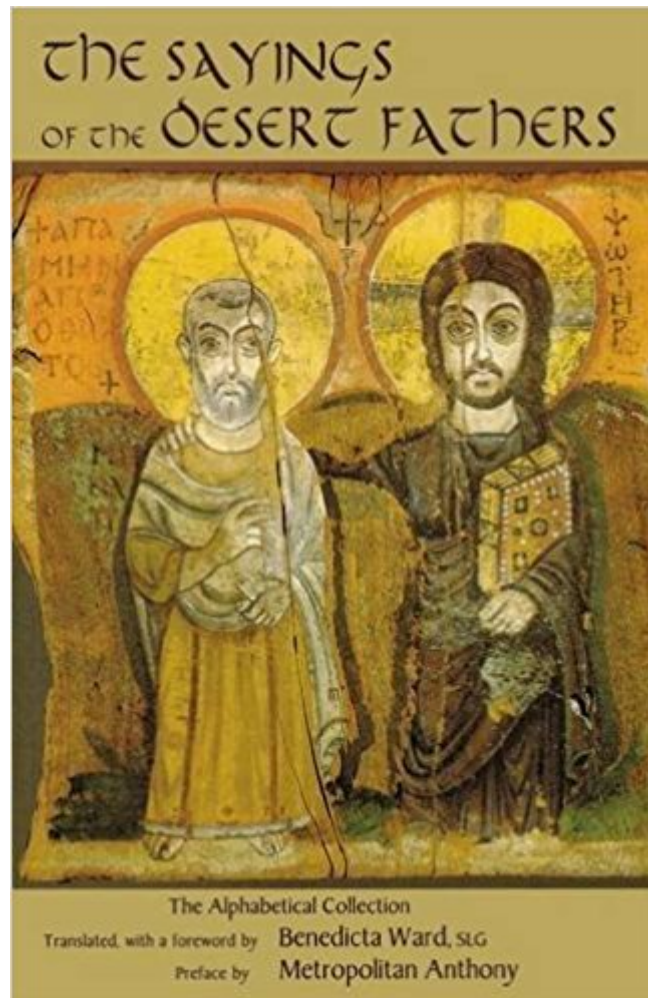




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The Sayings Of The Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection



Synopsis

The fourth-century ascetic flight to the desert indelibly marked Christianity. The faithful who did not embrace the austerity of the desert admired those who did and sought them out for counsel and consolation. The 'words' the monks gave were collected and passed around among those too far away or too feeble to make the trek themselves - or lived generations later. Previously available only in fragments, these Sayings of the Desert Fathers are now accessible in its entirety in English for the first time. We have a great deal to learn from their integrity and their unrelenting courage, from their vision of God - so Holy, so great, possessed of such a love, that nothing less than one's whole being could respond to it. These were men and women who had reached a humility of which we have no idea, because it is not rooted in an hypocritical or contrived depreciation of self, but in the vision of God, and a humbling experience of being so loved. They were ascetics, ruthless to themselves, yet so human, so immensely compassionate not only to the needs of men but also to their frailty and their sins; men and women wrapped in a depth of inner silence of which we have no idea and who taught by 'Being', not by speech: 'If a man cannot understand my silence, he will never understand my words.' If we wish to understand the sayings of the Fathers, let us approach them with veneration, silencing our judgments and our own thoughts in order to meet them on their own ground and perhaps to partake ultimately - if we prove able to emulate their earnestness in the search, their ruthless determination, their infinite compassion - in their own silent communion with God.

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. . . the only English translation of the most complete version of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, a compilation of sayings from the desert monks of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine in the fourth to sixth century, likely to be widely read and enjoyed for their own sake. Choice A delightful insight into the lives of ascetics who left all to follow Christ . . . a very readable translation of an important collection of sayings. Sisters Today. . . should be on the shelf of every library concentrating in spirituality. Abba

Benedicta Ward is Reader in the History of Christian Spirituality in the University of Oxford. Her most recent book is *Anselm of Canterbury: His Life and Legacy* (SPCK 2009). She is a member of the Anglican monastic community of the Sisters of the Love of God.

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Alphabetical Collection, Translated, with a foreword by Benedicta Ward, SLG, Preface by Metropolitan Anthony (Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 1975)

The monks we hear in this book are the first exemplars of what would become monastic life. They are also the model for innumerable parodies of 'wise old men on the mountain', most familiar from the recurring character in the Ziggy cartoon. The original motivation for these hermits, living primarily in the semi-desert climates of Egypt and Syria, was to escape the intermittent persecutions of Christians by Rome and the local populations, up to the Emperor Constantine's proclamation of religious tolerance throughout the empire in 313 CE. In this book, we discover several things which run against the modern stereotype. There were at least three different types of 'solitary monks' in the Egyptian desert. The most famous prototype of the hermit life in lower Egypt was St. Anthony the Great, a Copt (in antiquity, a word meaning Egyptian. In modern usage, and Egyptian Christian) and an unlettered layman. He began his hermit life about 269 CE, and had many disciples and imitators. The second style of desert monk was the cenobite, the same term St. Benedict uses to describe followers of his rule. These lived in a less remote part of Egypt, where groups of monks gathered around a spiritual father and performed communal work and prayer. The leader of this group, and the monk generally credited with founding coenobitic monasticism was St. Pachomius, who lived ca. 290-347 CE. The early style had no formal rule and no spiritual father. It may have been similar to 1960s counter-cultural communities. Both rebelled against established values and 'persecution'. The latter died out, while the former blossomed into the 318 Roman Catholic orders, plus numerous Eastern Orthodox monastic orders. The third style of desert monk was the ascetic, who lived together with an 'abba' or father, of whom the other monks were disciples. These communities centered around the area of Nitria and Scetis, west of the Nile delta, and about 50 and 100 miles south of Alexandria respectively. This was the

most literate, Greek-influenced group, from which most of these sayings come. One surprise is that there are so many of these desert monks. Apparently, these monks were not quite as taciturn as we may have believed. Another surprise is the level of cooperation between monks and the level of 'cottage industry' products they produced, which seemed to be their primary source of income. Their primary raw material was flax, the plant source of both linen fibers and seeds from which linseed oil is extracted. The most common product appears to be flax fiber rope which, based on my old Boy Scout experience with hemp cord, can be woven into a rope by a single person using a device no more complicated than a simple whirlygig. The technology for extracting oil from olives is already 2000 years old at this point, but I see nothing regarding the extraction of linseed oil from flax seeds. Another surprise was the number of monks from this tradition, including some of the greatest figures in the early church, who became bishops and major writers, such as Basil the Great (330--379 CE) and Cassian (360--435 CE), both authors of major works on organized monasticism which predate St. Benedict's rule. The fact that virtually all the monks quoted herein are given the title of 'abba' (the origin of the title 'abbot') suggests that there were many, many more monks, who did live this life in silence. While these monks nominally lived in the 'desert', it appears they were never too far away from oases or a fairly substantial lake which a modern map puts near the monastic center of Scetis. They were also never too far from a town, where they could go to sell their wares and beg for alms. The need to do this last act shows how the organized, self-sufficient community which evolved into schools and hospitals, was a major improvement in the moral stature of the monastic life. There are over 130 named monks in this book from whom we have sayings. The majority appear to have distinctively Greek names such as Achilles, Helladius, Zeno, and Apollo. Many others have names of Hebrew origin such as Abraham, Daniel, John, Joseph, and Isaac. Aside from all the historical background the book provides on the origins and nature of monasticism, we are surprised at how mundane are so many of the quotes. Few have an 'ah ha' quality of the saying printed on the cover. If not simply ordinary, they are simple elaborations on passages from the documents in the New Testament. For example, the first quote attributed to Cassian, upon his visiting an old Egyptian monk, asks why the old man does not keep to the rule of fasting. The old man essentially cites Jesus' comment from Mark 2:19-20, indicating that he is receiving Christ in Cassian, by serving him with all diligence, only to resume fasting when the guest leaves. If a lay person is to find anything distinctive teachings in this book, it is advice on living simply, and the fact that such a life does not exclude a large range of 'simple pleasures' such as conversation and table fellowship. Compared to the 'new monasticism', one has to admire the old monks' lack of self promotion and excessive zeal. They may have needed monetary charity, but

they had no interest in trying to talk you into something. The editors of this volume have done a wonderful job in introducing the material and making it accessible to the average reader. The five stars are based on the introduction, indexes, glossary, chronology, and bibliography. The sayings themselves reveal how important the original scriptures are in comparison to those who wish to interpret them.

Easy to read since the book is broken up into over 100 sections, one for each of the fathers (a few mothers also). I plan to enjoy many of these elders for a long time. There are some really valuable words of wisdom... a lot of advice on the virtues of solitude, controlling one's temperament, words and appetites (passions).

I love them! my beloved fathers sweet words, glad i found this book

Exactly what I expected.

Can't say anything other than I love it. The sayings are very moving, of course I haven't seen if they were confirmed sayings of the fathers, but they seem to be in line with Christian theology. I love this book, hard to put down.

Glad I bought it, it is reminding me how spoiled I am and that suffering and denial of self is worthy, Godly and edifying practice. Some of the writing are void and of minimal content but the gold nuggets one gets out of it are well worth it. I expect this to change how I view and live my life, more denial of self and willing sacrifices in order to achieve a walk closer to Him.

I have owned this book in the past and loaned it out. It never came back so when I saw an opportunity to purchase again, I did. It is a very good guide to living life.

I loved the sayings in this book. It gave me much to think about spiritually in my life.

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