



The Prophet of Suffering Roman Hellenism

In Memory of Photios Kontoglou

The Blessed Ascetics of Syria and Mesopotamia*

BLESSED is God
Who counts us worthy to sing the praises of His Saints.

After having written many things and acquired no little renown for my writing, I ultimately saw that I am in possession of a vain art. I liken myself to the repentant thief, or to the harlot who changed her course, or to St. Moses the Egyptian, who robbed and murdered for many years, and in his last years found mercy. For I wrote all sorts of stories about robbers and pirates and murderers, and now I understand that I must put my meager artistic talent to some good and blessed purpose: to weave a melodic encomium to the fleshless ascetics whose bodies were fragrant like cypress wood and dry grasses on the hillside.

Poets are wont to invoke the Muses to lend them wings. I, however, cry unto God to enlighten me, because it is with trembling that I take their holy names in my mouth; for their names are purer than snow, and I fear lest I become the cause for them to be besmirched by the glory of the world, from which they withdrew and sank into the depths of oblivion.

I will tell and speak in praise of those ascetics who manifested themselves in ancient times in the regions of Syria and Mesopotamia—and of some in Persia—, and separately of St. Isaac, that hidden treasure and sealed Paradise: I am at a loss with what words to depict

him. For whatever I have undertaken with my art up until this point has been within my powers, but that which I am now attempting is, in my opinion, beyond them.

Ascetics and monastics are held in contempt in our days, but in ancient times they were greatly revered, as they still are in the East. Whenever a hermit would go to the city, the people would receive him as though he were an Angel, as one of the ancients writes.

They lived wrapped in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented, wandering in deserts and mountains, and in the caves and dens of the earth. It was a great wonder to behold how rough people that lived in the gorges and ravines—there, where the wild beasts, the serpents, the scorpions, and every wild creature feed—not only did not grow fierce, but instead were the gentlest, holiest, and most innocent of all people. They did not concern themselves with food, shelter or clothing, or with the sufferings of the flesh, or with mother or father or siblings or friends, or with honors or with contempt. Many settled in tombs. They wore goat-hair cassocks. Instead of a pillow, they would lay their head on a stone. The mountains encompassed them like fortresses. Wherever they happened to be when overtaken by the dark, there they would spend the night.

The hand of God shielded these valiant souls, and nothing could touch them. Wicked people would scoff at them and regarded their resolve as madness and their condition as pitiable. But they were at peace. For though they may have been scorned in the eyes of men, yet their hope was full of immortality. And as many torments as they underwent, these were nothing compared to all that they gained. For God proved them, and found them worthy for Himself. When that day comes, they shall shine; and like the fire that flares up among the stubble, so shall they spring up. These humble ones shall judge the world, and the Lord will be glorified with them unto the ages. For only as many as have faith in Him shall understand the truth, and they await His arrival with love.

Such holy elders first appeared in Egypt, and from there the establishment of solitary life spread to Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Asia Minor. In Syria and Mesopotamia appeared the toughest ascetics: “The people of the East are more keen-minded,”

according to Herodian. It was as though the ancient and sinful Persian, Syrian, and Mesopotamian nations had lived many centuries and desired to take a rest from their passions and ascend to Heaven, after having descended into fiendishness. The wildness of soul of the ancient Assyrians—those unsmiling people with bushy beards, lion-hearted and hawk-nosed—turned in the harshest enmity on their own bodies at the time when they became Christians, as if God wanted to wash that savage race from the frightful sins they had committed when they slaughtered, blinded, impaled, and tormented their enemies with some kind of demonic fury, as is visible to this day from the fearsome carvings they left on the rocks and in their palaces....



(*) Photios Kontoglou, *The Mystical Garden* (Athens: 1944), pp. 21-23.