

The Theological Voice of a Poor Man in a Desert: Right for Africa?

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Abstract

Abba Matta revitalized the monastery of St. Macarius in Egypt, leaving it thriving at his death in 2006. His books demonstrate a life marked by deep devotion to prayer and holy living, from youth. Conflict in the church contributed to his passing through harsh conditions. His writings, spiritually guided and deeply rooted in the Bible, offer profound insights into Christian living, in theological depth and commitment. His implicit critique of the prosperity gospel combines with deep insights relevant to African contexts. Translating some of his key texts into prominent African languages like Hausa and Swahili could provide healthy ways forward on the continent.

Key Words: Africa, contextualization, missions, Church, Monasticism, Egypt, theology

Abba Matta, or Father Matta El-Meskeen, is often translated into English as “Matthew the Poor.” *Meskeen* is an Arabic equivalent to the English “poverty.” In this article I will use the Arabic designation *Abba Matta* (“Father Matthew”).

My Experience of Abba Matta

I first came across Abba Matta’s writings in March 2015 during a four-night visit to the Monastery of St. Macarius (Dayr Abu Maqar) in northern Egypt. Having already been living and working closely with Coptic Christians in Kenya for three years, my visit gave me opportunity to put “flesh and bones” to my understanding of ways the Copts had described their monasteries to me. This ancient monastery had become extremely dilapidated, with a population of just six old monks, when Abba Matta was asked to revive it in 1969. He oversaw the massive task of rebuilding the monastery into “a work of wonder” (Helmy, 2012, 17-18). Despite his passing on in 2006, when I visited the monastery in 2015 it was clearly still a thriving place, populated by over 100 monks. My visit was during Lent, which probably gave me less opportunity than I would have had otherwise to interact with those monks. Their having Arabic as their first language and Coptic as their liturgical language, neither of which I speak, made communication difficult anyway. Upon arrival I soon changed my routine to accommodate 4:00 a.m. beginnings in prayer, and I could not help but be enormously impressed by the evident profound dedication of the monks to their chosen life of relative solitude, celibacy, and intercession.

It was six years later, when in 2021 I was gifted a copy of Abba Matta’s book *Sojourners: Monastic Letters and Spiritual Teachings from the Desert* (Matthew the Poor, 2019), that my more personal and appreciative encounter with Abba Matta’s writings began. It took me about two years to read *Sojourners*. Small doses on a periodic basis sufficed to give me a new depth in understanding Jesus, while in-between continuing to focus on other things. In other words: Abba Matta’s recommendations to his monks made me feel like a spiritual weakling, so as to inspire me to persist in being faithful to my calling to serve through any “desert” experiences I might have been having. I did not need to read the whole book through all at once. I just read two or three pages periodically.

Abba Matta has frequently enabled me to release some pressures of cross-cultural missionary life through a flow of tears prompted by the impact of his words on my heart. In this sense, my interest in him has arisen primarily when I have been in difficulty! He has also helped me to better understand myself, at least as my Egyptian colleagues comprehend me. There are three alternatives in life, Abba Matta tells us in his book *How Do We Build Up Ourselves in the Most Holy Faith*. First is marriage, which should be a dedication to the glorification of God in one's relationship with one's spouse, especially in rearing godly children. Second is consecration. This alternative is an anointing to a life of celibate service, oriented to the poor and less able, and in plain clothes. (Unlike monks, consecrated servants do not have a uniform.) Third is the monk, who is not expected to serve amongst a community outside of the monastery itself but devotes himself to prayer, often in a very solitary way. This third option shames me, through the realization that being alone should not be feared. Rather, it can be seen as a very positive experience contributing to devotion and prayer. The second option, a plain-clothes celibate servant who is active in promoting Jesus in human community, describes my own role. (In hindsight, I did not design my role with any Coptic teaching in mind!)

Abba Matta's Life and Message

Reading an autobiographical history of the life of Abba Matta further increased my respect for him. From his own descriptions in his book *Word for Our Time*, from boyhood he became highly devoted to prayer and holy living. Before long, once grown, his gifts were recognized by church leadership. He was given to occupy some key posts in the church while still young. Then a disaster struck, described as being motivated by envy on the side of those who resented his success. Abba Matta's ordination, that as a typical act of his deep humility he had resisted in the first place, was revoked. Abba Matta was banished. He and a group of his close followers retreated to what by all accounts sounds to be a harsh location in the Egyptian desert. There, in a way reminiscent of the ancient fathers described in the book *Paradise of the Holy Fathers* (Budge, 1888/1978), he barely survived hunger and other desert challenges over a number of years. Eventually, the church leadership relented. The Coptic Patriarch himself made a prostration in front of Abba Matta, asking for forgiveness (Helmy, 2012, 17). Afterward Abba Matta was asked to revive the monastery of Macarius, which he very effectively did, of which monastery he was to be the spiritual head until his death.

While much of my published writing has been academic (Harries, n.d.), and while I endeavor to follow some academic procedures here, this article is very personal. I doubt whether Abba Matta himself would have favored his lifework receiving academic treatment, as "he speaks to the heart rather than the head," as the publisher's introduction to his book *Word for Our Time* comments (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2024). My reading has chanced upon a foreword to some of Abba Matta's writing by the well-known late Roman Catholic theologian, Henri Nouwen. Nouwen rightly describes Abba Matta as "a very perceptive observer of human behavior." Nouwen adds, "My joy comes from the deep conviction that we of the Western world must listen to this penetrating message coming to us from the Egyptian desert" (Nouwen, 2004, 9). Clearly Nouwen was vastly impressed with the Christian lessons from the desert that he was happy to review. To Nouwen, Abba Matta came from faraway Egypt. My close affiliation with the Coptic Church over 14 years to date helps me to appreciate Abba Matta more as a close neighbor.

What did Abba Matta write about? Clearly he addressed a wide variety of topics. The kinds of themes to which he guided his pen are illustrated by the variety of titles listed at the end of this

article (all translated from Arabic into English). “How to live as a Christian” comes to mind as a way of describing the orientation of his writing. To Abba Matta, life as a Christian requires both theological depth and profound commitment. According to his own frequently offered testimony, Abba Matta acquired his teaching not from classes, study, lectures, or even listening to sermons in the churches but directly from the Bible. In a way his testimony is reminiscent of the Apostle Paul (Galatians 1:17-18). Through prayerful fasting and all-night vigilance, the Holy Spirit guided Abba Matta. His penetrating mind was able, with the guidance of God’s Spirit, to acquire insights that often throw fresh and inspiring angles onto the meanings of well-known texts.

Relevance to Africans

Since most of my writing emerges from deep exposure to day-to-day life with African people over many years, one question that arises concerns whether my reviewing of Abba Matta’s work here is intended for Africans, for me personally, or for those I could call “my people” of heritage and upbringing, namely Brits and Germans. (My mother is German, I am a German speaker, and I have many relatives in Germany where I frequently visit—but I was born and raised in the UK.) I cannot entirely splice the above three identities apart. I can confidently say that, at least in part, this article represents a very personal appreciation of Abba Matta’s writings. Also, this article advocates for promotion of his work in sub-Saharan “Black” Africa, which is where I have lived for 36 years. (Egypt is of course also in Africa but in north Africa.)

Are Abba Matta’s writings particularly relevant to African contexts? I have two answers to that question. The first is, “Yes.” The second is, “I do not know.” That is to say, while I see much relevance, my 36 years of living in African community still leave my understanding of Africa’s people very limited. I live in Western Kenya where most of my ministry is with people of the Luo tribe, whom I engage using their own language. I also work more widely, especially in Tanzania. I have recently drawn on Abba Matta’s work in various ways in my own teaching and preaching among Africans. Most of the rest of this article constitutes a discussion of the relevance of Abba Matta’s writings for native African people, as I understand them, mediated through my own spiritual pilgrimage.

One major way in which Abba Matta trumps alternative devotional and theological texts is in his powerful and continual, albeit implicit, critique of the prosperity gospel. I am not aware that Abba Matta overtly mentions the prosperity gospel anywhere in his writings, although he may do so at some point. It is his own powerful articulation of how he meets Jesus in decades spent in the desert that provides this critique.

One factor that detracts from Abba Matta’s relevance to much of Africa is the extraordinary and peculiar history of his home context of Egypt, which Black Africans on the whole do not share. This historical difference can be discovered, for example, by browsing *Paradise of the Holy Fathers* (Budge, 1888/1978), a book apparently considered second only to the Bible in Egyptian monasteries. Set in the years following Constantine’s declaration that Christianity be practiced in the Roman Empire, *Paradise* is filled with numerous extraordinary accounts of efforts by the forefathers of today’s Egyptian monks to live secluded lives of extreme asceticism in desert places, in fulfilment of what they considered to be their Christian calling. Black Africans, including Christian Black Africans, outside of Ethiopia, do not share that type of historical experience (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).

The second trait that gives me pause in promoting Abba Matta in Africa today is his orientation to theological content rather than to heart-rending expression of the gospel. Not that Abba Matta's words do not speak to the emotions. They very much do. In my understanding, it is the content of what Abba Matta shares that speaks to the human heart, which is somewhat unlike my experience of much of Africa, where the emotional communication of dramatic oral expression is also key. Of course, Africa is diverse. Yet the wide spread of Pentecostalism and widely known incorporation of what in English could be called "emotionalism" into sensual Christian worship and communication of the gospel in Africa does not seem to be one of Abba Matta's emphases.

Given the above provisos, my own evaluation would suggest that many in Africa could learn very helpfully from the Coptic Orthodox Church in general and from the writings of Abba Matta in particular. To facilitate such learning, the translation of some of Abba Matta's key texts into an African idiom could be extremely helpful.

My own knowledge of Arabic being extremely minimal, I have only been privileged to read some of Abba Matta's writings that have been translated from Arabic to English. Although widely used in official circles, European languages are not the right medium for the future of the continent of Africa, as I have argued elsewhere (Harries, 2013). This linguistic conundrum leaves much of the continent in a very difficult epistemological jam, one that is not easily resolved. Perhaps an effective way to promote Abba Matta's work in Africa would be to encourage Arabic-speaking Africans to read his works in the original language, then disseminate some of his wisdom orally (through YouTube videos, for example) using one or more of today's prominent African tongues. Some of those tongues, including Hausa (World Translation Center, 2023) and Swahili, already have deep roots in Arabic, which could potentially be taken advantage of.

Abba Matta's desert context is, with little doubt, one of his works' greatest strengths. My own experience of alternative Western articulations of theology and the Christian life is that, when it comes to an African readership, they fall short in some important ways. Western theologians generally articulate their theologies, for example through illustrations they use, with reference to what to them are "normal" ways of life with respect to possessions and economic levels. (I recall a visitor to my mission context in Kenya saying they were having a significant conversation with a child as they drove him to school—but all our children walk to school. Also a lady once told us of God's saving her from a crisis: arriving by bus late at night and having nowhere to stay, amazingly she got hotel rooms for herself and her children. She related this episode to us about a month after I had arrived in a Tanzanian town by bus at 2.00 am, and found that women and children simply slept in their seats on the bus till morning.) Abba Matta is in this respect vastly different. He comes across as oblivious to or openly resisting the draw of wealth, power, prestige, and fame. This detachment from such allurements is a vast benefit when it comes to engaging Africa. Westerners' contributions to the thriving of the church in Africa are usually implicitly prosperity gospel, whether they realize this or not (Reese, 2010). Their own depiction of their personal lives just oozes with what, in traditional African terms, comes across as extravagant prosperity.

To illustrate what I mean, Abba Matta eats in no restaurants, owns no computer, has no wife or children, flies to no international conferences, keeps up with no Jones's, is not a successful senior minister of a mega church, promotes no analytical methods, presupposes no knowledge of German theologians and philosophers, is answerable to no women, drinks no coffee, sidles up to no politicians, follows no American spelling and has no American accent, shows off no smart suits

or even elegant robes. Abba Matta's type of "normal" lifestyle means that the poorest African receiving his message is more likely to be proud of the ways that his own so-called poverty enables his proximity to Christ, rather than to be ashamed of his lack of material things.

Concluding Summary

So what is Abba Matta's theology? Clearly it is Orthodox, and more precisely it follows the Egyptian tradition in Oriental Orthodoxy. As such Abba Matta's theology presupposes the seven sacraments of Orthodoxy as well as the "literal" transubstantiation of the elements of the communion, as Westerners would see it. Prayers may call upon departed Saints as well as Mary the mother of Jesus. Abba Matta does not require all to share in poverty, but he recognizes that some can benefit from ascetic discipline. Abba Matta's theology promotes an ideal of a man (or woman) devoting their whole life in prayer and service of others, rooted in the love of Christ, understood through the Christian Scriptures, preferably in the context of an isolation that monastic community can provide. Abba Matta does not even claim to preach, or even teach. He rather just speaks from his heart. In his book *How Do We Build Up Ourselves in the Most Holy Faith?*, Abba Matta tells us, "If you wish to be a perfect and learned monk, then go into your cell, shut the door behind you and keep your back to the door, from the inside of course, and the cell will teach you everything."

Finally, it must be said that perhaps the greatest value of Abba Matta's teachings is for men who find themselves "alone." That aloneness could be within a marriage, in which communication with a man's spouse may for a myriad of reasons be limited. More likely such an alone man would be a divorcee or a widower. He may be a consecrated servant or a dedicated monk. In each case, some "desert spirituality" could help each of these kinds of men to engage in more fervent prayer and in general to be a more valuable asset to whatever community they find themselves in.

Books by Abba Matta

An extensive list (with live links) of Abba Matta's writings translated into English is available on the Orthokairos website (Orthokairos, 2015). Below is an alphabetical list of the titles of books, or of chapters in books, by Abba Matta that I have read, at least in part, in preparation for the writing of this article:

An optimistic vision of divine justice

Asceticism and purity

Be transformed. A message to those who look forward to a better life

Coping with spiritual paralysis

Emmanuel, which means "God with us"

Guidelines for prayer. Book 1

How do we build up ourselves in the most holy faith?

How to read the Bible

Mystery of God's love in relation to renewed mankind

On love

On the mount of temptation

Our need for Christ

Repentance

The aim of the Christian life

The Bible as a personal message to you

The birth of Christ and the birth of man

The communion of love

The desire of all nations

The immortal church

The kingdom of God: clear vision versus illusion

The righteousness of humility

The true art of successful living

The wedding in Cana of Galilee

Words for our time: the spiritual words of Matthew the poor

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