

## The Desert Tradition and the Natural Environment

From [John Chryssavgis, SARX.org](#)

April 2024

*Fr John Chryssavgis explores the rich tradition of the Desert Monastics and their relationship to animals and the natural world.*



*Kyaw Tun, Unsplash*

In the early third to the late fourth centuries, the dry desert of Egypt became a testing ground for exploring hidden truths not only about heaven but also about earth. More precisely, it served as a forging ground for drawing connections between the two. The hermits who lived in that harsh spiritual laboratory analyzed what it means to be human in a natural world—with all the tensions and temptations, all the struggle and survival, all the contacts with good and conflicts with evil. These men and women dared to push the limits, to challenge the norms.

Their questions and responses are found in collections of aphorisms—or *apophthegmata* (“sayings”)—preserved in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Coptic.[1] Listening to their words, meditating on them in silence and subsequently transmitting them to others, help us to live humanely, to be more human, to be truly alive. Their stories were ways in which the desert elders maintained a sense of continuity with their past, while fostering a sense of connection with future generations. These stories from the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Sinai are more than just a part of the Christian past. They are a part of our human heritage; they communicate eternal values, spiritual truths.

It may be surprising to find that such ancient texts are so fresh and accessible in our age. It was a strange way of life, strange even to secular society in the fourth century and perhaps for many Christians of the time. These were men and women who chose to live outside towns and villages, as far as possible from civilization, often entirely alone. They had very few possessions, choosing to do without them in order to be free for God. They lived in simple huts or rough caves, eating and drinking a sparse diet of bread or herbs with water.



*Pat Whelen, Unsplash*

Their clothing entailed a simple garment, with a sheepskin that could be used as a blanket or rug. They were neither scholars nor preachers, neither teachers nor clerics, and they came from all kinds of backgrounds. They learned how to be still and silent, to know themselves and to know God, themselves ultimately becoming part of God's redeeming work for the whole world.

So did these early desert hermits recognize or overlook the natural and aesthetic beauty of creation through their austere life and harsh discipline? What is the relationship of the desert dwellers who filled this region with their environment and with animals? In renouncing the world, did the Desert Fathers and Mothers overlook the world, or did they enjoy a new awareness of everything in the world—human, animal, and natural?

In the *Life of Anthony*, we are told by Athanasius of Alexandria that Abba Anthony saw the desert for the first time “fell in love with it” (Chapter 50). The desert was home for Antony and the other elders who lived there. It was there that they experienced a sense of connection with the earth as well as their communion with heaven. It is there that they also experienced a sense of continuity with the entire creation.

Abba John said: “Let us imitate our Fathers. For they lived in this place with much austerity and peace.” (John, Saying 4)



*Craig Marshall, Unsplash*

In the desert, holiness was part and parcel of wholeness. If at-one-ment with their neighbor was of the essence in the spirituality of the desert, so too was at-tune-ment to their environment, to the world, and to God.

Abba John said: “My children, let us not pollute this place, since our Fathers have previously cleansed it.” (Saying 5)

The same worldview and conviction informs the attitude of the desert hermits to animals. In fact, when it comes to respecting or relating to animals, there is an abundance of stories describing the connection that the desert dwellers enjoyed with their untamed “co-inhabitants.”

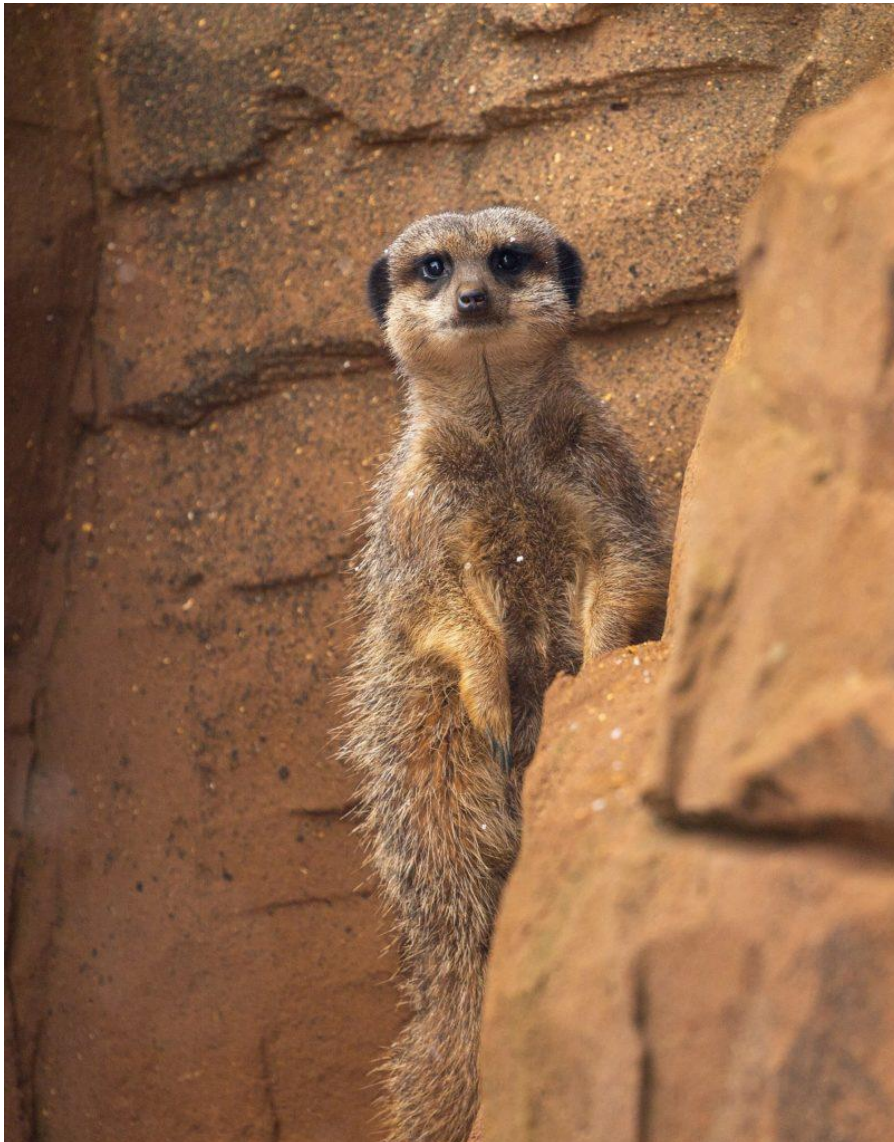
One of the Fathers used to talk about Abba Paul, from lower Egypt. He used to take various kinds of snakes in his bare hands. The brothers admired him, saying: “Tell us what you have done to receive this grace.” He replied: “Forgive me, but if someone acquires purity, then everything cooperates with that person, just as it was for Adam and Eve in paradise.” (Paul, Saying 1)

Abba Antony also said: “Reverence with moderation allows people to become stewards even over wild animals.” (Anthony, Saying 1)

Anthony certainly grasped the truth of this statement. He had, after all, persuaded the animals of his region to live at peace with him without disturbing him. In fact, the notion of resembling Adam and Eve before their Fall from the condition of grace, is the ideal to which the desert hermits aspired.

They said of Abba Pambo that his face was like that of Moses, who received the image of the glory of Adam when his face shone. Pambo's face likewise shone like fire. It was the same with Abba Silvanus and Abba Sisoës. (Pambo, Saying 12)

Of course, we find such a relationship with nature and animals in later mystics as well. It is a relationship that transcends place; we see it in the writing of Isaac the Syrian (in the seventh century) as well as in the life of Francis of Assisi (1181–1226). And it is a relationship that transcends time; we observe it in the lives of the early hermits as well as in the nineteenth-century life of Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833).



*Andy Holmes, Unsplash*

However, what is at stake here is much more than mere emotional attachment to animals. The connection of the early monks and of the later mystics with their natural surroundings as well as with the native animals is neither superficial nor sentimental; it is, in fact, deeply sacred and spiritual. It stems from an inner conviction that God created this world out of love, which further implies that God cares for the world and for all that exists in the world, both animate and inanimate.

Through this lens, then, the desert hermits are revealed to be—in a most intense and most intimate manner—“materialists.” In the desert, everything—including the smallest form of life and the slightest speck of dust—really mattered! In God’s eyes, the wild animals and the sand dunes are of sacred importance and have their unique place alongside humanity. In their understanding of heaven, birds and trees could never be eliminated or excluded.

For the early fathers and mothers of Egypt, the purpose of fleeing to the desert was precisely in order to restore a lost order, to reestablish a reconciliation with all creation, to reaffirm a connection between the natural world and God. The world becomes a wasteland unless it comes alive in an authentic human being, who in turn becomes the eyes, the conscience, and the heart of the world. So if we miss the story of the desert, we create an alienation between the world and ourselves, ultimately causing a division within ourselves. When we neglect the world of the spirit, we also neglect the spirit of the world. And when we disregard the world of the soul, we definitely overlook the living mystery of all God’s creation.

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[1] For one of the most popular anthologies, see Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Mowbrays, 1975. Revised edition: Liturgical Press, 1984.

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