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*edited by Alice-Mary Talbot*

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### 3. LIFE OF ST. MARY OF EGYPT

*translated by Maria Kouli*

#### *Introduction*

Mary of Egypt, the prostitute from Alexandria who achieved sanctity through repentance and ascetic solitary life, was a holy woman who offered reassurance to every Christian: if such a licentious woman could find forgiveness, surely ordinary sinners could hope for salvation. Her *vita* provides some information on daily life in Alexandria and Jerusalem, on pilgrimage, on the cult of the True Cross and the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, and on Palestinian monasticism. Its primary importance lies, however, in its graphic portrayal of the theme of the “repentant harlot,” a type of female saint that found particular favor in the milieu of Syro-Palestine and Egypt in the fourth to seventh centuries.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest version of Mary’s story is a brief account in the *vita* of Kyriakos by the sixth-century hagiographer Cyril of Skythopolis.<sup>2</sup> Cyril records the tale told him by a certain monk named John who had encountered Mary living as a solitary in a cave in the Judean desert. She, in turn, explained that she had been a singer at the church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem who withdrew to the desert to avoid leading men into sexual temptation. She had subsisted for eighteen years on the jar of water and basket of legumes she had brought with her. When John returned to visit Mary a second time, he found her dead, and buried her in the cave that had served as her hermitage.

A very similar tale is found a half-century or so later in *The Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschos (b. ca. 540/550, d. 619 or 634). Moschos describes the unnamed woman as a nun from Jerusalem who fled to the desert to avoid

<sup>1</sup> See B. Ward, *Harlots of the Desert* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1987), for translations of the *vitae* of other harlots, Pelagia, Thais, and Mary, the niece of Abraham.

<sup>2</sup> E. Schwartz, *Kyryllos von Skythopolis* (Leipzig, 1939), 233–34. Eng. trans., R. M. Price, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1991), 256–58.

causing temptation to young men, surviving for seventeen years on a basket of soaked legumes.<sup>3</sup>

The much longer and more detailed version presented here has transformed Mary into a prostitute with an insatiable sexual appetite, thus rendering even more remarkable her subsequent repentance and conversion into an ascetic holy woman. This *vita* is generally attributed in the manuscripts to a contemporary of Moschos, the theologian and writer Sophronios (ca. 560–638), who served as patriarch of Jerusalem from 634 to 638. Sophronios' authorship of the work has been debated in the scholarly literature. Both Zonaras, a twelfth-century eulogist of Sophronios,<sup>4</sup> and H. Delehay<sup>5</sup> viewed the *vita* as a genuine work of Sophronios, while F. Delmas cautiously accepted his authorship;<sup>6</sup> other modern scholars, however, among them F. Halkin and H.-G. Beck, have doubted the attribution.<sup>7</sup> In any case, the work was probably composed in the seventh century, since in the eighth century it was cited by John of Damascus and translated into Latin.<sup>8</sup>

The *vita* is written in a simple but vivid style, making abundant use of dialogue to advance the story. A substantial section, perhaps one-third of the whole, is Mary's first-person account to Zosimas of her sinful youth, conversion, and flight to the desert. It was no doubt this combination of compelling subject matter, exotic desert locale (complete with wadis and lions), and accessible language that led to the great popularity of the *vita*.

Despite the attempts of certain scholars,<sup>9</sup> it is impossible to provide a chronology for the life of Mary, or even to establish her historicity. The *vita* is almost totally lacking in fixed chronological reference points, indicating only Mary's age at various stages in her life. One must treat with skepticism the

<sup>3</sup> PG 87:3049; Eng. trans. J. Wortley, *The Spiritual Meadow of John Moschos* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1992), 148–49.

<sup>4</sup> A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, 'Ανάλεκτα Ἱεροσολυμιτικῆς Σταχυολογίας, V (St. Petersburg, 1898), 149.

<sup>5</sup> H. Delehay, *L'Ancienne hagiographie byzantine: les sources, les premiers modèles, la formation des genres* [= SubsHag, 73] (Brussels, 1991), 53.

<sup>6</sup> F. Delmas, "Remarques sur la Vie de Sainte Marie l'Egyptienne," *EO* 4 (1900–1901), 37.

<sup>7</sup> *BHG* 1042; Beck, *Kirche*, 435.

<sup>8</sup> For John of Damascus, see PG 94:1416–17; for Latin translation, see below, p. 68.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., K. Doukakes, *Μεγας Συναξαριστης*, IV [April] (Athens, 1892), 5–6.

author's claim that the events he relates occurred in his own time,<sup>10</sup> since Cyril of Skythopolis describes a similar female hermit around the middle of the sixth century. But there were indeed female solitaries in both the Syro-Palestinian and Egyptian deserts, and one of them may well have inspired the edifying tale of Mary of Egypt.

According to the *vita* attributed to Sophronios, Mary left her parents' home at the age of twelve and went to the cultural and commercial center of Alexandria, where she lived as a prostitute for more than seventeen years. When she was twenty-nine, she decided on the spur of the moment to attach herself to a group of Libyan and Egyptian men who were voyaging to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (14 September), which attracted pilgrims from all over the empire. Mary joined the pilgrims, offering sexual favors to the sailors in return for her passage.

It was at Golgotha in Jerusalem that she underwent a mystical experience that led to her conversion, repentance, and eventual expiation of her sins. After buying three loaves of bread for sustenance, she crossed the river Jordan and settled in the desert. There she lived for forty-seven years without encountering any other human being, until she met Zosimas, a devout monk of a monastery in the vicinity of the river Jordan. A year later, on Maundy Thursday, Zosimas brought her the holy eucharist as he had promised. He then went to meet her a third time in the following year as they had agreed. By then, however, Mary was dead. Zosimas discovered her body in the desert, and buried her with the help of a lion that appeared out of nowhere. The vignette of the lion's assistance in the burial of the holy woman is only one of many passages suggesting that the composition was strongly influenced by Jerome's *vita* of Paul the Hermit.<sup>11</sup>

The story of Mary of Egypt was popular in medieval Europe and eastern Mediterranean lands. Confirmation is found in the abundance of manuscripts of the Greek text (the earliest of which dates to the ninth century),<sup>12</sup> and the influence of the *vita* on Eastern Orthodox literature (see, for example, the *Life*

<sup>10</sup> PG 87:3697B.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the remarks of Delmas, "Marie l'Egyptienne," 36, 38–39.

<sup>12</sup> In the National Library of Athens alone, according to Halkin's catalogue of the library, twenty-seven Greek manuscripts are preserved. There are thirty-seven manuscripts of the *vita* in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris and numerous others in the libraries of Athos, Mt. Sinai, the Vatican, Oxford, and Cambridge.

of Theoktiste of Lesbos, no. 4 in this volume) and hymnography. There is also a strong tradition of Latin translations in the West, particularly in Spain, France, and Italy (e.g., by Paul the Deacon in the eighth century). In addition, versions exist in Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopic, and Slavonic. The Orthodox church commemorates Mary of Egypt on 1 April and on the fifth Sunday of Lent,<sup>13</sup> while in the West her feast is usually celebrated on 2 April or sometimes on the third, ninth or tenth of that month.

In Byzantine art the saint is depicted as an androgynous figure, extremely thin with a dark complexion. Her emaciated body is partly covered by a piece of cloth, representing the cloak offered her by Zosimas during their first encounter. Usually her figure is accompanied by that of Zosimas, toward whom she stretches her arms to receive his blessing or the eucharist.<sup>14</sup>

The Greek *vita* of Mary of Egypt still awaits a proper critical edition.<sup>15</sup> The translation below was prepared from the inadequate edition of the *Patrologia Graeca*, which is based on two sketchily identified manuscripts, one from Munich (perhaps Monac. gr. 24 of the eleventh century) and another from Paris. The Migne text is occasionally supplemented by better readings from the Athens and Munich manuscripts, as indicated in the notes.

<sup>13</sup> For an English translation of the services for the fifth Sunday in Lent, see Mother Mary and K. Ware, *The Lenten Triodion* (London, 1977), 447–63. The story of Mary is also read on the Thursday of that week.

<sup>14</sup> The most detailed discussion of her iconography in Byzantine art is found in N. K. Moutsopoulos and G. Demetrokalles, Γερακι Ι: Οι Εκκλησιες του Οικτισμου (Thessalonike, 1981), 61–71 and pl. 102 (with full bibliography). See also *LCI* 7:507–11.

<sup>15</sup> I am currently preparing a new edition based on the twenty-seven Athenian manuscripts as a D. Phil. dissertation at the University of London under the direction of Dr. Julian Chrysostomides.

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[col. 3697]

THE LIFE OF MARY OF EGYPT, THE FORMER HARLOT,  
WHO IN BLESSED MANNER BECAME AN ASCETIC IN THE  
DESERT OF THE <RIVER> JORDAN

1. “*It is good to keep close the secret of a king, but it is honorable to reveal the works of God.*”<sup>16</sup> Such were the words of the angel to Tobit<sup>17</sup> after the incredible recovery of his sight from blindness, and after he experienced those dangers from which he was saved because of his piety. And just as failing to keep the king’s secret is dangerous and destructive to oneself, similarly keeping silent about the marvelous works of God endangers the soul. Hence, fearful of remaining silent about divine things, and discerning the danger encountered by the servant who after receiving the talent from his master buried it in the earth and hid it, thus making no use of it,<sup>18</sup> I shall in no way keep silent with regard to the holy tale which has reached me. No one should disbelieve me when I write<sup>19</sup> what I have heard, either thinking that I am talking altogether about marvels, or being amazed by the extraordinary occurrence. For <God> forbid that I should give false account of or tamper with a story that mentions God.

To have mean thoughts unworthy<sup>20</sup> of the majesty of the incarnate word of God, as well as to disbelieve what has thus been said, does not seem to me sensible. If there are some people who happen to read this account and, allegedly because of their amazement at the extraordinary <aspects> of the story, refuse to believe it readily, may the Lord be merciful to them, because they, too, thinking in terms of the weakness of human nature, find it hard to believe extraordinary tales told about human beings.

I now proceed to narrate an event that took place in our own times, and which was told by a holy man, trained since childhood to speak and act in accordance with the divine <truths>. Nor should this lead into disbelief read-

<sup>16</sup> Tob. 12:7.

<sup>17</sup> A Jewish captive in Nineveh known for his piety and good works; his sight was restored after eight years of blindness. His story is told in the apocryphal book of the Old Testament that bears his name.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Mt. 25:25.

<sup>19</sup> The participle is masculine, thus indicating male authorship.

<sup>20</sup> Reading ἀναξία for ἀναξία.

ers who assume that such a miracle could not possibly happen in our times. For the grace of the Spirit<sup>21</sup> *in all ages enters into holy souls and maketh them friends of God and prophets*, as Solomon taught with divine inspiration.<sup>22</sup> It is now time to begin the holy narration.

2. There was a man <who lived> in the monasteries of Palestine, who was adorned both by his way of life and by his speech and from infancy was brought up in accordance with monastic principles and [col. 3700] customs. Zosimas was the name of this monk. One must not assume that I am talking of the Zosimas who was once accused of being a heretic,<sup>23</sup> simply because of the name. These two men are totally distinct, and the difference between them is great, even though they both had the same name. This Zosimas then followed the right faith, and from the very beginning lived as a monk in one of the monasteries in Palestine,<sup>24</sup> pursuing every kind of ascetic practice and entirely mastering self-discipline. For he obeyed every rule handed down <to him> by those who had trained him in such a wrestling arena. He also devised on his own many ways by which he sought to subdue the flesh to the spirit. In this goal he did not fail. For the monk became so famous for his spiritual qualities that many <monks> from the neighboring monasteries, and sometimes even distant ones, often resorted to him to be molded and trained in self-discipline by his teaching. And even though the monk was famous for his ascetic practice, yet he never neglected the study of the Holy Scriptures, whether going to sleep or waking up or holding his handiwork, or partaking of food (if one can give the name of food to what he ate).<sup>25</sup> He had one ceaseless task, which never ended, namely to sing psalms continuously and always study the Holy Scriptures. Some also say that the monk was often deemed worthy to receive a divine vision through illumination from God. For as the

<sup>21</sup> Reading τοῦ πνεύματος for τοῦ Πατρὸς.

<sup>22</sup> Sap. 7:27.

<sup>23</sup> Possibly an allusion to the pagan historian Zosimos, count (*komes*) and advocate of the imperial treasury (*ODB* 3:2231), although the hagiographer could surely distinguish between Christian heretics and pagans. Also in Greek there is a difference in both orthography and accentuation between Ζωσιμᾶς and Ζωσιμος.

<sup>24</sup> Reading κατά Παλαιστίνην for παλαι, as in Athens 252, fol. 61v.

<sup>25</sup> Following the variant reading of the Munich manuscript cited in n. 15 of the PG text (cols. 3699–3700), which is also found in two Athens manuscripts (e.g., Athens 252, fol. 61v).

Lord said, "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*"<sup>26</sup> Thus those who have cleansed their flesh, and always keep the vigilant eye of their soul alert, see visions of divine illumination, thus gaining a foretaste of the good which awaits them in the future.

3. Zosimas told <us> then that he was given to this monastery when he was still in his mother's<sup>27</sup> arms, so to speak, and pursued the ascetic discipline in this place until he was fifty-three years old. After that he was disturbed, as he said, by certain thoughts, namely, that he had become perfect in all <practices> and did not need anyone else's teaching at all. For, as he said, he thought to himself, "Is there a monk on earth who can teach me anything new, or who has the power to help me in any form of ascetic discipline that I do not know or have never practiced? Is there any man among those leading a contemplative life in the desert who surpasses me in ascetic practice or spiritual contemplation?"

As the monk was mulling over these thoughts, someone approached him and said to him, "Zosimas, you have exerted yourself well and as much as is possible for a human being, and you have traversed successfully the ascetic path. But there is no man on earth who has achieved perfection. In fact, the future struggle will be greater than that of the past, even though you are not aware of this. In order for you to learn how many other ways lead to salvation, *Go forth out of thy land and out of thy kindred and out of the house of thy father,*<sup>28</sup> as did Abraham the venerable among patriarchs, and go to that monastery which is situated near the river Jordan."

4. Obeying this command, at once the monk left the monastery where he had followed the monastic life since childhood. When he reached the Jordan, the most holy of rivers, he was led by the one who had ordered him to go to that monastery, where God had commanded him to be. [col. 3701] After knocking on the gate with his fist, he first met the monk guarding the gate, who announced him to the father superior.<sup>29</sup> The father superior received him, observing his <monastic> habit and his pious character, while Zosimas made the obeisance customary for monks and received his blessing. Then the father

<sup>26</sup> Mt. 5:8. I have inserted this verse (which is not in the PG edition), following Athens 252, fol. 62r, because a quotation from the Gospels has evidently fallen out here.

<sup>27</sup> Reading μητρικῶν for πατρικῶν.

<sup>28</sup> Gen. 12:1.

<sup>29</sup> A certain John; cf. Chap. 32.

superior asked him, "From where do you come, brother? And for what reason have you come to us humble monks?" Zosimas answered, "It is not necessary for me to state from where I come, but I have come for my own benefit, Father, because I have heard glorious and commendable things about you, capable of bringing the soul near to Christ, our God." Then the father superior said to him, "It is God, my brother, the only one Who can heal human weakness, Who will teach both you and us the divine will, and guide <us> to do what is proper. For no man can benefit another, unless each one constantly turns his mind within, and exercising self-control performs his duty, having secured God as his helper. But because the love of God, as you say, moved you to visit us humble monks, stay with us, if indeed you came for this reason, and through the grace of the Holy Spirit the *Good Shepherd*<sup>30</sup> will feed all of us, He Who *gave His life as a ransom* on our behalf,<sup>31</sup> and *He Who calleth His own sheep by name.*"<sup>32</sup> When the father superior said this, Zosimas made obeisance once more, asked for his blessing and, after saying "Amen," remained in that monastery.

5. <There> he met monks who distinguished themselves both in the practice <of ascetic life> and <spiritual> contemplation, and who showed a fervent spirit in the service of the Lord. Indeed, they continually chanted psalms during all-night vigils, and always had handiwork in their hands, and psalms on their lips. For they did not indulge in idle talk and were not preoccupied with cares for material things. They did not even know the names of the revenues that were assessed and collected on a yearly basis, or the cares pertaining to the hardships of daily life. But they all eagerly pursued their one and only primary goal, namely, that each one of them mortify his body, since they had died once and for all as far as the world and worldly things were concerned, and they did not exist <among the living>. They received the God-inspired sayings [i.e., the Holy Scriptures] as their inexhaustible food, while they nourished their body with only the utmost necessities, that is, bread and water, depending on the extent of the fervor of each <monk> toward divine love. When Zosimas saw these struggles, as he said, he was greatly edified, striving for progress and constantly intensifying his course <of monastic life>, since he had found fellow travelers who were admirably re-creating the divine paradise.

<sup>30</sup> Jn. 10:11, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Jn. 10:3.

6. After many days had passed, the time came when Christians traditionally observe holy Lent, so that they may purify themselves in advance so as to venerate the divine Passion and Resurrection of Christ. <Normally> the gate of the monastery was never opened but remained always shut, providing in this way the opportunity for the monks to pursue their ascetic life undisturbed. In fact, it was not permitted for the gate to be opened for a monk, except in case of necessity. For the site <of the monastery> was in the desert and it was not only inaccessible, but also unknown to the majority of the neighboring monks. The following rule was observed in the monastery from the very beginning, on account of which rule, I think, God led Zosimas to that <particular> monastery. I shall now describe this rule and how it was observed. On the Sunday which customarily gives its name to the first week of Lent, the divine liturgy was performed as usual, with each <monk> participating in the undefiled and life-giving sacraments; and <then>, according to custom, they partook of a small portion of food. Afterwards they all gathered in the chapel and, after long prayers and many genuflections, [col. 3703] the monks kissed each other and each one embraced the father superior. Then they made obeisance and asked for his blessing, so that they would have it with them as an experienced fellow combatant in their forthcoming spiritual struggle.

7. After these proceedings, the gate of the monastery was opened and all the monks came out singing in unison, "*The Lord is my light and my Savior, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?*,"<sup>33</sup> and the rest of the psalm. Often they left one or two monks behind to guard the monastery, not to guard what was stored inside (for there was nothing that could be taken away easily by thieves), but so that the chapel might not be left without ministry. Each monk provided his own food, as much as he could or wished. One carried bread with him in proportion to the need of his body, another dried figs, another dates, another legumes soaked in water, while another carried nothing at all, apart from his own body and the ragged habit he wore, and whenever he was hungry he fed himself with plants that grew in the desert. Moreover, there was a rule that each monk observed as an inviolable law: not to be concerned with the way that the other monks practiced self-restraint or conducted themselves. As soon as they crossed the <river> Jordan, they separated and moved far away from each other and made

<sup>33</sup> Ps. 26 (27):1.

the desert their city.<sup>34</sup> No <monk> approached another; but if one of them saw another <monk> coming from afar toward him, he immediately turned away from his intended direction and went to another place. Indeed <each monk> lived for himself and for God, chanting psalms continually throughout the day and <occasionally> tasting some uncooked food.<sup>35</sup>

8. Having spent all of Lent in this way, they would return to the monastery on the Sunday before our Savior's life-giving Resurrection from the dead, which the Church traditionally celebrates with palms as a preparatory feast.<sup>36</sup> Each monk returned <to the monastery>, having as the fruits of his own purpose his own conscience, which knew how he had labored and with what toil he had sown the seeds <of his spiritual struggles>. No <monk> asked another anything whatsoever about how or in what way he had exerted himself in his struggle. This was the rule of the monastery and in this way it was well fulfilled. For when each of them is in the desert, he struggles by himself under the supervision of God, the Judge of the contest, so that he may free himself from the desire to please men or to practice self-restraint in order to show off <to others>. For those actions undertaken for the sake of men and performed in order to please them, not only do not benefit the one who does them, but are an additional cause of much harm to him.

9. So Zosimas, following the customary rule of the monastery, crossed the Jordan, taking with him a few provisions for his bodily needs and the ragged garment that he wore. Indeed, he followed the rule as he walked through the desert, making time for food whenever he felt hungry, and at night he rested by lying down on the ground for a while, to get some sleep wherever dusk overtook him. He began to walk again very early at dawn, never relaxing the pace of his movement. For, as he told <us>, he wished to go to the inner-

<sup>34</sup> Reading πολιν for πολλην. This phrase is derived from a passage in the *vita* of Antony the Great by Athanasios of Alexandria (328–373); cf. PG 26:865B (chap. 14).

<sup>35</sup> This custom of the monks of Palestine was introduced in the early 5th century by Euthymios the Great. On 14 January, after the celebration of Epiphany, the monks would withdraw to the innermost desert of Palestine, according to the example of Christ, to prepare themselves, through fasting and praying, for Easter. A few decades later, St. Sabas moved the date of retreat to after the celebration of the memory of saints Antony and Euthymios (17 and 20 January, respectively), and later it was placed before the first week of Lent. Cf. Y. Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), 214–16 and nn. 5–7.

<sup>36</sup> Palm Sunday, which is considered a preparatory feast for Passion Week.

most part of the desert, hoping to find a <holy> father dwelling there, who could help him <to find> what he longed for. He continued his journey rapidly as if he were hastening to reach some renowned and famous <monastic> abode. When he had journeyed for twenty days, at the sixth hour of the day<sup>37</sup> he stopped walking for a short while and, turning toward the east, offered his usual prayers. He used to interrupt his journey at regular intervals during the day so that he could rest for a short while from his exertions, chant psalms, standing and kneeling, and pray in this way. [col. 3705]

10. While he was chanting psalms and looking up to heaven with an alert eye, he saw the shadowy illusion of a human body appear to the right of where he was standing and performing the prayers of the sixth hour. At first he was alarmed, suspecting that he was seeing a demonic phantom, and he shivered with fear. But after he had made the sign of the cross and shaken off his fear (for his prayer had ended), he looked again and saw that in fact someone was walking in a southward direction. What he saw was a naked figure whose body was black, as if tanned by the scorching of the sun. It had on its head *hair white as wool*,<sup>38</sup> and even this was sparse as it did not reach below the neck of its body. When Zosimas saw this, he was inspired with pleasure and, filled with joy at that incredible sight, began to run in the direction that this creature he saw was heading. He rejoiced *with joy unspeakable*,<sup>39</sup> for all those days <of his desert sojourn> he had never seen the shape or shadow of any kind of human being or of any animal, be it winged or terrestrial. So he sought to find out who this creature was and of what sort, hoping that he would become the observer or witness of some great marvel.

11. But as soon as <that creature> saw Zosimas coming from afar, it began to flee and run toward the innermost part of the desert. And Zosimas, as if unmindful of his old age and with no thought for his fatigue from his journey, hastened and exerted himself to overtake <the creature> that was running away from him. Thus he was pursuing, while the creature was being pursued. But Zosimas' pace was quicker, and little by little he drew nearer to the fleeing <figure>. When he had approached close enough that his voice could be heard, Zosimas started calling out these words tearfully, "Why are you running away from this old and sinful man? O servant of the true God, wait

<sup>37</sup> Around midday.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Rev. 1:14.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. 1 Pet. 1:8.

up for me whoever you are, in the name of God, for Whose sake you dwell in this desert. Wait for me, weak and unworthy <as I am>, for the sake of the hope that you expect as a reward for these toils of yours. Stop and give to an old man your blessing and benediction, for God *never abhors anyone*.<sup>40</sup> Zosimas said this with tears in his eyes, while both were running toward a place where a dry streambed had left its traces.<sup>41</sup> I do not think that a torrent ever existed there (for how could a torrent appear in that land?), but the place happened to have such a setting.

12. When they reached the aforementioned place, the fleeing creature descended <into the streambed> and climbed up again on the other bank, while Zosimas, who was exhausted and unable to run <any further>, stood on the opposite bank of the apparent streambed, and shed tears upon tears and <uttered> lamentation upon lamentation, so that his wailing could be heard by anyone in his vicinity. Then that fleeing creature cried out, "Father Zosimas, forgive me in the name of the Lord; I cannot turn toward you and be seen by you face to face, for as you see I am a woman and I am naked, and I am ashamed to have my body uncovered. But if you are really willing to grant one favor to a sinful woman, throw me the garment that you are wearing, so that with it I may cover my feminine weakness and turn toward you and receive your blessing." Shivering fear and astonishment overwhelmed Zosimas, as he told <us>, when he heard her calling him "Zosimas" by name; for as the man was sharp in mind and most wise in divine matters, he decided that [col. 3708] she could not have called by name a man whom she had never seen or heard about, unless she was clearly blessed with the gift of foresight.

13. So he quickly did her bidding and, removing the old and torn cloak which he was wearing, threw it to her while he stood with eyes averted. She took it and covered certain parts of her body that ought to be covered more than others. Then she turned to Zosimas and said to him, "Why, Father Zosimas, did you decide to look at a sinful woman? What did you wish to learn from me or see, so that you did not hesitate to put yourself to such trouble?" <Zosimas> knelt on the ground and asked to receive her blessing, according to the custom, while she insisted on doing obeisance to him. Both remained on the ground, each one asking the blessing of the other. No other word could

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Sap. 11:24.

<sup>41</sup> He is no doubt describing a wadi, the dry channel of a watercourse, such as are common in the deserts of the Middle East.

be heard from either of them, except “Give me <your> blessing.” After a long time had passed, the woman said to Zosimas: “Father Zosimas, it is fitting for you to give a blessing and prayer, for you have been honored with the rank of priest and you have served at the holy altar for many years<sup>42</sup> and have often performed <the sacrament of> the holy gifts <of eucharist>.” Those words cast Zosimas into greater fear and anxiety, and the monk became terrified and bathed in sweat, sighed, and was unable to speak clearly. He said to her with gasping and rapid breath, “It is clear from your appearance, O spiritual mother, that you have long ago departed toward God, and have in great part mortified yourself to the world. Also apparent to me is the grace that has been granted to you <by God>, from the fact that you called me by name and addressed me as priest, although you have never seen me before. But since grace is manifested not by official rank, but is usually indicated by spiritual attitudes, you should bless me for the sake of the Lord and pray for one who needs your help.”

14. Finally, yielding to the monk’s persistence, the woman said, “Blessed be God, Who is concerned for the salvation of men and their souls.” Then Zosimas said “Amen,” and they both arose from their kneeling position. The woman said to the monk, “Why did you come to see a sinful woman? Why did you wish to see a woman who is deprived of every virtue? But since the grace of the Holy Spirit surely guided you <to me> that you might render a service appropriate to my <old> age, tell me, how do the Christian people fare these days? How fare the kings? How are the affairs of the Church managed?” Zosimas said to her, “Briefly, <revered> mother, thanks to your holy prayers, Christ has granted stable peace to all. Yet accept the unworthy request of an old man, and pray for the whole world and for me the sinner, so that my sojourn in this desert may not prove fruitless.” She answered him, “It is you, Father Zosimas, who hold the office of priest, as I have said, who ought to pray for me and for everyone. For you were appointed to do this. However, since we are commanded to be obedient, I shall willingly do your bidding.”

15. After she spoke those words, she turned toward the east and, raising her eyes on high and stretching out her hands, started to pray in a soft whisper. Her voice was not heard to utter articulate sounds, and for this reason Zosimas was unable to take note of the words of the prayer. He remained standing,

<sup>42</sup> Note that the hagiographer does not inform his readers that Zosimas is a priest until this episode, when it is necessary for him to be an ordained priest to offer the eucharist to Mary.

as he told <us>, trembling from fear, and bowed down toward the ground without uttering a single word. He swore <to us>, calling upon God as the witness of his words, that when he saw that she was prolonging her prayers, he raised his head up a bit from the ground and saw her elevated about one cubit above the earth, hanging in the air and praying in this way. When he saw this, he was even more terrified and in great torment, not daring to utter a word, except to repeat to himself for a long time, “Lord, have mercy.” While he was lying on the ground, [col. 3709] the monk was tormented by the thought that perhaps she was a demonic spirit who was <only> pretending to pray. But the woman turned toward him, and raised up the monk, saying, “Why, O father, do these thoughts about me disturb and torment you, that I am a demonic spirit and that I pretend to pray? Be assured, my good man, that I am a sinful woman, but I am protected by holy baptism. I am not a spirit, but altogether *earth and ashes*<sup>43</sup> and flesh,” meaning that she was in no way a spirit. While she was speaking, she made the sign of the cross on her forehead, eyes, lips, and breast, saying thus, “Let God lead us away from the devil and his snares, Father Zosimas, for his power against us is great.”

16. When the monk heard those words and saw those gestures [i.e., the sign of the cross], he threw himself on the ground and clasped her feet, saying tearfully, “I implore you in the name of Christ our God, Who was born of the Virgin, for Whose sake you wear this nakedness, for Whose sake you have worn out this flesh of yours in this way, do not conceal anything from your servant, who you are and where you came from and when and in what way you came to dwell in this desert. Do not conceal from me any detail of your life, but tell me everything so that you may make manifest the wonders of God. For, as it has been written, *Wisdom that is hid and treasure that is hoarded up, what profit is in them both?*<sup>44</sup> Tell me everything in the name of the Lord, for you shall speak not to boast or show off, but to give assurance to me, a sinful and unworthy man. For I believe that God, in Whom you live and serve, led me into this desert for this reason, so that the Lord might make your life manifest. For it is not in our power to oppose God’s judgments. Indeed, if it were not pleasing to Christ, our God, that you and your struggles become known, He would not have permitted anyone to lay eyes on you, nor would He have given the strength to accomplish such a long journey to me who never intended to or was able to leave my cell.”

<sup>43</sup> Gen. 18:27; cf. Sir. 17:32.

<sup>44</sup> Sir. 20:30.

17. When Father Zosimas said these words and many more, the woman raised him up and said to him, “I am ashamed, my father, to describe for you my shameful actions. Forgive me in the name of the Lord. But since you have seen my bare body, I shall lay bare to you also my deeds, so that you may know with what great shame and humiliation my soul is filled. For <the reason> I did not wish to describe my life <was> not because I did not want to boast, as you suspected. For how could I possibly boast, since I had become the instrument of the devil? And I know that when I start telling you the story of my life, you will avoid me, as one avoids a snake, for you could not bear to hear the outrageous things that I have done. However, I shall speak without concealing anything. But before I do so, I ask you to swear that you will not stop praying for me that I may find mercy in the hour of judgment.” So, while the monk shed copious tears, the woman started the narration of her life with the following words:

18. “My homeland, <dear> brother, was Egypt. When my parents were still alive and I was twelve years old, I rejected my love for them and went to Alexandria. I am ashamed to think about how I first destroyed my own virginity, and how I then threw myself entirely and insatiably into the lust of sexual intercourse. But now <I feel> it is more decent for me to speak openly what I shall briefly describe, so that you may become aware of my lust and love of pleasure. For more than seventeen years—please forgive me—I was a public temptation to licentiousness, not for payment, I swear, since I did not accept anything although men often wished to pay me. I simply contrived this so that I could seduce many more men, thus turning my lust into a free gift. You should not think that I did not accept payment because I was rich, for I lived by begging [col. 3712] and often by spinning coarse flax fibers. The truth is that I had an insatiable passion and uncontrollable lust to wallow in filth. This was and was considered to be my life, to insult nature <with my lust>.

19. “So, while I was living in this way, one summer day I saw a huge crowd of Libyan and Egyptian men running toward the sea. I asked someone who happened to be next to me, ‘Where are these men running?’ and he answered, ‘Everybody is going to Jerusalem for <the feast of> the Exaltation of the Holy Cross,<sup>45</sup> which as usual takes place in a few days.’ Then I said to him, ‘Would they take me with them, if I wanted to go along?’ He replied, ‘If you

<sup>45</sup> Also called the Elevation of the Cross, a feast celebrated on 14 September in commemoration of the empress Helena’s discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem; see *ODB* 1:551.

have the money for your passage and expenses, no one will prevent you.’ Then I said to him, ‘In fact, my brother, I have no money for passage or expenses. But I shall go and get on one of the boats they have hired, and they shall feed me whether they wish it or not, for they will accept my body in lieu of the passage money.’ I wanted to go away <with them> for this reason—forgive me, my father—so that I could have many lovers, ready <to satisfy> my lust. I warned you, Father Zosimas, do not force me to describe to you my disgrace. For Lord knows how I shudder to defile both you and the air with my words.”

20. Then Zosimas, while drenching the ground with his tears, answered her, “Speak, my mother, in the name of the Lord, speak and do not interrupt the flow of such a beneficial narration.” Then, resuming her tale, she added the following: “So, when that young man heard those shameful words, he went away laughing. As for me, I threw away the distaff I was holding—for it happened that I had it in my hands at the time—and ran toward the sea, where I saw the other people running. And I saw some young men standing at the seashore, about ten or more, vigorous in their bodies as well as in their movements, who seemed to me fit for what I sought (they were apparently awaiting<sup>46</sup> their fellow passengers, while others had already embarked on the ships). I rushed shamelessly into their midst, as was my habit. ‘Take me where you are going,’ I said, ‘Surely you will not find me useless.’ Then, uttering other even more obscene words, I made everyone laugh, while they, seeing my penchant for shamelessness, took me and brought me to the boat they had prepared for the voyage. In the meantime, the men they were waiting for arrived, and we sailed from there.

21. “How can I possibly describe to you what followed, my dear man? What tongue can declare, or what ears can bear to hear what happened on the boat and during the journey <that followed> and the acts into which I forced those wretched men against their will? There is no kind of licentiousness, speakable or unspeakable, that I did not teach those miserable men. I am truly surprised, my father, how the sea endured my profligacy, and how the earth did not open its mouth to draw me alive down to Hades, as one who had ensnared so many souls! But, as it seemed, God sought my repentance, for *He desires not the death* of the sinner,<sup>47</sup> but remains patient waiting for his conversion. In this way, therefore, and in such a haste we reached Jerusalem.

<sup>46</sup> Reading ἀνεμένον for ἀνεβαίνον, as in Athens 252, fol. 64, and Athens 273, fol. 182r; cf. ἐμένον at end of Chap. 20.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Ezek. 33:11.

And during the days that I stayed in the city before the feast, I engaged in the same practices or even worse. For I was not contented with the young men who were at my service at sea and on the road, but I also corrupted many other men, both citizens and foreigners, whom I picked up for this purpose.

22. “When the holy feast of the Exaltation of the Cross came, I was wandering around hunting after the souls of young men, as I did before. At early dawn I saw [col. 3713] everybody hurrying to the church<sup>48</sup> and off I went, running along with those who were running. So, I came with them to the courtyard of the church. When the time came for the divine Exaltation <of the Cross>, I tried to join the crowd and force my way to the entrance, pushing <my way> forward but being pushed back. Eventually, with great trouble and grief—wretched woman <that I am>—I approached the door through which one entered the church where the life-giving cross was displayed. But as soon as I stepped on the threshold of the door, all the other people entered unhindered, while some kind of divine power held me back, not allowing me to pass through the entrance <of the church>. Once more I was pushed back and forth, finding myself again standing alone in the courtyard. I assumed that this was happening because of my womanly weakness. So I mingled with other people and pushed with all possible strength, shoving with my elbows and forcing myself inside. But I tried in vain, because again, from the moment my wretched foot stepped on the threshold, though the church received the others without any obstacle, it refused entrance to me alone, miserable woman <that I am>; and just as if a large company of soldiers were arrayed for this purpose, with orders to prevent my entering, so did some kind of overwhelming power hold me back and once more I was standing in the courtyard.

23. “After this happened three or four times, I became fatigued and no longer had the strength to push and be pushed back, for my body was exhausted as a result of my violent effort. So, I gave up and went back and stood at the corner of the courtyard of the church. Only then did I realize the cause which prevented me from laying eyes on the life-giving cross, for a salvific word touched the eyes of my heart, showing me that it was the filth of my actions that was barring the entrance to me. Then I began to cry, lamenting and beating my breast, raising sighs from the depths of my heart. As I was crying, I saw the icon of the all-holy Mother of God standing above the place

<sup>48</sup> This must be the church of Constantine on Golgotha where the wood of the cross was housed; cf. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 175.

where I stood.<sup>49</sup> I looked straight at Her and said, ‘Virgin Lady, Thou Who didst give flesh to God the Word by birth, I know, I know well that it is neither decent, nor reasonable for me who is so filthy and utterly prodigal, to look upon Thy icon, Thou the ever-virginal, the chaste, Thou Who art pure and undefiled in body and soul. For it is right that I, the prodigal woman, should be hated and abhorred by Thou Who art pure. But since, as I heard, God to Whom Thou gavest birth became man for this reason, in order to summon sinners to repentance, help me, a lone woman who has no one to help her. Command that I, too, may be allowed to enter the church. Do not deprive me of <the opportunity of> seeing the cross on which God, to Whom Thou gavest birth, was crucified in the flesh and offered His own blood as a ransom for my sake. Command, my Lady, that the door may be opened also to me, that I may venerate the divine cross; and I name Thee before God, Who was born from Thee, as a worthy guarantor, that I shall no longer insult this flesh by any shameful intercourse whatsoever, but from the moment I look upon the wood of Thy Son’s cross, I shall immediately renounce the world and all worldly things, and I shall go wherever Thou shalt instruct and guide me, as the guarantor of my salvation.’

24. “As soon as I spoke these words I received the fire of faith just like some kind of assurance, and being encouraged by the compassion of the Mother of God, I moved from that place where I stood praying, and returned and joined those people who were entering <the church>. No longer did anyone push me this way and that, nor did anyone prevent me from approaching the door through which they entered the church. Indeed, I was filled with a shivering fear and astonishment, shaking and trembling all over. Then I reached the door that until then had been barred to me, as if all the force that previously held me back was now preparing the way for my entrance. In this way I entered <the church> without any effort. Thus I found myself inside the Holy <of Holies>, and I was deemed worthy to see the life-giving cross, and saw the mysteries of God and knew that He is <always> ready to accept our repentance. [col. 3716] I threw myself to the ground—wretched woman <that

<sup>49</sup> The icon of the Virgin was displayed “on a raised place” in the courtyard before the church of Constantine; it is mentioned, for example, by the Piacenza Pilgrim (ca. 570) and by Epiphanius the Monk (8th century). Epiphanius states explicitly that he saw “on the left side of Saint Constantine . . . the icon of the very holy Theotokos, who forbade Saint Mary to enter the church on the day of the Exaltation.” Cf. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 83, 117, 177.

I was>—and after I kissed that holy ground, I rushed out eagerly to Her [the Virgin], Who had stood as guarantor for me. So I came to that place where the bond of guarantee was signed and, kneeling in front of the ever-virgin Mother of God, I said the following words:

25. ‘O my Lady, Thou Who lovest goodness hast shown me Thy love for mankind, for Thou didst not abhor the prayers of an unworthy woman. I saw the glory which we prodigal people rightly cannot see. Glory be to God, Who accepts through Thee the repentance of sinners. (For what else could I, a sinful woman, think or utter?) It is now time, my Lady, to fulfill what was agreed in Thy act of guarantee. Guide me now wherever Thou dost command. Be the teacher of my salvation and guide me toward the path which leads to repentance.’ While I was saying these words, I heard someone crying aloud from afar, ‘If you cross the <river> Jordan, you shall find a fine place of repose.’ When I heard this voice, believing that it was addressing me, I tearfully shouted and called out to the Mother of God, ‘Lady, Lady, do not abandon me.’ Having cried out these words, I came out of the courtyard of the church and hurried away.

26. “As I was leaving, someone who had seen me gave me three copper coins,<sup>50</sup> saying, ‘Accept these, my revered mother.’ I took <the coins> that were given to me and I spent them to buy three loaves of bread that I took with me as a provision of blessing. I asked the man who sold me the bread, ‘Which is the way and direction, my good man, which leads to the <river> Jordan?’ When I learned which gate of the city leads out to that place, I passed through it at a run and began my journey filled with tears. Then I asked <the way> again and again, and went on walking for the rest of the day—I think it had been the third hour of the day when I saw the <holy> cross—and around sunset I arrived at the church of John the Baptist, which was very near the <river> Jordan.<sup>51</sup> After I prayed in the church, I immediately walked down to

<sup>50</sup> Literally, “folleis.” In the 6th and 7th centuries, the term *folleis* referred to a large copper coin marked with a capital M (for 40 *nummi*); in the 540s it was worth 1/180th of a gold *solidus*; cf. P. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*, II (Washington, D. C., 1968), 8–9, 22–32.

<sup>51</sup> The church, built by the emperor Anastasios I (491–518), was located approximately 8 km north of the Dead Sea (and about 30 km from Jerusalem), at the traditional site of Christ’s baptism by John the Baptist; cf. Hirschfeld, *Judean Desert Monasteries*, 16–17, and Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 162–63.

the Jordan and washed my face and hands with its holy water. Then I partook of the undefiled and life-giving sacraments in the church of the Precursor [i.e., John the Baptist], ate half a loaf of bread, drank water from the Jordan, and spent the night lying on the ground. The next day I found a small boat there and crossed <the river> to the opposite bank. Once more, I asked my guide [i.e., the Virgin] to lead me wherever She pleased. So I came to this desert, and since then to this day *I have fled afar off and lodged in this <wilderness>, waiting for my God Who delivers those who return to Him from distress of spirit and tempest.*"<sup>52</sup>

27. Then Zosimas said to her, "How many years have passed, my lady, since you have *lodged in this wilderness?*"<sup>53</sup> The woman answered, "Forty-seven years<sup>54</sup> have passed, I think, since I came out from the Holy City [Jerusalem]." Zosimas said, "And what did you find or have for food, my lady?" The woman said, "I crossed the Jordan carrying two and a half loaves of bread, which little by little dried up and became hard as rock. In this way, I survived for years eating those <loaves> in small portions." Then Zosimas asked, "And did you live in this way for so many years without distress and without being disturbed by the sudden change in your way of life?" The woman answered, "Now you ask me something, Father Zosimas, which I shudder even to speak about. For, if I recall now all those dangers I suffered patiently and those thoughts which terribly disturbed me, I am afraid they might strike me again." Then Zosimas said, "Do not hold back, my lady, anything that you might tell me. Indeed I have asked you before to tell me everything without any omission."

28. She said to him, "Believe me, revered father, for seventeen years I wandered in this desert [col. 3717] struggling with those irrational desires, as if with wild beasts. Whenever I tried to take some food, I yearned for meat and fish that abound in Egypt. I longed to drink wine, which was <constantly> in my thoughts, for I used to drink a lot of wine when I was living in the world. But since I did not have even water to drink here, I was burning with terrible <thirst> and could not endure its deprivation. Also an irrational desire for lascivious songs entered my mind, always disturbing me profoundly and trying

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Ps. 54 (55):7–8.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Ps. 54 (55):7.

<sup>54</sup> Thus Mary must have been seventy-six years old, as she was twenty-nine when she left Alexandria for Jerusalem.

to seduce me into singing the demonic songs that I have learned. But immediately I would shed tears and beat my breast with my hand, and remind myself of the agreement I made when I came out to the desert. In my mind I would stand in front of the icon of the Mother of God, my guarantor, and I would weep before Her, asking Her to chase away those thoughts that assailed my miserable soul in this way. When I had shed enough tears and had beaten my breast as hard as I could, I used to see light shining everywhere around me. From that moment on, after that storm, I would feel constant tranquility deep inside me.

29. "How can I describe to you, revered father, those thoughts that were urging me again to fornication? Indeed, deep in my miserable heart a burning desire was kindled and set my whole <being> aflame and excited my desire for intercourse. Whenever such a thought came to my mind, I would at once throw myself to the ground and let my tears fall on the earth, imagining that She Who had acted as guarantor for me was present as my protector, and that since I was disobeying Her She was <rightly> inflicting punishment on me because of my trespasses. So I did not raise my eyes, but kept them cast down on the ground, even if it happened that I had to spend the whole day and night there, until that sweet light shone around me chasing away those thoughts that disturbed me. Therefore, I constantly raised the eyes of my mind toward my guarantor, seeking Her help for one who was in danger <of drowning> in the sea of the desert. And indeed She always helped and assisted me in my repentance. In this way seventeen years passed by,<sup>55</sup> during which I encountered countless dangers. But from that day until now my helper [i.e., the Virgin] has stood by me and guided me through all <hardships>."

30. Then Zosimas said to her, "Did you not need any food or clothes?" She answered him, "After I consumed those loaves of bread, as I said before, during those seventeen years, I <then> fed myself with wild plants and whatever else can be found in the desert. As for the cloak I wore when I crossed the Jordan, it was torn to pieces and wore out long ago. I have endured cold and again the flames of summer, scorching in the burning heat and freezing and shivering in the frost, so that many times I collapsed to the ground and remained there scarcely breathing or moving. The fact is that I have struggled

<sup>55</sup> It is probably no coincidence that Mary continued to be assailed by temptations during her first seventeen years in the desert, for this is exactly the length of time she lived in sin in Alexandria.

against many and various calamities and unbearable temptations. But from that day until now the power of God has preserved my sinful soul and humble body in many ways. For in only thinking of those evils from which He rescued me, I receive as inexhaustible food the hope of my salvation, for I feed and cover myself with the word of God Who governs the universe. For *man shall not live by bread alone*,<sup>56</sup> and *because they had no shelter*, those who have removed the covering of sin *have embraced the rock*.<sup>57</sup>

31. When Zosimas heard her citing verses of Scripture, from Moses, Job, and the Book of Psalms, he asked her, “Have you read the Psalms or other books, my lady?” When she heard this, she smiled gently and said to the monk, “Believe me, my good man, I have not seen another man since I crossed the Jordan, except your own face today, nor have I seen any beast [col. 3720] or any other animal since I saw this desert. So I have never learned to read, nor have I heard anyone chant psalms or read <sacred> texts. Yet *the word of God which is living and powerful*<sup>58</sup> teaches man knowledge. This is the end of my story. But as I did when I first started my story, I shall now ask you once again to swear in the name of the incarnate Word of God that you will pray to the Lord for me, the prodigal woman.” When she completed her narration with these words, the monk rushed to make obeisance, crying aloud again in tears, “Blessed be God *Who doth great and wondrous things, glorious things also and marvelous, of which there is no number*.<sup>59</sup> Blessed be God Who showed me all those <wonders>, which He grants to those who fear Him. For truly, *Lord, Thou hast not failed them that diligently seek Thee*.”<sup>60</sup>

32. But she grasped hold of the monk and did not allow him to complete his obeisance, saying to him, “I want you to swear to me, my good man, in the name of the Savior Christ our God that you will not tell anyone all these things you have heard, until God releases me from this world. In the meantime go in peace, and you shall see me again and I shall see you again next year, protected by the grace of God. But in the name of the Lord, do what I now bid you. During next year’s holy Lent, do not cross the Jordan as you are accustomed to do at the monastery.” Zosimas was astonished when he heard

<sup>56</sup> Deut. 8:3; Mt. 4:4.

<sup>57</sup> Job 24:8.

<sup>58</sup> Heb. 4:12.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Job 5:9, 9:10.

<sup>60</sup> Ps. 9:10.

her reciting the rule of the monastery, and he said nothing else but, “Glory to God Who grants gifts to those who love Him.” Then she said, “Revered father, stay in the monastery, as I said, for if you wish to go out, nothing good will happen to you. On the holy night of the Last Supper take for my sake the life-giving body and blood of Christ and put it into a sacred vessel, worthy of such great mysteries, bring it with you, and wait for me at all events on the bank of the Jordan that is near the inhabited area, so that I may come and receive the life-giving gifts. For since the time I received holy communion in the church of the Precursor, before I crossed the Jordan, I have been unable to receive this blessing up to this day. But now I long for this with unrestrained fervor. For this reason I ask and beg you not to disregard my request, but bring me without fail those life-giving and sacred gifts at the time when the Lord invited His disciples to partake of the divine Supper. Also say these words to Father John, the superior of the monastery in which you live: ‘Take care for yourself and your flock, for certain things are happening there that need correction.’ I do not want you to say this to him now, but when the Lord allows you.” After she spoke these words and said to the monk, “Pray for me,” she ran off once more into the depths of the desert. Then Zosimas, kneeling and venerating the traces that her feet had left on the ground, praised and thanked God, and <began> his return journey rejoicing in both body and soul, glorifying and praising Christ our God. And after traversing that part of the desert, he arrived at the monastery on the customary day of return for the monks who lived there.

33. For the whole year he kept silent, not daring to say to anybody anything of what he had seen. But deep inside him he entreated God to show him again the person he longed for. He was worried and anxious as he considered the length of one year, wishing if possible that one year would become one day. When the Sunday arrived after which holy Lent begins, immediately after the usual prayer, while all the other <monks> went out of the monastery chanting psalms, he was stricken with fever and was forced to remain inside. Zosimas then remembered the blessed woman who had said, “If you wish to go out of the monastery, nothing good will happen to you.”<sup>61</sup> A few days passed and then he recovered from the illness and stayed in the monastery. [col. 3721]

34. When the monks returned and the evening of the Last Supper came,

<sup>61</sup> Reading εὐ σοι γενήσεται for οὐ σοι γενήσεται, as in Athens 252, fol. 66r.

he did what he had been commanded. After placing the undefiled body and sacred blood of Christ our God in a small chalice, he put in a small basket dried figs, dates, and a small portion of lentils soaked in water, and departed late in the evening. He sat on the bank of the <river> Jordan awaiting the arrival of the blessed woman. Although the holy woman was late, Zosimas did not doze, but steadfastly watched the desert waiting to see the one whom he longed to see. While he sat <there>, the monk said to himself, "Is it possible that my own unworthiness prevented her from coming? Is it possible that she came and not finding me here left again?" While he was saying these words he wept, and while he shed tears he sighed. He raised his eyes to heaven and prayed to God, saying, "Do not deprive me, Lord, of laying eyes again on what Thou didst once allow me to see. Do not let me depart empty-handed, carrying my own sins for judgment." Having made this tearful prayer, another thought occurred to him, and he said to himself, "What will happen even if she does come? Since there is no boat around here, how will she cross the Jordan and come to me, the unworthy one? Alas for my unworthiness and pitiable condition! Who deprived me rightly of such good?"

35. While the monk was thinking this, behold! the blessed woman coming from the further side reached the river and stood on the opposite bank. Zosimas stood up full of happiness and joy and praising God. But again he struggled with the thought that she might not be able to cross the Jordan. Then he saw her making the sign of the holy cross over the Jordan—for, as he told us, there was a full moon that night—and at the same time she set foot on the water and walked on it, approaching him. When he wished to make obeisance, she prevented him, crying aloud as she walked on the water, "What are you doing, revered father, you who are a priest and holding the divine gifts?" As he complied with her words, she stepped out of the water and said to the monk, "Bless me, father, bless me." He answered her trembling with fear, for he was astonished at that extraordinary sight, "Indeed, God spoke the truth when He promised that those who purify themselves *liken themselves to God as much as is possible*.<sup>62</sup> Glory be to Thee, Christ our God, Who didst not disregard my prayers and didst show mercy to Thy servant. Glory be to Thee, Christ our God, Who hast shown me through this servant of Thine how far I am from reaching the measure of perfection." As he was saying these words, the woman asked him to recite the holy creed of our faith and to begin the

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b.

prayer, *Our Father, Who art in heaven . . .*<sup>63</sup> When this was done and the prayer came to an end, according to custom she gave the monk the kiss of love on his mouth.<sup>64</sup> And having received the life-giving sacraments, she raised her hands to heaven, sighed with tears in her eyes and cried aloud, "*Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.*"<sup>65</sup>

36. Then she said to the monk, "Forgive me, father, but I beg you, fulfill one more wish of mine. Under the protection of God's grace return now to the monastery, and come again next year to that dry streambed where I met you before. Come without fail, in the name of the Lord, and you shall see me again as the Lord wishes." He answered her, "I only wish it would be possible for me to follow you from now on, and look always upon your holy face. Fulfill an old man's wish and take some of the food I have brought here." As soon as he said this, he showed her the basket he had with him. She touched the lentils with her fingertips, took three of the lentil beans and brought them to her mouth, saying that the grace of the Spirit was ample to preserve undefiled the essence of her soul. Having spoken those words, she said again to the monk, "Pray [col. 3724] in the name of the Lord. Pray for me and remember my wretchedness." He touched the blessed woman's feet and asked her with tears in his eyes to pray for the Church, for the empire, and for him. He then released her and took his departure sighing and lamenting, for he did not dare to hold for long one who could not be held. She once more made the sign of the cross over the Jordan, stepped upon the water and walked across exactly as before. The monk returned <to his monastery> with joy and great fear, blaming himself for not seeking to learn the name of the blessed woman. But he hoped to be able to do so the following year.

37. When the year passed, he went again to the desert, doing everything according to the custom <of the monastery>, and ran to meet that extraordinary marvel. After he walked a long distance in the desert, he reached a point where there were signs indicating that he had found the place he was looking for. He looked carefully right and left, turning his gaze in every direction like a most experienced hunter pursuing a most sweet prey. But as he did not see anything moving anywhere, he began to shed copious tears, and raising his

<sup>63</sup> The Lord's Prayer; cf. Mt. 6:9, Lk. 11:2.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. note 47 in *Life of Matrona*, above.

<sup>65</sup> Lk. 2:29.

eyes to heaven, he prayed, "Show me, my Lord, Thy inviolate treasure that Thou hast hidden in this desert. Show me, I pray, the one who is an angel incarnate, of whom this world is unworthy." While he was saying this prayer, he reached the place that had the form of a dry streambed, and saw the blessed woman lying dead on its eastern slope, her hands folded in the proper manner and her body lying in such a way that she was facing toward the east. He ran up to her and bathed the feet of the blessed woman with his tears, for he did not dare to touch any other part <of her body>.

38. After he wept for some time and recited psalms appropriate to the occasion, he offered a funerary prayer and said to himself, "Is it proper to bury the remains of the blessed woman? Would the blessed woman approve this?" While he was saying these words, he saw some writing impressed on the ground beside her head, where the following words had been written<sup>66</sup>: "Father Zosimas, bury the body of the humble Mary in this place. Return *dust to dust*,<sup>67</sup> and pray always to the Lord for me. I died in the month of Pharmouthi, according to the Egyptians (April, according to the Romans), on that very night of the Passion of our Savior, after I received the holy Last Supper." When the monk read these words he was overjoyed, for he had learned the name of the blessed woman. He realized that as soon as she had received the divine sacrament at the <river> Jordan, she came immediately to this place, where she died.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the distance Zosimas had covered in twenty days of laborious walking Mary had traversed in one hour, and had then departed straightway to God.

39. Praising God while he drenched his body with tears, he thought to himself, "It is now time, humble Zosimas, for you to fulfill her bidding. But how will you dig a <burial> pit, you poor man, since you have no <tool> at hand?" As soon as he had said this, he saw nearby a small piece of wood lying on the ground. He picked it up and tried to start digging. But since the earth was dry, it did not yield at all to the old man who was trying hard to dig, drenched with sweat. So he heaved a great sigh from the depths of his spirit, and lifting up his head he saw a huge lion standing beside the dead body of

<sup>66</sup> Since Mary was illiterate (cf. Chap. 31), her writing of a message in the sand must be viewed as miraculous.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Eccl. 3:20.

<sup>68</sup> Thus her body had miraculously been preserved from corruption for an entire year, as another sign of sanctity.

the blessed woman, licking the soles of her feet. When he saw the beast, he was terrified and trembled with fear, especially when he remembered Mary's words saying that she had never seen a wild beast. He made the sign of the cross, trusting that the power of the <holy woman>, who was lying dead, would keep him safe. The lion in turn began to fawn upon the monk, [col. 3725] thus not only greeting him with the movements of its body, but also showing its intentions. Then Zosimas said to the lion, "Since, wild beast, that great woman entrusted me with the burial of her dead body, and as I am an old man and do not have the strength to dig a pit (for I do not have the proper digging tool I need <for such work>), and since I cannot walk back such a long distance to get a suitable tool, do what is necessary with your claws, so that we may return to the earth the body of the blessed woman." As soon as he said these words, the lion dug with its front paws a pit deep enough for the burial of her body.

40. Once more the monk bathed the blessed woman's feet with his tears and entreated her now even more to pray for all men. Then, with the lion in attendance, he covered with earth her body, which was naked as before and clad in nothing more than that torn cloak that Zosimas had thrown to her with averted eyes and with which Mary had covered certain parts of her body. Then they both departed, the lion withdrawing like a sheep into the innermost part of the desert, while Zosimas returned <to the monastery> blessing and praising Christ our God. When he came again to the cenobitic monastery, he told the monks everything, without holding back anything of what he had heard and seen. Indeed, he narrated in detail everything from the beginning, so that all who heard the marvels of God were astonished and celebrated the blessed woman's memorial service with awe and affection. Moreover, John the father superior found certain people <in the monastery> who were in need of correction, so that even in this respect the blessed woman's words did not prove futile or fruitless. As for Zosimas, he died in that monastery when he was almost a hundred years old.

41. The monks continued to pass on these events by word of mouth from one generation to the other, presenting them as a model <of ascetic life>, to benefit those who wish to listen. However, to this day they have never heard that anyone else has set this story down in writing. <Thus> I have put down in this written narrative what I had heard by word of mouth. Perhaps others, too, have written the Life of the blessed <woman>, and probably in a more imposing style than my own, even though nothing of this sort has ever come

to my attention. Nevertheless, I wrote this story to the best of my ability, desiring to prefer nothing but the truth. May God, Who rewards with great <gifts> those who take refuge in Him, grant <me> as a reward the benefit of those who read this story, and <may He grant it as well> to the one who commanded that this work—I mean this narrative—be handed down in writing. And may <God> deem <us> worthy of the state and position of this blessed Mary, the subject of the story, along with all those individuals who ever pleased Him through their contemplation and acts. Let us, too, therefore, give glory to God, the universal King of ages, so that He may deem us worthy of mercy on the day of judgment, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, to Whom belongs all glory, honor, and reverence forever, together with His eternal Father and the all-holy, benevolent, and life-giving Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.