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The Church Fathers' Spiritual Interpretation of the Psalms

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THE WORLD OF THE church fathers may seem far removed from our everyday lives. In some respects, that is indeed the case. It would be foolish to try to appropriate their writings into our theological and cultural contexts without taking into account the many centuries that separate us from the Fathers. Despite the obvious developments and changes that have taken place since the patristic era, however, there is an underlying commonality that links faithful biblical interpretation today with the exegetical endeavors of the early church. Over the past number of years, there has been a growing recognition of the shortcomings of historical critical exegesis and, as a result, an increasing appreciation for the church fathers and their spiritual or theological interpretation of the Bible.¹ In this essay, I will focus on three theological concerns that we, along with the Fathers, may continue to bring to bear on our reading of the book of Psalms. In particular, I am thinking of (1) the Psalms' focus on the harmonious virtue of the person who sings them, (2) the Psalms' christological focus, and (3) the need to appropriate the Psalms in a personal manner.

I want to preface my analysis, however, by recognizing with gratitude that, long before I started reading the church fathers, I encountered

1. For helpful introductions to theological or spiritual interpretation, see Billings, *Word of God*; O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*; and Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*.

each of these three elements in the teaching of Professor Cornelis Van Dam. His teaching radiated personal integrity (section 1: “Harmonious Virtue”); a focus on Jesus Christ (section 2: “The Voice of Christ”); and an obvious desire to appropriate the contents of the Scriptures into his own life (section 3: “The Personal Appropriation”). For each of these aspects of Professor Van Dam’s teaching, I am truly grateful. In this essay, then, I will highlight these three characteristics of the Psalms, which the Fathers of the church were deeply conscious of and which we need to incorporate also in our exegetical work today.

This essay will focus on several fourth- and fifth-century church fathers and their approach to the interpretation of the Psalms. It would have been possible to focus on almost any other Old Testament book, and in each case, we would have been able to locate important underlying characteristics of the Fathers’ spiritual or theological interpretation of Scripture. The Psalms nonetheless stand out as a particularly fruitful entry into our topic. Brian Daley, the well-known patristic scholar from the University of Notre Dame, has pointed out that the Psalms were hugely popular throughout the early church and the Middle Ages: “Early Christian commentaries on the Psalms easily exceed in number those on any other book of the Old or New Testament; we still possess partial or complete sets of homilies or scholarly commentaries on the Psalms—sometimes more than one set—by at least twenty-one Latin or Greek Patristic authors, and this interest did not abate in the medieval Church.”² The popularity of the Psalms throughout the church’s history means that we have a great deal of material from which we can infer how people used to read them theologically or spiritually. Moreover, we are fortunate to have two fairly lengthy fourth-century writings that explain *how* we are supposed to read the Psalms. I am thinking of the *Letter to Marcellinus* written by Athanasius (c. 296–373), the ardent defender of the doctrine of the Trinity against Arian heresy, and of the *Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms* written by the mystical theologian Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 394).³ There is also an introduction to the Psalms written by Basil of Caesarea (c. 329–379), Gregory’s older brother, which reflects on principles of interpretation one should bring

2. Daley, “Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?” 204.

3. Athanasius, “Letter,” 101–29, 144–47; Gregory, of Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions*, 83–213.

to bear on a reading of the Psalms.⁴ I will especially focus on these more general hermeneutical treatises, and also, as an example, look at how Basil of Caesarea, Hilary of Poitiers (c. 300–c. 368), Augustine of Hippo (354–430), and Theodoret of Cyrus (c. 393–c. 457) read Psalm 1.

HARMONIOUS VIRTUE

Psalms are for singing, not just for reading and preaching. That is to say, they fulfill a double function in the liturgy. This opens up an interesting avenue of reflection as here, more explicitly than elsewhere in Scripture, we enter the realm of aesthetics. Questions of beauty and its function come to the fore when we reflect on the role of music in the liturgy. Athanasius reflects explicitly on the role that music and singing play in the liturgy. “It is important,” he writes in his *Letter to Marcellinus*, “not to pass over the question of why words of this kind are chanted with melodies and strains.”⁵ As he addresses this question, Athanasius explicitly rejects the notion that singing in church is simply for aesthetic pleasure. Some, he writes, imagine that “on account of the sweetness of the sound . . . the psalms are rendered musically for the sake of the ear’s delight. But this is not so.”⁶ The purpose of liturgical music, we could also say, is not sensual or material; the purpose is spiritual. It is, says the Egyptian bishop, “for the benefit of the soul.”⁷

Athanasius points to two benefits of singing in particular. First, he comments that in singing the voice “is richly broadened.”⁸ What he seems to mean, is that the sounds of the words are lengthened, dragged out as it were, while at the same time they span various tonal inflections of the human voice. This allows people, says Athanasius somewhat cryptically, “to love God with their whole strength and power.”⁹ Second, for Athanasius, the melody accompanying the words serves as “a symbol of the spiritual harmony of the soul.”¹⁰ Just as the soul has different faculties, so music combines various sounds into one. The harmony of the

4. Basil, of Caesarea, *Exegetic Homilies*, 151–54.

5. Athanasius, “Letter,” no. 27, p. 123.

6. Ibid. A little later, he reiterates, “[T]he Psalms are not recited with melodies because of a desire for pleasant sounds” (no. 29, p. 125).

7. Athanasius, “Letter,” no. 27, p. 123.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Athanasius, “Letter,” no. 28, p. 125.

music, we could say, is analogous to the harmony of the soul. And the way in which the faculties of the soul are ordered is no less important than the way in which the various sounds of a song are ordered.

Following Plato, Athanasius holds that human beings have three faculties: reason (*logistikon*), affections (*thumētikon*), and passions or desires (*epithumētikon*).¹¹ For those three faculties to be in harmony, it is important that reason govern the passions. After all, says Athanasius, “the most excellent things derive from reasoning, while the most worthless derive from acting on the basis of desire.”¹² However, there is more to it than just an external analogy between the harmony of the Psalms and the harmony of the soul’s faculties. Athanasius appeals to typology to make clear that there is an intimate connection between the two. “The harmonious reading of the Psalms,” he claims, “is a *figure and type* of such undisturbed and calm equanimity of our thoughts.”¹³ A little later, he again comments that the harmonious combination of cymbals, harp, and the ten-stringed instrument is a “*figure and sign* of the parts of the body coming into natural concord like harp strings, and of the thoughts of the soul becoming like cymbals.”¹⁴ The harmonious character of the melody of the Psalms and of musical instruments serves as a figure, a type, or a sign of the harmonious character of the body and of the faculties of the soul. For Athanasius, genuine aesthetics recognizes the need to move from outward (aesthetic) beauty to inner (spiritual) harmony.

This concern for harmony, along with the language of typology, pervades also Gregory’s discussion. Gregory, much like Athanasius, makes reference to the narrative of David playing the harp and thereby soothing King Saul’s troubled disposition, restoring harmony among his soul’s faculties (1 Sam 16).¹⁵ Gregory observes that people tend to sing the Psalms on all sorts of occasions, including “banquets and wedding festivities.”¹⁶ He then deals with the question of what it is that makes people take such pleasure in what the Psalms teach. It is not just the fact that we *sing* the words that causes this pleasure, insists Gregory, but

11. Cf. Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 52–58.

12. Athanasius, “Letter,” no. 27, p. 124.

13. *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

14. Athanasius, “Letter,” no. 29, pp. 125–26; emphasis added.

15. *Ibid.*, 125; Gregory of Nyssa, *Treatise on the Inscriptions*, I.3, p. 92.

16. Gregory, *ibid.*, 88.

singing the Psalms puts us in line with the order of the universe.¹⁷ The universe itself constitutes what the Cappadocian theologian calls a “diverse and variegated musical harmony,” so that it sings a “polyphonic tune.”¹⁸ One can observe in creation a rhythmic oscillation between rest and motion. Together, rest and motion create a musical pattern in praise of God. Gregory calls this cosmic harmony “the primal, archetypal, true music.”¹⁹ Gregory then moves from the cosmos to humanity, insisting that human beings are a microcosmos, as human nature reflects the musical harmony of the cosmic archetype.²⁰ Even the human body, insists Gregory, shows this harmony: “Do you see the flute in the windpipe, the bridge of the lyre in the palate, the music of the lyre that comes from tongue, cheeks, and mouth, as though from strings and a plectrum?”²¹ Gregory, while focusing on spiritual realities first and foremost, obviously does not disdain the human body; instead, he considers it an intricate work of divine art, reflecting the musical order of the cosmos.

The conclusion we need to draw, according to Gregory, is that music forms the very pattern both of the cosmos in general, the archetype, and of human beings in particular, the microcosm. This implies that musical expression fits well with the content of the Psalms, since the teaching of the Psalms is meant to harmonize the faculties of the soul. “In this singing,” says Gregory, “nature reflects on itself in a certain manner, and heals itself.”²² The very fact that we *sing* the Psalms is a symbolic act, Gregory insists repeatedly, pointing to the “proper rhythm of life”; that is, a virtuous life in which the passions have been subdued. At this point, Gregory concludes that people take such pleasure in the teaching of the Psalms because harmonious singing puts us in harmony with the cosmos, with human nature, and therefore, ultimately, with the teaching about the virtues, which we find in the Psalms.²³ Harmony and virtue, beauty and goodness, go together for the Cappadocian Father.

17. *Ibid.*, I.2, p. 88.

18. *Ibid.*, I.3, p. 89.

19. *Ibid.*, 90. See on this topic and its relation to mathematics: Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake*.

20. Gregory of Nyssa, *Treatise on the Inscriptions*, I.3, pp. 90–91.

21. *Ibid.*, 91.

22. *Ibid.*

23. For similar reflections, see *ibid.*, 129–30.

Gregory's older brother, Basil, presents similar reflections in the introduction to his homily on Psalm 1. These Cappadocian theologians both focus on cultivation of virtue as the purpose of the Psalms. To them, music exists not for its own sake but serves to support the promotion of virtue. Basil charmingly comments, "The delight of melody He [i.e., the Holy Spirit] mingled with the doctrines so that by the pleasantness and softness of the sound heard we might receive without perceiving it the benefit of the words, just as the wise physicians who, when giving the fastidious rather bitter drugs to drink, frequently smear the cup with honey."²⁴ For Basil, the Psalms' teaching on virtue is the bitter but beneficial drug while the melody is the honey that makes it palatable. In fact, Basil considers the musical harmony of the Psalms not merely as conducive to ridding oneself of sinful passions, but he also has an eye for the communal benefits of the Psalms. "A psalm," he says, "forms friendships, unites those separated, conciliates those at enmity."²⁵ The result is that the harmony of the Psalms produces harmony within the congregation: "[P]salmody, bringing about choral singing, a bond, as it were, toward unity, and joining the people into a harmonious union of one choir, produces also the greatest of blessings, charity."²⁶ The harmony of the choir produces the virtuous harmony of love. The church fathers were not content with the kind of exegesis that is satisfied once it has determined the historical meaning of the text. Instead, they insist that we ask whether one's reading promotes virtue and yields genuine harmony. Interpretation and harmonious character are inseparable.²⁷

THE VOICE OF CHRIST

The Psalms are particularly suited for spiritual interpretation because of the multiple ways in which one can discern Christ in them. Michael Fiedrowicz, in his introduction to Augustine's *Expositions of the Psalms*, mentions a five-fold christological interpretation of the Psalms among the Fathers. He explains that the Psalms were interpreted as a word to Christ (*vox ad Christum*); a word about Christ (*vox de Christo*); a word of Christ, spoken by him (*vox Christi*); a word about the Church

24. Basil, of Caesarea, *Exegetic Homilies*, 152.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. Fowl, "Virtue," 837. Cf. also Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader*; Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 92–96.

(*vox de ecclesia*); and a word of the Church, spoken by the Church (*vox ecclesiae*).²⁸ Of course, only the first three are strictly christological, and I will focus on them. But we should keep in mind that, for Augustine at least, Christ and church should always be viewed together as the “whole Christ” (*totus Christus*). Christ’s reprimand of Saul—“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”²⁹ (Acts 9:4)—implied, for Augustine, that Christ identifies with his church.³⁰ The head and the body, the groom and the bride, make up the one total Christ. Jason Byassee, author of a wonderful book on Augustine’s interpretation of the Psalms, observes that Augustine’s commentary presents “a ‘christo-ecclesiological’ form of exegesis, premised on the *totus Christus*, the ‘whole Christ,’ who speaks throughout the Psalter.”³¹ So, when the Psalms speak about Christ, the words often need to be applied to those united to him—the church as well as individual believers. Conversely, what the Psalms say about either individual believers or the church often needs to be understood as referring to Christ himself, as well. Thus, Augustine is convinced that proper interpretation of the Psalms takes into account not *just* Christology, but that the Psalms also speak a word about the Church (*vox de ecclesia*) and a word spoken by the Church (*vox ecclesiae*). In what follows, however, I will focus only on the strictly christological interpretation of the Psalms, noting how Augustine’s outlook discerns Christ in three ways: the Psalms are words *to* Christ, *about* Christ, and *of* Christ.

Let me first comment on the Psalms as words *to* Christ (*vox ad Christum*). When the Psalms address God, the Fathers have little hesitation in seeing in these words also prayers addressed to Christ. Since Christ is the incarnate Son of God, the Fathers consider it entirely legitimate that Christ is addressed as God in the very words of the Psalms. So when the Psalmist appeals to God for help, forgiveness, and justice, and so on, all of these petitions may be interpreted also as petitions addressed to Christ.³² Thus, the Fathers consciously allow theological convictions to influence their reading of the text.

28. Fiedrowicz, “General Introduction,” 44–45.

29. Scripture quotations in this article are from the New International Version (NIV).

30. Cf. Matt 25:40; 1 Cor 10:16–17; 1 Cor 12:2; Col 1:24. Cf. Fiedrowicz, “General Introduction,” 53–54.

31. Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 63.

32. *Ibid.*, 45.

The Psalms also speak *about* Christ (*vox de Christo*). This becomes particularly clear when we look at the Fathers' exegesis of Psalm 1. "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked," begins Psalm 1. The immediate question, of course, is: who is "the man" who is the object of the psalmist's speech? Fascinatingly, the very first words of Augustine's commentary on the Psalms are Christ-filled words. "This statement," he says, "should be understood as referring to our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, the Lord-Man."³³ He then continues to speak about Christ's faithfulness in contrast to Adam's lack thereof: "*Blessed is the person who has not gone astray in the council of the ungodly*, as did the earthly man who conspired with his wife, already beguiled by the serpent, to disregard God's commandments."³⁴ When he then reflects on the man of Psalm 1 as not standing in the way of sinners, Augustine takes this as an opportunity to comment on the incarnation itself: "Christ most certainly came in the way of sinners by being born as sinners are; but he did not stand in it, for worldly allurements did not hold him."³⁵ Augustine distinguishes here between "coming" and "standing": Christ "came" in the way of sinners since in the incarnation he came in the likeness of sinful flesh, but he did not "stand" in the way of sinners, which is to say he did not become sinful. Without any hesitation, therefore, Augustine begins with a christological reading of the Psalm. The psalmist's voice is here a *vox de Christo*; a voice about Christ.

To be sure, there is no unanimity on this point among patristic interpreters. The great fourth-century defender of orthodox Trinitarian thought, Hilary of Poitiers, explicitly disagreed with this approach that Augustine would later take. "I have discovered," says Hilary, "either from personal conversation or from their letters and writings, that the opinion of many men about this Psalm is, that we ought to understand it to be a description of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that it is His happiness which is extolled in the verses following."³⁶ We just saw that this is exactly the approach of Augustine, and judging by Hilary's words, this was a common patristic approach. Hilary, however, disagrees, "But this interpretation is wrong both in method and reasoning," he comments, "though doubtless it is inspired by a pious tendency of thought, since the whole of the

33. Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 1," 67.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. Hilary, of Poitiers, "Psalm I," 236.

Psalter is to be referred to Him.”³⁷ We must carefully note that Hilary is not objecting to a christological reading. Indeed, he writes, “[T]he whole of the Psalter is to be referred to Him [i.e., Christ].” Hilary nonetheless does not think that the comment, “Blessed is the man,” is a reference to Christ, and he gives two basic reasons for this. First, the Son is the one who *gave* the Law, while according to the Psalm, this man’s happiness or blessedness depends on his “desire” being in the Law of the Lord. How can one attribute such desire to Christ? Christ’s desire, insists Hilary, is not in the Law of the Lord since, as the one who gives it, he is the Law’s Lord.³⁸ Second, the psalmist compares the blessed or happy man to a tree. This presupposes, Hilary explains, that the tree is the greater standard by which the blessed man is measured. How can a tree be happier than the Son of God? How can Christ be happy by becoming like the objects he himself created? The conclusion, insists Hilary, must be that the psalmist is speaking about believers: “[W]e must suppose him, who is here extolled as happy by the Prophet, to be the man who strives to conform himself to that body which the Lord assumed and in which He was born as man. . . .”³⁹ What we see from this comparison of Hilary and Augustine’s readings of Psalm 1 is that the church fathers, while unanimous in reading the Psalms christologically, are not always agreed on the details of *how* to do so.

Athanasius provides us with numerous examples of words *about* Christ (*vox de Christo*) in the Psalter. Thoroughly at home in the Psalms, Athanasius moves back and forth among them with amazing alacrity, and, as he does so, he locates in them many of the particular moments within the economy of the Son’s work. Athanasius reads in the Psalms the teaching of the Savior who will come as one who is God (Pss 50:3; 107:20; 118:26–27); the eternal generation of the Son (Pss 45:1; 110:3); the incarnation of God’s Son in the flesh (Pss 45:6–7; 87:5); the virgin birth (Ps 45:10–11); the suffering of the Savior (Ps 2:1–2); the death on a Cross (Ps 22:15–18); the representative character of Christ’s suffering (Pss 69:4; 72:4, 12; 88:16; 138:8); the ascension into heaven (Pss 24:7; 47:5); the session at God’s right hand (Pss 9:7–8; 110:1); the prophecy of Christ’s return as Judge (Pss 50:4; 72:1–2; 82:1); and, finally, the calling of

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 237.

the nations (Pss 47:1; 72:9–11).⁴⁰ Athanasius regards the *vox de Christo* as nearly omnipresent in the book of Psalms. And while his exegesis tends to be less christological, Basil of Caesarea, too, heaps praise on the Psalms when commenting, “Therein is perfect theology, a prediction of the coming of Christ in the flesh . . .”⁴¹ The notion that the Psalms present a “word about Christ” receives the unanimous support of the Fathers.

This approach implies great confidence in the inspiration of Scripture. According to the Fathers’ interpretation, the Spirit has so shaped the contents of the Old Testament that it already bespeaks New Testament christological realities. This confidence in divine inspiration is what allows the Fathers to read the book of Psalms prophetically. The notion that the Psalter is a book of prophecy is perhaps one of the distinguishing characteristics of pre-modern exegesis. Interpreters like Augustine will often refer to the psalmist as “the prophet.” Or, more radically yet, in an unencumbered sort of way, someone like Augustine will simply refer to the Holy Spirit as the speaker of the Psalm.⁴² Contemporary sermons and commentaries tend to be much more hesitant in referring to “the prophet” or “the Spirit” as saying something in the text. Such hesitation goes hand in hand with a reluctance to read the Psalms as speaking prophetically about Christ. The modern notion that restricts exegesis to a search for the intent of the human author has a tendency to limit the horizons of interpretation to realities of this world. The almost inevitable result, it seems to me, is that any overarching intentions of the Spirit are excluded from the outset. It is by expanding our attention beyond this-worldly realities and by acknowledging the Spirit’s guiding hand in both the authorship and the interpretation of Holy Scripture that we will likely also regain confidence in our discernment of Christ’s presence in the Old Testament.

Finally, not only do we have the *vox ad Christum* and the *vox de Christo* in the Psalms, but there is also the *vox Christi*, the voice of Christ—Christ himself speaking through the voice of the psalmist. Fiedrowicz makes clear that one of the key elements of patristic exegesis is the attempt to figure out who is speaking in a psalm. Fiedrowicz refers to this as “prosopological exegesis,” derived from the Greek word *prosōpon*, meaning “person.” Prosopological exegesis, therefore, asks the

40. Athanasius, “Letter,” nos. 5–8, pp. 103–6. See also no. 26, p. 123.

41. Basil, of Caesarea, *Exegetic Homilies*, 153.

42. Fiedrowicz, “General Introduction,” 24.

question: which *person* is speaking in this psalm? Once this has been figured out, much of the rest of the psalm falls into place. We see a striking example of such prosopological exegesis at the very beginning of Hilary's commentary on Psalm 1: "The primary condition of knowledge for reading the Psalms," he starts off, clearly raising a hermeneutical issue right at the outset, "is the ability to see as whose mouthpiece we are to regard the Psalmist as speaking, and who it is that he addresses."⁴³ With the former of these two issues, the question of whose mouthpiece the psalmist might be, Hilary introduces prosopological interpretation.

We see something similar in Augustine's work. As already mentioned, for Augustine, the doctrine of *totus Christus*—the "whole Christ" as reference to Christ *and* his members—means that Christ can be speaking in these kinds of passages either in his own person (*ex persona sua*) or in our person (*ex persona nostra*).⁴⁴ Fiedrowicz puts it this way:

An important part of Augustine's thought is that the Church was already present in Christ's prayer. His exegesis of the frequently quoted verse of Psalm 21 (21:2[22:1]) shows that for Augustine the cry of Christ on the cross was not only raised "in Adam's name" but had an ecclesial dimension too, in that Christ directed those words to the Father "in the name of his body" equally (*ex persona corporis*). By identifying the Church with even the earthly body of Christ Augustine was able to discover a mysterious involvement of humanity in the event of the cross. We were there (*nos ibi eramus*).⁴⁵

"We were there." This statement shows what is at stake for Augustine—and, really, for the Fathers in general—in prosopological exegesis. By seeing the Psalms as referring to Christ, the church fathers allow God's people to make these Psalms their own, as well.⁴⁶ The church is present in the Psalms because Christ himself is present there. Pulling these various strands together, we may say that, for the Fathers, spiritual interpretation is nearly synonymous with christological interpretation.

43. Hilary, of Poitiers, "Psalm I," 236.

44. Fiedrowicz, "General Introduction," 52–55.

45. *Ibid.*, 54.

46. Discussing Augustine's exegesis of Ps 100 (101), Louth, "Heart in Pilgrimage," 303, comments: "[I]t is Christ's voice we hear in the psalm, and part of what is meant by understanding the psalm is learning how to join our voice to Christ's; the Christ singing in the psalm is Christ the head of the Church, of which we are the members . . ."

PERSONAL APPROPRIATION

Augustine's *totus Christus* theology makes the Psalms eminently suitable for the life of the church and for individual Christians. Patristic commentators who do not have Augustine's highly developed *totus Christus* theology are, nonetheless, equally convinced that the meaning of the Psalms is intimately connected to the lives of believers. Specifically, I want to point to two elements of this connection. First, I have already mentioned the centrality of the element of virtue for the Fathers when discussing the role of music in connection with the Psalms. But the focus on virtue is not merely a by-product of the Fathers' reflections on aesthetics and harmony; a concern with virtue dominates much of their exegesis. It is central particularly to the Alexandrian tradition (notably Clement and Origen) and to the Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus), who in this respect follow, at least in part, the first-century Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, Philo. Commenting on the two ways of Psalm 1, Basil explains: "[L]eading us on wisely and skilfully to virtue, David made the departure from evil the beginning of good."⁴⁷ Basil's brother, Gregory of Nyssa, places an even greater emphasis on virtue in his *Treatise on the Inscriptions on the Psalms*. He casts the entire book as a treatise on virtue, writing in the preface, "[Y]ou enjoined us to investigate the meaning to be observed in these inscriptions, so that their capacity to lead us to virtue might be obvious to all."⁴⁸ Gregory begins the first chapter of Part I with the words, "The goal of the virtuous life is blessedness."⁴⁹ He then explains the five books of the Psalms as five stages of ascent in the growth of virtue. In Part II he explains the Septuagint's inscriptions, or headings, above the Psalms, and begins by insisting that these also are meant to lead us on in virtue: "For these too make a significant contribution to us in respect to the way of virtue, as can be learned from the meaning itself of the words which have been inscribed."⁵⁰ Gregory is convinced that the Psalms are all about teaching us the virtuous life, and, as a result, the theme of virtue runs throughout his commentary.

47. Basil, of Caesarea, *Exegetic Homilies*, 157. See also pp. 160, 161.

48. Gregory, of Nyssa, *Treatise on the Inscriptions*, I.pref.1, p. 83.

49. *Ibid.*, I.1.5, p. 84.

50. *Ibid.*, II.1.1, p. 124.

The emphasis on virtue is not restricted to the Alexandrians and the Cappadocians. It is also present among the Antiochenes. When Theodoret of Cyrus, who likely wrote his *Commentary on the Psalms* between 441 and 448,⁵¹ comments on the word “blessed” in Psalm 1, he explains that this epithet “constitutes the fruit of perfection as far as virtue is concerned. . . . [T]he practice of virtue has as its fruit and goal the beatitude from God.”⁵² And speaking about the tree growing by the riverbanks, he explains, “You see, champions of virtue reap the fruit of their labors in the future life; but like a kind of foliage they bear sound hope constantly within them . . .”⁵³

We may say that the church fathers let their exegesis be guided by the question of how a particular reading advances growth in virtue. Interpretation for them was less a matter of historical investigation than the pursuit of a spiritual purpose. This difference in perspective means an entry into the text rather different from what we are used to. We tend to put historical questions to the text and ask, primarily, what the text *meant*. The Fathers perhaps make us feel uncomfortable by their relative neglect of the historical level of meaning. They are right, however, to search Scripture to see how it can help us rid ourselves of earthly passions and assist our growth in the life of God; in other words, they rightly focus on what the text *means*.

Personal appropriation is not only a matter of growth in virtue, even if that is the overriding and ultimate concern, especially for the Cappadocians. The church fathers are also keenly aware that the book of Psalms reflects a broad range of human emotions, and they believed it quite legitimate to find one’s own emotional experiences reflected there. Athanasius’s *Letter to Marcellinus* contains a long section in which he reflects on how one can make the Psalms his own. Athanasius praises the Psalter for having “a certain grace of its own.”⁵⁴ He then comments:

It contains even the emotions of each soul, and it has the changes and rectifications of these delineated and regulated in itself. Therefore anyone who wishes boundlessly to receive and understand from it, so as to mold himself, it is written there. For in the other books one hears only what one must do and what one

51. Hill, “Introduction,” 4.

52. Theodoret, of Cyrus, “Commentary on Psalm 1,” 47.

53. *Ibid.*, 49. See also p. 50.

54. Athanasius, “Letter,” no. 10, p. 107.

must not do. And one listens to the Prophets so as solely to have knowledge of the coming of the Savior. One turns his attention to the histories, on the basis of which he can know the deeds of the kings and saints. But in the Book of Psalms, the one who hears, in addition to learning these things, also comprehends and is taught in the emotions of the soul. . . .⁵⁵

Athanasius shows himself here as a pastor and physician of the soul who is aware that one cannot read the Psalms without making the various emotions of them one's own. And so he comments that "the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs."⁵⁶ Reading the Psalms, for Athanasius, leads to deeper knowledge also of oneself.

Athanasius does not base this emotional appropriation on a *totus Christus* theology. He carefully distinguishes between psalms that prophesy about the Savior, on the one hand, and passages that reflect our own emotions, on the other hand.⁵⁷ To be sure, Athanasius then goes on to say that just as the Psalms provide examples that mirror the emotions of our souls, so also Christ provides what Athanasius calls a "type," "image," or "model" for our actions.⁵⁸ According to Athanasius, Christ "offered himself as a model for those who wish to know the power of acting. It was indeed for this reason that he made this resound in the Psalms before his sojourn in our midst, so that just as he provided the model of the earthly and heavenly man in his own person, so also from the Psalms he who wants to do so can learn the emotions and dispositions of the souls, finding in them also the therapy and correction suited for each emotion."⁵⁹ Christ is the one who stands behind the descriptions of our emotional life in the Psalms; and, what is more, his very life itself offers a description of the life of the soul. Athanasius then goes on to offer page upon page of references to the Psalms connecting them to the various emotional states of the believer. There are psalms for nearly every situation one may encounter and for nearly every emotional expression to which one may wish to give voice.⁶⁰ The Psalms, for Athanasius as well

55. *Ibid.*, 108.

56. Athanasius, "Letter," no. 11, p. 109.

57. *Ibid.*, 109–10.

58. Athanasius, "Letter," no. 13, p. 112.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Athanasius, "Letter," nos. 14–26, pp. 112–23.

as for the other church fathers, offer a glimpse into one's own soul. Thus, the Psalms become a means for healing one's emotional life.

It may be true that in many ways the church fathers inhabited a world quite different from our own. Nonetheless, their exegesis of the Psalms shows an underlying sensibility that we need to retain or, perhaps, retrieve. The underlying sensibility is that the Psalms must be read theologically or spiritually. They are not just human words from the past, whose meaning we can objectively ascertain by painstaking historical research. Instead, in and through the human words of Scripture, the divine author intends to convey eternal, spiritual truth. This interpretive principle—that, in and through the historical or literal meaning of Scripture, God wants to convey spiritual levels of meaning—has several implications. First, we recognize the congruence between the harmonious singing of the Psalms, on the one hand, and the harmony of the cosmos and of the human soul, on the other hand. Singing the Psalms makes us beautiful because it puts us in virtuous harmony with the created order. Second, we recognize Christ at the center of the Psalms. The ultimate reason that we cannot limit our interpretation of the Psalms to their historical meaning is that such exegesis fails to do justice to the newness of what comes in and through the fulfillment of the Psalms in Christ. Finally, union with Christ allows us to appropriate personally the contents of the Psalms and so come to deeper self-knowledge. We ourselves have a place in the Psalms. They speak of us, of our maturation in virtue, and of the wide variety of human emotions. Spiritual or theological exegesis of the Psalms, therefore, yields virtuous harmony, draws us deeper into Christ, and teaches us a deeper knowledge of ourselves.⁶¹

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