

# HEROES OF THE DESERT

## The Great Amma

### The Mothers of the Desert

- Not surprisingly, ancient sources do not always give “equal time” to the women who answered the call to live as ascetics in the desert.
- Nevertheless, there were many such women
  - Pachomius’s sister founded a monastery for women near his, near Tabennensis
    - “They had the same sort of management and the same way of life . . .”
    - “The women lived on one side of the river opposite the men.”
- The *Lausiaca History* of Palladius relates a number of stories of women
  - “. . . the courageous women to whom God granted struggles equal to those of men”
  - Amma Alexandra: lived walled in a tomb for 10 years
  - Amma Isidora: did menial work and let everyone in her convent think she was insane
- The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* include four women, along with 130 men.
  - Amma Theodora
    - wife of a tribune who became notable for her detachment
    - “Just as the trees, if they have not stood before the winter’s storms, cannot bear fruit, so it is with us. This present age is a storm, and it is only through many trials and temptations that we can obtain an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven.”
  - Amma Sarah
    - struggled against temptations for many years
    - strict penance: lived near a river for 60 years but never looked at it
    - “If I prayed God that all men should approve of my conduct, I should find myself a penitent at the door of each one. I shall rather pray that my heart may be pure towards all.”
  - Amma Matrona
    - married woman from Constantinople
    - felt called to leave her husband and become a nun; eventually became abbess of her community
    - “We carry ourselves wherever we go, and cannot escape temptation by mere flight. Many people living secluded lives on the mountain have perished by living like people in the world. It is better to live in a crowd and want to live a solitary life than to live a solitary life but all the time be longing for company.”

## Amma Syncletica

- born in Alexandria, Egypt, around AD 270
  - parents were from Macedonia, wealthy Christians
  - emigrated to Alexandria because of the reputation of Christians there
  - a distinguished family
    - one sister (who was blind)
    - a brother who died in childhood
    - a brother who became a monk
- by all accounts, extremely beautiful.
  - had many suitors, because of her wealth, rank and beauty.
  - parents encouraged her to marry, especially as she was their only hope of grandchildren.
    - ignored her suitors, and neglected her appearance so as to discourage them.
    - desired a “divine marriage”, a total commitment to Christ.
  - her sacrifice was seen as a new kind of martyrdom
  - was not persuaded by her parents’ pleading, nor offers of gifts or jewelry
- began a strict, ascetical life in her parents’ house
  - fasting was “a safeguard and foundation for the other virtues.”
    - when she was made to eat more than a little, she was sick
    - when she fasted, she felt and looked exceptionally well
- when her parents die, she leaves home with her sister
  - sells property and distributes it to the poor
  - lives in a relative’s tomb outside the city
  - sends for a priest and cuts off her hair.
  - austerities included
    - bran bread in small amounts
    - often no water at all
    - sleeping on the ground
    - constant prayer
    - faith hope and love
    - almsgiving: “if not in actually then certainly in intent”
  - she knew to moderate her penance when the battle was easier, in order not to lose strength
- women came to her and asked for advice on the spiritual life
  - at first refused, because of her humility
  - eventually gave into their request: a large part of her *Life* is a discourse
  - seems that many women came to live in the same region
- after many years of penance, was stricken with great suffering
  - cancer in the lungs, which afflicted her for 3½ years
  - fever which burned her insides.
  - infection in a molar quickly destroyed her jaw and her tongue
  - she became a model of patience in suffering, and taught patience to those who tended her
  - Suffered in this way for three more months.
- died on the day she had predicted, at the age of 80.

## The Wisdom of Amma Syncletica

- “I am telling you these things to safeguard you from the Adversary. What is being said, however, is not suitable for all, but only for those who choose this life. Just as one diet is not suitable for all animals, so the same instruction is not appropriate for all people.”
- “For those who are making their way to God, there is at first great struggle and effort, but then indescribable joy.”
- “We should not be careless, but should maintain our vigilance. For the more athletes make progress, the more they are matched with stronger opponents. Consider how much you have advanced, and you will not underestimate the present situation.”
- “Do not bolt when the Enemy checks you, for he himself is confounded by your steadfastness. Those who are beginning a sea voyage first encounter a favoring wind when they have unfurled their sails, but later a contrary wind blows against them. The sailors, however, do not dock the ship waiting for a fortuitous breeze, but they continue their voyage after lying quiet for a little while, or even after having battled against the storm blast. So we too shall complete our voyage successfully when we encounter an opposing wind, if we raise the Cross in place of the sail.”
- “The mind must become painstakingly diligent with respect to its thoughts. We are sailing in uncertainty. For our life is a sea . . . But some parts of the sea are full of reefs, and some full also of monsters, but some too are calm. We seem to be sailing in the calm . . . during the day. It often happens, however, that the secular person has saved his ship in the midst of storm and darkness, by crying out and staying awake. We, on the other hand, have drowned in calm waters through carelessness in letting go of the rudder of righteousness. Let the one standing firm, therefore, take care lest he fall.”
- “Like a ship our soul is sometimes engulfed by the waves without, and is sometimes swamped by the bilge-water within. We must guard against onslaughts of spirits from outside us, and bail out impurities of thoughts inside us. Against the storm waves outside, salvation often comes from ships nearby when the sailors cry out for help. But bilge-waters overflow and frequently kill the sailors, often when they are asleep and the sea is calm.”
- “Those who sail ships go without food when stormy weather and high seas overtake them . . . but when they succeed in recovering, then they take thought for a second kind of salvation. They welcome the briefest calm spell as rest from their labors. But even so they neither pass their time free from care nor sink into deep sleep . . . since, with experience of the past, they take thought for the future. . . . Even if the storm has abated, still what caused it is at hand.”
- “Those who have endured the labors and dangers of the sea and then amass material riches, even when they have gained much, desire to gain yet more. They consider what they have at present as nothing and reach out for what they have not got. We, who have nothing of that which we desire, wish to acquire everything through the fear of God.”

- “Just as a ship sailing without rudders is constantly tossed about, so is danger ever gusting against negligent souls. They are not able to reach a safe harbor since they have dropped the Lord as their pilot.”
- “Just as one cannot build a ship unless one has some nails, so it is impossible to be saved without humility.”
- “It is essential to be on guard against remembrance of wrongs, for many terrible consequences develop from it: envy, sadness, malicious talk. The evil of these vices is lethal, even if they seem to occur in small doses. For these are, so to speak, the light weaponry of the Enemy. Often the wounds from the two-edged blade and the larger sword (such as sexual impurity, greed and murder) have been healed by the saving medicine of conversion. Pride, however, remembrance of wrongs or malicious talk (which seem to be small weapons) have wrought destruction unnoticed, once they have been implanted in the more vital parts of the soul. And these vices do damage not by the size of their blow, but by the negligence of the wounded.”
- “As long as we are in the monastery, obedience is preferable to asceticism. The one teaches pride, the other humility. We must not seek our own will, nor follow our personal opinion, but obey our fathers in the faith.”
- “Whatever we do or gain in this world, let us consider it insignificant in comparison with the eternal wealth that is to come. In the present world we are impoverished in comparison with the kingdom of heaven. We have sampled the nourishment here; let us reach for the Divine! . . . Let us live prudently in this world so that we may obtain eternal life.”
- “There is a sadness that is helpful, and a sadness that is destructive. It is a function of the useful sorrow, then, to lament about one’s own sins as well as the ignorance of one’s neighbors, but also to avoid falling away from one’s purpose and to achieve the goal of goodness. These concerns are the signs of a sorrow that is legitimate and good. There is also another kind of sorrow, prompted by the Enemy, which knows how to merge with the first kind. For he himself imposes a sorrow, completely irrational, which has also been called by some *acedia*. This spirit, therefore, must be driven off, especially by prayer and by the singing of psalms.”
- “This is the great ascesis: to remain strong in illness and to keep sending up hymns of thanksgiving to the Almighty.”
- “The cross is for us the trophy of victory. For our calling is nothing other than a renunciation of life, a rehearsal of death. Just as corpses are not active in their body, so we too. . . . We live by the soul; by it let us demonstrate our virtues.”