure himself in any matter but rather places himself in humiliation beneath the whole of creation, and refuses to judge anybody at all except himself alone; unless he endures insult and tears all evil out of his heart, forces himself to be long-suffering, kindly, brotherly, chaste, and self-controlled (for it is written, ‘The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force’ [Matt 11:12]), seeing what is right with the eyes, maintaining a guard on his tongue, and turning aside from every vain and soul-destroying rumor; there being justice at his hands, purity of heart toward God, and a spotless body; unless he has the remembrance of death before his eyes every day and has renounced all spiritual anger and evil, renounced material goods and the delights of the flesh, renounced the devil and all his works, but has firmly committed himself to God, the universal sovereign, and to all his commandments and is constantly waiting upon God on every occasion, in every matter and every undertaking.”

¹“This person has an extraordinary crown; but I would prefer sickness,” adds *APalph.*
17. Abba Mark said, “The law of freedom teaches all truth. Most people read [this law] in the light of what they know, but a few think of it as an analogy for the fulfilling of the commandments. Do not look for its perfection in human virtues, for nobody is found to be perfect in them; its perfection is encrypted in the cross of Christ.”

18. A brother asked an elder, “What good activity is there, that I could practice and live in it?” The elder said, “God knows what is good, but I heard that one of the fathers questioned Abba Nisteros the Great, the friend of Abba Antony, saying to him, ‘What good work is there, that I might practice [it]?’ and he said to him, ‘Are not all undertakings equal? For the Scripture says, “Abraham was hospitable and God was with him” [see Gen 18:2]; Elijah loved ἡσυχία and God was with him; David was humble and God was with him.’ So whatever you observe your soul wishing to do for God, do it—and watch over your heart.”

19. Abba Poemen used to say of Abba Nisteros, “Just as with the case of the brazen serpent in the wilderness—anyone of the people who looked at it was healed [see Num 21:9]—so it was with the elder. Possessing all virtue and keeping silence, he would heal everybody.”

20. Abba Poemen said, “Being on the alert, paying attention to oneself, and discretion—these three virtues are the working tools of the soul.”

21. He also said, “God gave this rule of life to Israel: to refrain from what is contrary to nature, that is, from anger, bad temper, jealousy, hatred, slandering a brother, and the rest of the things [pertaining] to the old way of life.”

22. A brother asked him how a person ought to order his life, and the elder said to him, “Let us look at Daniel; no accusation was found against him other than the way he served his God” [Dan 6:5–6].
23. He also said, “Poverty, affliction, and discretion: these are the working tools of the monastic life, for it is written, ‘There were these three men: Noah, Job, and Daniel’ [Ezek 14:14]. Noah represents indifference to material goods, Job toil, and Daniel discretion. If there are these three activities in a person, God is dwelling in him.”

24. Abba Poemen also said, “If a monk hates two things, he can become free of the world.” “What are they?” said the brother to him, and the elder said, “Repose of the flesh and vainglory.”

25. They said of Abba Pambo that when he was dying, at the moment of departure, he said to the holy fathers who were present, “From the time I came to this place in the desert, built my cell and dwelt in it, I do not recall eating bread except what came from my hands, nor do I repent of anything I said until this time. And yet I am going to God as one who has not even begun to serve him.”

26. Abba Sisoës said, “Be of no significance, cast your will behind you, do not worry yourself [see Matt 6:25] about the concerns of the world, and you shall have repose.”

27. When Abba Chomai was going to die, he said to his sons, “Do not dwell with heretics; do not become acquainted with persons in power. Do not let your hands be open to gather in; let them rather be open to give.”

28. Speaking about life, a brother asked an elder and the elder said, “Eat hay, wear hay, sleep on hay (meaning: despise everything), and acquire a heart of steel.”

29. A brother asked an elder, “How does the fear of God come into the soul?” “If a person has humility, is indifferent to material goods, and refrains from judging, in this way the fear of God comes upon him,” the elder said.
30. An elder said, “May fear, humility, shortage of food, and sorrow remain with you.”

31. One of the elders said, “If you hate something, refrain from doing it to anybody else. Do you hate it when somebody speaks ill of you? Then speak no ill of any person. Do you hate it when somebody makes false accusations against you? Then do not accuse anybody falsely. Do you hate it if somebody sets you at naught or insults you or makes off with what is yours or [does] whatever is like that? Then do nothing of that sort to another. For the person who can keep this saying, it will suffice for his salvation.”

32. An elder said, “This is the life of the monk: work, obedience, meditation, not judging, not backbiting, not grumbling; for it is written, ‘O you that love the Lord, hate the things that are evil’ [Ps 96:10]. The life of a monk is to have nothing to do with that which is unjust, not to see evil with one’s eyes, not to be a busybody, not to listen to other folks’ affairs, to give rather than to take away with one’s hands, not to have pride in one’s heart nor wicked thoughts in one’s mind nor to fill one’s belly, but rather to act with discretion in all things. In these the life of the monk consists.”

33. An elder said, “He who does not receive all persons as brothers but discriminates, such a one is not perfect.”

34. An elder said, “Beseech God to give you sorrow in your heart and humility. Be always attentive to your sins and do not judge others; rather, rate yourself beneath all others. Maintain no friendship with a woman, with a child, or with heretics. Disassociate yourself from loose talk; control your tongue and your belly, [abstaining] from² wine. If somebody speaks to you about any matter whatsoever, do not argue with him. If he speaks well,

²Here Matoës 11 (but not N 330) adds, “more than a little.”
say, ‘Yes.’ If he speaks badly, say, ‘You know what you are talking about,’ and do not contend with him about what he says; then your mind will be at peace.”

35. A brother asked one of the fathers, “What is life?” and in answer he said, “A truthful mouth, a holy body, a pure heart, thoughts that do not wander off to the world, psalm singing with sorrow for sin, living in ἡσυχία, and having nothing in mind other than the expectation of the Lord.”

36. An elder said, “Let us practice gentleness and long-suffering, forbearance, and love, for in these the monk consists.”

37. He also said, “The definition of Christian is the imitation of Christ.”