

## [SAINT JOHN COLOBOS](#)

### **Coptic Tradition**

John Colobos, the Little or the Dwarf (fourth and fifth centuries), is one of the most striking figures among the desert fathers. He is known principally from the [APOPTHEGMATA PATRUM](#) and from a Life in the form of a [panegyric](#) composed by Zacharias, the bishop of Sakha, at the end of the seventh century in Coptic, in Lower Egypt. This Life adds certain extra information to the data in the apothegms, the value of which it is difficult to assess with any precision. Some of the apothegms also should be handled with caution.

In the fourth century there were many monks in Egypt bearing the name John, and it is not easy to be sure of the establishment of the role each played. The episode regarding the piece of wood that was watered for three years as an act of obedience should, according to [Saint John CASSIAN](#), be attributed to JOHN OF LYCOPOLIS (PG 65, cols. 154-57). On the other hand, we should certainly keep the identification of John Colobos with the John described as “the Little,” who was a disciple of Ammoes (PG 65, cols. 125-28) mentioned by EVAGRIUS in his treatise *On Prayer* (PG 79, col. 1192).

According to Zacharias (*Annales du Musée Guimet*, p. 324), this John, also called the “Theban,” was a native of the [village](#) of Tesi in the region of Oxyrhynchus (known today as al-Bahnasa). From his youth he sought to serve God continually, without any preoccupation, like the angels. He must have come to SCETIS in the middle of the fourth century. He found the abbot Ammoes a rough and austere master who did not stint when it came to humiliating and rebuffing him. When Ammoes became incapacitated, John cared devotedly for him for twelve years, without ever receiving the least thanks. It was only just before he died that Ammoes praised his disciple, saying to the old men who were present, “He is an angel, not a man” (PG 65, col. 240B).

When in his turn John had become one of the “elders,” he led a solitary life “in a pit,” that is, in one of those narrow, deep natural caves in the environs of the Wadi al-Natrun, doubtless at the site where later the monastery bearing his name was to be erected. His holiness, his humility, and his discernment ensured that his influence would be an extraordinary one: “Who is John that by his humility he had all Scetis hanging on his little finger?” And yet we do not know the names of any of his disciples. We know only, through Theodore the Studite, that ARSENIUS, on arrival at Scetis, was subjected by John to a humiliating test (PG 99, col. 852).

Moreover, from the way in which POEMEN speaks of him, it may be conjectured that he himself had profited from John’s teaching (PG 65, col. 340, no. 74). In the apothegms there is no indication that John was a HEGUMENOS and a priest as Zacharias claims. However, he was a spiritual father renowned and appreciated, always available to welcome the brethren who came to consult him. He was also able to be severe on occasion, to ensure that the claims of God and the requirements of silence were respected during meals and work alike. At such times he could even let his spirited temperament run away with him to the point of finding it difficult to master his temper. Sometimes his thoughts were so fixed on God that he could not turn away from meditating to deal with the things of this world.

His concern to “win” souls was such that he had no hesitation in going to a prostitute to convert her, and succeeded so well that he saw his convert ascend to [heaven](#) by the very next night. Recorded in an apothegm, the story may have shocked some monks of former days, but it filled Saint Theresa of Lisieux with enthusiasm (*cf.* Regnault, 1983).

John Colobos had to leave Scetis for good when raiders made an incursion into the region, doubtless in 407 (Evelyn-White, 1932, pt. 2, p. 158). He withdrew to the Clysma area where he seems to have died on 17 October 409 and his remains were brought back to Scetis on 22 August 804 (Evelyn-White, Vol. 2, p. 294). The monastery of Saint John, the ruins of

which are now almost entirely covered with sand, is located [roughly](#) 2 miles (3 km) to the southeast of that of DAYR ANBA BISHOI.

In Upper Egypt, to the south of Minya, in the [village](#) which still bears his name—DAYR ABU HINNIS—near the ancient Antinoopolis, there existed another monastery dedicated to John, going back possibly to the sixth century. This could be where John Colobos led a hermit's life before going to Scetis. This monastery at least proves that the cult of John spread rapidly as far as the Thebaid. The saint is mentioned in the Coptic Synaxarion under 17 October and sometimes also under 22 or 23 August.

We may regard the apothegms on John Colobos as a particularly noteworthy synthesis of desert spirituality. There is nothing hard and fast or systematic, nor is there any abstract development, but rather a series of live pictures interspersed with maxims of great lucidity, the outcome of rich experience. According to Poemen, John cultivated every virtue and encouraged his disciples to do likewise, giving them a whole list which perhaps did not pass his lips as it stands all at once, but must nevertheless be a good reflection of his teaching, since we find most of its elements scattered among the other apothegms.

All the essentials are there, from [ascetic](#) toil practiced with “endurance” to the heights of humility and the fear of God. Its basis was “the love of God” and “winning one's neighbour” “with every fervour of soul and body.” To this end a constant struggle is necessary against the fleshly passions, by means of dieting restrictions; and against bad thoughts, by means of watchfulness, *hesychia* (quietness), and the opening up of the soul (Poemen 101).

Every monastic observance has its place in this list: prayer and manual work, nocturnal watches, hunger and thirst, cold and nakedness, troublesome impositions, and so forth, but the accent is laid on the spiritual side with the words “soul,” “heart,” and “spirit” cropping up several times. Keeping what matters most is “spiritual *hesychia*.”

Spiritual combat is necessary because it is the condition for progress, but still more necessary is the action of the Spirit to produce a variety of foliage and fruits in each person.

In John Colobos, mystical allusions are always unobtrusive. Whereas Zacharias' account abounds in visions, the apothegms record only three and do so very soberly. John certainly was a great contemplative, but doubtless it was not he who spoke of "contemplation." In his youth he had dreamed of angelic carefreeness and later he had already enjoyed here on earth the company of the angels. He had asked God to free him from his passions and had obtained his request, but he had learned that perfection consists rather in endurance and humility.

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## **Arabic Tradition**

The Arabic version of the Life of John Colobus by Zacharias of Sakha (Göttingen codex Arabic 114, sixteenth century, fols. 110r-150r) has not been published. There is a much older translation into Syriac, made in 936 and preserved in a series of Syriac manuscripts in the British Museum. The edition and translation were provided by F. Nau in *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* from 1912 to 1914. Some interesting facts emerge from this long text. First, the name of John Colobos is not mentioned, except in the title. In the passage about the visit to Theophilus, the text conforms with the [panegyric](#) which is attributed to him in Sahidic. There are, therefore, grounds for asking if the Bohairic Coptic text has not

inserted an independent story into the panegyric of Zacharias of Sakha of which only the Sahidic fragments remain.

Doubtless also through Arabic channels comes the Ethiopic reference for 29 Nahasé (5 September) which tells of the difficulties in moving the remains of John Colobos from Clysma, then in Chalcedonian hands, to the convent of Saint Macarius (DAYR ANBA MAQAR) of Scetis in the year A.M. 520/A.D. 805.

This transference was without doubt mentioned in his Life, hitherto better known. It is rather strange that in the Ethiopic SYNAXARION (PO 9, pp. 418-22), the commemoration of this event took place on the same day as the [Nativity](#) of our Lord as well as the martyrdom of Saint Athanasius of Clysma whose Chalcedonian legend places this celebration on exactly the same date. His tomb was identified among those of the desert fathers including John Colobos. However, the Arabic Synaxarion merely states under 20 Babah that the remains of [Saint John](#) Colobos were transferred to Minya.

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