

COMMENTARY TO POEM 17 RECTO

Please note: Several editions of the Dioscorian poems are available, with different numbering systems. I am using the numbering of *P.Aphrod.Lit.* IV [= Poem 1, Poem 2, etc.]. When appropriate, I give the Heitsch and/or MacCoull numbers. For details about the other literary editions and biblical editions used in the citations, see *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*: <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/> Cf. *Perseus*: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/> Translations of biblical citations are modifications of the King James Bible. For useful descriptions of Classical figures of speech, see *Silva Rhetoricae*: <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/>

Verses 1-4: Preamble

Verses 1-2

[P]ς ἄμμιν ἵκανε φερέσβιος ἐσθλοσυνάω[ν],

[.....]ς ἄμμιν ἵκανε. ...

[P] *has come to us, bringing life and all good things,*

[.....] *has come to us!*

Repetition, such as ἄμμιν ἵκανε ... ἄμμιν ἵκανε “he has come to us ... he has come to us,” is a common formula for ecstatically announcing a divine presence. Compare, for example, the words of the Sibyl when Apollo has taken control of her (Aeneid 6.46): *Deus ecce deus!* “The god, behold the god!” (Some familiarity with Latin was expected from those in the legal profession, like

Dioscorus, and the *Aeneid* was a standard learning text.) See also the *repetition* of the ecstatic Maenads' cry when Dionysus arrives in Thebes (Greece). Here they are not announcing his arrival, but encouraging one another to join his ritual:

στόμα τ' εὐφημον ἅπας ἐξοσιούσθω·
τὰ νομισθέντα γὰρ αἰεὶ
Διόνυσον ὑμνήσω. ...
ἴτε βάκχαι, ἴτε βάκχαι,
Βρόμιον παῖδα θεὸν θεοῦ
Διόνυσον κατάγουσαι ...
ἅμα δ' ἐπ' εὐάσμασιν ἐπιβρέμει τοιάδ'
ᾠ ἴτε βάκχαι,
ὦ ἴτε βάκχαι

“And let everyone keep his mouth pure, speaking propitious things.

For I will celebrate Dionysus with hymns

according to eternal custom. ...

Go, Bacchae, go, Bacchae,

escorting the god Bromius, child of a god!” ...

And among the Maenad cries, his voice rings deep:

“Go, Bacchae, go, Bacchae!”

(Euripides, *Bacchae* 70-72, 83-85, 152-153; translation by T. A. Buckley)

Although the corner of the Dioscorian papyrus and the beginning of verses 1 and 2 are missing, the epithet φερέβιος “life-bringing” clearly establishes the identity of the divinity: Christ. This epithet is stressed by its placement in the verse: right after the main *caesura*.

In verse 1, the poem in its present state begins with a strong *assonance* of the vowel *alpha*, ἄμμιν ἴκανε, which is appropriate for a beginning. The *assonance* is stressed by the metrical *ictus* of the third foot, which falls on the long *alpha* of ἴκανε. And the poet immediately establishes his creativity and control of the language by apparently coining the *hapax legomenon* ἐκθλοσυνάω[ν]. The penultimate syllable of verse 1 (-νά-) has both the word accent and metrical *ictus*, echoing the *alpha assonance* at the beginning of the verse. The *assonance* is continued at the beginning of verse 2 and in the fifth foot (-ησ καὶ ἄ-), where there is no elision and both *alpha* sounds are pronounced.

[Ϸ] : a Christian symbol that Dioscorus uses to begin his poems.

[.....]σ : The upper left corner of the papyrus is missing, so we cannot establish who “has come to us.” It might be that Maspero had an additional piece with νο to create]νσ. This is how he reads the papyrus, but such a piece no longer exists and he did not include a photographic plate. In explaining the surface level of meaning, various papyrologists and historians (beginning with the original editor) suggested that the word [λουστῖνο]σ filled the *lacuna*. This restoration would establish that the surface level was addressed to the Emperor Justin, and that the poem was written shortly after his inauguration in November 565. This restoration, however, is hypothetical, and a specific emperor is not necessary for the allegory to work. The subsequent description “bringing life” makes clear that Christ is the subject on the allegorical level (see the discussion below).

ἄμμιν ἴκανε ... ἄμμιν ἴκανεν : By repeating “has come to us,” the poet firmly

establishes that the Divine is now present at the liturgical service. This concept is based on the New Testament and the words of Christ: οὐ γὰρ εἰσιν δύο ἢ τρεῖς συνηγμένοι εἰς τὸ ἕμὸν ὄνομα, ἐκεῖ εἰμι ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Mt. 18:20) *Repetition* is also helpful in increasing the attention of an audience. One cannot ignore the phonetic similarity between ἄμμιν ... ἄμμιν and ἀμὴν ἀμὴν, which Jesus used to begin an especially important statement. For example: ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ. “Jesus answered and said unto him: ‘Verily verily I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God’.” (Jo. 3:3; cf. Jo. 1:51; etc.)

Without the *repetition*, Dioscorus uses the phrase οὕτως ἄμμιν ἴκανες “so you have come to us” in at least three other poems: Poem 11.46, 14.35, and 18.42; cf. 20.8 (Heitsch 3.46, 5.18, 13.11; cf. 2.8).

φερέσβιος : The compound adjective “life-bringing” is placed in a strong position in the verse: right after the main *caesura*. The main *caesura* is feminine ($\bar{\kappa}\alpha$ $\bar{\nu}\epsilon$ || $\bar{\phi}\epsilon$ $\rho\epsilon\sigma\beta$), which is less common among epic poets and draws attention to the adjective.

The word is not found in Homer, but the phrase φερέσβιος υἱός “life-bringing Son” is used three times by Nonnus as an epithet for Christ in his *Paraphrase of the Gospel of St. John* (Paraphrasis 5.105, 6.117, 8.92; cf. 6.99, 18.132). Nonnus was the most influential poet of the early Byzantine Era. In the

poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus, a popular Christian theologian of the early Byzantine Era, the name Φερέσβιος is synonymous with the Logos (Epigrammata, Book 8, epigram 79, line 7; cf. Carmina de se ipso, page 1448, line 9).

ἐσθλοσυνάω[v] : “bringing all good things”. The word is an *hapax legomenon*: it appears nowhere else in Greek literature and was probably coined by Dioscorus. It might be a genitive plural noun created from the hypothetical ἐσθλοσύνη (Saija, s.v.). It is then dependent on the preceding adjective φερέσβιος: “nutrimento di bene” (Saija) or “celui qui apporte la vie (les ressources) que fournissent ses bienfaits” (Fournet, p. 569). MacCoull prefers using it as a participle: “bringer of good” (MacCoull, p. 73). The concept is biblical: πᾶσα δόσις ἀγαθὴ καὶ πᾶν δώρημα τέλειον ἄνωθεν ἐστὶν καταβαῖνον ἀπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν φώτων “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and cometh down from the Father of lights” (Jac. 1:17)

The *hapax* ἐσθλοσυνάω[v] has at its core the adjective ἐσθλός “good”, which is found in Homer. More significantly, Gregory of Nazianzus frequently uses the adjective ἐσθλός in his poetry to describe Christ. And in the tragedy *Christus Patiens*, which traditionally is ascribed to Gregory, we find the following verse used twice as a greeting for Christ (2098, 2538): Χαῖρ’, ἐσθλὸς ἐσθλοῦ Παῖ, Βασιλεῦ παντάναξ. “Greetings, good Son of the Good, King, Lord of all!”

Verses 2-4

- 2 ... ἐλευθερίας καὶ ἀρωγῆ[ς]
3 [δεινῶν σφ]αλμάτων λαθικηδέος ἤγαγε τέρψιν
4 [ἀνδράσι τε κρατ]εροῖς πολυτε[ρ]πέσι· ἡδὲ γυναῖξι[ν].
 ... *He has brought to mighty men
 and very pleasing women the joy of help and freedom,
 which banishes the woe of our terrible failings.*

These three verses are joined grammatically into one sentence. Within the sentence, verses 2-3, whose subject is Christ, are interwoven by a complex genitive construction. These intertwined genitives will be recalled in verses 17-18, where Christ is described with vine imagery, alluding to his description of himself as a vine (Jo. 15:5; cf. 15:1). That is not the image created here. The tangled genitive construction in verses 2-3 recalls the entanglement of sin described in several biblical passages. See for example: Τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ ἡμᾶς Χριστὸς ἠλευθέρωσεν· στήκετε οὖν καὶ μὴ πάλιν ζυγῷ δουλείας ἐνέχεσθε. “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” (Col. 1:14; cf. Mc. 4:7; etc.) In the following Dioscorian verse, verse 4, the genitives are replaced by straightforward datives of interest (arranged in a *chiasmic* order). In the same way, the congregation of verse 4 is freed from their failings. This is a perfect blend of sense and style.

ἐλευθερίας καὶ ἀρωγῆ[ς] / [δεινῶν σφ]αλμάτων λαθικηδέος : The restorations are by Maspero. He gives no reason for [δεινῶν σφ], but says simply that the restoration is difficult. He translates: “son secours, qui fait

oublier les malheurs.” It is interesting that, outside of Dioscorus, this noun-adjective pair appears only in the *Typica Monastica*: διὰ δὲ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν πεπραγμένων μοι δεινῶν σφαλμάτων “on account of the great number of terrible sins having been committed by me” (Typicon monasterii Theotoci Petritziotissae, sub auctore Gregorio Pacuriano, Chapter 1, lines 205-206).

As pointed out above, this is an intricate genitive construction. The first two nouns should be understood as an *hendiadys*: “helpful freedom”. The genitive construction in the following verse, [δεινῶν σφ]αλμάτων, grammatically depends upon the word ἐλευθερίας and means literally “freedom from our terrible failings.” This is a standard biblical concept. Christ’s mission was to free the faithful from their sins. See for instance: ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:14). And: ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον ἐξαγοράσῃ ἵνα τὴν υἰοθεσίαν ἀπολάβωμεν “to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” (Gal. 4:5). And also: ὅτι καὶ αὐτὴ ἡ κτίσις ἐλευθερωθήσεται ἀπὸ τῆς δουλείας τῆς φθορᾶς εἰς τὴν ἐλευθερίαν τῆς δόξης τῶν τέκνων τοῦ θεοῦ. “Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Rom. 8:21) In fact, Christ and the Spirit were closely associated with freedom in general: ὁ δὲ κύριος τὸ πνεῦμα ἐστίν· οὗ δὲ τὸ πνεῦμα κυρίου, ἐλευθερία. “Now the Lord is that Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” (II Cor. 3:17)

Part of the genitive construction involves a *chiasmus* that bridges two verses: ἐλευθερίας καὶ ἀρωγῆ[ς] / [δεινῶν σφ]αλμάτων λαθικηδέος. Here the

adjective λαθικηδέος properly modifies the noun ἀρωγῆ[ς], but it actually modifies the entire *hendiadys* ἐλευθερίας καὶ ἀρωγῆ[ς]. The *chiasmus* is created by the adjective-noun phrase [δεινῶν σφ]αλμάτων sandwiched in-between the noun-adjective phrase ἀρωγῆ[ς] ... λαθικηδέος.

σφ]αλμάτων : This is not the biblical word for sin, which is ἁμαρτία and which means literally “failure” or “fault”. The biblical phrase for “freedom from sins” or “remission of sins” is: ἡ ἄφεσις τῶν ἁμαρτίων. The noun here, σφάλμα, means literally “trip” or “stumble”. The biblical term for this concept is πρόσκομμα, which is sometimes used to express the temptation or cause of sin (Rom. 14:13) and sometimes used for the same concept as ἁμαρτία (Rom. 9:33). Dioscorus—like Nonnus, Apollinaris, Eudocia, and other early Byzantine writers—used an epic vocabulary for Christian themes and avoided biblical terminology. Here, however, the term σφάλμα is not found in the Bible, and is also not found in Homer or Nonnus. But it is used frequently by early Christian writers—to express the concept of sin. For example, in the *Christus Patiens*, Gregory of Nazianzus writes: Γινώσκομεν σφάλματα, σὺ δὲ παρόρα. “We recognize our failings—you, our forgiveness.” (2562; cf. 821)

λαθικηδέος : This compound adjective is not uncommon, and is found in Homer, Nonnus, and other secular and Christian writers. It means literally “banishing care”. In Homer it describes the suckling breast (Il. 22.83); in Nonnus’s *Dionysiaca*, it describes wine and Dionysus the god of wine (7.339, 19.54, 21.234).

In Poem 17, it is singular and modifies the noun closest to it: ἀρωγῆ[ς]. But in fact, it describes the entire concept found in the *hendiadys* ἐλευθερίας καὶ ἀρωγῆ[ς]. The compound adjective λαθικηδέος also gives us a second possibility for the genitives [δεινῶν σφ]αλμάτων: they could be objective genitives dependent on the second element of the compound (-κηδέος), which then means “banishing the care about ...”. The poet now offers us two grammatically correct meanings: “care-banishing freedom from our terrible failings” and “freedom that banishes the care about our terrible failings”. Both concepts, in the end, mean the same. What is important is that with the adjective λαθικηδέος the poet has turned a standard biblical concept—freedom from sins—into a personal, subjective emotion, emphasizing the piety of the congregation: “release from our guilt about our terrible failings.”

ἤγαγε τέρψιν : The compilation of genitives is *epexegetic*: the genitive construction is in apposition to and describes the τέρψιν “joy”, which the subject has brought. The joy arises out of the freedom from failures, and replaces the care.

[ἀνδράσι τε κρατ]εροιῶς πολυτε[ρ]πέειν ἡδὲ γυναῖξι[ν] : The restoration of the beginning was suggested by Maspero, who did not explain. The exact phrase ἀνδράσι κρατεροῖς appears nowhere else in Dioscorus’s poetry or in Greek literature, but ἀνὴρ κρατερός is a common epic pair. See for example: ἀνδρὶ δαμειῶς κρατερῶ (Il. 3.429), ἀνδρὶ πάρα κρατερῶ (Il. 24.212), etc.

The congregation is described in heroic terms: literally “to strong men and very pleasing women.” This is a nicely balanced verse, using a *chiasmic*

construction. The opposite genders are placed at opposite ends of the line, with their corresponding adjectives placed within: A B B A. The adjective describing the women, πολυτε[ρ]πέειν, echoes the noun in the preceding verse, τέρψιν. In this way the poet suggests that, on the allegorical level, as the joy is a gift from Christ, so also the pleasing nature is his gift. In other words, the adjective is *proleptic*. Only after the women have received the joy of freedom from their failings (ἐλευθερίης ... σφαλμάτων ... τέρψιν), only after they have been washed free of their sins through Baptism, do they become completely pleasing to him (πολυτερπέειν).

κρατ]εροῑς : “strong”, “stout”, “mighty”. The adjective is usually used by Homer for physical strength in war: Ἀγαμέμνων, / ἀμφοτέρων βασιλεύς τ’ ἀγαθὸς κρατερός τ’ αἰχμητής “Agamemnon, / both a good king and a mighty warrior” (Il. 3.178-179; cf. 2.515, 6.97, 16.624, etc.). And that is the usage in Nonnus’s *Dionysiaca* (21.11) The adjective is not found in the Septuagint or the New Testament. The term κρατερός, however, is related to the verb κρατέω, which can mean “to overcome” or “to endure”. The Dioscorian adjective thus suggests the New Testament admonition to overcome temptation and to persevere: it is the enduring believer that is rewarded with the crown. The standard New Testament terms for this concept are ὑπομένω and προσκαρτερέω. See for example: Μακάριος ἀνὴρ ὃς ὑπομένει πειρασμόν, ὅτι δόκιμος γενόμενος λήμψεται τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς, ὃν ἐπηγγείλατο τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν. “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.” (Jac. 1:12) See also: τῇ ἐλπίδι χαίροντες, τῇ θλίψει ὑπομένοντες, τῇ προσευχῇ προσκαρτεροῦντες “as regards hope,

rejoicing; as regards tribulation, enduring; as regards prayer, persevering” (Rom. 12:12).

The infinitive and participle of κρατέω were used by early Byzantine writers to denote perseverance in the Faith or in a way of life. For example, Joannes Malalas, an older contemporary of Dioscorus, used the phrase κρατήσαντες τὸ ἀρχαῖον ἔθος ἕως τῆς νῦν “having persevered in the old way to the present day” (Chronographia, page 180, line 9). The infinitive was used in a similar sense by Gelasius Cyzicenus, the fifth-century Church historian: τὴν ... κρατεῖν πίστιν “to persevere in the faith” (Historia ecclesiastica, Book 1, proem., section 10, line 4). And equally important, the Dioscorian term would have echoed the superlative and ubiquitous epithet for Christ: παντοκράτωρ “almighty”.

πολυτε[ρ]πέειν : The adjective πολυτερπής is rare and thus draws attention to itself. It was not used by Homer and was used only once by Nonnus, in his *Dionysiaca*. But it was used at least five times by Proclus, the fifth-century Neoplatonic philosopher, in his commentaries to Plato. (Proclus wrote not only commentaries to Classical works but also essays, and even hymns to pagan gods.) Proclus was influential in Greek, Roman, and Islamic philosophy and had a strong impact on Christian mystical writers, especially Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite. Proclus worked in Alexandria for the early part of his career, where he taught Ammonius, who in turn taught John Philoponus. Philoponus was a Christian philosopher and possibly a teacher

of Dioscorus. In his surviving works, Proclus uses the adjective πολυτερπής three times as an epithet for Eros, a metaphysical emanation from the One.