

THE PSALTER AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE IN ORIGEN'S AND BASIL'S EXEGESIS ON THE PSALMS¹

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ABSTRACT. By comparing Origen's and Basil's homilies on the psalms, this article aims to demonstrate how both authors conceived of the literary and theological unity of the Psalter. Both exegetes incorporate Christian spiritual progress—as presented, according to them, in the divine music—into the dichotomy of *praxis* and *theoria*. To this end, they use a set of specific images. For instance, they both contrast the practical life of moral preparation, depicted as the “psalm” and a kind of instrumental music, with the contemplative life as the “canticle” and a kind of vocal music. In this way, drawing on the superiority of the body over the mind, Basil and Origen present the human body as a musical instrument and the virtuous life as harmonious song. I suggest that the recurring stress on this philosophical structure in the exegesis of the Psalter is explained by a desire to present this scriptural book as adapted for every Christian from the simplest to the more advanced ones, whatever spiritual preparation they have. The conception of the Psalter as an universal text embracing the content of the whole Bible developed by Basil, Athanasius and possibly Origen also leads to this approach. My research focuses primarily on Origen's and Basil's *Homilies on the Psalms*, but also establishes some relevant connections with other commentaries on the psalms.

KEYWORDS: Psalter, Origen, Basil of Caesarea, Alexandrian exegesis, musical imagery, *praxis* and *theoria*.

1. Introduction

Among all the books of the Old Testament, the Psalter was by far the scriptural text most commented on from Late Antiquity until the Middle Ages². The first well-preserved commentaries on the psalms that have come down to us, however, are

¹ I thank Miriam De Cock for all the comments she made on the first draft of this paper.

² E. Grünbeck (1994) 5.

dated only to the third century CE and belong to Origen.³ This fact is attested by Jerome, who mentions that Origen was the first one to leave a range of exegetical texts on the Psalter.⁴ These were composed in three different genres: scholiae, commentaries, and homilies. The homilies had been almost inaccessible until the discovery of the *Codex Monacensis Graecus 314*. The codex contains a collection of 29 sermons on the Psalter; these invaluable homilies, published in 2015 by Lorenzo Perrone and his colleagues, are now progressively gaining prominence among academics through studies and translations.⁵

In my investigation, I demonstrate that Origen and Basil develop some metaphors of musicality and harmony with a view to present the psalms as a source of divine knowledge and to shape the journey of the soul.⁶ By delving into this pedagogical aspect of the homilies, I will concentrate on those passages where the authors use musical imagery and other similar metaphors as a means to encourage harmonious intellectual and spiritual progress. Already Francesco Pelosi offered a comprehensive overview of the functions that music could have in the Platonic tradition, which had an impact on Origen. Of these functions, the educational or therapeutic aspect of music, along with the idea that music can play in the body and soul, is of primary interest for my research.⁷

The intrinsic relevance of the Psalter for the early Christian community and its generic uniqueness has been accurately pointed out by Carol Harrison in her essay about the musicality of the psalms:

the psalms, because they were songs or chants, were unique among the books of Scripture in being a microcosm of cosmic unity and harmony: they were not only a mirror for the soul and its movements but a mirror of the whole of creation and divine revelation: they contained all truth, in other words, the whole of reality, including the whole of Scripture, and therefore, in a sense, unify or harmonise it, too, in microcosm.⁸

³ Hippolytus' (c. 235 AD) earlier fragments of some commentaries on the psalms have been preserved in chains (P. Nautin (1953) 167–183) or in Theodoret's *Eranistes* (G. Ettlinger (1975) 156–157). Concerning the debates about the authorship and authenticity of these commentaries attributed to Hippolytus, see, M.-J. Rondeau (1985) 28–32; R. Heine (2004) 142–143.

⁴ Hier. *Epist.* 112.20.

⁵ Origen's *Homilies on the Psalms* have been so far translated in English, Italian and Russian: J.W. Trigg (2020); L. Perrone (2020); A. Grünert (2021), (2022), respectively.

⁶ See, K.J. Torjesen (1986) 32.

⁷ F. Pelosi (2010)

⁸ C. Harrison (2011) 215. C. Harrison is specifically drawing here on Athanasius' *Letter to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms* and Ambrosius' *Explanatio Psalmi* (I, 7).

In terms of Christian teachings, the very fact that the psalms provided a concise overview of all the relevant scriptural doctrines made the Christological reading of the Psalter a new means to thoroughly and “harmonically” grasp the reality of the divine creation inside and outside the human being made in the image of God. For the patristic authors, the idea that the harmonious structure of reality is “musically” reproduced in the songs of the Psalter was probably rooted in the philosophical concepts of Plato's *Republic*⁹ and inherently connected to the Pythagorean doctrine of cosmic harmony. Furthermore, the search for a literary unity of the Psalter was driven by concerns not unlike those of the Neoplatonic tradition of philosophical commentaries—even if the Christian focus remained, strictly speaking, theological.¹⁰ This philosophical idea about the musicality of the cosmos should be taken into account if we want to explore the unity of the Psalter as well as the metaphorical language of the commentaries on the psalms. Yet we should bear in mind that the fathers are less interested in the philosophy of music, but focus rather on their exegetical tasks.¹¹

The widespread use of the psalms was due not only to the fact they were included in the Christian liturgy, which inherited and adapted Jewish worship,¹² but also to the “universal” variety of topics they touch upon. This thematic diversity was probably another reason why exegetes as early as Origen laid great emphasis on the literary and theological unity of the Psalter.¹³ Although we find a considerable number of allusions to the Psalter in the gospels,¹⁴ the very singing of the psalms became a more or less established liturgical practice as well as a form of personal piety only in the second middle of the fourth century, after the Council of Laodicea (363–364)¹⁵. In this regard, the *Homilies on the Psalms* by Basil of Caesarea, delivered shortly after this council (approximately between 370 and 375)¹⁶, represent a particularly relevant collection of 14 sermons dealing with an array of psalms from Ps 1 to Ps 114. These homilies were not conceived as a whole, but are still united by a common hermeneutic approach, a similar audience, and a common metaphorical language. This also applies to Origen's *Homilies on the Psalms*. After them,

⁹ Plato. *Resp.* 617b

¹⁰ R. Edwards (2016) 52.

¹¹ F.X. Risch (2019) 302.

¹² For the singing of psalms in Jewish worship, see D.S. Katz (2000) 57–78.

¹³ R. Edwards (2016) 51–52.

¹⁴ H. Attridge (2004) 101.

¹⁵ E.J. Jonkers (1954) 96.

¹⁶ C. Moreschini (2005) 75.

Basil's homilies are the first extant collection of sermons on the psalms (other interpretations of the Psalter, for instance, by Eusebius or Athanasius, pertain to different exegetical genres).¹⁷

This paper will be divided into two parts. First, I explore Origen's and Basil's attitude towards the Psalter as a text providing a harmonious and comprehensive knowledge about God and His creation. I also pay attention here to some differences in their approach to the psalms as a source of spiritual knowledge. Second, I explore some of the metaphors used by both authors in the context of their homilies on the Psalms. With these metaphors, they put forth the idea that human life itself can be compared to instrumental or vocal music, and these two forms correspond to the two ways in which God can be known, the practical and the theoretical.

2. The Psalter as a Bible-in-miniature

As we have seen, the psalms were, for the church fathers, “a mirror for the soul” and also tend to “unify or harmonise it [i.e. the whole of reality as presented in the Scripture — A.G.], too, in microcosm”¹⁸. In other words, the Psalter as a divinely inspired book and a source of Christian teaching provides an all-encompassing and harmonious image of the multifarious reality created by God and enables the human, created in His image, to attain a higher degree of self-knowledge. In this regard, Michael Cameron figuratively characterizes the Psalter as “a handbook of spiritual discipline, a road map for spiritual advancement, and a charter for doctrinal discussion”.¹⁹ The patristic authors explained this comprehensiveness by the fact that the Psalter covers the content of all biblical books like a Bible-in-miniature: the psalms “interwove the Bible's great themes of creation, history, law, prophecy, and wisdom, mapping God's providential design for creation”.²⁰

This idea of harmonious diversity can be identified in the Caesarean prologue to Origen's *Commentary on Psalm 1*, preserved in the *Philokalia*²¹: first, in the idea based on Rev 3.7 that “the Divine Scriptures have been closed up and sealed with the key of David (τῆ κλειδί τοῦ Δαυείδ)” (*Philokalia* II.1); secondly, in the metaphor of Scripture as “many locked-up rooms in one house (πολλοὶ οἴκοι ἐν οἰκίᾳ μιᾷ

¹⁷ See, Eusebius of Caesarea's *Commentaria in Psalmos* (PG. T. 23. P., 1857) or Athanasius of Alexandria's *Expositiones in Psalmos* (PG. T. 27. P., 1857. Col. 59–590).

¹⁸ C. Harrison (2011) 215.

¹⁹ M. Cameron (2019) 572.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Orig. *Philokalia* 2, 3 (SC 302, 240)

κεκλεισμένοι)" (*Philokalia* II.3).²² As he introduces his exegesis of the whole Psalter with this image, Origen refers to a Jewish tradition of reading the Bible as a set of "obscure" books sealed with a key, which through their intertextual unity provide their interpretation. In this way, the only means to interpret a book of Scripture (to unlock a sealed room) was through other biblical passages. Although this approach is often, and justly, compared to the Alexandrian exegetical principle of "clarifying Homer from Homer", Origen clearly states that he owes this method to a certain Jew whose name he does not specify. Thereby he underlines that this procedure is also applicable to the exegesis of Scripture. Trying to identify the source which exerted an influence upon Origen, Guy Stroumsa points to an Alexandrian Jewish esoteric tradition with its tendency to apply the methods developed by the Homeric commentators to Biblical exegesis.²³ Supporting the metaphor of a mansion with 1 Cor 2.13, whose idea of "comparing spiritual things with spiritual" he often uses to sustain his exegetical method,²⁴ Origen provides a methodological basis for a "symphonic reading of the Scripture". Although the passage of *Philokalia* only conveys the idea that the obscure meaning of the Scripture should be clarified through other scriptural texts, we should take into account that the *Commentary on Psalm 1* came down to us in fragmentary form. Because all its extant passages touch upon more general hermeneutical questions and provide, for instance, a list of all the canonical books of the Old Testament,²⁵ frustratingly enough, we do not have any precise idea about Origen's exegesis of Psalm 1. Moreover, on the grounds of the fragments from the *Commentary on Psalm 1* it is not clear how the "key of David" closing up the Scriptures or the metaphor of the mansion, which should immediately precede the commentary on Ps 1.1,²⁶ are related to Psalm 1 or the Psalter in general. As Marguerite Harl notices in her edition of the *Philokalia*, the habit of incorporating a prologue to the Psalter into the commentary on Psalm 1 would be found in other Greek exegeses on the same psalm.²⁷ Therefore, the subsequent patristic tradition heavily relying on the *Philokalia* (probably compiled by Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea,²⁸ who at least ought to have read Origen's entire *Commentary on Psalm 1*), can help us to reconstruct some of Origen's hermeneutic procedures as regards the Psalter.

²² Orig. *Philokalia* 2, 3 (SC 302, 244)

²³ G. Stroumsa (2005) 125–126.

²⁴ See, Orig. *HomPs.* 77.5.2 (GCS 19, 410)

²⁵ Orig. *Prooemium e commentario in psalmos.* 5 (B. Villani (2019) 110). See, R.E. Heine (2015) 66–67.

²⁶ R.E. Heine (2015) 68.

²⁷ M. Harl (1983) 239.

²⁸ A. Louth (2022) 431.

These exegetical texts as well as some of Origen's homilies on other psalms allow for a more thorough understanding of the approach to the Psalter that Origen had. Among these, Basil's *Homily on the Psalm 1* is a kind of commentary that represents at the same time an introduction to the whole Psalter. The Book of Psalms is presented here as a text containing "what is profitable from all (τὸ ἐκ πάντων ὠφέλιμον) books of the Bible", because it is "the common treasury of good doctrine (κοινὸν ταμειὸν ἐστὶν ἀγαθῶν διδασκαλιῶν), carefully finding what is suitable for each person (τὸ ἐκάστῳ πρόσφορον κατὰ τὴν ἐπιμέλειαν ἐξευρίσκουσα)".²⁹ A similar idea conveying the unity of the Psalter, as well as the Psalter's encapsulation of all Scripture, is expressed by Athanasius, who bears some marks of Origen's influence in his approach to the Scripture,³⁰ in his *Letter to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms*:

each book of the Bible has, of course, its own particular message (τὸ ἴδιον ἐπάγγελμα): [...] Each of these books, you see, is like a garden which grows one special kind of fruit; by contrast, the Psalter is a garden which, besides its special fruit, grows also some those of all the rest (τὰ ἴδια δὲ πάλιν μετ' αὐτῶν ψάλλουσα δείκνυσι).³¹

Even though neither Basil nor Athanasius uses any musical metaphors, the images of the treasury and the garden convey a similar idea of the Psalter as a harmonious and complete source of knowledge which represents a kind of Bible-in-miniature.³² Because of this similarity, I suggest that Basil and Athanasius in their introductions to the Psalter were drawing on the tradition of Origen. It means that they could know the mentioned *Commentary on Psalm 1* from the *Philokalia*. It is probable that the image of "the key of David" sealing up the Scriptures and the metaphor of the Scriptures as a mansion full of sealed and obscure rooms led, in the unpreserved part of the *Commentary on Psalm 1*, to the conclusion that all the books of the Bible bear a specific connection with the Psalter as the book of David and can be interpreted (unsealed) through it.

In the introduction to his *First Homily on Psalm 36*, Origen sets forth the idea that the Scripture deals with a variety of themes, although in this passage he does not specify that the Psalter embraces all the topics that are treated elsewhere in

²⁹ Bas. *HomPs.* 1.1 (PG 29, 212.4–5; 7–9). Hereinafter translated by A.C. Way (1981).

³⁰ H.-J. Sieben (1974) 205–214. See also A Louth's recent chapter "The Transmission of Origen from Athanasius to the Cappadocians": A Louth (2022) 429–444.

³¹ Athanasius. *Epist. ad Marcell.* 1 (PG 27, 12.26;38–40). Quoted according to St Athanasius: *On the Incarnation*. Crestwood (N.Y.), St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1953, 97–98.

³² R. Edwards (2016) 57.

the Bible. Thus, he states that the Scripture “sometimes teaches unspeakable and secret matters (ἀπόρρητά τινα καὶ μυστικά)”, “sometimes announces in advance about the Savior and his visitation (τὰ περὶ τοῦ σωτῆρος καὶ τῆς ἐπιδημίας)” and sometimes “treats our behavior (τὰ ἡθῆ ἡμῶν)”, the latter being the topic of the Psalm 36.³³ In his *Homily on Psalm 1*, specifying which topics the Book of Psalms has taken over, Basil, like Origen, enumerates prophecy and ethics, but he omits the mystical aspect and adds the historical one: “it foretells coming events (προφητεύει τὰ μέλλοντα); it recalls history (ἱστορίας ὑπομνήσκει); it frames laws for life (νομοθετεῖ τῷ βίῳ); it suggests what must be done (ὑποτίθεται τὰ πρακτέα).”³⁴ We encounter the same categories in Athanasius' *Letter to Marcellinus*.³⁵ However, while Athanasius and Basil do not highlight the mystical Christian teaching as a distinct topic of the Bible and the Psalter, it does not mean that they exclude the mystical theology from their commentaries on the psalms; they prefer to include it in the description of spiritual progress.

3. The Psalter as a Source for the Spiritual Progress to the Benefit of Every Christian

In the well-known prologue to the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*,³⁶ Origen argues, in the spirit of Neoplatonic philosophy, that the three Books of Solomon, namely the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, should be understood as three parts of philosophy that must be studied one after another in the sequence of ethics, physics, and epoptics. This means that Proverbs constitutes ethics, Ecclesiastes represents physics, and the Song of Songs becomes the source of epoptics, i.e. Christian philosophy or mystical theology.³⁷ According to the Christian reception of this division, it signifies that ethics aims to purify the soul from sin and teaches the Christian to act according to the Gospel, physics tends to show the vanity of the sensuous reality, while epoptics teaches the purified soul to seek the contemplation of the divine realities.³⁸ In one of his *Homilies on Psalm 67*, by contrasting pagan hymns, such as paeans and wedding songs, with Christian songs, Origen also refers to the Song of Songs as a source of divine knowledge: “just as something can be a holy of holies, so sing the Song of Songs”.³⁹ Furthermore, among

³³ Orig. *HomPs.* 36.1.1 (GCS 19, 113). Hereinafter translated by J.W. Trigg (2020).

³⁴ Bas. *HomPs.* 1.1 (PG 29, 212.4–7)

³⁵ Athanasius. *Epist. ad Marcell.* 1 (PG 27, 20.40–49)

³⁶ Orig. *Comm. Cant.* prol. 3.1–3 (SC 375, 128–130)

³⁷ See O. Alieva (2020).

³⁸ P. Hadot (1979) 218–219.

³⁹ Orig. *HomPs.* 67.2.2 (GCS 19, 202).

other songs appropriate for a Christian seeking the divine Jerusalem, he cites the Psalm 136 (“On the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept...”).⁴⁰ The latter suggests that this psalm in the same degree as the Song of Songs also represents a source of mystical knowledge.

In the *Homily on Psalm 44*, Basil applies this division to Christian teaching by providing an exegesis of the many-colored (πεποικιλμένη) garments of the queen from Ps 44, 10 (“The queen stood on thy right hand, arrayed in gilded clothing, embroidered with varied colors”):

since, however, the teachings are not simple, but varied and manifold, and embrace words, moral and natural, and the so-called esoteric (φυσικούς και τούς έποπτικούς λεγομένους περιέχοντα λόγους), therefore, the Scripture says that *the clothing of the bride is varied*⁴¹.

As Olga Alieva noted, Plutarch explains similarly the many-colored (ποικίλαι) garments of Isis, and contrasts them to the “luminosity (τὸ φωτεινός) of Osiris, that is epopteia (De Is. 382de)”.⁴² All in all, the epopteia, according to Origen and Basil, represents in a Christian setting an equivalent to theology as the crown jewel of knowledge and the culmination of the Christian *cursus studiorum*,⁴³ while the two first steps, namely, ethics and physics, serve as an essential preparation to this.

However, in his *Homily on Psalm 1*, Basil alludes without using specific mystical terminology to the fact that the Psalter encompasses ethics and epoptics without physics. First of all, he enumerates the set of virtues pertaining in part to the platonic cardinal virtues (courage, justice, self-control, prudence), which certainly refers to ethics:

what, in fact, can you not learn from the psalms? Can you not learn the grandeur of courage (τῆς ἀνδρίας τὸ μεγαλοπρεπές)? The exactness of justice (τῆς δικαιοσύνης τὸ ἀκριβές)? The nobility of self-control (σωφροσύνης τὸ σεμνόν)? The perfection of prudence (τὸ τῆς φρονήσεως τέλειον)? A manner of penance (μετανοίας τρόπον)? The measure of patience (ὑπομονῆς μέτρα)?⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Orig. *HomPs.* 67.2.2 (GCS 19, 203) See also John McGuckin’s paper, where he shows that Origen employed the Psalter to support some of his more speculative assertions: J. McGuckin (2011).

⁴¹ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 44.10 (PG 29, 408.42–44).

⁴² O. Alieva (2020) 388.

⁴³ See, Greg.Thaum. *Paneg.* 13.150 (SC 148, 158); I.L.E. Ramelli (2023) 98.

⁴⁴ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 11 (PG 29, 213.13–17)

Then Basil proceeds with a range of topics that correspond to epoptics:

Therein is perfect theology (θεολογία τελεία), a prediction of the coming of Christ in the flesh (πρόρρησις τῆς διὰ σαρκὸς ἐπιδημίας Χριστοῦ), a threat of judgement (ἀπειλή κρίσεως), a hope of resurrection (ἀναστάσεως ἐλπίς), a fear of punishment (φόβος κολάσεως), promises of glory (ἐπαγγελία δόξης), an unveiling of mysteries (μυστηρίων ἀποκαλύψεις); all things, as if in some great public treasury (ἐν μεγάλῳ τινὶ καὶ κοινῷ ταμείῳ), are stored up in the Book of Psalms⁴⁵.

As Marie-Odile Boulnois states,⁴⁶ in Origen's *Homilies on the Psalms*, mystical knowledge is often connected to eschatology,⁴⁷ eternity,⁴⁸ and the heavenly homeland⁴⁹—which is also the case in the quoted passage of Basil. He actually mentions among the mystical matters encompassed by the Psalter “the threat of judgement” and “the hope of resurrection”.

In Basil's *Homily on Psalm 1* in particular, the universality of the Psalter and its pedagogical character is demonstrated not only by its content, but also by the diversity of its audience, which is expressed by the fact that the psalms also reach out to less spiritually advanced Christians. Since they are inclined to pleasure, the Holy Spirit created a kind of spiritual medication by adding to the psalms a musical component (τὸ ἐκ τῆς μελωδίας τερπνόν).⁵⁰ Thus, He connects the musicality of the psalms with the healing effect brought by the singing or hearing of these songs to every human being. In this perspective, the Holy Spirit as the Author of the Scripture resorted to music with a specific pedagogical goal in mind, because of His charity. A similar idea can be found in Plato's *Timaeus*, where the function of music is to restore the harmony of the soul.⁵¹ Origen and Basil, who had to deliver their homilies to a very diverse audience, saw in this musical aspect of the Psalter a pedagogical intention; in fact, they considered that the objective of this book was to provide teaching with a modicum of relaxation and enjoyment, which is especially suitable for the less advanced. Basil associates the efficacy of its teaching with the pleasure provided by the hearing or singing of psalms: “even a forceful lesson does not always endure, but what enters the mind with joy and pleasure (μετὰ τέρψεως

⁴⁵ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 1.1 (PG 29, 213.18–23)

⁴⁶ M.-O Boulnois (2021) 430.

⁴⁷ Orig. *HomPs.* 36.2.5 (GCS 19, 133)

⁴⁸ Orig. *HomPs.* 36.4.8 (GCS 19, 172)

⁴⁹ Orig. *HomPs.* 67.2.2 (GCS 19, 202)

⁵⁰ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 1.1 (PG 29, 212.20).

⁵¹ Pl. *Ti.* 47c–e.

καὶ χάριτος) somehow becomes more firmly impressed upon it”.⁵² A similar idea is expressed by Origen in his *Homilies on the Psalms*: the singing of psalms provides humans with the relaxation they need (ἀνέσεως δεόμεθα).⁵³ As Pelosi notices concerning Plato’s *Laws*, “pleasure seems to play an important role in the mechanisms with which music exerts ethical power over the soul”.⁵⁴

The conception implying that the Psalter includes a range of distinctive teachings related to different levels of spiritual advancement entails a possible engagement with a diversified audience. Thus, the musicality of the Psalter is expressed as a feature specifically appropriate for the younger who lack experience or intellectual preparation and require a more simplified approach to the Scripture, so that they “might to all appearances chant but, in reality, become trained in the soul (τῇ δὲ ἀληθείᾳ τὰς ψυχὰς ἐκπαιδευόνται)”.⁵⁵ This also applies to all common people who, like children, do not have the opportunity to get proper preparation for the reading and understanding of the Scripture.⁵⁶ The performance of psalms is not limited to the Church congregation, and by stressing their universal applicability Basil implies that they are a part of the private as well as public everyday life of the post-Constantine era: “they do chant the words of the psalms, even in the home (τὰ δὲ τῶν ψαλμῶν λόγια καὶ κατ’ οἶκον μελωδοῦσι), and they spread them around in the marketplace”.⁵⁷ Thus, Basil concludes, the Psalter contains teaching for three different levels of students: “it is the elementary exposition of beginners (εἰσαγομένοις στοιχείωσις), the improvement of those advancing (προκοπτόντων ἀΰξησις), the solid support of the perfect (τελειουμένων στήριγμα)”.⁵⁸ A similar three-part curriculum for the ordinary people (φαῦλοι), those who are making progress (προκόποντες), and the perfect (τέλειοι) is also sometimes used by Origen, for instance, in his exegesis of Ps 36.8.⁵⁹

⁵² Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 1.1 (PG 29, 213.11–13)

⁵³ R. Somos (2019) 78. Despite the fact that R. Somos translates ἀνεσις as “recreation” I would, along with J.W. Trigg, suggest that this technical term from musicology means rather “relaxation”. See, Arist. *Pol.* 1341b41.

⁵⁴ F. Pelosi (2010) 53. See, Pl. *Lg.* 655e5–656b7.

⁵⁵ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 1.1 (PG 29, 212.28–29)

⁵⁶ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 1.1 (PG 29, 212.29–32)

⁵⁷ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 1.1 (PG 29, 212.32–34)

⁵⁸ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 1.1 (PG 29, 213.1–3)

⁵⁹ Orig. *HomPs.* 36.2.3 (GCS 19,131)

The idea of progress and a specific taxis regarding the *Homilies on the Psalms* should be set in the specific context of the polemic with the Gnostics,⁶⁰ whom Origen reproached for a lack of methodology.⁶¹ This is precisely the reason why heresies were born, according to Origen's *Homily on the Psalm 77*:

we see how one must behave according to the law of Christ (πὼς πολιτευτέον κατ' αὐτόν). [...] If, then, before observing the commandments we go in search of secrets (πρὶν τηρῆσαι τὰς ἐντολάς ἐπὶ τὴν ζήτησιν ἐρχώμεθα τῶν μυστικῶν), not travelling on the road, we go astray.⁶²

We can observe the same sequence of ethics and eoptics in Origen's excerpt on the Psalm 118:

you should adopt a good behavior (πολιτευτέον) and correct your habits (τὰ ἔθη κατορθωτέον) before you come close to the examinations of the divine sayings (ἐπὶ τὴν ἐξέτασιν τῶν θείων λογίων).⁶³

Thus, as Robert Edwards has argued, the search for a theological or literary unity in the Psalter can be explained as “an attempt to reconcile the obvious diversity of the content of the Psalter with the emerging speculative theology”.⁶⁴ This search is driven by an intrinsically pedagogical agenda.

4. The Psalter as the Source of *Praxis* and *Theoria*

In connection with the previous excerpt from Psalm 118, it would be more accurate to speak not about the association of ethics and, eoptics, but about the two-stage sequence of *praxis* (the practical life of moral preparation) and *theoria* (the true contemplation), which comes back to the Aristotelian tradition. This two-stage progression can be compared with the Neoplatonic three-part curriculum: the *praxis* includes the Neoplatonic ethics and physics, while the *theoria* corresponds to eoptics and involves the contemplation of heavenly realities.⁶⁵ This scheme is also developed in Origen's and Basil's *Homilies on the Psalms*.

⁶⁰ M.-O Boulnois (2021) 423.

⁶¹ M.-O Boulnois (2021) 427.

⁶² Orig. *HomPs.* 77.1.5 (GCS 19, 361).

⁶³ Orig. *FrPs* 118. 2 (SC 189, 186–187). My translation.

⁶⁴ R. Edwards (2016) 52.

⁶⁵ A.G. Paddle (2004) 81–82.

In the prooimion to *the Homily on Psalm 29*, Basil links “the psalm” (ὁ ψαλμός) to the bodily praxis, whereas the “canticle” (ἡ ᾠδὴ) is related to contemplation.⁶⁶ In terms of this metaphorical musicality, the *praxis* corresponds to music performed on an instrument. This instrument is the human body, by nature adapted to glorify God.⁶⁷ Furthermore, it means that whereas the psalm, as an inferior genre, is performed on a cithara and corresponds to instrumental music, the canticle, as a superior genre, including the *Song of Songs*, corresponds to vocal music.⁶⁸ A similar idea about the superiority of vocal music can also be found in Plotinus’ *Enneads*: the philosopher “will abandon the use of lyres (ἀφήσει τὰς λύρας) and will cease to play it, having another job that requires no lyre (εἰς λύραν) and will let it lie unregarded while he sings without an instrument”.⁶⁹

The superiority of vocal music over instrumental music is also stated by Origen, who explains it through the difference between the body and the *hegemonikon*, suggesting that the mind prevails over the body. Thus, in his exegesis of Ps 67.5 (“Sing to God, play a stringed instrument to his name”), he connects “playing a stringed instrument” to the activity of the body and “singing” to the activity of the mind. The activity of the mind corresponds to the correct understanding of God as well as to an appropriate discourse about Him.⁷⁰

The idea that the actions of the body, i.e. the ethical preparation, should precede the contemplation is also grounded in the difference between the cithara and the psaltery.⁷¹ This link between the actions of the body and the cithara is rooted in the fact that in contrast to the psaltery, the cithara produces its sound from below.⁷² Thus, in his *Commentaries on the Psalms* 150, Origen gives the psaltery the following characteristics: the psaltery is the straightest instrument and the only one that has no curve as the cithara; in addition, it is the only instrument whose sound comes from above, while the cithara sounds from below.⁷³

⁶⁶ F.X. Risch (2019) 309.

⁶⁷ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 29.1 (PG 29, 305.23–31)

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Plot. *Enn.* 1.4.16. Translation: L.P. Gerson (2018), 84–85.

⁷⁰ Orig. *HomPs.* 67.2.4 (GCS 19, 209).

⁷¹ Within Alexandrian Christianity, this opposition of cithara related to the body and the psaltery related to the mind originates with Origen. However, as Valeriy Petrov observed (V. Petrov (2020) 233), Didymus conversely connects the cithara to the contemplation. See, Did. *Fr.* 16 (in Ps. 4.1), PG 39, 1166.1–4.

⁷² Bas. *In Ps.* 1, 2 (PG 29, 213.22–38).

⁷³ [Origen =] Hippolytus Romanus. *Fragmenta in Psalmos.* Fr. 9 (GCS 1, 140, 19–24); Fr. 11 (GCS 1, 141, 3–11) (= PG 10, 716D–717B). See, A.E. Ceulemans (2002) 13.

This opposition of the cithara and the psaltery can also be found in Basil's explanation of Ps 32.2 ("Give praise to the Lord on the harp; sing to him with the psaltery, the instrument of ten strings"). Thus, it is first of all "necessary to praise the Lord on the cithara (κιθάρα); that is, to render harmoniously (ἑναρμονίως) the actions of the body (τάς διὰ τοῦ σώματος ἐνεργείας ἀποδοῦναι)".⁷⁴ Then, keeping in mind the two-stage scheme of *praxis* and *theoria*, Basil compares the practical life and the contemplative life to a sort of harmonious music:

it is necessary, first, to correct the actions of our body (κατορθῶσαι τὰς διὰ τοῦ σώματος ἐνεργείας), so that we perform them harmoniously with the divine Word (ἄρμονίως τῷ θείῳ λόγῳ ἀποτελεῖν) and thus mount up to the contemplation of things intellectual (ἐπὶ τὴν θεωρίαν τῶν νοητῶν).⁷⁵

Then Basil elaborates on this metaphor with a symbolic interpretation of the construction of the psaltery: he connects the mind "seeking things above" and "proclaiming the mysteries" with the upper part of the psaltery, while the lower part of the psaltery is linked to the actions of the body. Thus, the human engaged in virtuous actions and contemplating "things above" creates, with his body and mind, a sort of spiritual symphony.⁷⁶ A similar expression of the virtuous life as a symphony of actions and words, which corresponds to intellectual activity, can be found in Plato's *Laches*.⁷⁷

5. Conclusion

As Robert Edwards stated, "not only was it imperative to interpret individual psalms in keeping with the purpose (σκοπός) or meaning (διάνοια) of the whole of the Scriptures, but it was also believed that the book of the Psalms itself had a special unity, likewise according to its own purpose and meaning".⁷⁸ Although he considers this "special unity" as an intrinsically theological one, this paper shows that it also has a pedagogical dimension to it. In their different metaphors related to the psaltery and its music, Origen and Basil of Caesarea formulate the philosophical dichotomy of *praxis* and *theoria*, which is closely connected to the Neoplatonic scheme of ethics, physics, and epoptics. Nevertheless, in the texts quoted above, Origen and Basil seem to focus on ethics and epoptics, leaving aside physics. In so

⁷⁴ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 32.2 (PG 29, 325.39–46)

⁷⁵ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 32.2 (PG 29, 328.3–6)

⁷⁶ Bas. *Hom.Ps.* 32.2 (PG 29, 328.11–17)

⁷⁷ Pl. *La.* 188d

⁷⁸ R. Edwards (2016) 57.

doing, they structure the spiritual progress of their congregation with a view to helping them achieve spiritual harmony given by Psalter. In fact, Origen and Basil aim to demonstrate that the Psalter offers instruction for every situation of life and for every Christian, whatever preparation or level of knowledge they have. At the same time, Basil and Athanasius stress the comprehensiveness of the Psalter, which includes the content of all other books of the Bible. This comprehensiveness is expressed with some powerful metaphors of harmony, such as the garden or the treasury. While this idea is explicitly presented only by Athanasius and Basil, we can reasonably maintain, on the account of some hints given in the *Philokalia*, that Origen shared the same attitude towards the composition of the Psalter.

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