

THE SPIRITUAL MEADOW

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May 16, 2020

Contents

JOHN

EVIRATUS

TO HIS BELOVED IN CHRIST, SOPHRONIOS THE SOPHIST	v
THE LIFE OF JOHN THE ELDER AND THE CAVE OF SAPSAS	1
THE ELDER WHO FED LIONS IN HIS OWN CAVE	3
THE LIFE OF CONON, PRIEST OF THE COMMUNITY OF PENTHOUCLA	5
THE VISION OF ABBA LEONTIOS	7
ABBA POLYCHRONIOS' STORY OF THE THREE MONKS	9
ANOTHER STORY OF ABBA POLYCHRONIOS	11
THE LIFE AND DEATH OF AN ELDER WHO WOULD NOT BE HIGOUMEN OF THE LAVRA OF THE TOWERS	13
THE LIFE OF ABBA MYROGENES WHO HAD DROPSY	15
THE WONDROUS CHARITY OF AN HOLY ELDER	17
THE LIFE OF BARNABAS THE ANCHORITE	19
THE LIFE OF ABBA HAGIODOULOS	21
A SAYING OF ABBA OLYMPIOS	23
THE LIFE OF ABBA MARK THE ANCHORITE	25
A BROTHER ASSAILED BY A LASCIVIOUS SPIRIT WHO WAS STRICKEN WITH LEPROSY	27
THE WONDROUS DEED OF ABBA CONON	29
ABBA NICOLAS' STORY ABOUT HIMSELF AND HIS FRIENDS	31
THE LIFE OF A GREAT ELDER	33
THE LIFE OF ANOTHER ELDER AT THE MONASTERY OF THE LAVRA WHO SLEPT WITH LIONS	35
ABBA ELIJAH'S STORY ABOUT HIMSELF	37
THE CONVERSION OF A SOLDIER (WHOSE LIFE IS BRIEFLY DESCRIBED) WHEN GOD WORKED A MIRACLE FOR HIM	39

JOHN EVIRATUS

TO HIS BELOVED IN CHRIST, SOPHRONIOS THE SOPHIST

In my opinion, the meadows in spring present a particularly delightful prospect. They display to the beholder a rich diversity of flowers which arrests him with its charm, for it brings delight to his eyes and perfume to his nostrils. One part of this meadow blushes with roses; in another place lilies predominate, drawing one's attention to themselves and away from the roses. In another part the colour of violets blazes out, resembling the imperial purple. In short, the diversity and variety of innumerable flowers affords delights both to nostril and to eye on every side.

Think of this present work in the same way Sophronios, my sacred and faithful child. For in it, you will discover the virtues of holy men who have distinguished themselves in our own times; men, as the Psalmist says, planted by the waterside <Ps 1:3>. They were all equally beloved of God (by the grace of Christ),—yet there was a diversity in the virtues from which the beauty and the charm of each derived. From among these I have plucked the finest flowers of the unmown meadow and worked them into a crown which I now offer to you, most faithful child; and through you, to the world at large.

I have called this work meadow on account of the delight, the fragrance and the benefit which it will afford those who come across it. For the virtuous life and habitual piety do not merely consist of studying divinity; not only of thinking on an elevated plain about things as they are here and now. It must also include the description in writing of the way of life of others. So I have striven to complete this composition to inform your love, oh child; and as I have put together a copious and accurate collection, so I have emulated the most wise bee, gathering up the spiritually beneficial deeds of the fathers. Now I will begin to tell <you> those things.

THE LIFE OF JOHN THE ELDER AND THE CAVE OF SAPSAS

There was an elder living in the monastery of Abba Eustorgios* whom our saintly Archbishop of Jerusalem wanted to appoint higoumen of the monastery. <The candidate> however would not agree and said: 'I prefer praye on Mount Sinai', The archbishop* urged him first to become <higoumen> and then to depart <for the mountain> but the elder would not be persuaded. So <the arch-bishop> gave him leave of absence, charging him to accept the office of higoumen on his return. <The elder> bid the archbishop farewell and set out on the journe to Mount Sinal, taking his own disciple* with him. They crossed the river Jordan* but before they reached even the first mile-post the elder began to shiver with fever. As he was unable to walk, they found a small cave and went into it so that the elder could rest. He stayed in the cave for three days, scarcely able to move and burning with fever. Then, whilst he was sleeping, he saw a figure who said to him: 'Tell me, elder, where do you want to go?' He replied: 'To Mount Sinai'. The vision then said to him: 'Please, I beg of you, do not go there', but as he could not prevail upon the elder, he withdrew from him. Now the elder's fever attacked him more violently. Again the following night the same figure with the same appearance came to him and said: 'Why do you insist on suffering like this, good elder? Listen to me and do not go there,' The elder asked him: 'Who then are you?' The vision replied: 'I am John the Baptist and that is why I say to you: do not go there. For this little cave is greater than Mount Sinai. Many times did our Lord Jesus Christ come in here to visit me. Give me your word that you will stay here and I will give you back your health'. The elder accepted this with joy and gave his solemn word that he would remain in the cave. He was instantly restored to health and stayed there for the rest of his life. He made the cave into a church and gathered a brotherhood together there; the place is called Sapsas.* Close by it and to the left is the Wadi Chorath* to which Elijah the Tishbite was sent during a drought, it faces the Jordan.

THE ELDER WHO FED LIONS IN HIS OWN CAVE

There was another elder at that place called Sapsas whose virtue was so great that he would welcome the lions which came into his cave and feed them at his lap, so full of divine grace was this man.

THE LIFE OF CONON, PRIEST OF THE COMMUNITY OF PENTHOUCLA

At the monastery of our holy father Sabas* we met Athanasios. The elder told us this tale:

When I was in the Community of Penthoucla,* there was a priest there who baptised. He was a Cilician and his name was Conon. He had been appointed to administer baptisms because he was a great elder. He would anoint and baptise those who came there; but it was an occasion of acute embarrassment to him whenever he had to anoint a woman. For this reason, he wanted to withdraw from the community. But whenever he thought of withdrawing, Saint John would stand by him, saying: 'Persevere and I will make the struggle easier for you'. One day a Persian damsel came to be baptised and she was so very beautiful that the priest could not bring himself to anoint her with the holy oil. After she had waited two days, Archbishop Peter* heard of it and was very angry with the elder. He wanted to appoint a woman deacon for the task but he did not do so since this would have been contrary to custom.* Conon the priest took up his sheepskin* cloak and went his way saying: 'I will not stay in this place any longer.' However, when he got into the hills, Saint John the Baptist met him and said to him in a gentle voice: 'Go back to your monastery and I will make the struggle easier for you'. Abba Conon replied in anger: 'Believe me, I will *not* return. You have often made that promise to me and you have done nothing about it'. Saint John then made him sit down on one of the hills, stripped him of his clothes and three times made the sign of the cross beneath his navel. 'Believe me, Conon the priest', he said, 'I wanted you to carry away some reward from the struggle. But since you did not wish it to be so, I have caused the struggle to cease. But you shall have no reward for this'. Conon the priest returned to the task of baptising at the community and next day he baptised and anointed the Persian without even being aware that she was of the female sex. For twelve years he anointed and baptised without suffering any physical disturbance and with no awareness of women's femininity; so he drew his life to a close.

THE VISION OF ABBA LEONTIOS

Abba Leontios of the community of our holy father Theodosios* told us: After the new Lavriotes were driven out of the New Lavra* I went and took up residence in the same lavra. One Sunday I went to the church to make my communion and when I went in, I saw an angel standing at the right side of the altar. When I had received <communion> I went back to my cell and a voice came to me saying: 'From the moment that altar was consecrated I was commanded to remain here'.*

ABBA POLYCHRONIOS' STORY OF THE THREE MONKS

Abba Polychronios told us: I saw one of the brothers at the Lavra of the Towers of Jordan* who was not keeping himself up to the mark;* for he never fulfilled his Sunday duties.* Then, some time later, I saw this man who had formerly been so lax devoting himself <to his duties> with all diligence and great zeal. So I said to him: 'Now you are doing well, brother, and looking after your own soul'. He said to me: 'Abba, I am about to die sir',—and three days later he was dead.

This same Polychronios, priest of the New Lavra, also told me this: Once whilst I was staying at the Lavra of the Towers one of the brothers died. The steward said to me: 'Of your charity, brother, come so we can carry that brother's effects into the storeroom', As we began to move his things I saw the steward weeping. I said to him: 'Come now, abba, why are you weeping in this way, sir'? He replied: 'Because today I am carrying out that brother's effects and two days from now others shall bear away mine'. And so it was; two days later the steward himself died, just as he said.

ANOTHER STORY OF ABBA POLYCHRONIOS

Abba Polychronios the priest told us that he had heard from Abba Constantine, who was higoumen of the New Lavra of Holy Mary the Mother of God,* that one of the brethren died in the hospital at Jericho. They brought him back to The Towers to bury him there and from the moment they left the hospital until they arrived at The Towers, a star travelled with them and never ceased shining over the dead brother until they laid him in the earth.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF AN ELDER WHO WOULD NOT BE HIGOUMEN OF THE LAVRA OF THE TOWERS

There was an elder dwelling at the Lavra of the Towers and when the higoumen died, the priests and other brethren at the lavra wanted to make him higoumen because of his great virtue. The elder begged them <not to,> saying: 'Let me rather go and weep for my sins, fathers, for I am no fit man to undertake the care of souls. This is a task for great fathers <such as> those who were with Abba Anthony* and the others'. The brethren, however, would not permit this, Each day they came begging him <to accept,> but he would not. When he saw that they were determined to make him change his mind, he said to them all; 'Give me three days for prayer and I shall do whatever God requires of me', This was on a Friday: He died on the Sunday morning.

THE LIFE OF ABBA MYROGENES WHO HAD DROPSY

At the Lavra of the Towers there was an elder named Myrogenes who had been so harsh in his treatment of himself that he developed dropsy. He would often say to the elders who came by to take care of him: 'Pray for me, fathers, so that I do not develop dropsy in my inner man. I pray to God that I may endure this sickness for a long time'. When Eutychios, the Archbishop of Jerusalem,* heard about this, he wanted to send Abba Myrogenes all that he needed; but he never got anything back in reply to his offer other than: 'Pray for me father, that I might be delivered from eternal torment'.

THE WONDROUS CHARITY OF AN HOLY ELDER

At the same Lavra of the Towers there was an elder who practised poverty to an exceptional degree* and yet his particular spiritual gift was that of almsgiving. One day a beggar came to his little tower asking for alms. The elder had nothing but a single loaf of bread which he brought out and gave to the beggar. 'It is not bread I want' said the beggar; 'I need clothing'. Wishing to minister to the man's needs, the elder took him by the hand and led him into his tower. When the beggar found that there was nothing there at all other than what the elder stood up in, he was so impressed by his virtue that he opened his bag and emptied out all its contents in the middle of the cell. 'Take this, good elder', he said; 'I will satisfy my needs elsewhere'.

THE LIFE OF BARNABAS THE ANCHORITE

There was an anchorite at The Caves of the holy Jordan called Barnabas. One day he went down to drink at the Jordan and he got something sharp deeply embedded in his foot. But he left it there, and would not let a doctor examine it. His foot turned septic and compelled him to seek assistance at one of the towers of The Towers. His foot became more and more infected and he used to say to everybody who called on him that the more the outer man suffered, the more the inner man flourished.

After Abba Barnabas the anchorite had left the cave, come to The Towers and been there for some time, another anchorite went out to his cave. When he went in there he saw an angel of God standing at the altar which the elder Barnabas had set up and consecrated in the cave. The anchorite said to the angel: 'What are you doing there?' The angel replied: 'I am the angel of the Lord; and from the moment that <this altar> was consecrated, it was entrusted to me by God'.

THE LIFE OF ABBA HAGIODOULOS

Abba Peter, priest of the Lavra of our holy father Saint Sabas, told us that when Hagiodoulos was higoumen of the Lavra of the blessed Gerasimos,* one of the brethren there died without the elder knowing of it. When the precentor struck the wood <-en signal>* for all the brethren to mourn together and send the dead man on his way, the elder came and saw the body of the brother lying in the church. He grieved at not having been able to take leave of him before he died. Going up to the bier, he said to the dead man: 'Rise up and greet me, brother', and the dead man rose up and greeted him. Then the elder said to him: 'Take your rest* now until the Son of God shall come and raise you up again'.

When this same Hagiodoulos had come down to the banks of the holy Jordan he pondered in his mind as to what had become of the stones* which Joshua <the son> of Nun collected and set up before his chosen leaders. As he was pondering these things, the waters suddenly parted to either side and he saw the twelve stones. He humbly prostrated himself before God and went his way.

A SAYING OF ABBA OLYMPIOS

A brother asked Abba Olympios, the priest of the Lavra of Abba Gerasimos, to say something to him;* this is what he said: “Do not consort with heretics; keep a watch over the tongue and the belly and wherever you stay, keep on saying <to yourself> ‘I am a stranger.’”*

THE LIFE OF ABBA MARK THE ANCHORITE

They said that Abba Mark the anchorite who lived near the Penthoucla monastery practised the austerity of fasting all week long for sixty-nine years, with the result that some people thought he was incorporeal. He also laboured night and day in accordance with Christ's commandments. <What he gained> he gave to the poor and he never accepted anything from anybody. There were some people, friends of Christ, who heard of him and came, intending to give him some charitable donation. But he said to them: 'I do not accept <alms.> The labour of my hands is sufficient both for me and for those who come to me by <the grace of> God'.*

A BROTHER ASSAILED BY A LASCIVIOUS SPIRIT WHO WAS STRICKEN WITH LEPROSY

On another occasion Abba Polychronios told us the following tale: In the Community of Penthoucla there was a brother who was extremely ascetic and attentive <to his soul's health>. He had, however, to strive against sexual temptation. As he was not winning the battle, he left the monastery and went off to Jericho to satisfy his desires. Just as he was entering the den of fornication, he was suddenly afflicted with leprosy all over. When he saw himself in such a condition, he immediately returned to the monastery, giving thanks to God and saying: 'God has stricken me with this terrible disease in order that my soul should be saved', and he glorified God exceedingly.

THE WONDROUS DEED OF ABBA CONON

They said that Abba Conon, higoumen of the Penthoucla <monastery>, met some Hebrews one day when he was on his way to the holy place of the Bites.* They wanted to kill him; they drew their swords and ran towards the elder. But when they reached him and lifted up their hands to strike at him, their hands remained immobile in the air. The elder made a prayer on their behalf and they went their way, praising and glorifying God.

ABBA NICOLAS' STORY ABOUT HIMSELF AND HIS FRIENDS

There was an elder living at the Lavra of Abba Peter* near the holy Jordan whose name was Nicolas. He told us that when he was staying at Raithou,* three of the brethren, <of whom he was one> were sent to perform a service* at the Thebaid. 'But when we were going through the desert', he said, 'we lost our way and wandered far and wide. Our water was all used up and we went for days without finding any. We began to faint from thirst and heat. When we could not take one more step, we found some tamarisk trees there in the desert and flung ourselves down wherever any shade could be found, fully expecting to die of thirst. As I lay there I fell into an ecstasy and I saw a pool of water full to overflowing. Two people were standing at the edge of the pool, drawing water with a wooden vessel. I began to make a request of one of them in these words: 'Of your charity, sir, give me a little water, for I am faint', but he was unwilling to grant my request. The other one said to him: 'Give him a little', but he replied: 'No, let us not give him any, for he is too easy-going,* and does not take care <of his soul'.> The other said: 'Yes, yes; it is true that he is easy-going but he is hospitable* to strangers',—and so he gave some to me and also to my companions. We drank and went on our way, travelling three more days without drinking until we reached civilisation.*

THE LIFE OF A GREAT ELDER

The same elder also told us about a certain great elder of the same lavra who spent fifty years in his cave. He never drank wine and the only bread he ate was made from bran, He received <communion> three times a week.

THE LIFE OF ANOTHER ELDER AT THE MONASTERY OF THE LAVRA WHO SLEPT WITH LIONS

Abba Polychronius the priest also told us about another elder living in the same Lavra of Abba Peter who would often go off and stay on the banks of the holy Jordan. There he found a lion's den in which he installed himself. One day he found two lion-cubs in the cave. Wrapping them up in his cloak,* he took them to church. 'If we kept the commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ', he said, 'these animals would fear us. But because of our sins we have become slaves and it is rather we who fear them', Greatly edified, the brethren returned to their caves.

ABBA ELIJAH'S STORY ABOUT HIMSELF

Abba Elijah the grazer* told us that he was once living in a cave in the area around Jordan because he was not in communion with Abba Macarios, the Bishop of Jerusalem:*

One day, about the sixth hour, when the heat was at its most intense, somebody came knocking at the cave. I went out and saw a woman there. 'What are you doing here?' I asked her, and she answered in these words: 'Abba, I too follow this way of life, sir. I have a little cave in which I live about a stone's throw from your cell'. She pointed out to me where it was located, away to the south. Then she said to me: 'I have travelled across this wilderness and am very thirsty on account of the raging heat. Of your charity, give me a little water'. I took out my water-bottle and gave it to her. She took it and drank, then I sent her on her way. When she had departed, the devil began working against me on her account, putting lewd thoughts* into my mind. The devil gained possession of me and I could not bear the flame of lust. So I took my staff and set out from the cave in the heat of the day, across the burning stones, It was my intention to search for her and to satisfy my desire, When I had gone about a furlong, my passion reached fever-pitch and I went into a trance. I saw the earth open up and I fell down into it. There I saw rotting corpses, badly decayed and burst open, filling the place with an unspeakably foul stench, I then saw a person of venerable appearance who pointed to the corpses and said to me: 'See, this is a woman's <body> and that is a man's; go and enjoy yourself and do whatever your passion dictates. But in return for that pleasure, take note how much labour you intend to destroy. Just look at the sort of sin for which you are prepared to deprive yourself of the kingdom of heaven, Oh, wretched humanity! Would you lose the fruit of all that toil for one hour's <pleasure>?' But I was overcome by the appalling stench and fell to the ground. The holy apparition came and set me on my feet. He caused the warfare to cease and I returned to my cell giving thanks to God.

THE CONVERSION OF A SOLDIER (WHOSE LIFE IS BRIEFLY DESCRIBED) WHEN GOD WORKED A MIRACLE FOR HIM

One of the fathers told me that a military standard-bearer* had told him this:

We were in a battle with the Mauritanians in the African provinces, the barbarians defeated us and put us to flight. They pursued us and many of us were slain. One of the barbarians caught up with me and raised his spear to strike at me. When I saw this, I began calling on God. 'Lord God', I said; 'You who appeared to your servant Thecla* and delivered her from impious hands: deliver me from this calamity and save me from this bitter death. Then I will go and lead a life of solitude* in the desert', When I turned round, there was not a barbarian in sight. I came straight away to this Lavra of Kopratha* and, by the grace of God, I have lived thirty years in this cave.