

Apophthegmata of Amun in Syriac

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The text of these sayings, taken from the publication by François Nau 'Ammonas, successeur de Saint Antoine: textes grecs et syriaques' *Patrologia Orientalis* 11 (1915) pp. 393 - 502, can be found together with a French translation on pp. 410-422.¹ There are 25 Syriac sayings and 15 Greek sayings in this collection. They are a very small part of his dossier on Amun, the name used in the Syriac and Coptic texts, which I will use here. I also use Egyptian forms of Egyptian place names, e.g. Pernouj (ΠΕΡΝΟΥΧ) and Shiêt (ϠΗΙΤ) instead of the Greco-Latin Nitria and Scetis and the Cells for Kellia.

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* have a relatively complex written tradition. Having started life as orally transmitted stories in Coptic, they were later written down in Greek, from which they were translated into various languages, one of which was the language in which they originally took shape: Coptic. The Greek text can be found in Jean-Paul Migne *Patrologia Graeca* 65 (1864) cols. 71-440, where it is described as an appendix to the *Lausiac History* of Palladius and the arrangement of the sayings is alphabetical. The eleven sayings of Amun occupy cols. 119ff.²

Immediately before the Syriac apophthegms is a Greek version of the sayings (pp. 403-409), which is not the same as that published in *PG* 65. Reference will be made to the former from time to time.

It is fairly clear that the apophthegms have different settings

Egypt has a reasonably long tradition of 'wise sayings' recorded in writing and probably used in teaching social or civic behaviour. The best known texts from the Middle Kingdom (about 2000-1750 BC) are two texts from the Papyrus Prisse (in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris), in consecutive order, set in the Old Kingdom, with sayings attributed to viziers of the 4th and 5th dynasties (Kagemni and Ptahhotep). The time in which they are set was one of relative political and social stability, the advice in them is essentially 'father to son'. After the first major breakdown of centralized authority at the end of the Old Kingdom, this

1 Fourteen Syriac letters of Amun, as well as a couple of doubtful letters, were published by Michael Kmosko in *PO* 10.

2 The sequence is as follows: There are 11 apophthegms in cols 119-123 and a further three in col. 128, attributed 'Amun the Nitriote'. For a good English translation of the text of *PG* 65 see B. Ward *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (1975)

authority, after a certain amount of social upheaval, was re-established in the Middle Kingdom, and the instructional texts (*sb3yt* in Anc. Eg. and *ⲥⲉⲱ* in Coptic) of that period reveal a subtle shift of tone from old advising young to ruler 'advising' ruled.

In the western Classical world perhaps the best-known collections of non-Christian apophthegms are those of Plutarch (1st-2nd cent. AD), e.g. the *Apophthegmata Laconica*.³ The Spartans had an impressive reputation for brevity reaching back at least to the time of Socrates, who praises them in the *Protagoras* (342e) for their ability to launch a ῥῆμα ἄξιον λόγου βραχὺ καὶ συνεστραμμένον (short pithy memorable saying), which came to be regarded as the sign of the τελέως πεπαιδευμένου ἀνθρώπου (perfectly educated man). This was probably also the case with the Christian apophthegms. An indication that they may have been used in the 'classroom' is the short discussion between teacher and pupils that follows saying 2 in this collection.

Of more recent examples of the genre it will be enough merely to mention the 8 books produced by Erasmus in 1533 for the edification of the young Wilhelm Herzog von Kleve, essentially an elaborate recasting of all the apophthegms of Plutarch.

³ 208a ff., in accordance with the Stephanus pagination.


1. Someone asked Apa Amun, saying to him: “Give me a word⁴ to live by.” He said to him: “Go and make your own reckoning like wrongdoers in prison, who are always asking those who come to them: 'Where is the governor ?'⁵ When is he coming here ?' And in fearful expectation they begin to weep. Thus, the solitary has always to be attentive,⁶ examine himself and say: 'Woe is me ! How will I be able to stand before the tribunal⁷ of Christ ? And what shall I answer him ?' If you apply yourself in this way at all times, you will be saved.”⁸

2. Apa Amun said: “ I spent fourteen years at Shiêt, praying to God day and night to grant me the strength to overcome anger.”⁹

The brothers¹⁰ said: “Why was Apa Amun unable to overcome his anger for fourteen years because he told us that he prayed day and night in sorrow and tears to be able to overcome this passion ?”

The elder said: “This overpowering passion had control of him because of his bodily temperament.¹¹ But it is certain that the other passions and demons fought against him as against a giant and a hero. This is how demons struggle against the Fathers, and with passion and strength, each according to his ability, they are radiant through patience, that is, endurance, as long as they are engaged in the struggle.”

3. One of the fathers told a story of an elder at the Cells,¹² of extremely ascetic habit,¹³ whose clothing was a mat. He went to Apa Amun¹⁴ and as the latter saw that this garment was

4 

5 ἡγεμών

6 Gk προσέχειν

7 βῆμα

8 What follows in the Greek version, a story about Amun killing a snake (p. 403), is not in the Syriac.

9 Probably a typographical error for 

10 The exchange that follows has been italicized by me: it is not in the Greek text and appears to be a commentary on the apophthegm that is quite separate from the apophthegm itself. This saying is not known to me in Coptic, so I do not know whether the commentary is also there.

11 Lit. 'bodily mixture'. The word for 'mixture'  has gone into Coptic as **MOYXO** cf. W.E. Crum *Coptic Dictionary* (1939) 214a

12 Gk Kellia, the settlement founded by Amun between Pernouj and Shiêt.

13 Gk calls him 'spiritual'.

14 In the Latin version it is Amun who approaches the ascetic.


matting and said to him: “This is of no use to you at all.” He then asked¹⁵ him: “Three thoughts disturb me: going into the desert, going to a foreign country or locking myself in a cell, not seeing anyone and eating only every two days.” Amun replied: “You may do none of these. Go back to your cell and eat a little each day. And keep the words of the tax collector ¹⁶in mind: 'Have mercy on me, for I am a sinner;'¹⁷ and you will be saved.”

5. The brothers once suffered distress in their place and wanted to leave it. They went to Amun, who was sailing in a boat.¹⁸ When he saw them on the bank¹⁹ of the river, he told the boatman to set him down on land. He called out to the brothers: “I am Amun. Whom do you wish to see ?” He persuaded them to return to their place and offered them words of solace, for their distress did not affect the soul but was merely human distress.

6. Apa Amun once came to cross a river and found that the passenger ship²⁰ was being prepared and took his place in it. Just then another passenger ship came, and the passengers called him and said: “Father, come with us.” He replied: “I will travel only by the public²¹ ship.” He had with him a jar of leaves, and he set to weaving them until the ship was ready to leave, and he left. The brothers made a gesture of reverence as they said to him: “Why did you do that ?” And he said: “So that I do not always act in haste like a fool.” It was an instruction to follow the way of God in an orderly way.



7. Apa Amun one day went to visit Apa Anthony and lost his way. He sat down for some time and fell asleep. When he woke up, he arose and prayed to God: “My Lord, do not, I beg you,


15 What follows is not a question. Gk also has 'ask'.


16 

17 Luke 18, 13

18  Compare the word used in the next apophthegm

19 The Gk term is ὄχθα. The Syriac  bears a remarkable similarity to Coptic  CD 353a. There are related words in Hebrew (שפה) and Arabic (شفة), all of which may point to a common Semitic ancestry.

20  Payne-Smith uses the word 'ship', and I do not know if the same rough distinction between 'boat' and 'ship' is made as in English, essentially small and large. River crossing was only possible, until the building of bridges, by boat and was almost certainly a daily occurrence and in addition provided a means of physical mobility during the inundation season cf. M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1 (1973), p. 90 for an example of the selfless provision of river transport during the inundation season in the transition period to the Middle Kingdom by a successful soldier named Qedes.

21 

allow your creature to die.” He lifted up his eyes and saw something like a human hand²² hanging over him and pointing the way until he arrived and stood over the cave of Anthony.

8. When he entered and saw him, Anthony prophesied, saying to him: “You will grow in the fear of God.” He led him out of the cave and showed him a stone: “Insult²³ this stone and strike it.” And he did so. Anthony said: “You too will reach this level. You will be able to bear burdens and much contempt.” And so it was. Amun made progress and, because of his goodness, knew no evil. In his state of perfection, when he was bishop,²⁴ a pregnant unmarried girl²⁵ was brought to him and he was told: “So and so has done this; let them do penance.” But Amun made the sign of the cross over her womb and ordered six pieces²⁶ of cloth,²⁷ and he said: “In the event that, when she gives birth, the mother or child dies, they can serve as a burial shroud.” Those nearby said to him: “What are you doing? Impose a penance on them.” He said to them: “You see, my brothers, there is a risk of death. What can I do?” and he sent her away. Amun felt unable to judge anyone, for he was merciful and full of goodness towards people.

9. There is a story about Amun that certain people came to plead before him, but he ignored them, as if he were not listening. Then a woman said to her neighbour: “The old man is mad.” Amun heard her talking to her neighbour and he called her over: “How much have I done in this desert? Am I now to throw it all away for your sake?”

10. One day Amun came to a place to eat with the brothers, and one of them had a bad reputation. Now, a woman arrived one day and went into the brother's cell. When everyone saw this, they were incensed and gathered to drive her from his cell. On learning that the blessed Amun the bishop was there, they went to ask him to accompany them. When the

22 The Hand of God is originally a Jewish motif that found its way into Christian iconography. For an early example in Judaism, cf. Ex. 3, 20

23 The Syriac verb ܐܘܢܐ is used here probably because Anthony is comparing Amun to a stone.

24 The apophthegms seem to be the only evidence that Amun was consecrated bishop, but it is not known when, where and by whom. There is no mention of it in his 'biographical' text in the Synaxary (Pashons 20).

25 ܘܨܘܪܐ The translation 'virgin' hardly seems appropriate in the circumstances.

26 The text uses 'pairs'.

27 ܘܨܘܪܐ There seem to be two superficially similar words with similar meaning: (1) the Syriac word, clearly related to the Hebrew יָטוּ and Arabic نَسْدٌ and (2) the Egyptian word *šndyt* cf. Coptic ܘܨܘܪܐ (CD 573a), which has given rise to the Greek σινδών. Both refer to textiles of some form.

brother saw them, he took the woman and hid her in a jar.²⁸ A great crowd gathered and Amun knew what he had done, he concealed it in the sight of God. He went over and sat down on the jar and ordered the cell to be searched. They found nothing and nobody. Amun spoke and said: "What have you done ? May God forgive you." Then he prayed and asked them all to leave the cell. He put his hand on the brother and said: "Have a care" and went out, not wanting to expose him.²⁹

11. An elder³⁰ was asked: "What is the narrow way ?"³¹ The elder replied: "The narrow way is the way of controlling and suppressing one's thoughts for God and what God wants. This why he said: *We have given up everything and followed you.*³²

12. Some brothers went to see Anthony to ask him about a passage in the Book of Leviticus. The elder went out into the desert and Amun, who was familiar with his habits, secretly followed him. After the elder had gone some distance, he cried aloud: "God, send Moses to me that he may explain this passage." And at once a voice was heard speaking to him. Our father Amun said: "I heard the voice speaking, but I did not understand what it said."

13. Paese, the brother of Apa Poimen, had forged a friendship with someone outside the monastery, which Poimen did not want. He arose and made his way to Amun, saying: "My brother Paese shows sign of a friendship with a certain person, and I am troubled." Amun said to him: "Poimen, you are still alive ! Go and sit in your cell and think on this, that you have been in your grave for a year."

14. Poimen reported the following saying of Amun: "A certain man spends his entire life with an axe in his hand for cutting down a tree, and he cannot cut it down. There is another who knows how to cut down trees and cuts it down with three blows." He said that the axe was

28 According Payne-Smith jars of this sort were often amphorae.

29 I am not sure that I understand the Syriac or Nau's translation of it. The Greek says merely: "After having said this, he left"

30 Gk. Amun

31 Ref. to Matth. 7, 14. The two Syriac adjectives seem to be synonyms

32 Matth. 19, 27

discernment.

15. Apa Amun said: “A certain man spends a hundred years in a cell and does not learn how a solitary ought to stay in his cell ³³ or how to rest, even for a day.” He said that the proper life and proper conduct for a monk was to constantly reproach himself.

16. Amun asked Poimen³⁴ about unclean thoughts that beset man and empty wishes. Poimen said: *Is the axe glorified and not the one who cuts with it?*³⁵ Do not invite them and they will go away.”

17. Apa Amun said: “I said to Apa Poimen: 'If for some reason I go to my neighbour's cell or if he visits me, we are both afraid to speak for fear that a profane³⁶ word might be said.' The elder said: 'You are right. Young people should be reserved and pay attention.' And I said to him: 'How is it with elders?' He replied: 'Elders have advanced to a stage where they are able to speak and there is nothing profane that comes out of their mouth.' I said to him: 'If I had to speak with a neighbour, would you like me to talk about Holy Scripture or the words of the elders?' He said to me: 'If you cannot be silent, it is better for you to talk of the words of the elders, for it is dangerous for men to talk about Holy Scripture.’”³⁷

18. Amun tells of how he saw a youth laughing and said to him: “Brother, do not laugh except to drive fear from your soul.”³⁸

19. A brother once asked Amun: “Why does a man work and ask for something without receiving it?” Amun replied: “Have you not read about how much trouble Jacob took to win Rachel and he did not get her whom he asked for but her whom he did not ask for. He

33 The Gk text ends here.

34 At a certain point in their relationship Amun appears to become a pupil of Poimen.

35 Isaiah 10,15

36  The Gk text uses the word ξένη

37 The precise background of this opinion is not known, but one thinks of the Tall Brothers at Nitria, who supported the suspect theology of Origen and eventually had to take refuge at Constantinople from the hostile opposition directed at them by the Patriarch Theophilus, cf. N. Russell *Theophilus of Alexandria* (2007)p. 19.

38 I cannot find any passages in Classical or early Christian texts that express the same sentiment.

continued to work and finally got the woman he loved. It is the same with the monk who fasts and prays and does not get what he asks for. He works in prayer and fasting and finally receives the grace he asks for.”³⁹

20. One day Amun went to visit the brothers, who asked him for useful advice. He replied: “It is good for us to walk in orderly fashion on the path God.”

21. Amun told a story about Papnoute the Simple of Shiêt: “When I went down⁴⁰ into the desert I was young, and he would not let me stay, saying: “As long as I live, I will not let someone who looks like a woman stay here.”⁴¹

22. The disciple of Apa Amun said: “One night my master came out of the cell and found me asleep at the entrance. He stood near me, lamenting and crying: ‘What is this brother thinking of that he can sleep in such a carefree way?’”

23. The disciple of Amun told the following story: “One day, while we were performing our office, my spirit was troubled and I forgot a word in the Psalms. When we had finished, the elder said to me: ‘While I am performing the office, I think that I am standing in a fire and burning and my thoughts move neither to the right nor to the left. What were you thinking of while we were saying the office and you left out a word?’⁴² Did you not know that you were standing before God and speaking to him?’”

24. A brother asked Amun: “How is a person to act when he wishes to embark on an enterprise: go, come, pass from one place to another so that his enterprise is performed according to the will of God and escapes the deceit of the demons?” The elder replied: “The man must first consider why he is doing it and what the origin of the enterprise is: God or Satan or himself? The first is acceptable, but the other two will be the ruin of him. He can then

39 Gen. 29. Jacob first married Laban's older daughter Leah and had to wait for seven years to marry the woman he really loved, Laban's younger daughter Rachel.

40 The Wadi Natrun is a depression.

41 The message seems to be that attractive boys and young men could be a disruptive element in a monastic settlement. Same-sex attraction or exploitation in closed institutions limited to one sex, especially where the age difference can be considerable, is a well-known phenomenon and there is no reason why 4th cent AD monastic settlements should have been an exception. Nau (p. 422 n.1) cites an example of monks' awareness of this possibility in *PG* 65 col. 273.

42 Nau suggests 'verse' in brackets.

pray and ask of God what is God's work, apply to himself to it and glorify God.”

25. He also said: “Support each other as God supports you.”