Zachary B. Smith, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*, Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia 80, Turnhout, Brepols 2017, 327 p., ISBN: 978-2-503-57888-0

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Apophthegmata Patrum (AP) is one of the most significant monastic writings for Eastern Christian-Orthodox spirituality. It enjoyed immense popularity among monks, but did not arouse the same interest in academia – even if there are more notable contributions in this regard lately.¹ In 2017, Zachary B. Smith (ZS) published “the result of a decade of reading, contemplation, conversation, and critique” (p. 11) in the book *Philosopher-monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: the Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine*. The author defines the AP as a “collection of sayings and stories that condenses nearly two centuries of primarily Egyptian desert wisdom into a single text” (p. 13). He wants to set his analysis apart from previous approaches (e.g., he lists and reviews Wilhelm Bousset,² Jean-Claude Guy,³ Graham Gould,⁴ Douglas Burton-Christie⁵) and begins by asking a simple question: “Why did its compiler produce the AP?” (p. 13). Nevertheless, this simple question elicits a complex answer, which involves a vast analysis of the intellectual, literary and historical context of the afore-mentioned compilation. His beautifully crafted architecture of arguments is meant to

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¹ Lucien Regnault, *Les Pères Du Désert à Travers Leurs Apophthegmes* (Solesmes: Ed. de Solesmes, 1987); idem, *L'Évangile vécu au désert: paroles des Pères du désert* (Paris: Sarmant-Fayard, 1990); Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert*, New edition (Oxford: Lion Books, 2004); John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert. The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2003); Daniel Lemeni, „Avva, Spune-Mi Un Cuvânt!” *Dinamica Îndrumării Spirituale La Părinții Deșertului* (Iași: Doxologia, 2017); idem, *Duhul a suflat în pustie: lumea duhovnicească a Părinților deșertului*, Monografii 5 (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2014).

² Wilhelm Bousset, *Apophthegmata: Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchtums* (J. C. B. Mohr [P. Siebeck], 1923).

³ Jean-Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des 'Apophthegmata Patrum'* (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1962).

⁴ Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

⁵ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

prove that “the compiler of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* tacitly urges monastic autonomy from ecclesiastical oversight by carefully compiling stories with an anti-clerical bias and an emphasis on the continuity of practices and intellectual systems from classical philosophers to Christian monks” (p. 14).

Although the major theme of the AP stories is the monasticism of 4th century Egypt, still “it is more honest to read the AP as a reflection of Palestine in the fifth century than as a reflection of Egypt in the fourth century (the original setting for most of the sayings)” (p. 18). The reasons why the compiler chooses to introduce certain stories in his collection while ignoring others from the oral tradition (we will never know exactly which ones were left out) indicate a certain program and a certain intention that ZS is trying to decipher.

The paper is structured in five chapters. The first talks about the text itself, but also about the context in which the compilation that came to us under the name *Apophthegmata Patrum* was created (p. 21-22). The second chapter “assesses other pieces of literature to establish that monks and bishops fought for monastic control in late antique Christianity. Some texts and authors assert the primacy of the episcopacy, others decry ecclesiastical overreach into monastic affairs, and others still fall somewhere between those perspectives” (p. 22). The third chapter is centered around the demonstration that the AP is part of a category of writings that present ascetics and the church hierarchy as two separate groups. “The compiler’s presentation avoids aggression but remains consistent—monastic authority should reign supreme within monasteries. In the AP, monks gird their authority with their ability to practice self-care” (p. 22). It is naturally dedicated to the analysis of the concept of self-care in classical and late antiquity, and then chapter five explores the contours of self-care thought in the AP, suggesting how monastic communities applied the Christian narrative to the self-care tradition. The result is a Christianized self-care that allows monks to assert their autonomy based on the tradition of philosophical and religious communities educating themselves independently in self-care (p. 22).

An important statement that sums up ZS’s vision reaches through his entire book is that the AP’s compiler did not intend the AP solely as a hidden polemic against ecclesiastical interference. One of the AP’s main goals was in fact protreptic and didactic toward Christian asceticism, but its character presentations and creation of a Christian system of self-care hint at multivalence in the AP’s composition in late fifth-century Palestine (p. 22).

The work is overall informative and balanced. Informative because it reviews the academic literature on AP and provides a fair perspective on the history of the text and its circulation. It is balanced because it does not do

injustice to the ancient text by forcing it to fit into the constrictive interests of its demonstration, even if the initial question is one that has not been addressed in this way. Therefore, the reader is invited to take part in a sometimes detective tour and invited to understand thoroughly the Egyptian context, but especially the Palestinian one in which the apophthegms were compiled. At the same time, the author embarks on a detailed analysis of the philosophical tradition of self-care, which he relates to monastic ascetic practices. His demonstration is convincing: the monastic communities certainly pleaded for their independence, without doing so in an aggressive and controversial manner. As for the philosophical traditions the AP integrated, they cannot be denied, even if the phenomenon of Egyptian monasticism cannot be explained exclusively by the otherwise very well-articulated philosophical tradition of self-care.