

Miracle and Humility in “Apophtegmata Patrum”: Analysis of an Intricate Balance

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the perspective on miracles and their relationship to humility offered by the alphabetical collection of *Apophtegmata Patrum*. For the analysis of this relationship, texts that speak directly or indirectly about humility have been selected and an attempt has been made to organize them into a coherent discourse. Then a significant set of accounts of miracles is analysed, which are seen from the perspective of their relationship with humility.

Keywords: miracles, humility, *Apophtegmata Patrum*, Orthodox spirituality, Desert Fathers

Introduction

CHRISTIANITY IS INTIMATELY LINKED TO miracles. From the “founding” miracles that justify its existence in the world, especially the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, to the “everyday” miracles that are found at every turn in the biographies of the saints honoured by the Church, the Saints have, for the most part, remained in the Church’s consciousness as miracle workers. In the popular consciousness spiritual figures are associated with the power to work miracles. The Synaxaria, those lives of saints that are read in worship, abound in the description of miraculous events. In the Orthodox Church, miracles are still an important criterion for the canonisation of new saints. So, the life of a saint is a mixture of the natural and the supernatural. At the same time, however, from a strictly human, psychological perspective, miracles are manifestations of power that superordinate the one who performs them. In this way, at the very heart

of this fact, so important for the Christian life, lies the danger of pride or vain glory.¹

For the ascetic fathers pride is one of the sure ways to fall, which annihilates all their efforts:

Abba Isidore said, "If you [pl.] are practicing askésis according to the rules, do not be conceited when you fast. For if you become arrogant on this account, it is better to eat meat; for it is better for a person to eat meat than to become puffed up and boastful." (Isidore the Priest 4)²

Just as miracles are linked to external history, the search for humility is the central event of the inner life of the hermits. Humility, one of the fundamental features of Christian spirituality, was defined as "to see oneself as inferior to all creation" (Sisoës 13).³

Research question and relevance of the topic

The fundamental question that arises in this context concerns how the gift of miracle-working reconciles and coexists with humility and, implicitly, what is the attitude of the desert fathers towards miracles and manifestations of power. Such a question is relevant today because it reveals the authentic spirit of Christianity in relation to a sensitive issue of modernity: power, i.e. renouncing it, at a time when the Orthodox Church is trying to legitimise itself in the public sphere through manifestations of power that sometimes contradict its nature. Such an analysis is also relevant because it establishes criteria for authentic miracles in order to distinguish them from false ones born of pride and the will to power.

Sources and method

The most appropriate source for such research is the "Apophtegmata Patrum"⁴ (AP), that collection of sayings and deeds of the Fathers in the wilderness of 4th century Egypt, which has several major advantages. Disseminated under the name of the Egyptian Paterikon or Gerontikon, the AP is a fundamental synthesis of authentic Christian spirituality, which has experienced a very wide diffusion and has enjoyed enormous popularity, being read intensively especially in monastic circles. The popularity of this

¹ The theme of prestige as an impediment to the normal course of the spiritual life has been briefly analysed: Oliver Freiburger, "Prestige als Plage. Vergleichende Untersuchungen zu einem asketischen Dilemma", *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 16, 1 (2008).

² *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. John Wortley, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014, p. 162.

³ *Give Me a Word*, p. 298.

⁴ Quotations in this study will be made using the above cited translation of John Wortley, published in 2014.

collection makes it at the same time very influential and came to shape monastic spirituality. The AP in the form it has come down to us was born from the recorded sayings that had previously circulated orally in monastic communities for 100-150 years.⁵ The pressure of orality has resulted in a text stripped of insignificant details and subjectivity and is ultimately a comprehensive expression of the Church's Tradition. The Paterikon is born of tradition and then determines tradition through its wide dissemination.

For all the widespread diffusion of the Paterikon in monastic circles, scholarly studies dedicated to it are not abundant. Alongside highly accurate philological approaches⁶, there is no lack of unusual questions for a theologian, such as the monastic diet in late antique Egypt⁷, but most of the texts deal with specific aspects of the daily life of ascetics and the spiritual content of the texts they left behind. The topic of miracles among the desert fathers is addressed only by David Jasper⁸, and H. A. Drake devotes a chapter to it in his volume *A Century of Miracles*⁹, but the focus has never been on the alphabetical collection of the AP. Moreover, humility in the Apophthegmata Patrum has not been treated in any study and obviously the two have never been analysed in relation to one-another.

In what follows we will analyse the most significant texts on humility in order to set out a possible discourse on this capital virtue, then we will organize and analyse the most important accounts of miracles in the alphabetical collection of the AP, which we will read precisely from the perspective of the relationship with humility.

How are things in the Paterikon?

Systematic reading of the Paterikon can reveal the perfect balance between humility and miracle. Humility appears as a main theme or subtext in many apophthegms. The most important definition can be found in the

⁵ For a brief history of the text and reception see: Paul Siladi, 'Loneliness, Solitude, Community: Insights from the Apophthegmata Patrum', *Religions* 14, 3 (22 February 2023), pp. 2-4.

⁶ The best known work is Jean-Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des "Apophthegmata Patrum"*, 1962; He is also the author of the French edition of the systematic collection of the apophthegmata of the Fathers: Jean-Claude Guy, *Les apophthegmes des Pères : collection systématique*, Éd. ; Jean-Claude Guy, *Les apophthegmes des Pères : collection systématique*, Éd. du Cerf, Paris, 2003; Jean-Claude Guy, *Les apophthegmes des Pères : collection systématique*, Éd. du Cerf, Paris, 2005.

⁷ Mary Harlow, Wendy Smith, „Between fasting and feasting: the literary and archaeobotanical evidence for monastic diet in Late Antique Egypt", *Antiquity* 75 (2001); Andrew Jotischky, *Hermit's Cookbook: Monks, Food and Fasting in the Middle Ages*, Continuum International Publishing, London, 2011.

⁸ David Jasper, *The Desert Fathers: Wanderings and Miracles*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford, UK, 2008.

⁹ H. A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles*, 1st edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 2017, pp. 135-156.

work of Abba Sisoës (13).¹⁰ Humility means to see oneself as being lower than all flesh. Such a view means making a downward inward movement, which results in an upward movement, a passage from death to life.

Miracles are, by their very nature, manifestations of power. Miracle-workers have always been admired and sought after precisely because of their superiority over others. Power, especially consciously wielded power, is dangerous because of the corruption it may bring. This is precisely why miracles are not sought by the fathers of the desert, but rather we can see a certain reserve towards them. And here we are not talking about miracles that take place in a very private context, revelations that God makes to hermits during prayer, but we are talking about miracles that happen in a public context, generally healings and exorcisms. The reservation towards miracles was constant, but miracles continued to happen. We can identify two types of strategies that accompany miracles. On the one hand are the strategies employed by the brothers or by those who wanted miracles in order to make the elders to perform them (sometimes against their will); on the other hand, we have the strategies of the elders who when they perform the miracles are wary of the temptation to take credit for them. This brings us to the main research question: power and the pride it causes collide with miracles, which, like humility, are part of the treasury of Christianity, being natural consequences of the restoration of human nature through grace and asceticism. What, then, is the place of miracles in the lives of hermits who seek humility above all else, and how is the balance between miracle and humility achieved?

Humility in Apophthegmata Patrum

The main lines of the spirituality of the Egyptian Desert Fathers are found in the assiduous practice of humility and repentance. Humility is implicitly present in most of the acts the hermits perform, and sometimes the theme of humility appears explicitly in their dialogues. And yet, no one ventures to give a definition of humility that would confine it to a narrow and definitive framework. More often than not, the elders approximate or indicate the directions in which humility can be discovered. However, they constantly insist on its character as a capital virtue, as necessary to man on the spiritual level as air is to the physical life (Poemen 49;¹¹ John the Pythian 21¹²).

The first direct reference to humility is found in the words of the Abba Anthony, in the context of a revelation that God makes to him. The ascetic understands in a vision the multitude of temptations and demonic snares that beset man at every turn. Close to despair he wonders what the escape is, how all this can be avoided. The answer he receives, simply and naturally

¹⁰ *Give Me a Word*, p. 298.

¹¹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 244.

¹² *Give Me a Word*, p. 140.

from God, is "humble-mindedness" (Anthony 7).¹³ The Paterikon almost opens with this reference to the virtue that will later be the main concern of all the residents of the desert.

Although we are warned that this quality plays an overwhelming role in the spiritual life, the fathers do not venture to offer either detailed descriptions of humility or the ways in which it can be acquired. Yet we can find elements of both. Some fathers indicate one aspect or another of humility, depending on their experience and the practical needs of those who come to receive their words, and others even offer little programs of life aimed at humility. We will look at some of them below.

If father Anthony is shown that humility is the only solution in the fight against temptations and trials that come to us at every step from the demons, Macarius the Egyptian goes one step further. The Paterikon preserves two apophthegmata on the account of Abba Macarius the Great in which several encounters with demons on the topic of humility are recounted (Macarius the Egyptian 11¹⁴ and 35¹⁵). The ideological content of the two texts is almost identical. Each time the demons find that the monks have a lot in common with them (they fast, keep vigil, never sleep) and yet the monks overcome them, they are stronger. What differentiates them is humility, which becomes the criterion by which the entire ascetic efforts is judged. The same idea is then taken up by Amma Theodora (6)¹⁶, starting from a similar encounter of an ascetic with demons, which ends with the conclusion that only humility differentiates people from demons and can overcome the latter. A more extensive apophthegm related by Abba Daniel ends with this conclusion born of the experience of the desert fathers: "It is usually the case that the arrogance of the devil falls as a result of the humility [required by] Christ's commandment" (Daniel 3).¹⁷

The fact that humility is the criterion by which asceticism is judged and implicitly the criterion of salvation is clearly stated: "It is neither spiritual discipline nor vigilance nor diverse toil that saves us if there be not genuine humble-mindedness" (Theodora 6).¹⁸

It is precisely because humility plays such a role that Abba John of Thebaida does not shy away from saying in plain language, in the only saying that has remained engraved in the memory of the hermits: "Before all else, the monk ought to attain humble-mindedness for this is the first commandment of the Saviour, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven".¹⁹

¹³ *Give Me a Word*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Give Me a Word*, p. 190.

¹⁵ *Give Me a Word*, p. 199.

¹⁶ *Give Me a Word*, p. 131.

¹⁷ *Give Me a Word*, p. 89.

¹⁸ *Give Me a Word*, p. 131.

¹⁹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 160.

At the same time humility is the cohesive factor of the spiritual life, which permeates all other qualities and brings them together into a unified whole: “Just as a ship cannot be built without nails, so is it impossible to be saved without humble-mindedness” (Syncretica 27).²⁰ Precisely because humility is so important, Abba Poemen says: “A person is as much in need of humble-mindedness and of the fear of God as he is of the breath that comes out of his nose” (Poemen 49).²¹ Of these two virtues, Abba John the Pythian says that they surpass all the others (John the Pythian 22)²², and “humble-mindedness is the monk’s crown.” (Or 9).²³

From all these apophthegms one thing emerges: the paramount importance of humility in the life of the monk and implicitly in the life of the Christian. We are not told much about what humility is and how it is acquired. But we do have a number of stories describing acts of humility by elders, descriptions that can bring us even closer to understanding this quality.

Perhaps the most poignant of these stories is the one that has come down to us under the name Romanus, none other than the well-known ascetic Arsenius, a native of Constantinople, New Rome. The story is as follows:

There was an elder who had a fine disciple but that elder was so contemptuous that he threw the disciple out of the gate together with his sheepskin. The brother, however, just remained there, sitting outside. When the elder opened [the gate] and found him sitting [there] he prostrated himself before him, saying: “Father, the humiliation of your long-suffering patience has overcome my contempt. Come inside; from now on you are the elder and father, I the junior and the disciple.” (The Roman 2)²⁴

Humility is revealed to us here as characterized by availability. Openness to receive the truth about yourself and those around you and act accordingly. Even if the elder lacks humility in his daily actions, he proves ready to turn his life upside down when he realizes that he has done wrong and is ready to submit to the one he has until recently oppressed. But the elder’s humility is only the answer to the light brought by the constant humility of his disciple, who endures the former’s whims and injustices without flinching. Here we see two movements, a downward and an upward movement that flow from humility. It is humility that makes the brother accept all the reproaches (the downward movement generated by humility), just as it is humility that turns his life upside down, suddenly placing him in the position of “elder” before his time (the upward movement).

²⁰ *Give Me a Word*, p. 322.

²¹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 243.

²² *Give Me a Word*, p. 139.

²³ *Give Me a Word*, p. 336.

²⁴ *Give Me a Word*, p. 292.

The two movements that arise from humility are clearly highlighted by the Abba John the Dwarf, in apophthegm 20:

Abba John said, "Who sold Joseph?" and some brother replied, "It was his brothers" [Gen 37.36]. The elder said to him, "No; it was his humility that sold him. He could have said, 'I am their brother' and contradicted them, but he kept quiet-and sold himself by humility. And humility made him as a commander in Egypt."²⁵

The first movement is the downward, descending movement, in which man takes on the vicissitudes of the context without resistance and without hesitation. The consequence of this assumed suffering is rising. But the relationship between the two is never strictly causal. Between the downward and the upward movement comes the great interplay of God's freedom and human freedoms. However, the first kenotic movement is like a crucifixion that passes through death to resurrection: the logic of humility, that of the inverted pyramid, the top of which becomes the base, Christ Himself, His humility being the model and foundation of all others who advance in humility, thus descending towards Him. The logic of humility is therefore paradoxical. In its context self-exaltation is synonymous with falling, while shrinking and self-contempt is rising, for the Lord says: "whoever exalts himself will humble himself, and whoever humbles himself will exalt himself" (Lk 14:11). If at first the movement of descent "to see oneself as inferior to all creation", Sisoës 13.²⁶ is singular, rising to various positions of authority does not cancel it out. The same paradoxical logic continues to operate, the humble person is empowered to lead others, without this altering his relationship with the world and causing him to cease his ascetic exercise of self-denial. The paradox of humility is revealed in the exclamation of a father regarding the same Abba John the Dwarf, whom I quoted earlier: "Who is John who has the whole of Scete hanging on his little finger on account of his humility?" (John Colobos 36).²⁷ The source of his awesome authority is to be found nowhere else but in his humility, whose main thought, truly hard to bear, is to see himself lower than any creature (Wisdom 3).

I said earlier that humility is the criterion according to which all ascetic effort is judged, by which all human spiritual endeavours stand or fall. Somewhat more precise in this direction is a story by the Abba Daniel about his spiritual father, Abba Arsenius. The latter tells of a vision that someone had (the disciples suspect that it was precisely the old man, who out of humility refuses to show himself), during which, through some suggestive images, three possible ways of missing the Kingdom of God are shown. We are interested in the third of these images:

²⁵ *Give Me a Word*, p. 140.

²⁶ *Give Me a Word*, p. 298.

²⁷ *Give Me a Word*, p. 143.

He saw a temple and two persons on horseback carrying a piece of wood crossways, one beside the other. They wanted to enter through the gate but could not because the piece of wood was crossways. One would not humble himself to carry the wood lengthwise behind the other; for that reason they remained outside the gate. "These are they," he said, "who bear the yoke of righteousness with pride and did not humble themselves to put their house in order and to travel the humble way of Christ; so they remain outside the Kingdom of God." (Arsenius 33)²⁸

Miracles in the Apophthegmata Patrum

Even if we consider only the alphabetical collection of Apophthegmata Patrum, it still proves extremely difficult to inventory, without the rest of the wonders that fall into this category. If we were to categorise them, they could be divided into two main groups: 1. "personal" miracles (discoveries, visions, ecstasies, etc.) and 2. public miracles (cures of bodily diseases or even resurrections, exorcisms, mastery of the environment and nature, etc.). In order to limit the body of texts analysed, this study will focus only on miracles of the second category, miracles of a public nature, which show the ascetic as an intimate of God and give him an unusual character, place the monk above the others.

Circumspection about the origin of miracles

Quite paradoxically, the first miracle in this category, which we already find in the words of Abba Anthony, introduces a note of circumspection about the origin of miracles.

Some brothers visited Abba Anthony to report to him some visions they were seeing and to learn from him whether they were genuine or from demons. They had an ass, but it died along the way. When they came to the elder, he anticipated them, saying to them, "How did it come about that the little ass died on the way?" "How do you know that, abba?" they said to him, and he said to them, "The demons showed me," and they said to him, "This is the reason we came to inquire of you because we are seeing visions and they are often genuine, but maybe we are being led astray." The elder convinced them, using the example of the ass, that [visions] are from demons. (Anthony the Great 12)²⁹

In other words, the miracle simply cannot be a criterion for judging the authenticity of the spiritual life. More important than the miracle is its

²⁸ *Give Me a Word*, p. 44.

²⁹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 28.

source. Excluding the possibility of outright deception, both the work of God and the work of devils can be behind a miracle. That is why circumspection is necessary. But a certain caution, or even a censure of miracles is seen in many cases. Of Anthony we are told that he was full of the Holy Spirit, that he could see what was happening in the world and what would happen in the future, but "he was unwilling to speak on account of people" (Anthony 30).³⁰ Abba Bessarion (about whom we will speak more below), if asked to pray for the casting out of demons he would "not even come into the church" (Bessarion 5).³¹ Similarly, with Abba Daniel we are told that although the Anachorites could cast out demons, they did not do so "out of humility" (Daniel 3).³²

Power over wild animals

A special case of power over the wild beasts, hardly fitting into any particular category, is found in Abba Ammonas (2):

They used to say of Abba Ammonas that he killed a basilisk. He went off into the desert to draw water from a lake. When he saw the basilisk he threw himself face down, saying: "Lord, am I to die or is it?" and the basilisk promptly perished through the power of Christ.³³

What can be seen here is that the ascetic surrenders himself completely into God's hands, and then, when the serpent dies and the elder is saved, full credit for the miracle goes to Christ. There is not the slightest return to self. Ascetics erase themselves altogether to make room for God's work. In this way, humility again proves to be a necessary precondition for God to be able to work, even miraculously.

A miracle we find at Abba Theodore of Pherme belongs in the same category: a snake flees from him and hides in shame in the desert the moment it sees him (Theodore of Pherme 23).³⁴ These miracles, which can be placed in the general context of the restoration of man's mastery over wild nature, can be directly related to Christ's promise in Luke's Gospel: "I give you the power to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you" (Lk. 10:19).

In the category of scenes in which the connection with the surrounding nature is restored is a scene that we find in Abba James:

³⁰ *Give Me a Word*, p. 33.

³¹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 77.

³² *Give Me a Word*, p. 89.

³³ *Give Me a Word*, p. 58.

³⁴ *Give Me a Word*, p. 124.

He also said that one of the elders said: "When I was staying in the desert there was a youngster living on his own near me. Paying him a fatherly visit I saw him at prayer, beseeching God that he might be at peace with the wild animals. Following the prayer a hyena that was suckling her young came by. The youngster got under her and began suckling with them." (James S1)³⁵

Abba Bessarion, miracles and humility

A special case is Abba Bessarion, who is the greatest miracle worker in the entire alphabetical collection of the Egyptian Paterikon. Of the 12 apophthegmata dedicated to him, the first group of 5 focus on his miracles, most of which are constructed after the model of biblical miracles. In this way the elder appears to be in the lineage of the prophets, saints and Christ Himself, who promised His disciples that those who believe in Him will perform greater miracles than those He performed (cf. In. 14, 12). The elder prays and his disciple drinks water from the sea, but then, when he puts water in the vessel to have for later, the monk forbids him because "God is here, and God is everywhere" (Bessarion 1).³⁶ The two moments of the apophthegmata clearly refer to Moses, who was leading the people through the wilderness. When they were thirsty, Moses struck the rock with his staff from which water flowed (Exodus 17). But when they were fed with manna, they were commanded not to store up in vessels for later and to leave themselves entirely in God's care (Jn 16). In the second apophthegm³⁷ we see him crossing the Chrysoroas river without sinking, which recalls both the crossing of the Red Sea (Jn 14) and Jesus' walk on the sea (Mt 14:25). The third apophthegmata³⁸ shows Bessarion stopping the sun in the sky like Joshua of Navi (Joshua 10:12-13). In the fourth apophthegmata³⁹ following his prayer, his well is filled with water and he gives it to his disciple to drink, recalling the scene in Judges when Gideon prays to the Lord to send him a sign, and the wool he spreads in the field is filled with water, while everything around it is dry (Judges 6:36-38).

"Unsought miracles". Some scenarios

The most interesting of all the miracles, however, is the one in apophthegm 5.⁴⁰ Here his deep humility meets his charismatic dimension, and the way they meet may point to a path of balance in humility and miracle.

³⁵ *Give Me a Word*, p. 158.

³⁶ *Give Me a Word*, p. 75.

³⁷ *Give Me a Word*, p. 76.

³⁸ *Give Me a Word*, p. 76.

³⁹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 76.

⁴⁰ *Give Me a Word*, p. 77.

In Sketis, there came a man subject to demonic possession to ask the fathers to pray for him, but the fierce devil did not come out. This situation echoes the demon that the disciples of the Lord could not cast out because of their lack of faith (Mt. 17:20). Like the Apostles, the clerics humble themselves and ask for further help. In our case, they ask for help from the Abba Bessarion, but for his humility he refuses to try and perform shocking miracles (even though miracles in his life are a matter of course). The fathers of the Sketis community know this and devise a ruse, designed to solve the sick man's problem, but at the same time to undermine the humility of the Abba Bessarion, who did not want to get the reputation of one who casts out demons. The way the whole scene is conceived is clear from the apophthegm. There are just a few elements worth highlighting.

First of all, it is important to see that the community does not leave Bessarion alone in prayer. When they enter the church, they all pray. This creates an atmosphere of communion in prayer that embraces everyone. Humility and prayer form the environment in which healing germinates.

Secondly, it should be noted that, although the possessed man is seated in the place of elder Bessarion, the latter does not bully him at all. He does not intervene to put him in his place. He honours the person more than he respects a local rule or custom.

Then elder Bessarion shows obedience in its purest and most authentic spiritual sense. Obedience is benevolent openness, solicitude towards all who ask for something that is not contrary to the commandments of Christ, and not merely disciplined obedience to a commanding authority. The words of the Abba Bessarion, effective and healing, are the fruit of obedience and humility, and not a bitter reaction to the violation of a form of discipline (a newcomer occupying the place in the Church of a venerable member of the community).

We see here that the miracle is placed in a ritual context, where, if people are sincere, no one can assume "authorship" of the miracle. At the moment they all prayed, no one knows for whose prayers the healing happened (or perhaps it is precisely the chain of common prayer that frees the one trapped by the devil in his snare). Furthermore, Abba Bessarion obeys the community. There we have not only prayer, but also the series of consecutive acts of obedience, in which each one humbles and submits to the other, and this attitude leaves room for God's work.

This miracle is close in structure to another that we find in Abba Sisoës:

A worldling, together with his son, once visited Abba Sisoës at the mountain of Abba Anthony and it came about that his son died on the way. The parent] was not distressed: in faith he took [the son] to the elder and fell down with his son as though making a prostration in order to be blessed by the elder. Then the father got up, leaving the son at the elder's feet, and

went out of the cell. Thinking that [the child] was making a prostration to him, the elder said to him: "Get up and go out," not realizing that he was dead. [The child] immediately got up and went out. His father was astounded when he saw him; in he went and did homage to the elder, reporting the matter to him. But the elder was saddened on hearing it, for he did not want that to happen. His disciple ordered [the parent] not to report it to anybody until the elder's death. (Sisoes 18)⁴¹

The two scenes have in common the fact that the miracle happens without being sought, on the contrary, even overcoming a certain resistance or even resistance of the ascetics to what could be considered a miracle. And the two elders, Bessarion and Sisoes, are similar in their deep, stirring humility.

Following the same pattern, we find another miracle in St. Macarius the Egyptian:

There was a person in Egypt who had a paralyzed son. He brought him to Abba Macarius' cell and, leaving him weeping at the door, went some distance away. The elder peeped out and saw the child weeping. "Who brought you here?" he said to the child. The child said: "My father abandoned me here and went away." "Get up and go after him," the elder said to him. He was instantly made whole; he got up and went after his father and in this way they departed to their house. (Macarie 15)⁴²

Another scene, similar in many ways, is the one mentioned earlier in passing, which we find in Abba Daniel:

Abba Daniel said that there was a daughter of a leading citizen in Babylon possessed of a demon. Her father had a monk whom he cherished, and that one said to him: "No one can cure your daughter except some anchorites I know. If you entreat them, they will not agree to do this out of humility. But let us do this: when they come to market, pretend you want to buy [their] wares; then when they come to get the price of them, we will tell them to offer a prayer, and I believe she will be healed." They went out into the marketplace and found a disciple of the elders sitting there to sell their wares. When the monk came into the house, the woman possessed of a demon came and gave him a slap, but he turned the other cheek, according to the Lord's commandment [Mt 5.39]. Tortured [by this], the demon cried out: "What violence! The commandment of Jesus is casting me out!" and the maiden was immediately purged. When the elders came, they told them what had happened; they glorified God and said, "It is usually the case that the

⁴¹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 300.

⁴² *Give Me a Word*, p. 191.

arrogance of the devil falls as a result of the humility [required by] Christ's commandment." (Daniel 3)⁴³

This time it is no longer about a particular ascetic who refuses to be put in the spotlight, but we are shown that we are dealing with a general reservation about any possibility of being in the limelight. Their withdrawal from the world also implies a refusal of any affirmation before people. But, as is often the case, despair unleashes creativity, and in this way another scenario is created in which the premises for the miracle are found. And it is precisely here that the link between humility and miracle appears most directly and unequivocally. This time the monk is not even a renowned elder, honoured for his asceticism and discernment. He is a simple apprentice, selling monastery products. But he stands out because he takes the words of the gospel seriously, which command humility, and the moment he is slapped, he turns the other cheek. The simple act of obedience to Christ's commandments gives him (entirely unquestioned) power over demons. And in this way he performs the miracle: accidentally, without being sought by the one through whom it was done, as a fruit of obedience and humility, but hoped for by those who set up the whole scenario.

In the same category of miracles, the link between obedience, humility and overcoming the narrow and constraining laws of physics is also part of the first story of the Abba John Colobos, which also opens Tarkovsky's film *Sacrifice*.

They used to say of Abba John Colobos that, having withdrawn from the world to be with an elder from Thebes at Scete, he was living in the desert. His abba took some dry wood, planted it and said to him: "Irrigate it every day with a bottle of water until it bears fruit." Water was a long way from them, so one had to go in the evening and return at dawn. After three years [the dry wood] became alive and bore fruit. The elder took its fruit and brought it to the church, saying to the brothers: "Take and eat some fruit of obedience." (John Colobos 1)⁴⁴

This time the miracle is not about power either. Or at least it is not about the power of the one who commands, but about the extraordinary power of the one who gives up power and goes deeper in obedience.

Miracles with authors who hide

Among miracle-working ascetics, a very special place is occupied by Abba Longinus, who is very creative in the way he defends his anonymity. There are two relevant apophthegms in this regard.

⁴³ *Give Me a Word*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ *Give Me a Word*, p. 134.

In the first one, the elder directly opposes any praise or acts honouring him, and even chooses to say bad things about himself under the protection of anonymity:

There was a woman with the condition known as cancer in her breast who sought to meet with Abba Longinus when she heard of him. He was staying at the ninth [Enaton] milepost to the west of Alexandria. When the woman came looking for him that blessed one happened to be gathering wood by the sea. When she found him, unaware that it was he, she said to him: "Abba, where is the servant of God Longinus staying?" "What do you want with that imposter?" he said. "Do not go to him for he is an imposter. What is the matter with you?" The woman showed him her condition: the elder made the sign [of the cross] over the place and dismissed her, saying: "Off you go. God is healing you; Longinus cannot be of any benefit to you." The woman went her way believing what was said and was immediately healed. After she had told the matter to some people and said what the characteristics of the elder were she learned that it was Abba Longinus. (Longinus 3)⁴⁵

In the second case, he refuses to intervene for a woman suffering from demonic possession, whom he sends to the Abba Zeno:

Another time too some people brought a person possessed of a demon to him but he said to them: "I can do nothing for you; go rather to Abba Zeno." Subsequently Abba Zeno began to put pressure on the demon, chasing it out. The demon began shouting out: "Now you think I am coming out because of you, Abba Zeno, but see: Abba Longinus is in prayer on the demon, chasing it out. The demon began shouting out: "Now you think I am coming out because of you, Abba Zeno, but see: Abba Longinus is in prayer over there, pleading against me. It is in fear of his prayers that I am coming out; otherwise I would have given you no answer." (Longinus 4)⁴⁶

In both cases the elder refuses to assert himself, to put himself first, although each time he has a compassionate heart and cannot remain indifferent to the suffering he sees around him. He therefore chooses to help and hide at the same time.

Exceptions

The charm of this collection of stories full of patristic and ascetic wisdom lies in its unsystematizable character, it refuses to be locked into monolithic

⁴⁵ *Give Me a Word*, p. 182.

⁴⁶ *Give Me a Word*, p. 182.

structures of thought. Consequently, there are also accounts of miracles that cannot be fitted tightly into the pattern mentioned earlier. Such, for example, is an account from Abba Ammonathas:

A magistrate once came to Pelusium wanting to levy a poll-tax on the monks, as he did on the worldlings. All the brothers gathered around Abba Ammonathas concerning this matter and elected some of the fathers to go to the emperor. But Abba Ammonathas said to them: "It is not necessary to go to that trouble. Do you rather keep hesychia in your cells and fast for two weeks. By the grace of Christ, I will deal with the matter alone." The brothers went off to their own cells and the elder maintained hesychia in his own cell. When the fourteen days were accomplished, the brothers were aggrieved at the elder (for they had never seen him move at all) and they said: "The elder has set our affair aside." On the fifteenth day the brothers gathered together as agreed and the elder came to them bearing the emperor's rescript duly sealed. The brothers were astounded when they saw it, saying, "When did you bring this, abba?" The elder said, "Believe me brothers, this very night I went to the emperor and he wrote this rescript; then I came to Alexandria and got it signed by the magistrates-and so I came to you." They were afraid on hearing this and prostrated themselves before him. Their affair was settled and the magistrate did not trouble them. (Ammonathas)⁴⁷

In this case the miracle is an open manifestation of God's power, through his chosen people, that frightens and subdues. But such cases are far from the norm or pattern of miracles recounted in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.

Conclusions

The apophthegms in the alphabetical collection of the *Paterikon* do not focus on miracles and do not use miracles as a justification of the authority and power of spiritually advanced elders. Instances of this kind, while they may occur, are nonetheless uncommon and most often do not concern truly great personalities of the desert. For example, the Abba Poemen, around whom the entire collection is built and to whom the most extensive corpus is dedicated, has an authority that derives not from miracles but from his practical wisdom. The same is the case with the Abba Anthony, in whom we first find a reservation about miracles whose origins are not necessarily divine.

Ascetic topics, like the quest for attaining virtues, among which humility plays a primary role, occupy a much greater place in the universe of monastic concerns, as reflected in the apophthegmata, than the (shallow) extraordinary

⁴⁷ *Give Me a Word*, p. 72.

character of miracles. Precisely because humility is so important, the fathers construct scenarios and contexts that erase as much as possible the authorship of miracles. In this way their humility is untainted, and all honour is directed towards God.

The approach to miracles found in the *Paterikon* is an excellent guide to how to approach miracles in any age: their authenticity is indirectly proportional to how avidly they are sought after. Miracles appear unexpectedly, and when they happen they further accentuate the humility of those through whom they were performed. Genuine miracles have nothing demonstrative about them, they are not done for profit (not even a good image), they are the result of humility and bring glory only to God, who works through saints.

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