

## INTRODUCTION TO POEM 17

### **Hymn to St. Theodosius**

Poem 17 is carefully wrought, original, and exceptionally musical. The poet has employed a rich variety of *assonance*, *consonance*, and other poetic devices to create a perfect blend of style and meaning in every verse. It is, without question, a poetic masterpiece. Poem 17 is also deep, with layers of meaning. It is impossible that an audience would have grasped all the allusions and innuendoes in this poem at a first reading. Yet there is no evidence that this hymn was ever published in Antiquity. None of Dioscorus's poems were collected in an ancient anthology, and none of his verses were ever quoted. It is possible that Dioscorus recited the hymn at a church after Theodosius, Patriarch of Alexandria, died on June 6, 567, or on a subsequent feastday. Its later history is unknown: except that near the end of Dioscorus's life or after his death, the poem was carefully stored in a large jar with his other poetic manuscripts and documents, then left undisturbed for over thirteen hundred years.

Poem 17 is an allegory. On the surface level of meaning, Dioscorus appears to be praising an icon of a new emperor. This was a standard rhetorical format, which the poet would have learned at school. The poet did not employ, however, the Hellenistic Greek that was the cultural language of the Byzantine Empire in the 6th century. He employed an ancient dialect, called Homeric Greek because of its use in the epics by Homer. The use of this epic language and grammar was part of a poetic revolution that had been fostered by several successful poets from his area in Upper Egypt. This experiment included usurping the pagan vocabulary and style

of Homer for Christian topics, and it inspired such works as a verse rendition of the Gospel of John (Nonnus), a reworking of the Psalms (Apollinaris), and epic Christian *centos* (Eudocia).

Allegory in literary criticism and biblical exegesis was popular in Late Antiquity. Neoplatonic philosophers such as Proclus, who had studied in Alexandria, argued that Homer wrote the Iliad and the Odyssey as concealed allegories about the metaphysical world. The Fathers of the Church, especially those from Alexandria, argued that Moses prophetically wrote the first five books of the Bible as a concealed allegory about Christ and the Church.

Creative allegory in Christian poetry from this period has been difficult to substantiate. Unlike the obvious allegory in Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, written in Latin, the allegories in Greek poetry (if they truly existed) were largely concealed. The poets did not explicitly say that they were writing allegory. Anomalies on the surface level of meaning could be helpful pointers to an allegorical level of meaning. Yet the deeper level had to be deciphered by the audience from images and verbal hints inside the poem, and from the religious and cultural milieu. This secrecy was related to Neoplatonic and Christian mystical literature, which expressed a fear that advanced spiritual knowledge could be misunderstood and be harmful to neophytes. The secrecy can in fact be traced back to the parables by Christ, whose spiritual message was purposefully recondite: ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· ὑμῖν δέδοται γινῶναι τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ, τοῖς δὲ λοιποῖς ἐν παραβολαῖς ἵνα βλέποντες μὴ βλέπωσιν καὶ ἀκούοντες μὴ συνιῶσιν. “And he said: ‘Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest in parables, that seeing they might not see and hearing they might not understand’.” (Lc. 8:10; cf. Mt. 13:34) Concealed allegories from the early Byzantine

Era might include the epic *Dionysiaca* by Nonnus and the epyllion *Hero and Leander* by Musaeus, both written in an Homeric style.

Dioscorus did not make a consistent effort to hide his allegorical meaning. Sometimes the deeper level supplants the superficial, so that the surface level becomes, at times, incomprehensible if not viewed through the lens of Byzantine spirituality. The allegorical meaning is always coherent and profound. Dioscorus was well-educated, cosmopolitan, and talented. He was Christian and surrounded by churches and important monasteries. Upper Egypt (the higher southern part of Egypt) was a center of religious and poetic innovations during Late Antiquity and the early Byzantine Era. The allegorical sense of Poem 17 is condensed, philosophical, and deeply religious. It must be extracted from subtle signs—but the clues are always there. The closest modern equivalent is the poetry by T. S. Eliot. If one were to compare Eliot's poems to Shakespeare, they would appear nonsensical. Eliot was part of a literary revolution of the early 20th century, and he used Shakespeare for his own ends. If one compares Dioscorus to Homer, the Byzantine poet's music would be, at best, a cicada song. As one needs to understand the history of Western culture to make sense of a verse from Eliot, one needs to explore the Byzantine culture to understand Dioscorus. But the effort is always worthwhile.

The closest Byzantine equivalent to the allegorical style used by Dioscorus, or at least the most accessible, can be found the pictorial art of the period. Justinian the Great (regnal years 527–565) was a generous patron of the arts, and allegorical mosaics and icons created during his reign and shortly thereafter have survived at Ravenna in Italy (the most powerful city of the Western half of the Empire) and in the fortified monastery at Mount Sinai, which was established by Justinian himself. These mosaics and icons, as well as Coptic tapestries and frescoes depict Christ, the Virgin, angels, and the faithful in heaven as an emperor, empress, consuls, gen-

erals, and other nobility in a Byzantine imperial court. Some examples will be examined in this critical edition to show trends in sixth-century allegorical art and how they illuminate Dioscorus's poetry.

Poem 17 was discovered on papyrus in Egypt in 1905, along with other creative literary works, legal documents, and personal papers belonging to Dioscorus and his family. These are the oldest poems written by the hand of a known poet, and the manuscripts contain his changes and corrections. Since Jean Maspero's *editio princeps* of this poem in 1913, it has appeared in several modern editions, notably by Ernst Heitsch (1964), Leslie MacCoull (1984, 1989), Berry Baldwin (1985), and Jean-Luc Fournet (1999). The *Hymn to St. Theodosius* was the first poem in Heitsch's edition, which served as the standard edition for thirty-five years. It was the first poem because of its imperial significance. A more comprehensive numbering system was introduced by Fournet, which system is adopted here. These earlier editions focused on the surface level of meaning and how it contained information about the administration of Egypt and Hellenistic rhetoric. The present critical edition focuses on the allegorical, and Poem 17 is discussed first because it serves as a solid introduction to the style of Dioscorus.

The allegory exists primarily in symbolic imagery. The poet does not use a biblical vocabulary, so significant parallels to biblical words or phrases are infrequent. Besides, the poet was probably less familiar with the Greek version of the Bible than the Coptic, his native language. The symbolic imagery forms a coherent whole. Here below is a summary of the allegorical level. It follows the Greek text of the poem. The poet uses *enjambment* and sometimes the sense is spread across several verses, therefore the numbering is approximate. The hymn has four distinct parts: three on the *recto* side (the front) and one on the *verso* side (the back).

## **Paraphrase of the Hymn to St. Theodosius**

### Part I : Preamble

Verse 1: The poet announces the presence of the Divine, who brings life.

Verse 2: The poet calls the congregation to a devout attitude,

Verse 3: he recalls the remission of sins by Christ,

Verse 4: and praises the purity and perseverance of the congregation.

### Part II : Christ

Verse 5: *a restoration*

Verse 6: Because Christ is gracious and is the Word,

Verse 7: sing a hymn to the Son of God in heaven.

Verse 8: God the King loves Christ,

Verse 9: yet gave his beloved Son to redeem the world.

Verse 10: In righteousness, the Son tends to the needs of the faithful.

### Part III : Theodosius

Verse 11: With divine inspiration,

Verse 12: Christ nourished the spirit of Theodosius.

Verse 13: Throughout his life on earth, Theodosius honored God.

Verse 14: Having shared in Christ's suffering, he is now a saint.

Verse 15: You, Patriarch, are preeminent among the saints.  
Verse 16: You were unique: receive your heavenly reward.  
Verse 17: You saints, continue to contemplate the Creator,  
Verse 18: who is the root of the fruit of Wisdom,  
Verse 19: The Son of God, who is praised by the patriarchs.

#### Part IV : Christ

Verse 20: Rejoice, you saints, who share in his glory forever!  
Verse 21: Let envy wander far away from your domain,  
Verse 22: let the envious snake wander far from your domain.  
Verse 23: The faithful will be freed from Hades:  
Verse 24: I weep for our fall.  
Verse 25: You raise up the faithful, who receive divinity.  
Verse 26: Your glory, Lord, will never die.  
Verse 27: You are the beginning and the end.  
Verse 28: Your Spirit illuminates.

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Verse 31: Lord, you are the only begotten Son:  
Verse 32: God has entrusted the faithful to you.

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