



St. Macarius the Great
Father of the Elders of Scetis
300-390 CE

Some advice about reading
ancient lives of the saints...

“We cannot let modern questions about historicity (factual accuracy) divert us from understanding how memory worked in early monastic communities. Those communities, from all indications, did take great pains to remember accurately. But it was not accuracy for accuracy’s sake. It was not the accuracy that might move a modern historian, or one that might have moved an ancient historian. It was accuracy for the sake of spirituality...Its concern was not past facts, but past wisdom that might serve the present quest.”

William Harmless, S.J
Author of *Desert Christians:
An Introduction to the Literature
of Early Monasticism*

[This booklet is edited and compiled by David Keller and produced by St. Macarius Contemplative Community + Asheville, NC. See page 21 for more information.]



A Short Life of St. Macarius the Great

By H.G. Bishop Youssef
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the
Southern United States

St. Macarius the Great was truly a saint chosen by God from a very young age, perhaps even from his birth. He was born in the village of Shabsheer-Menuf, in the province of Giza south of Cairo, from good and righteous parents. [His story mirrors the life of Abraham and Sarah in the book of Genesis. In a dream an angel told the father of St. Macarius that he would have a son and his name would be known all over the earth and would be further blessed with a multitude of spiritual sons.]

When St. Macarius was born, he was named "Macarius" which means blessed. He was an obedient son in all things. At his parent's insistence and against his will he was forced into marriage. [To avoid intercourse with his wife, Macarius worked as a camel driver hauling natron in the remote desert near the mountain and valley of Wadi Natrum.] While in the wilderness Macarius prayed to the Lord Jesus Christ to be directed to do what was pleasing unto Him. His humbleness gave him the strength to be obedient in all things despite his personal desires.

While in the desert Macarius had a vision in which he saw a beautiful winged Cherubim who took him to a high mountaintop. While at the height of the mountain, Macarius was told, "God has given the desert to you and your spiritual sons for an inheritance." He was shown the vast expanse of the desert to the east and west, north and south. Following this he returned from the wilderness home to find that his virgin wife had departed. Although respective of the departure, Macarius was now happy to lead the life in which he so ardently desired.

Shortly thereafter, his parents also departed and he gave all that they had left to the poor. At about the age of 30, he began his life of asceticism in a cell near his village. The people of the village admired his humbleness and purity and took him to the Bishop of Ashmoun

who ordained Macarius as a priest for them. Father Macarius had not wished to become a priest. In his humility he could not refuse.

A certain young girl in the village became pregnant and accused Father Macarius of fathering her unborn child. The people without weighing the matter immediately sought him out and brought him back to the village. They beat and whipped Father Macarius severely and hung huge black pots around his neck. He was forced to go before the village while they were mocking him and saying, "This monk seduced our daughter. Let him be hanged." With the merciless behavior shown to him he continued in humility.

When allowed to return to his cell, he gave a young man all the mats that he had made from the work of his hands. Father Macarius instructed the young man to "Sell these mats and give the money to MY WIFE that she may eat." Father Macarius in thought had accepted this young woman as his wife without a single denial or bitter thought. He worked night and day making mats to send money to her. Humbleness was the mother of forgiveness in this saint's soul.

At the time of the young girl's delivery, she suffered many days in labor. The unbearable pain motivated the girl into telling the truth regarding Father Macarius. She related to all that she had falsely accused this priest and that

he had never so much as touched her. Having not been able to deliver until she confessed, the entire village was remorseful at their judgmental actions. When Father Macarius heard that the village was on route to seek his forgiveness he fled to the place where he would live the remainder of his holy life. His humble and forgiving natures were the clothes in which he would wear throughout his life.

This is how he came to the Desert of Scetis in the Valley of Nitron. He is known to have visited St. Anthony to seek his spiritual guidance in beginning his life in the desert. The prophecy foretold to him by his lifetime companion the cherub was about to be fulfilled. Many monks joined Father Macarius in the desert, filling the wilderness with prayers and fasting. Countless cells and caves were filled with these men who desired to be in continual worship to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is said that he dwelt in the Inner Desert, in the place of the Monastery of Sts Maximus and Domadius, which is now known as the Monastery of El-Baramous. As the monasteries rose in number this dry desert began to flower and became known as "The Paradise of the Holy Fathers".

One day while meditating St. Macarius thought that perhaps there were no more righteous people in the world. A voice came from Heaven and said "In the City of Alexandria you will find

two very righteous women." He took his staff and went to the city. He was guided to the home of the two women where he inquired of their life. One of them related to him, "There is no kinship between us and when we married these two brothers we asked them to leave us to be nuns but they refused. So we committed ourselves to spend our life fasting until evening and we pray diligently. When each of us had a son, whenever one of them would cry, any one of us would carry and nurse him even if he was not her own son. We are in one living arrangement, the unity of opinion is our model, and our husbands work as shepherds, we are poor and only have our daily bread and what is left over we give to the poor and needy." Rejoicing he bade them farewell. Reflecting upon the comfort of the Holy Spirit to all those who loved the Lord his soul was filled with compassion once again and he returned to his beloved desert.

Father Macarius is known for his humble encounters with those whom followed him into the desert way of life. There was a certain monk who was leading other monks astray in his proclaiming that there was no resurrection of the dead. The bishop of the City of Osseem went to Father Macarius and told him about the saying of this particular monk. Father Macarius went and stayed with the erring monk until the monk returned to the correct and true beliefs concerning the resurrection of the dead.

As the abbot of his monastery, Abba Macarius dealt with many problems and always solved them in a humbled manner. It was reported to him through the monks of the monastery that a particular monk had allowed a woman to enter his cell. Abba Macarius did not reprimand nor scold this monk. The monks continued to wait for the woman's return. Upon discovering her presence once again they reported their finding to Abba Macarius.

He entered the monk's cell and asked the others to wait outside. Upon hearing the approaching footsteps of others, the brother had hidden the women in a big trunk used for storing grain. When Abba Macarius entered he promptly sat upon the trunk knowing its hidden contents. He called the other monks to enter. They did not see the women in question and dared not to ask Abba Macarius the contents of the trunk he was sitting upon. When the others had left, Abba Macarius looked at the brother in question and said, "Brother, judge yourself before they judge you, because the true judgment comes only from God." As did our Lord and Savior, Abba Macarius concealed other people's sins.

As was the birth of this humble saint so is his departure date. The twenty-seventh day of the Blessed Month of Baramhat is also the Commemoration of the Crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am sure this humble saint considers it with solemn humility to have his

departure date overshadowed by the Commemoration of the Crucifixion. With the Holy Crucifixion foremost in everyone's mind, the Lord our God allowed Abba Macarius the Great's life to remain "clothed in humility" for all generations and all the years to come.

His "clothing in humility" led him to be remembered as "Epnevma-Tovoros" meaning "clothed WITH the Holy Spirit". *"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of God"* (Matthew 5:3)

May we keep the humbleness of Abba Macarius and his total dependence upon God ever before us and may this great saint's blessings be with us all.



St. Macarius Monastery Today: Scetis, Egypt

Comments on the Life of Macarius the Great

by Abu Matta el Meskeen

“Matthew the Poor”

1920-2006

Spiritual Leader of the Monastic Community
for over fifty years

Since his early youth, St. Macarius had shown a high degree of wisdom, and his friends dubbed him “the youth endowed with the wisdom of the old.” He had a keen insight – much like the spirit of prophecy – and was therefore called the “prophet endowed with the Holy Spirit,” or “bearer of the Holy Spirit.” He was forgiving, comforting, able to teach and lead of all ranks to Christ, holding within his flock violent types like Moses the Black and gentle ones like Zachariah, the handsome boy, or Apollinaria Synkletica, the courier’s daughter.

St. Macarius’ face shone with grace so remarkably that many fathers witnessed that it shone in the dark, and thus called him “the shining lamp.” The name passed to his monastery, the seat of high wisdom and unceasing prayer. But, his greatest quality was the divine power of the Cherubim which settled upon him, and was the main spring of his prophecy, sagacity, and formidable power over evil spirits.

The desert of Shihet (Scetis) was familiar to St. Macarius, for he had frequented it as a boy,

driving camels for his father (the village priest) carrying nitron from the Valley to Ternout on the Nile, whence it was shipped to France and other countries. While praying at Shabshir in Menoulia province – where he had been ordained to the priesthood – St. Macarius experienced a joyful vision of the Cherubim, which encouraged him to go to Shihet (Scetis).



1

He was uncertain where to settle, and prayed to the Lord to show him the right place to live in. The Lord spoke through the angel Cherubim saying, “That you should decide for yourself, and I will give you no commandment to dwell here or there, lest you should be baffled by boredom or persecution, leave the place, and break the commandment. Therefore you should choose your own abode.” The

¹ Icon of the Cherubim written by Abu Irenaeus, who is the modern monastery’s guest master and pharmacist.

Cherubim encouraged him by adding, “I shall be with you all the time, according to the order of the Lord.”

St. Macarius chose the place now known as Deir-el-Baramus, where he hewed himself a cave in the desert and started his austere anchoritic life. See maps on pages 19 & 20. Many followers flocked to this spot, and became deeply attached to him on account of his fatherly love, his wisdom, and his grace. His fame soon spread far and wide, and he stayed here for about twenty years; the monastery developed at Shihet (Scetis), with many solitary monks living in caves around the main church, there being at this time no walled enclosure.

During this period, St. Macarius twice visited St. Antony the Great (in 343 and 352 CE) who inspired him with his virtues (his monastic and spiritual practices, i.e. his example) and his teachings. St. Antony witnessed that “a great power emerged from these hands” of St. Macarius, and dressed him in the holy belt (monastic clothing) and gave him the T-shaped staff known as the “cross of St. Antony – thereby prophetically assigning to St. Macarius the leadership of monasticism after his death. No church was built at Shihet (Scetis) until after St. Macarius’ visit to St. Antony in 352 CE, and before then St. Macarius would travel to the community led by St. Amon (Ammoun) in Nitria whenever he wanted to pray in the church and partake of the Holy Sacrament.

About 360 CE when he was sixty, St. Macarius left the north of the valley, which then was crowded with anchorites for whom he had a church, leaving his disciple Paphnutius to look after them. At the extreme south of the valley, he hollowed out a cave on the top of the rocky surface, with a long tunnel leading to another secret cave where he entered – to avoid meeting visitors – for he dearly loved solitude and quiet. Nevertheless, his followers



St. Macarius' cave (recently discovered)

increased and formed surrounding communities by building dwelling-houses of mud-bricks roofed with reeds, designed to meet the dual objective of voluntary poverty and absolute tranquility; they began as individuals, but soon their number ran into thousands. At first there were no walls or keeps (central towers for protection) and the monks would gather only on Saturdays and Sundays, to

listen to the teachings of the Church and partake of the Holy Sacrament. Eventually a church was built, together with a refectory, service rooms, a guest-house, storage cells, and a patient's rest house. Before St. Macarius' death in 390 CE, the number of monks here had risen to some 2,400.



2



3

² Remnants of fourth-century mud-brick dwelling houses near the modern monastery. Photo by David Keller, 2006.

When St. Macarius died in 390 CE, he was buried in the cave where he had lived for more than thirty years, and this cell which he dearly loved became the focal point of the community. His body became the monastery's priceless relic, passed from generation to generation up to the present, and honored in churches and sanctuaries to remind humankind of his holy life, his devotion to the Lord, and the immeasurable grace with which he was endowed.

Some Sayings of St. Macarius the Great

The need for constant prayer:

“A brother asked Abba Macarius, “Tell me the meaning of this saying, “The meditation of my heart is placed before you (Psalm 19:14 & Psalm 49:3).” The old man said to him, “There is no better meditation than having this saving and blessed name of our Lord Jesus Christ continually within you, as it is written, “Like a swallow I will call and like a dove I will meditate. (Isaiah 38:15)” Thus it is with the person who worships God by tending the saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The power of repentance:

“A brother asked Abba Macarius, “Tell me the meaning of repentance.” Abba Macarius said to him, ‘Repentance does not consist only of kneeling, like a divining rod that indicates water by going up

³ From previous page: Broken pottery from dishes, jugs, and bowls from the time of St. Macarius near the modern monastery. Photo by David Keller, 2006.

and down, but is like a wise goldsmith who wishes to craft a chain: with a link of gold and a link of silver, even with iron and lead, he lengthens the chain until he completes his work. This too is the form that repentance takes. All virtues depend on it.”

Depending solely on God:

“One time a brother asked Abba Macarius, ‘Tell me, my father, what is it to throw oneself down before God?’ Abba Macarius said to him, ‘If we put our faith in God, he will not allow the Enemy to do violence to us but will send his angel to us to save us from the Devil. Therefore, my children, throwing oneself down before God is when a person does not trust in his own strength, for it is God who saves us.’”

The simplicity of prayer

“Some old men asked Abba Macarius, saying, ‘How should one pray?’ The old man told them, ‘It is not necessary to say a lot of words; just stretch your hands up to God and say, “Lord, as you will and as you desire, lead me.” And if you are afflicted, say, “Lord help me!” He knows what is good. He will take pity on us in accordance with his mercies and his love of humanity.’”

A path to fullness of life:

“Abba Paphnutius, the disciple of Abba Macarius, said, ‘I begged the old man, “My father, tell me a word.”’ “He said to me, ‘Do not do anything evil and do not judge anyone, and you will be saved.’”

The destructiveness of anger:

“Abba Macarius said, ‘If you rebuke someone and do it with anger, you have allowed a passion to control you. You have not saved anyone and have destroyed yourself.’”

The necessity of silence:

“Abba Macarius the Great dismissed the congregation from Scetis and said to the brothers, ‘Flee, brothers.’ An old man said to him, “Where shall we flee beyond this desert?” He placed his finger on his mouth and said, “This is flight,” that is, silence.”

The power of forgiveness:

“A brother asked Abba Macarius, ‘My father, I have committed a transgression.’ Abba Macarius said to him, ‘It is written, my child, “I do not desire the death of a sinner so much as his repentance and his life. (Ezekiel 33:11 & 2 Peter 3:9) Repent, therefore, my child, you will see who is gentle, our Lord Jesus Christ, his face full of joy for you, like a nursing mother whose face is full of joy for her child. When he raises his hands and his face up to her, even if he is full of all kinds of uncleanness, she does not turn away from that bad smell and excrement, but takes pity on him and lifts him up and presses him to her breast, her face full of joy, and everything about him is sweet to her. If then, this created person has pity for her child, how much greater is the love of the creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, for us.”

Abba Macarius the Spiritbearer:

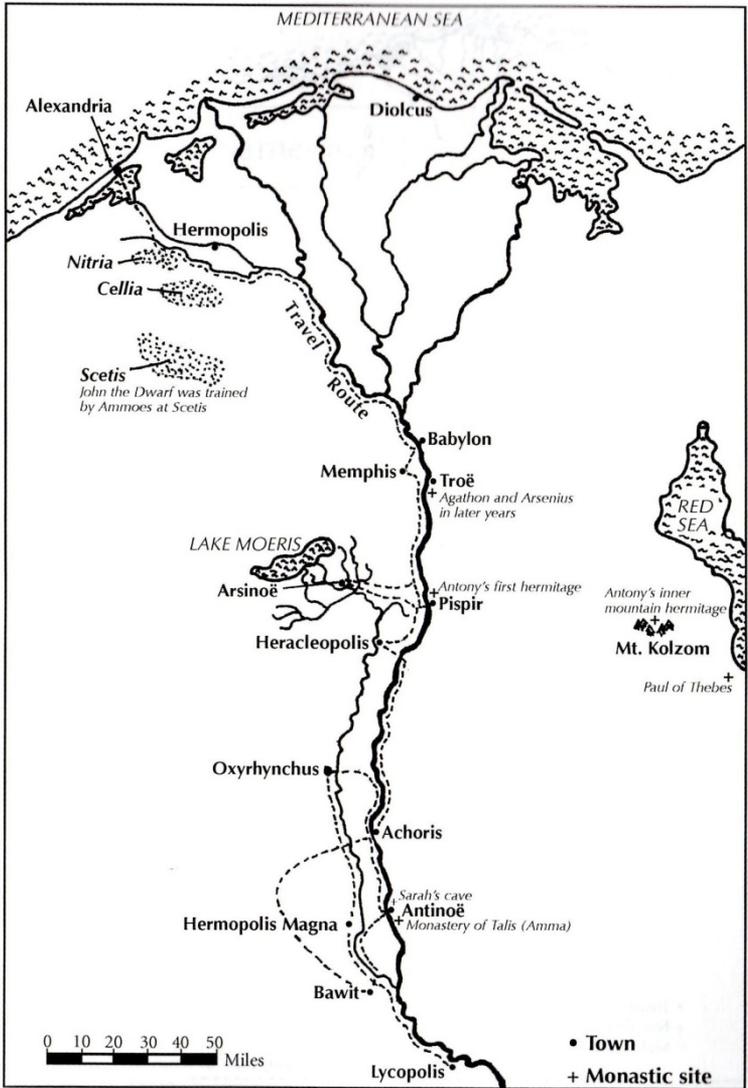
“Abba Poemen said, ‘ Every time I met Abba Macarius I did not say a single word without his already having knowledge of it because he was a Spiritbearer and possessed a prophetic spirit, like Elijah and all the other prophets, for he was clothed with humility like a cloak through the power of the Paraclete who dwelt in him. He alone possessed foresight and was filled with the grace of God; the glory of the Lord shone on his face, the consolation of the Consoler, the Holy Spirit, which was with him, came down upon everyone sitting around him. When we were filled with the joy and rejoicing and gladness of his life-giving words filled with grace, we would go to our dwellings, glorifying God and his servant Abba Macarius, to the glory of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and at all times always, forever and ever. Amen”⁴

A forgiving heart is greater than judgment:

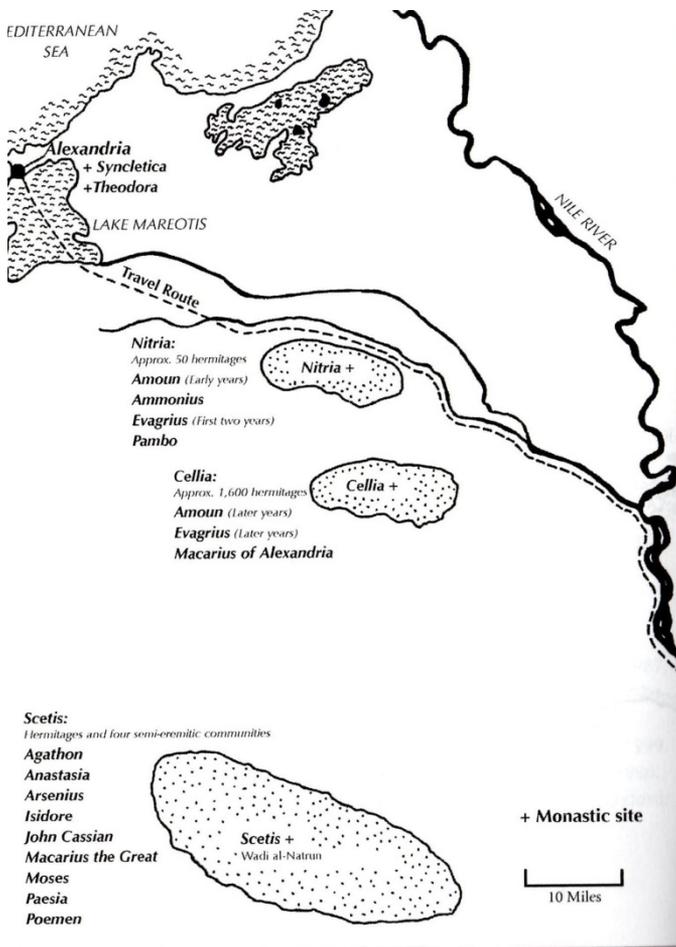
“They said of Abba Macarius the Great that he became, as it is written, a god upon earth, because, just as God protects the world, so Abba Macarius would cover the faults which he saw, as though he did not see them, and those which he heard, as though he did not hear them.”⁵

⁴ All quotations above are from: Tim Vivian. *St. Macarius the Spirit Bearer: Coptic Texts Relating to Sint Macarius the Great*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004

⁵ Benedicta Ward, SLG. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975. Page 134



3. Lower and Middle Egypt Monastic Sites



2. Lower Egypt Hermits and Semi-eremitic Sites

Maps by David Keller, excerpted from: David G. R. Keller. *Oasis of Wisdom: The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press 2005.



St. Macarius Contemplative Community

... is a small community dedicated to patterns of quiet listening to God that lead us to deepening love of God and our neighbor.

Our Shared Life

We are a community of persons who gather regularly for contemplative prayer, study, worship, and fellowship. Contemplative experience of God's love is the source of compassionate engagement in the life of the world and its people. Although we are rooted in the Episcopal tradition, we welcome persons from other traditions and every walk of life to share and contribute to our life.

All members of our community share responsibility for the leadership and ongoing life of the community. Some members are called to follow the St. Macarius Community Rule of Life, but it is not necessary to accept this Rule to be a regular part of the community. The Rule provides a manner of life and stability that helps form and nurture the soul of every person who shares our life.

We meet every Wednesday from 6:45-8:30 PM at Servanthood House, 156 Chestnut St., Asheville, NC
For information contact: Emily@oasisofwisdom.net