

**Abba Dorotheos of Gaza:  
Guidance in the Path of Humility and the Virtues**

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## ***Introduction***

Abba Dorotheos was a monk and teacher of the desert who lived in the sixth century. We possess relatively little historical data concerning his life,<sup>1</sup> and it is not for the example of his life that Abba Dorotheos is primarily known. Rather, it his teachings on the spiritual life which have proven throughout the centuries to be of exceptional value, acclaimed by spiritual masters and yet suitable not only for novices in monasticism but even for those living in the world and relatively new to the Orthodox faith. The centerpiece of Abba Dorotheos' teaching comes to us in the form of fourteen “discourses” or “lessons” on the spiritual life given to his disciples: presumably these were homilies which were recorded by a scribe. We also have three homilies regarding Lent and Pascha, sixteen brief letters which he wrote and a very short collection of his sayings. Along with these is preserved a life of St. Dositheos, a noted disciple of Abba Dorotheos who God manifested as an example of obedience and humility.

## ***Contemporary English Sources***

The two most valuable sources in English regarding Abba Dorotheos' life and writings are the two English editions of his teachings. The first, *Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings* was published by Cistercian Publications (Michigan) in 1977, translated by, and with an introduction by, Eric P. Wheeler. Wheeler candidly admits in his introduction that his knowledge of patristic Greek was rather limited at the outset of his translation and that this is likely reflected in the result. Nevertheless Abba Dorotheos' wisdom shines through clearly in his translation, and Wheeler's extensive and lively introduction is by far the most comprehensive article available on Abba Dorotheos in English. The second English edition, published in Athens in 2000, was translated by

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<sup>1</sup> Scouteris, p. 30.

Constantine Scouteris. Besides his introduction, Scouteris provides an invaluable 25-page glossary of patristic terms. Thus, Scouteris' edition is of special value to those wishing to more fully understand the nuances of Dorotheos' text and become more familiar with patristic terminology. For the most part, the two editions are translations of the same material (despite apparent differences in the tables of contents: Wheeler took more liberty in rearranging some of the material to present Abba Dorotheos' teachings in a more structured format), but Mr. Scouteris' translation is more literal and scholarly. Beyond these two editions, there does not seem to be much material available on Dorotheos in English; see the bibliography of this presentation for a few other sources. Regarding modern writings on Dorotheos in other languages, see Mr. Scouteris' bibliography.

### ***Primary Sources (Manuscripts)***

Wheeler gives a good overview of the manuscript tradition from which Dorotheos' writings come to us.<sup>2</sup> In short, the earliest Greek manuscripts date back to the tenth century, but there are also Georgian translations dating back to the ninth century as well as Arabic translations that may date as early as the ninth century.

### ***The Life of Abba Dorotheos***

Abba Dorotheos was born in Antioch around 500 A.D. He was well educated, and he devoted himself to monasticism at an early age, entering the Monastery of Seridos in Gaza. Two holy spiritual fathers lived as recluses at the monastery: Abba Barsanuphius and Abba John the Prophet (so called because of his clairvoyance). It was these two fathers who directed the spiritual life of the monastery, since Seridos was their disciple.<sup>3</sup>

The elders Barsanuphius and John had come to the monastery of Seridos after many years of ascetic life in the deserts of Upper Egypt, fleeing the barrage of visitors

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<sup>2</sup> Wheeler, p. 19-22.

<sup>3</sup> Scouteris, pp. 30-31.

that flocked to them there because of their renowned holiness. In Gaza they lived a life of “complete and permanent enclosure, with no communication with the outside world except by the written word communicated through a secretary.”<sup>4</sup>

Among other spiritual gifts, God granted the elders Barsanuphius and John an amazing oneness of soul from before the time they arrived in Gaza:

*The extraordinary thing about this relationship was that, although John was himself a highly charismatic person, he always wrote of Barsanufius as his spiritual Father and Master, whereas Barsanufius always referred to John as his alter ego and powerful ally in the spiritual combat; yet they never saw one another, and never corresponded with one another. John was often asked to explain some of the things which Barsanufius had written to a correspondent—and he did so to perfection, while some of Barsanufius' correspondents who had consulted John (and not mentioned the fact) were told summarily to do what Brother John had told them.<sup>5</sup>*

Dorotheos submitted himself to the guidance of these two elders with complete openness and obedience. He kept in contact with them by written correspondence and also had the privilege of serving as Abba John's cell attendant for some time. These illumined elders directed Dorotheos with discernment. Dorotheos initially wanted to live the strict ascetic life of a hermit, but the elders did not agree with his wish, partly because of his physical weakness. Instead, they directed him to serve the monastery as its guest-master; later they gave him responsibilities at the monastery infirmary. Over time Dorotheos also took on the responsibility of being a spiritual guide to some younger

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4 Wheeler, p. 41.

5 Wheeler, p. 42.

monks; of all his spiritual children, Dositheos was distinguished for his life of obedience and virtue.<sup>6</sup>

“After the demise of John the Prophet and the complete silence of Barsanuphius, around 540, a few days after the death of Abba Seridos, Dorotheos left this monastery and built his own. It was to the monks of this monastery that he addressed his famous teachings.<sup>7</sup>” Thus, Abba Dorotheos lived a life of obedience and comparative silence as long as his spiritual fathers lived to direct him, but once their counsel was no longer available, he devoted himself to the service of directing his brothers who might otherwise be at a loss for spiritual guidance. In his teaching he strove to pass on what he had received from his elders and from God. To this teaching, steeped in Holy Scripture and patristic wisdom, let us now turn our attention.

***Abba Dorotheos' Style: Accessible, Memorable, Simple, and Traditional***

As mentioned earlier, Abba Dorotheos' lessons were most likely homilies recorded by a scribe.<sup>8</sup> They are notable not only for their content but also for their style. Abba Dorotheos' style makes his lessons particularly accessible and memorable. He knows how to draw his audience in. Accordingly, his style is a model for those who wish to write or speak in an accessible and memorable way regarding the Christian faith and the spiritual life.

Abba Dorotheos' style is both rhetorical and conversational. For example, he makes very effective use of rhetorical questions: he will often start by raising a question and then developing the line of questioning for some time, to build the reader's interest,

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6 Scouteris, pp. 31-33.

7 Scouteris, p. 32.

8 Scouteris, p. 34.

before presenting the answer to the question.<sup>9</sup> He also uses stories very effectively to illustrate his points: stories from his own experience, from his teachers, and from the writings of earlier fathers. These stories are memorable and clearly connect the principles he is presenting with the kinds of every-day challenges that his audience faces.

Abba Dorotheos' lessons are written in simple language. He does not aim to impress his audience with flowery expressions. Instead, he presents his material in a way that makes it easy to understand and remember.

Abba Dorotheos' teaching is scriptural and patristic. His writings are saturated with passages from the Old and New Testaments. He makes frequent reference to the sayings of the fathers and to their lives. His aim is clearly not to innovate but to hand down the mind-set of the Church—to call his brethren to join him in discipleship.

### ***The Fall and Our Salvation: God's Gifts***<sup>10</sup>

Abba Dorotheos begins his discourses with a lesson entitled “On Renunciation,” but his starting point in this lesson, and the foundation of his entire teaching, is the foundation of all Christian teaching: The story of the incarnation. Abba Dorotheos paints the story of our salvation in a way that calls to mind the beginning of Saint Athanasius' treatise *On the Incarnation*.

Abba Dorotheos begins in the garden of Eden with the Fall, then speaks of mankind's descent into greater and greater depths of depravity: the reign of sin and death. “Only a few,” he says, “knew God, moved by the natural law.” Then God in his goodness gave the written law, that men might leave their sin and return to God—however, they transgressed the law and sunk deeper into their sin. God sent the prophets and yet people

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9 For an excellent example of this stylistic trait, see Scouteris, pp. 89-91, translated from Dorotheos' second lesson, “On Humility.”

10 Based on Scouteris, pp. 69-74, translated from Dositheos' first lesson, “On Renunciation.”

did not give up their evil ways. The prophets bore witness to the way in which evil dominated the world, like a disease that infects a person's whole body. “Then God, Who is good and loves mankind, sent His only-begotten Son, because only God could heal Man and enable him to rise up from this kind of suffering.” God assumed our essence that he might heal it, and thus liberated man from the dominion of sin. God “destroyed all the devil's power... and delivered us from under his control... *unless we want to sin voluntarily.*”

And how can we, through our Lord's incarnation, be liberated from the power of sin? By receiving the two gifts, says Abba Dorotheos, that our Lord gave us: **Baptism** and **His Commandments**. Through Holy Baptism, the Lord has purified us from every sin and forgiven everything. However, our *sickness* – our tendency to sin – remains after baptism. Knowing this, our Lord also gave us His Holy Commandments. Through observance of His commandments we can be purified from both our sins and our passions which lead us to sin. In His teaching, our Lord shows us the *causes* of sin and how to eliminate them. (For example, in the sermon on the mount, He teaches us that adultery is the fruit of lust and that we must eliminate lust to be safe from adultery.)

To summarize, in baptism the Lord released us from every sin we had committed and gave us the *power* to do good if we desire it; in His teaching He pointed out the *way* of purification from our passions that we can follow in order not fall into sin again.

This way of purification, the Lord's commandments, is exactly what Abba Dorotheos intends to lay before us in his Discourses. By starting in this way, and throughout his Discourses, Abba Dorotheos makes it clear that his aim is not to teach us anything new of his own devising, but rather to hand down to us teachings that help us to

clearly understand our Lord's commandments—teachings which Abba Dorotheos received from his own spiritual guides, from scripture, and from the patristic writings such as the sayings of Desert Fathers.

### ***The Root of Our Sin and Its Cure*<sup>11</sup>**

What do we learn from our Lord's teaching about the cause of our bondage to sin, and its cure? “Hear what the Lord says, 'Learn from me, *for I am gentle and lowly in heart*, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matt. 11:29). Here briefly, in one word, He has shown us the root and cause of every evil and the treatment for it and also the cause of every good.” It is **arrogance**, or **pride**, that defeated us: pride makes it impossible for us to be receptive to the Lord's mercy. We can only begin to receive God's mercy through pride's opposite, humility, and through the obedience which comes from true humility.

Man's pride and disobedience was the cause of his sin in Eden, and the cause of all suffering. For man's pride led not only to his self-will, in eating the forbidden fruit, but also to his refusal to repent. God asked Adam why he sinned, giving him a chance to repent, but Adam blamed Eve and even blamed God: “The woman whom You gave me...” Adam had no trace of humility and set himself against God. Yet God did not want man to be cut off from Him and suffer eternal death. Thus God allowed sorrow and affliction, that man might be cured from his pride and thus return to God. If we, then, take the path that Adam took—following our own opinion, insisting on our own will, and justifying ourselves—we too will arrive at all kinds of sorrows, which God allows in our lives to call us to repentance.

The **cure** to our sin, says Abba Dorotheos, is the opposite of its cause: humility. Through humility we can be purified and return to our natural state. The humble man is

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<sup>11</sup> Based on Scouteris, pp. 74-77, translated from Dositheos' first lesson, “On Renunciation.”

one who mistrusts his own wisdom and his own will, and ceases to be a slave to his own will. In fact, says Abba Dorotheos, he *hates* and *renounces* his own will.

### ***The Power of Humility and the Perfect Humility of the Saints***

Elsewhere, Abba Dorotheos explains that through humility we can not only be free from slavery to our own will, but we can even learn to peacefully accept whatever happens to us as God's will.<sup>12</sup> This peace comes from our freedom from self-will (we are not constantly wishing for something other than what God allows for us) and also from overcoming the belief that we deserve ease and pleasure. The humble man is keenly aware of his need for purification, and he realizes that God alone knows and provides the means for his purification – that God is allowing difficulties and temptations as medicine for his sins. The humble man, accepting temptations as God's benevolence, is free from the impulse to blame others: an impulse which, unchecked, would throw him into the pit of anger. In fact, writes Abba Dorotheos, “nothing is more powerful than humility. Nothing can overcome it.”<sup>13</sup>

In summary, humility is the central virtue, and it leads to tranquility and cleansing from every passion. It “protects the soul from all the passions and also from every temptation.”<sup>14</sup> The theme of achieving tranquility through humility recurs constantly throughout Dorotheos' writings.<sup>15</sup>

Abba Dorotheos writes about a specific type of humility, which he calls the “perfect humility of the saints:” coming to realize that all our achievements come from God and not from ourselves.<sup>16</sup> Nothing good comes about apart from God. As we come to

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12 Scouteris, pp. 89-91 (translated from Lesson 2 of Dorotheos) and pp. 203-4 (translated from Lesson 13).

13 Scouteris, p. 90 (translated from Lesson 2 of Dorotheos).

14 Dorotheos, *On Humility* 96 quoted in Seid, section “The Goal of Life: Achieving Tranquility by Acquiring Humility.”

15 Seid, section “The Goal of Life: Achieving Tranquility by Acquiring Humility.”

16 Scouteris, p. 93 (translated from Lesson 2 of Dorotheos).

realize our utter dependence on God's grace, we begin to rely on Him alone, to turn constantly to Him, trusting ever more fully in His mercy. This humility comes about gradually and naturally, says Dorotheos, as we strive to keep the Lord's commandments. The further the saints progress in keeping the Lord's commandments, and the more their mind is directed toward God, the more keenly aware they are of their smallness and sinfulness in contrast to God's infinite power and goodness.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Obedience and the Need for Guidance***

In the struggle toward humility and cutting off our own will, Abba Dorotheos teaches us, we can derive great benefit from *obedience*. In his writing we see a stark contrast between those who direct themselves and those who live a life of obedience to a spiritual guide.

Abba Dorotheos begins a lesson on the need for obedience<sup>18</sup> with Proverbs 11:14, “Those who have no guidance fall like leaves, but there is safety in much counsel.” “No one is more wretched,” Dorotheos explains, “no one is more easily caught unawares, than a man who has no one to guide him along the road to God.” He further explains that safety in “much counsel” refers not to taking counsel from many people and at random, but rather, taking counsel from a person in whom we have full confidence. We should “report everything and take counsel about everything” from this trusted spiritual guide. Everything, that is, regarding our sins: in this way alone he is safe from the attacks of the enemy. Otherwise, the enemy will find any “little bit of self-will or self-righteousness” and use that to bring us down—to divert us from serving God.

What then is the condition of the person who submits himself fully to a spiritual guide? Abba Dorotheos cites the life of his disciple, St. Dositheos, to teach us the great

<sup>17</sup> Scouteris, p. 94 (translated from Lesson 2 of Dorotheos).

<sup>18</sup> Wheeler, pp. 122-129 (translated from Lesson 5 of Dorotheos).

value of this virtue of obedience. Dositheos left a “life of pleasure and idleness” and died after living only a short time in the Seridos monastery—not distinguished by any great feats of asceticism, but by obedience, repentance, and acceptance of whatever difficulties came to him. After Dositheos' death, God granted one of the Elders at the monastery a vision of Dositheos glorified and rejoicing among the saints.<sup>19</sup>

Dorotheos gives many other illustrations of the blessings that God gives to those who strive to live in obedience to their spiritual fathers. He concludes one discussion of the value of obedience with this telling paragraph:

*At one time, before I knew the power of this virtue (that is, humility), hearing that through much tribulation we must enter the Kingdom of Heaven, I became afraid because I had no troubles. And when such thoughts came upon me, I used to take up a pen and write to one of the Elders. On one occasion I wrote to Abba John, the disciple of Abba Barsanuphius, and while I was writing, even before I had finished, I was sensible of help and relief, and this itself increased my freedom from care and my sense of peace. And this is what I said: “Master, since the scriptures say that through much tribulation we must enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, and I do not seem to have a single affliction, what shall I do? Shall I not lose my soul if I haven’t a single affliction or anxiety?” When I had explained my thought to him in this way, he wrote back declaring, “Do not be afraid; you have no cause to be, for everyone who throws himself completely into obedience to the Fathers shall surely possess this state of freedom from care and peacefulness of soul.”<sup>20</sup>*

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19 Wheeler, p. 89, and Scouteris, pp. 55-63 (translated from the life of Abba Dositheos).

20 Wheeler, pp. 91-92 (translated from Lesson 1 of Dorotheos).

### ***Overcoming Demonic Thoughts In Times of Distress and Temptation***<sup>21</sup>

We spoke earlier of the centrality of humility in Abba Dorotheos' writings. Humility is the basis of Abba Dorotheos' teaching on how we can respond when we are overcome by opposing thoughts. We must first understand that, although God's plan for us is beyond our knowledge, we are safe only when we entrust ourselves to His care. We must also realize that we cannot “overcome demonic thoughts through human ones.” Therefore, Abba Dorotheos writes to a brother distressed by temptations, “when opposing thoughts overwhelm you, it is necessary to shout to God, 'Lord, take care of the matter, as you want and as you know.' For the providence of God puts many things in order, in spite of what we think or hope.”

Abba Dorotheos writes here against worry and proud self-reliance, not against using our mental abilities. Though we should of course use the intellectual gifts that God gave us, our **trust** must be in God, not in our own ability to reason through our situation.

Citing Abba Poemen, Abba Dorotheos writes that the commandment “do not worry about tomorrow” (Matt. 6:34) applies especially in times of trial or temptation. Trusting in Christ's commandment, he counsels his distressed brother to keep to the “most carefree and the surest” path: the path of hope in God, “Who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20).

### ***Virtues – The Royal Way***<sup>22</sup>

Although the virtues of humility and obedience are central to Abba Dorotheos' writings, he has much to say about the acquisition of the other virtues. He uses the following illustration to help us understand the virtues. All of us who desire to follow the path of the saints, says Abba Dorotheos, are like pilgrims traveling toward the holy city,

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21 Based on Scouteris, pp. 285-7 (Dorotheos' “Letter to a Brother Distressed by Temptation”).

22 Based on Scouteris, pp. 170-172, translated from Dorotheos, “On Vigilance and Sobriety.”

Jerusalem. If we want to reach our destination, we must not veer to the right or to the left, but follow the middle and direct road. This “royal path” is the path of virtue. The acquisition of the virtues involves both continual striving toward our destination (the perfection of Christ) and avoidance of every harmful extreme.

What does Abba Dorotheos mean when he calls the path of virtue the royal path and the middle road? Each virtue, he teaches us, is the healthy midpoint between two opposite extremes. Thus the virtues are very similar to the principles of moderation which preserve the health of our body. If a person sleeps too little or too much, his health will be disturbed, until balance is restored. The same is true of the virtues, which preserve the healthy or natural state of the soul. For example, “courage stands in the middle between cowardice and foolhardiness; humility in the middle between arrogance and obsequiousness. Modesty is a mean between bashfulness and boldness—and so on with the other virtues.”<sup>23</sup>

### ***The Need for Self-Examination, and the Three States of the Soul***

Abba Dorotheos uses the aforementioned analogy of pilgrimage to the holy city to illustrate another principle of the spiritual life: the need for self-examination. All of us who desire to follow the path of the saints, are like pilgrims traveling toward the holy city, who find ourselves in many different situations. For any of us to make further progress toward our destination, we must know where we are. In our journey toward virtue, we must especially know where we stand with respect to the passions.<sup>24</sup>

Abba Dorotheos teaches that a man may be in one of three states with regard to a particular passion. The first situation is when a man allows a passion to operate, and adapts his life according to it: he lives his life in a way that allows him to satisfy his

<sup>23</sup> Wheeler, p.166, translated from Dorotheos, “On Vigilance and Sobriety.”

<sup>24</sup> Scouteris, pp. 172-173, translated from Dorotheos, “On Vigilance and Sobriety.”

passions. The second situation is when a man does not give a passion free reign but also does not cut it off: he disputes with his passions but lives with them inside of him. The third situation is when a man actively roots out a passion, by continually struggling against it and acting in opposition to it.<sup>25</sup>

For example, let us consider the passion of anger and vengeance: suppose a man hears someone insult him. A man in the first state with regard to anger is one who immediately strikes back with harsh words, and feels justified in doing so. A man in the second state might respond angrily out of habit, but would struggle to restrain himself. A man in the third state would accept the words against him as God's providence, thank God for humbling him, and pray for the person who insulted him.

On our journey toward virtue, Abba Dorotheos teaches us, we must not only be aware of our current situation, but also examine ourselves from time to time as to our progress. Specifically: have we taken steps toward rooting out our passions, or are some of them becoming worse? Yet, if some of them are becoming worse, he says, let us not despair, but do what we can to fight against them.<sup>26</sup> Let us ask God for the help we need with humility and repentance—and when we have sought God's help through contrition and confession, let us follow the example of Dorotheos' disciple Dositheos, who after confessing, “would get up and run joyfully to his duties,” “leaving behind his sorrow,” confident that “he had indeed received God's forgiveness.”<sup>27</sup>

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25 Scouteris, pp. 173-175, translated from Dorotheos, “On Vigilance and Sobriety.”

26 Scouteris, pp. 175-176, translated from Dorotheos, “On Vigilance and Sobriety.”

27 Scouteris, pp. 58-59 (translated from the life of Dositheos).

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