

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PSALMODY IN THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY OF EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS

Luke Dysinger, O.S.B. [*Studia Patristica* XXX (1997), pp. 176-182]

Depending upon one's preferred vantage point, Evagrius Ponticus can be assessed and described in very different ways. As Michael O'Laughlin has pointed out,¹ those who regard Evagrius' ascetical treatises such as the *Praktikos*, *de Malignis Cogitationibus*, and *Antirrheticus* as the center of his thought often regard Evagrius as an orthodox spiritual master who assimilated and adapted the best traditions of the Desert Fathers. Others who consider the *Kephalaia Gnostica* and the *Letter to Melania* to represent the fullest expression of his mature thought can describe him as a speculative, esoteric theologian who deliberately employed an enigmatic style, since he knew that expressing himself plainly would be dangerous. Thus in this century scholars have described Evagrius' theology as: "more philosophical than properly theological,"² "closer to Buddhism than Christianity,"³ and, more recently, as spiritual "iconoclasm."⁴

What would be useful, indeed what is necessary today is an approach which holds together both these depictions of Evagrius: on the one hand the much sought-after spiritual father of Kellia, "the Blessed Abba Evagrius," of Palladius; and on the other (using his own terminology) Evagrius the *gnostikos*, that is to say the contemplative in search of knowledge, and through knowledge union with God. Or to put it another way, what is needed is an approach to Evagrius which emphasizes the interrelationship and not merely the distinctions between the different levels or stages of spiritual development which are the foundation of Evagrius' ascetical and mystical theology.

I believe that a bridge between these different depictions of Evagrius and a clearer appreciation of the overall unity of his model of spiritual progress may be found in Evagrius' personal asceticism, specifically in his practice of the monastic discipline of psalmody. I should add that several of the points I am about to make are discussed in detail in chapters one and two of *Das Geistgebet*, Gabriel Bunge's collection of essays on Evagrius' *De Oratione*.⁵

THE DISCIPLINE OF PSALMODY

In the *Lausiaca History* Evagrius' enthusiastic biographer and disciple Palladius describes what he personally witnessed of Evagrius' ascetical practice. Of

¹Michael O'Laughlin, "New Questions Concerning the Origenism of Evagrius" R.J. Daly, (ed.), *Origeniana Quinta*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 105 (Leiden, 1992): 528-534.

²I. Hausherr, "Le Traité de l'Oraison D'Évagre le Pontique," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 15 (1934): 117

³H. Urs von Balthasar, "Metaphysik und Mystik des Evagrius Ponticus," *Zeitschrift für Aszese und Mystik*, 14 (1939): 39-40.

⁴Elizabeth Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* (Princeton, 1992): 84.

⁵G. Bunge, *Das Geistgebet*, (Cologne, 1987)

Macarius, who was Evagrius' teacher, and of Evagrius himself Palladius writes that they "performed one hundred prayers each day."⁶ Bunge believes that these "prayers" were the intervals of upright or prostrate adoration that concluded a given period of psalmody,⁷ and which are described in detail by Cassian in Book II of his *Institutes*.

According to Cassian's description, the cenobites' experience of psalmody at the twice-daily community synaxis would have generally been passive, or perhaps better-said, receptive. One or more cantors chanted the psalms while all listened attentively:⁸ at the conclusion of each psalm or portion of a psalm (it was permitted to break up the longer psalms into more manageable sections⁹) the whole community would first stand with arms extended in prayer; then all would lie prostrate for a brief period; and finally all would stand again while a prayer was intoned by the cantor.¹⁰ It was expected that this same rhythm of psalmody frequently interrupted by a change in posture and prayer would be continued by the monks while they were alone in their cells at manual labor.¹¹ Hermits like Evagrius would have chanted psalms to themselves, followed by the customary prostrations and prayers.

It should be borne in mind that this detailed description of posture and practice comes from Cassian, who undoubtedly had his own reasons for proposing this liturgical model to his monks in fifth century Gaul. But Palladius' descriptions in the *Lausiaca History* of the practice of psalmody by the cenobites and hermits of Egypt seems to corroborate for the most part the picture drawn by Cassian.¹²

If it is true that one hundred times each day Evagrius practiced psalmody followed by a prostration and an interval for private prayer, then the ascetical discipline of psalmody must have engaged his attention for a considerable portion of his waking hours. Bunge has calculated that when one subtracts the psalmody of the evening and vigil offices and allows for four hours of sleep, one is left to conclude that Evagrius would, on average, have chanted a psalm and prostrated in prayer every ten minutes.¹³

Even if this depiction is somewhat exaggerated - and there are good reasons for believing that it is not exaggerated - Evagrius must have spent a very considerable portion of his day chanting psalms and offering up prayers in the interval which followed the psalm. This notion of an interval of silent prayer preceded by

⁶ Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 38.10 where it is said of Evagrius, Ἐποίη δὲ εὐχὰς ἑκατὸν; and 20.3 where Macarius is quoted as saying of himself ἑκατὸν εὐχὰς ποιῶν. *Historia Lausiaca* (recensio G) ed. G.J.M. Bartelink, *Palladio. La storia Lausiaca* (Verona, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1974).

⁷Bunge, *Geistgebet* 13.

⁸ Cassian, *Institutes* II.11.3

⁹ Cassian, *Institutes* II.11.1.

¹⁰ Cassian, *Institutes* II.7.2-3.

¹¹ Cassian, *Institutes* II.12.3

¹² Palladius particularly associates psalmody with prayers in *Lausiaca history* 22: 5-8 and 43:2-3.

¹³ Bunge, *Geistgebet* 29-32.

psalmody is extremely important. In the *De Oratione* Evagrius repeatedly emphasizes the need to let go of words and images “at the time of prayer” (ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῆς προσευχῆς).¹⁴ Modern readers of Evagrius unfamiliar with his monastic context may assume that this refers to an extended period of time dedicated to the project of attempting wordless, imageless, prayer. It would seem, however, that Evagrius’ recommendations in this regard refer specifically to the relatively brief period that followed each psalm or reading.¹⁵ The practice of wordless prayer thus preceded and followed a longer period of attentive listening or singing, during which one focused the whole of one’s concentration on the multiple images and words of scripture, in order to “receive and be stamped”¹⁶ by what Evagrius called their concealed λόγοι - the hidden meanings and purposes of God.

Of particular interest in this regard are the six chapters of the *De Oratione* (chapters 82-87) and several chapters of the *Praktikos* (notably chapters 15 and 69) in which Evagrius discusses the respective significance and purpose of both psalmody and prayer. In these passages he compares and contrasts what he understands to be the purpose of psalmody with that of the period of silent prayer which followed each psalm.

THE GOALS OF PSALMODY

Evagrius’ understanding of the purpose and place of psalmody may be considered under three headings: first, the “tranquilizing” effect of psalmody on the passions, especially the passion of *thumos* or anger; second, the use of verses from the psalms in *antirrhesis* or “contradiction” of demonic temptations; and third, the psalms as a training-ground for *theoria* or contemplation.

The first effect of psalmody - that which might be termed its most basic or universal effect, since it does not depend on one’s level of spiritual maturity - consists in its calming effect on the passions, in particular the passion of anger.

Thus Evagrius writes in chapter 83 of the *De Oratione*:

ΗΓ’. Ἡ μὲν ψαλμωδία τὰ πάθη κατευνάζει, καὶ τὴν ἀκρασίαν τοῦ σώματος ἡρεμεῖν ἀπεργάζεται. Ἡ δὲ προσευχὴ ἐνεργεῖν παρασκευάζει τὸν νοῦν τὴν ἰδίαν ἐνέργειαν.¹⁷

83. Psalmody calms the passions and quiets the body’s intemperance; prayer arouses the intellect to activate its own proper powers.

Here Evagrius offers an interpretation of both aspects to the monastic practice of psalmody: the first part, listening to psalmody in community or chanting psalms to oneself in private calms inward compulsions and restores balance; the prostration and prayer which follow activate - literally “energize” - the *nous* or intellect to engage in its proper task, namely contemplation.

¹⁴Evagrius, *De Oratione*, chapters 11, 14, 18, 43, 44, 69, 114, 117, 119, 120, 128, 148.

¹⁵ Rufinus similarly describes this interval between psalms as “the time of prayer” in his additions to the *Historia Monachorum*, XXIX, PL 21.453-454.

¹⁶ Evagrius, *De Malignis Cogitationibus* 4; *Scholia on Psalms* 137 α.

¹⁷ Evagrius, *De Oratione* 80, PG 79.1185 b-c. Numbering and textual emendations used here are those recommended by I. Hausherr, “Le Traité de l’Oraison D’Évagre le le Pontique,” *Revue d’ascétique et de mystique* 15 (1934): 34-93 & 113-170.

Similarly, in chapter 15 of the *Praktikos* psalmody is listed among the spiritual remedies to be applied when one is troubled by anger:

ιε'. Νοῦν μεν πλανώμενον ἴστησιν
ἀναγνωσις καὶ ἀγρυπνία καὶ προσευχή·
ἐπιθυμίαν δὲ ἐκφλογουμένην μαραΐνει
πείνα καὶ κόπος καὶ ἀναχώρησις·
θυμὸν δὲ καταπαύει κυκώμενον
ψαλμῳδία καὶ μακροθυμία καὶ ἔλεος·

15. The wandering *nous* is stabilized reading, vigils and prayer. Inflamed desire is quenched by hunger, toil, and solitude. Boiling anger is calmed by psalmody and patient endurance and mercy.

The belief that psalmody calms *thumos* is found also in chapter 98 of Evagrius' *Ad Monachos* and again in chapter 34 of the longer recension of the *De Malignis Cogitationibus*. This insight, however, is not unique to Evagrius: it is discussed in detail in Athanasius' *Letter to Marcellinus*, where psalmody is described as:

Τῆς δὲ τοιαύτης τῶν λογισμῶν ἀταραξίας
καὶ ἀκόμονος καταστάσεως εἰκὼν καὶ
τύπος ἐστίν . . .

(28) ... a figure and type of undisturbed and calm equanimity of our thoughts.¹⁸

Athanasius goes on to explain:

Οὕτως τὸ μὲν ἐν αὐτῇ ταραχῶδες καὶ τραχὺ
καὶ ἀτακτον ἐξομαλίζεται· τὸ δὲ λυποῦν
θεραπεύεται, ψαλλόντων ἡμῶν.¹⁹

. . . that which is disturbing and rough and disorderly in [the soul] is smoothed away, and that which causes grief is healed when we sing psalms."²⁰

He points to the story of King Saul, whose "troubled" disposition was calmed through David's psalmody:

Ὁ γοῦν μακάριος Δαβὶδ, οὕτως
καταψάλλον τοῦ Σαοῦλ, αὐτὸς εὐηρέσκει
τῷ Θεῷ, καὶ τὸν τάραχον καὶ τὸ μανικὸν
πάθος τοῦ Σαοῦλ ἀπήλαυσε, καὶ γαληνᾶν
τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ παρεσκεύαζεν. Οὕτως οἱ
ἱερεῖς ψάλλοντες, εἰς ἀταραξίαν τὰς ψυχὰς
τῶν λαῶν καὶ εἰς ὁμόνοιαν αὐτὰς τῶν ἐν
οὐρανοῖς χορευόντων προσεκαλοῦντο.²¹

(29) ... Blessed David, then, making music in this way for Saul, was himself well pleasing to God, and he drove away from Saul the troubled and frenzied disposition, making his soul calm. The priests who sang thus summoned the souls of the people into tranquillity, and called them into unanimity with those who form the heavenly chorus.²²

Closely related to this primary effect of calming anger and the other passions is the role assigned by Evagrius to the use of memorized verses from the psalms in *antirrhesis* or "contradiction" of specific demonic temptations. In his work *Antirrheticus* Evagrius offers brief scripture texts, generally no more than one or two verses, to be used as remedies against specific manifestations of the eight principal *logismoi* of gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, *acedia*, vainglory, and

¹⁸ Athanasius, *A Letter to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of Psalms 28*, tr. R.C. Gregg, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, ser. *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York, 1980): 124-125.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *Epistula ad Marcellinum de interpretatione Psalmorum*, PG 27.40-41

²⁰ Athanasius, *A Letter to Marcellinus* 28.125.

²¹ Athanasius, *Epistula ad Marcellinum* 29, PG 27.41.

²² Athanasius, *A Letter to Marcellinus* 29.125.

pride. The work is divided into eight books, each concerned with a different *logismos*. Each book begins at Genesis and works progressively through the Bible, offering a brief description of the offending demon or habit of thought and then the healing verse. The Psalter is the biblical book most frequently recommended by Evagrius, with verses from the psalms accounting for 85 of the 492 verses offered.

The third and final role of psalmody in Evagrius' thought that I wish to consider here is that of psalmody as a training-ground for contemplation. For Evagrius, as for Clement before him, biblical exegesis is the proper work of the *gnostikos*, the Christian who has successfully engaged in the battles of the *praktike* and is now ready to undertake the *physike*, the art of perceiving God's designs in creation. The *gnostikos* is one who is ready to look outward, to shift his inward gaze from the battle for virtue and *apatheia* within himself to the search for God's hidden purposes and meanings - His *logoi* - in the whole of the created world and in particular in that part of creation which is the scriptures. For Evagrius the holy scriptures are the handbook of the Christian contemplative. As Evagrius puts it in Chapter 3 of the *Gnostikos*:

<γ> Γνωστικός δὲ ὁ ἄλλος μὲν λόγον ἐπέχων
τοῖς ἀκαθάρτοις, φωτὸς δὲ τοῖς καθαροῖς.²³

3. The *gnostikos* it is who signifies salt for the impure and light for the pure.

The Christian contemplative or *gnostikos* must 'signify' or more literally 'hold forth the meaning of' that is to say teach and explicate, the sacred text for others; taking into account their abilities and their level of spiritual maturity.²⁴ Evagrius goes on in the *Gnostikos* to outline his exegetical method:

18. It is necessary to search, therefore, concerning allegorical and literal passages relevant to the *praktike*, *physike*, and *theologike*. If it is relevant to the *praktike* it is necessary to examine whether it treats of *thumos* and what comes from it, or rather of *epithumia* and what follows it, or again of the *nous* and its movements.

If it is pertinent to the *physike*, it is necessary to note whether it makes known one of the doctrines concerning nature, and which one. And if it is an allegorical passage concerning *theologike* it is necessary to examine as far as possible whether it provides information on the Trinity and whether it is seen [in its] simplicity or seen as The Unity. But if it is none of these, then it is a simple contemplation, or perhaps makes known a prophecy.²⁵

Here the *gnostikos* is depicted as a biblical exegete concerned not only with his own welfare, but also with that of others. He seeks to understand human nature and human circumstances so that he can discover in the scriptures remedies for the spiritual ills of those who seek his advice. To do this he must become familiar with all the levels of meaning contained in the scriptures, from ethical instruction, through the contemplation of creation, to the mysteries of the Trinity itself. In the scriptures he discovers a whole new world of history and story that help him

²³ Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 3, A. & C. Guillaumont (ed.), *Sources Chrétiennes* N° 356 (Paris, 1989): 90.

²⁴ Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 12-17.

²⁵ Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 18. The Greek original of this passage is lost. This translation is based on the Syriac version and Guillaumont's reconstruction of the Greek, pp. 116-117.

express both the “ethical” insights he learned as a *praktikos* and the new mysteries of creation he is exploring as a contemplative.

There could hardly be a better textbook for this enterprise than the Psalter: in it are expressed the whole range of human feeling and experience. It is therefore not surprising that the *Scholia on Psalms* are the longest work by Evagrius we possess. It contains around 1300 scholia, or brief annotations, which offer a fascinating insight into Evagrius’ own contemplative experience of the practice of psalmody. These scholia offer brief meditations on all aspects of his model of spiritual development: among them can be found “ethical” admonitions concerning the battle for virtue and *apatheia*; interpretations of the divine “meanings” hidden within beings visible and invisible; and speculations on questions of eschatology and Christology.

For Evagrius the highest expression of the monastic discipline of psalmody is found in its practice by the *gnostikos*, the contemplative exegete and presumably also the intended audience of his *Scholia on Psalms*. In scholion 25 on Psalm 76:21 Evagrius unites his model of spiritual progress with a program for contemplative exegesis. This represents his own adaptation of a classical Alexandrian exegetical method, here taken literally from Clement of Alexandria, and destined to become famous in the West through John Cassian’s fourteenth conference:

21. Ὡδήγησας ὡς πρόβατα τὸν λαόν σου ἐν χειρὶ Μωϋσῆ καὶ Ἀαρών.

ιε'. Ἡ κατὰ Μωσέα φιλοσοφία τετραχῆ τέμνεται· εἰς τὸ ἱστορικόν, καὶ τὸ κυρίως λεγόμενον νομοθετικόν, ἅπερ ἂν εἴη τῆς ἠθικῆς πραγματείας ἴδια· τὸ τρίτον τε εἰς τὸ ἱερουργικόν, ὃ ἐστὶν ἡδη τῆς φυσικῆς θεωρίας, καὶ τέταρτον ἐπὶ πᾶσι τὸ θεολογικόν εἶδος. . .²⁶

v. 21. *You guided your people like sheep, by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

25. According to Moses, philosophy is divided into four [parts]: [first,] the historical; [second,] that called by the Lord the legislative, (cf. Ex.24:12), which may be [concerned] with its own ethical matters; the third is the priestly, that is the contemplation of nature; and the fourth is [concerned] with the whole expression of *theologike*. . .

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Evagrius’ many references to imageless, wordless prayer have more often than not been used to characterize his mystical theology as primarily apophatic. However, if it is true that his references to the “time of prayer” reflect his monastic ascesis of alternating psalmody and prayer, then this portrayal needs to be more carefully nuanced. It would seem that imageless, wordless prayer and image-filled, word-filled prayer alternated as part of an ongoing liturgical rhythm in such a way that each activity nourished the other. Thus Evagrius’ *Scholia on Psalms* should perhaps be read as the companion volume to his *De Oratione*.

²⁶ Evagrius, *Scholia on the Psalms* 76 α, *Pitra Analecta Sacra* 3 (Paris, 1912): Ps 76.21,1-15, according to the collation of M.-J. Rondeau, “Le commentaire sur les Psaumes d’Évagre le Pontique”, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 26 (1960):307-348.