

EVAGRIUS PONTICUS:  
THE PSALTER *as* A HANDBOOK *for the* CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVE

Luke Dysinger, OSB

forthcoming in: *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms*  
, ed. Daley and Kolbet, (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2015)

---

[1. INTRODUCTION](#)

[2. THE GNOSTIKOS and THE PSALTER](#)

[3. THE LITERAL SENSE of the PSALMS](#)

[4. ASCETICAL WISDOM in the PSALTER](#)

[5. THE COSMOS in the PSALTER](#)

[6. CHRIST in the PSALTER](#)

[7. THE BLESSED TRINITY in the PSALTER](#)

[8. CONCLUSION: READING THE BOOK of GOD](#)

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

---

Until recently the name of Evagrius Ponticus (345-399) would seldom have arisen in discussions of patristic exegesis. While his influence on the theory and practice of Christian asceticism was consistently acknowledged (often pejoratively) in the centuries following his death in 399, neither Evagrius' critics nor those sympathetic to his cause ever attributed to him commentaries on the scriptures. This is surprising, since it has become clear that biblical scholia constitute a very large part, perhaps the majority, of Evagrius' literary output.<sup>1</sup> It was only in the twentieth century that fragments from his biblical commentaries were reliably identified in catenae and ascetical anthologies. Publication of these recovered fragments facilitated critical editions of his commentary on Proverbs in 1989 and in 1993 of his commentary on Ecclesiastes.<sup>2</sup> Evagrius describes his commentaries as belonging to the established genre of *scholia*, literally "marginal annotations", on successive, selected verses.<sup>3</sup> His biblical scholia vary in form from paragraph-length, narrative expositions of particularly rich texts to the much more common brief definitions and summaries which, stripped of the biblical verses they explicate, often reappear as *kephalaia* or *gnomai* ("chapters" or "sentences") in his ascetical texts. Evagrius' *Scholia on Psalms* are his longest extant work, containing more than 1350 scholia explicating texts from all the psalms except Psalm 116/115.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Extant are Evagrius' scholia on the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. He probably also wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs and perhaps on other biblical books as well, but of these no certain traces remain. H.U. Von Balthasar discusses fragments suggestive of commentaries, now lost, on books of the Pentateuch and the Song of Songs: "Die *Hiera* des Evagrius" *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 63 (1939): 86-106, 181-206 (87-89). Also suggestive of a lost commentary on the Song of Songs are recently-discovered *kephalaia* in which Evagrius deliberately imitates both the style and themes of the Song of Songs: Géhin, "Evagriana d'un Manuscrit Basilien, (*Vaticanus Gr. 2028; olim Basilianus 67*)", *Le Muséon* 109 (1996): 59-85 (71-73).

<sup>2</sup> *Scholia on Ecclesiastes*, ed. and trans. by Paul Géhin, *Évagre le Pontique Scholies a L'Ecclésiaste*, Sources Chrétiennes (hereafter "SC") 397 (Paris: Cerf, 1993); *Scholia on Proverbs*, ed. and trans. by Paul Géhin, *Évagre le Pontique Scholies aux Proverbes*, SC 340 (Paris: Cerf, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 5 on Psalm 88.9. J. B. Pitra, *Origines in Psalms*, 88.9(2), *Analecta Sacra* 3 (Venice, St. Lazarus Monastery, 1883): 160.

<sup>4</sup> Although still awaiting a critical edition, the majority (over 95%) of Evagrius' *Scholia on Psalms* may be assembled from printed sources according to a key published by M.-J. Rondeau: "Le commentaire sur les Psaumes d'Évagre le Pontique", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 26 (1960): 307-348. Rondeau's reconstruction is based on MS. *Vaticanus Graecus 754* (10<sup>th</sup> cent., 395 ff., *Psalmi et cantica cum catena*, Karo-Lietzman Cat.: 39-41). A working edition of Evagrius' *Scholia on Psalms*, based on Rondeau's key and my own reworking of Rondeau's transcription of ms. VG 754, may be downloaded at:

[http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/Evagrius/08\\_Psalms/00a\\_start.htm](http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/Evagrius/08_Psalms/00a_start.htm) .

That Evagrius would devote so much energy to interpreting the psalms is hardly surprising, given the increasingly-important role of the Psalter in the Egyptian monastic culture where he flourished. During the latter half of the fourth century the Psalter came to occupy an increasingly prominent place in Christian worship, both in liturgical gatherings and private devotion. In the fourth century the Book of Psalms gradually displaced other biblical texts used at the so-called “canonical prayers” of both the urban cathedral liturgies and the rapidly-expanding Christian monastic movement.<sup>5</sup> One historian of music has described this “psalmodic movement” as “an unprecedented wave of enthusiasm for the singing of psalms that swept from east to west through the Christian population in the closing decades of the fourth century”.<sup>6</sup> Different reasons have been adduced for the increasing popularity of the Psalter; but whatever the cause, by the 380s when Evagrius became a monk the central place of the Psalter in monastic ascetical practice was well-established, and the need for a spiritual rationale for reciting the Psalter was widely-felt. Athanasius’ *Letter to Marcellinus*, discussed in the preceding chapter of this book, represents one response to this growing need, as do the commentaries of Hilary of Poitiers, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine. Unlike these more popular introductions and commentaries, however, Evagrius’ *Scholia on Psalms* were directed towards a specific and small “target audience”: namely the Christian contemplative whom he called *gnostikos*.

---

## 2. THE GNOSTIKOS and THE PSALTER

---

The term *gnostikos*, used as an honorific to describe the mature Christian spiritual guide and contemplative exegete, was rendered acceptable by Clement of Alexandria, whose writings along with those of Origen were part of Evagrius’ early pastoral and later monastic training. Born in Pontus (modern-day northern Turkey) around 345, Evagrius was in his mid to late twenties when Basil of Caesarea ordained him lector. He served in the famous bishop’s clergy until Basil’s death in 379. Devastated by the sudden death of his patron and mentor, he fled to Basil’s friend Gregory Nazianzen in Constantinople, where Gregory ordained him deacon. Evagrius appears to have inherited from these two Cappadocians an appreciation for Alexandrian exegesis, typified by their compilation of the *Philocalia* from the *Peri Archōn* of Origen. Evagrius remained in the imperial capital after Gregory’s departure, and played an active role during the First Council of Constantinople in 381. He then travelled to Jerusalem, where he encountered two more enthusiastic proponents of Alexandrian spirituality, Rufinus and Melania the Elder, who convinced him to become a monk. After providing initial monastic training in their monastery on the Mount of Olives Melania urged Evagrius to continue his studies in Egypt with renowned desert *abbas* and *ammās* with whom she and Rufinus were in close contact.

Evagrius lived for two years in the monastic settlement of Nitria, 30 miles southeast of Alexandria, then withdrew to the nearby hermit-colony of Kellia where he spent the remaining 15 years of his life. He became a disciple of the desert fathers Macarius of Alexandria and Macarius the Egyptian, and in time came to be regarded as a gifted *abba* in his own right. As such he played a leading role in the intellectual “Origenist circle” in Kellia whose members included the so-called “tall brothers”, Ammonius, Euthymius, Dioscorus, and Eusebius, who had all been disciples of the

---

<sup>5</sup> A. Veilleux argues that in the primitive Pachomian office of the early fourth century there was no particular preference for psalmody, and that the office consisted largely of consecutive scripture readings, each followed by the prayers Cassian describes in Book 2 of the *Institutes*. *La liturgie dans le cénobitisme pachômien au quatrième siècle*, *Studia Anselmiana* 57 (Rome, 1968): 276-323.

<sup>6</sup> J. McKinnon, “Desert Monasticism and the Later Fourth-Century Psalmodic Movement”, *Music and Letters* 75 (Oxford, 1994), 505-521 (506). In regard to this widespread, accelerating enthusiasm for psalms in the fourth century the same author asserts, “Nothing quite like it has been observed either before or after in the history of Christianity or Judaism.” “The Fourth Century Origin of the Gradual”, *Early Music History* 7 (Cambridge, 1987): 91-106 (98).

famous Abba Pambo. Evagrius' own disciples included John Cassian and the later bishops Palladius of Helenopolis and Heraclides of Cyprus. He died in 399, thus escaping by only a few weeks the expulsion from Egypt and exile that befell many monastic intellectuals during the first Origenist crisis. His reputation, however, did not escape and his name was eventually linked with Origen and Didymus in anti-Origenist anathemas of later Ecumenical Councils.<sup>7</sup>

Evagrius' condemnation divided and scattered his literary legacy, dismembering his sophisticated program of monastic pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> He had intended his texts to both analyze and assist in the project of monastic spiritual progress. He composed elementary ascetical treatises for *praktikoi*, monks who struggle against the eight principal *logismoi* or tempting-thoughts of gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride.<sup>9</sup> Their labors in the realm of *praktikē* (asceticism) would be rewarded by God with acquisition of the virtues, especially love, and with the gift of *apatheia*, dispassion or freedom from compulsion.<sup>10</sup> *Apatheia* would, in turn, facilitate progress from asceticism to contemplation, enabling the *gnostikos* to undertake the more intricate labors of contemplative biblical exegesis, spiritual guidance, and teaching. He composed progressively more sophisticated and compact treatises for *gnostikoi*, contemplatives searching for the divine *logoi*, inner meanings and purposes of God hidden beneath the surface appearances of nature, history, and the texts of sacred scripture. These treatises include collections of *gnomai* (sentences) and *kephalaia* (chapters) as well as biblical scholia. They take the form of brief expositions, usually no more than a few sentences in length, syllogisms, parables, and definitions that often become progressively more compact and cryptic as the work progresses. This progression is deliberate, requiring careful meditation and familiarity with Evagrius' model of spiritual progress in order to decode meanings and subtle interconnections.<sup>11</sup> In the wake of his condemnation the ordering and interrelationship between these works and the significance of their intrinsic pedagogy were lost. His straightforward ascetical treatises survive in the original Greek, often under pseudonyms of more reputable authors. The more advanced and speculative collections such as the *Gnostikos* and *Kephalaia Gnostica* were retained, although often expurgated, in the Syriac and Armenian Christian patrimony, whose monks and bishops were undeterred by Chalcedonian anathemas. The fate of his exegetical treatises was mixed: some survived as dislocated fragments; others were incorporated wholly or in part into the Greek biblical *catanae*, often attributed to Origen or Athanasius.

The modern recovery of Evagrius' exegetical scholia on Psalms Proverbs and Ecclesiastes has facilitated a re-appreciation of the monastic pedagogy underlying all his works. Hardly recognizable as "commentaries" in the modern sense, often having the appearance of allegorical glossaries, his

---

<sup>7</sup> Precisely when Evagrius was first condemned remains something of a mystery. The Lateran Synod of 649 is the first council to explicitly name Evagrius in a list of 21 condemned authors. However it is widely-believed that his name may have appeared in anathemas of the sixth century. In the surviving texts of the fourteen anathemas of the Second Council of Constantinople (the Fifth Ecumenical Council) in 553 there is no mention of Evagrius; however accounts by two contemporaries of the council who had access to the conciliar decrees suggest that the surviving texts may be incomplete, and that the names of both Evagrius and Didymus may originally have appeared together with that of Origen in the list of condemned heretics.

<sup>8</sup> See Columba Stewart, "Evagrius Ponticus on Monastic Pedagogy", *Abba, The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West, Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia*, ed. Behr, Louth, & Conomos, (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, NY, 2003): 241-271.

<sup>9</sup> These roughly correspond to the divisions of the Platonic tripartite soul, beginning with the *epithumetikon* (concupiscible faculty) moving through the *thumikon* (irascible faculty) and concluding with intellectual temptations. See section 4, below on Evagrius' assignment of different virtues to each of these parts of the soul.

<sup>10</sup> *Apatheia* does not mean freedom from temptation, since Evagrius emphasizes that certain temptations will continue until death. (*Praktikos* 36); rather, it refers to freedom from the inner storm of "passions' irrational drives which in their extreme forms would today be called obsessions, compulsions, or addictions. (*Praktikos* prol. 8, ch. 81).

<sup>11</sup> Stewart, *Evagrius Ponticus on Monastic Pedagogy*, 254-268. Jeremy Driscoll also discusses the complex interrelationship and progressive nature of Evagrius' sentences in *The 'Ad Monachus of Evagrius Ponticus'*, *Studia Anselmiana* 104, (Rome, 1991).

collections of scholia were intended for use by *gnostikoi*, contemplative *abbas* and *ammās* who were expected to offer biblical texts to their disciples in response to their regular plea, “give me a word!” For Evagrius, biblical exegesis entailed the search for scriptural texts that would benefit both the *gnostikos* and those who sought spiritual counsel. He wrote that the *gnostikos* must be able to “give a word to each, according to their [spiritual] attainment.”<sup>12</sup> This presupposes the ability to discern the disciple’s level of spiritual maturity and draw from the large store of biblical wisdom provided in the scholia. Evagrius also expected the *gnostikos* to be familiar with the different levels of meaning contained in sacred scripture. These include spiritual (often allegorical) definitions of biblical terms<sup>13</sup> and familiarity with both the “customary expressions of scripture”<sup>14</sup> and the rules for allegorical exegesis.<sup>15</sup> Evagrius’ succinctly presents his exegetical program in *Gnostikos* 18. It clearly derives from Clement of Alexandria and Origen,<sup>16</sup> however Evagrius has superimposed his own schema of spiritual progress on the Alexandrian exegetical models he inherited.

*Gnostikos* 18. It is necessary to search for allegorical and literal passages pertaining to the *praktikē*, *physikē*, and *theologikē*.

- [1] If the passage concerns the *praktikē* it is necessary to determine whether it concerns *thumos* and its effects, or *epithumia* and its consequences, or whether it concerns the movements of the *nous*.
- [2] If the passage pertains to the *physikē*, it is necessary to note whether it reveals a doctrine concerning nature, and which one.
- [3] Or if it is an allegorical passage concerning *theologikē* it should be determined as far as possible whether it reveals the doctrine of the Trinity [...].<sup>17</sup>

Evagrius thus expected the *gnostikos* to explicate biblical texts according to three principal criteria. First is their usefulness in the battle against temptation and the acquisition of virtue (*praktikē*), divided according to the three subdivisions of the Platonic tripartite soul.<sup>18</sup> Second, is what they reveal of the inner purposes of God in history and creation (*physikē*). Third, is whether they hint at the ineffable mysteries of the divine nature or the transcendent experience of pure prayer (*theologikē*). In what follows Evagrius’ exegetical program will serve as a framework for studying examples from the *Scholia on Psalms* will be presented.

---

### 3. THE LITERAL SENSE of the PSALMS

---

The exegetical schema of *Gnostikos* 18 clarifies Evagrius’ focus on the utility of biblical texts in Christian ascetical and contemplative practice. There are only a very few *Scholia on Psalms* in which he attempts to explain words solely in their historical context, most often in regard to points of geography or natural history. Thus in Psalm 46, mention of the “the ships of Tarsis” evokes the explanation, “‘Tharsis’ refers to a region of Ethiopia, while ‘Tarsus’ is the city that is called ‘Tharsis’ in the Book of Jonah.”<sup>19</sup> And in Psalm 88 Evagrius responds to the verse, “Tabor and Hermon will rejoice in your name,” with the observation: “Tabor, the chosen! Tabor is the mountain

<sup>12</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 44; SC 356 (1989): 174.

<sup>13</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 17; SC 356 (1989): 114-16.

<sup>14</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 19; SC 356 (1989): 118f.

<sup>15</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 20-1; SC 356 (1989): 118-21.

<sup>16</sup> CLEMENT, *Stromateis* I.28.179, 3-4.; ORIGEN *Com. in Cant.* Prol. 3.6.

<sup>17</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 18; SC 356 (1989): 116-18.

<sup>18</sup> See section 4, below, for a discussion of these divisions and their associated virtues and vices.

<sup>19</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 4 on *Psalm* 47.8, PG 12.1440.

of Galilee on which Christ was transfigured. Hermon is the mountain on which lies the city of Naim, where Christ raised the widow's son."<sup>20</sup>

While such comments on the historical context of scripture are uncommon in the *Scholia on Psalms*,<sup>21</sup> Evagrius regarded the literal sense as very useful in the practice of *antirrhesis*, the “contradiction” of harmful thoughts by meditation on or verbal recitation of a biblical passage. He wrote an extensive treatise, *Antirrhethikos*, on this practice,<sup>22</sup> and recommended it as an essential ascetical technique in *Praktikos*, and *On Prayer*.<sup>23</sup> In the *Scholia on Psalms* Evagrius recommends antirrhetic verses for use not only against the demons and their *logismoi*, but also against sinful tendencies within the self, and even more broadly as “refutations” of particular groups of people and forms of behavior. He also provides antirrhetic texts from the psalms intended to console the tempted soul and remind it of virtues opposed to the *logismoi*. Finally, *antirrhesis* includes the offering to God of succinct biblical prayers. Part of the reason Evagrius found the Book of Psalms such a rich source-book of antirrhetic verses, both in the scholia and in the *Antirrhethikos*,<sup>24</sup> may be the fact that he regarded the Psalter as a kind of textbook that had served King David in his own journey of spiritual progress: “I expound openly the entire contest of the monastic way of life, [that contest] which the Holy Spirit taught David by means of the psalms, and which was also handed on to us by the blessed fathers.”<sup>25</sup>

What may be called “direct *antirrhesis*”, that is verses intended solely to contradict a particular species of demon or its attendant *logismos*, are uncommon in the *Scholia on Psalms*. Examples include Evagrius’ recommendation that those afflicted by “demons who become visible to us and thus tempt us to be terrified” should recite Psalm 91.12. “my eye has seen my enemies and my ear will hear the wicked who rise against me.”<sup>26</sup> Those troubled by the *logismos* of pride should remind themselves of their need for God’s help in the words of Psalm 126.1 “Unless the Lord build the house, in vain do they labor who build it; unless the lord keeps watch over the city in vain do the watchers keep vigil.”<sup>27</sup> More typical of the *Scholia on Psalms* are thirteen antirrhetic scholia intended to induce compunction and repentance. Four of these concern the misuse of wealth, such as Psalm 61.11, recommended to reprove the greedy: “If wealth should flow in, do not set your heart upon it.”<sup>28</sup> Five scholia are directed towards those who scorn virtue or engage in worldly pursuits.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 8 on *Psalm* 88.13, PG 12.1548.

<sup>21</sup> In addition to the two examples given, Evagrius cites Josephus on the fate of Jerusalem in scholia 1 and 2 on *Psalm* 73.

<sup>22</sup> The *Antirrhethikos* consists of 494 brief texts from the scriptures, each preceded by a description of the *logismos* the text is intended to counteract. It is divided into eight chapters, each devoted to one of the eight principal *logismoi* of gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. For a modern translation with introduction and commentary see D. BRAKKE, *Evagrius of Pontus, Talking Back, Antirrhethikos, A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons* (Collegeville, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 42; *De oratione* 94-99, 134-135. Bunge speculates that Evagrius may at one time have intended the *Antirrhethikos* to be published as part of the *Praktikos*, or at least to be read in conjunction with it: Bunge, ‘Der Prolog des «Antirrhethikos»’, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> In his *Antirrhethikos* Evagrius offers 494 brief biblical texts, usually consisting of only one or two verses, as remedies against different manifestations of the eight principal *logismoi* of gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger (*thumos*), *acedia*, vainglory, and pride. Of the 494 verses in this work, 91 are taken from the Book of Psalms.

<sup>25</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Antirrhethikos*, Prologue, Frankenberg: 474-475.

<sup>26</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 7 on *Psalm* 91.12, Pitra, AS 3, 91.12: 172.

<sup>27</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 1 on *Psalm* 126.1, PG 24.20.

<sup>28</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 6 on *Psalm* 61.11, Pitra, AS 3, 61.11(3): 70. The other three verses intended for the wealthy are: scholion 14 on *Psalm* 10.30; scholion 8 on *Psalm* 38.7; and scholion 4 on *Psalm* 14.5 (particularly directed against usurers).

<sup>29</sup> Scholion 16 on *Psalm* 108.24; scholion 4 on *Psalm* 100.5; scholion 4 on *Psalm* 25.5; scholion 5 on *Psalm* 37.8; scholion 5 on *Psalm* 101.10.

Four are intended to exhort or rebuke erring monks and aspiring *gnostikoi*, such as those who are “neglectful of nocturnal prayers”<sup>30</sup> or who lack discretion in their exegesis of scripture.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to these thirteen texts intended to induce compunction are eight antirrhetic scholia intended to encourage persons in distress, such as scholion 6 on Psalm 41.12, where the soul “given over to grief” is encouraged to recite the verse, “Why, then, are you sad, my soul? And why do you trouble me?”<sup>32</sup> Four of these consoling scholia are antirrhetic prayers, such as scholion 1 on Psalm 24.1-3, where those required to bear witness to their faith are encouraged to pray, “To you, O Lord, have I lifted up my soul.”<sup>33</sup>

Antirrhetic verses in the *Scholia on Psalms* thus serve a wide variety of spiritual purposes. Texts are recited in order to confound the demons and neutralize their effects in the soul, and to encourage repentance and spiritual improvement. In such *antirrhesis* the relationship between prayer and recitation of psalm-verses sometimes becomes one of identity: texts that have been memorized through the practice of psalmody may serve as the soul’s own words to God in times of temptation and affliction.

In comparing the orientation of antirrhetic passages in the the *Scholia on Psalms* with Evagrius’ other works on *antirrhesis*, a progression can be discerned from preoccupation with one’s own spiritual improvement in the ascetical texts and the *Antirrhetikos*, to a broader concern for others in the exegetical scholia. Whereas most of the biblical verses in the *Antirrhetikos* are intended for a single demon, habit of thought, or afflicted soul, the antirrhetic scholia are generally intended for groups of people who share a common affliction. To some extent this corresponds to Evagrius’ model of spiritual progress. Whereas Christian ascetics or *praktikoi* employ the weapons of the *Antirrhetikos* in the battlefield of their own souls, contemplative *gnostikoi* discover in the *Scholia on Psalms* healing texts that are not only therapeutic for themselves, but which may also be offered as remedies to the diverse groups of people who seek their advice.

---

#### 4. ASCETICAL WISDOM in the PSALTER

---

A significant number of Evagrius’ scholia interpret the Psalter at the level of *praktikē*, the ascetical project of developing virtue and avoiding vice. The *Scholia on Psalms* differ from his ascetical treatises in that he assumes the reader of the scholia to be spiritually mature, practicing asceticism *gnostikoteros*, that is with increasing contemplative wisdom and understanding.<sup>34</sup> The scholia thus contain little of the detailed advice on overcoming temptation characteristic of his ascetical writings. Instead, Evagrius presumes the *gnostikos*’ desire to uncover symbolic significance in the imagery and events of the psalms, to recognize allegorical allusions to virtues, vices, and certain hidden *logoi*, inner purposes of God. Evagrius alludes to the relationship between the scholia and the ascetical treatises in his first scholion on Psalm 143.

Ps.143.1. *Blessed be the Lord my God, who teaches my hands to fight, and my fingers to do battle.*

*Scholion 1. Taught by the Lord is one who battles against the opposing powers, who is well-versed in the logoi of virtues and vices and of various [tempting-] thoughts, and of the*

---

<sup>30</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 27 on Psalm 118.:62, PG 12.1600.

<sup>31</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 4 on Psalm 111.5, Pitra, AS 3 111.5(2): 231; PG 12.1572. The other two are scholion 44 on Psalm 118.100 and scholion 37 on Psalm 118.85.

<sup>32</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 6 on Psalm 41.12, Pitra, AS 3, 41.8: 37. Additional encouraging antirrhetic scholia include: scholia 6 and 8 on Psalm 89.12; scholia 10 on Psalm 43.17 and 6 on Psalm 100.6

<sup>33</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 1 on Psalm 24.1-3, PG 27.144. The other three antirrhetic prayers are: scholia 31 on Psalm 118.71; 7 on Psalm 25.9; and 8 on Psalm 26.12.

<sup>34</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 50.

signs and stages of *apatheia*.. And he also knows the *logoi* of nocturnal phantasms that arise during sleep: namely, which of these originate in the reasoning part of the soul (*logistikon*), thus activating the memory; which come from the *thumikon*; and which come from the *epithumetikon*. But I have written more extensively and in more detail concerning these in *The Monk*. As regards investigating the *logoi* of ethical matters, we have set forth there what we were taught by the Lord: namely, how those who wish may withstand the *battle*.

Here Evagrius employs the traditional image of the *praktikē* as spiritual warfare<sup>35</sup> and refers the reader to his text *Praktikos*, subtitled “The Monk”, for detailed information on the subject. He explains that perception of the *logoi* or inner dynamics of this spiritual struggle requires knowledge of the inner structure of the soul. Following Plato and the later Aristotelian tradition, Evagrius considered the soul tripartite,<sup>36</sup> ruled (when all goes well) by the *logistikon* or reasoning faculty, chiefly responsible for developing the virtues of prudence, understanding and wisdom.<sup>37</sup> It rules over the *pathetikon*, the portion of the soul subject to passion and the source of the powers of *epithumia* (desire) and *thumos* (indignation).<sup>38</sup> These powers or energies, “yoked to [the soul] as helpmates”,<sup>39</sup> are intended by God to be used *kata phusin* “according to nature”; but they will overwhelm the soul as passions if misused or present in excess. When exercised according to nature the *epithumetikon* contributes the virtues of temperance, love, and continence,<sup>40</sup> while the *thumikon* provides courage and patient endurance.<sup>41</sup> Through the practice of *diakrisis* (discernment) the ascetic or *praktikos* learns to employ these “helpmates” as they are experienced in interpersonal relationships, in dreams, and in thoughts, especially thoughts that occur during prayer.<sup>42</sup>

Evagrius expected the *gnostikos* to detect in the Psalter symbolic references to virtues and spiritual warfare. Defensive imagery, such as “walls” or “gates” could stand for “gates of justice [...], prudence, fortitude, love, and patient endurance, through which enters in the knowledge of God”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, weapons such as “arrows” could evoke the whole panoply of the virtues:

Ps. 44.6. *Your arrows are sharp, O mighty one.*

*Scholion 6.* Arrows of Christ are the *praktikē* virtues. And he shoots with justice at the unjust, with prudence at the imprudent, and with temperance at the sexually immoral; and again he shoots the coward with courage, with temperance at the undisciplined, with patient endurance at the irascible, and with faith at the unbeliever. And it seems as if the *arrows* of faith appears

---

<sup>35</sup> The concept of spiritual warfare was popular with both biblical and Alexandrian writers. St. Paul describes both a “warfare against the law of the mind” (Rom 7.23); and “passions of the flesh that wage war on the soul” (2 Cor 10.3-4). Similar imagery is also employed by the authors of 1Tim 1.18 and 1 Peter 2.11. Origen invokes the notion of spiritual warfare in: *Philokalia* 15, *On Prayer* 3, *Contra Celsum* Bk 8,44, *Commentary on Luke* 3 (Homily 10 on Luke 1.67-76), and *Treatise on the Passover* 48.

<sup>36</sup> Plato’s description of the tripartite soul is found in *Phaedrus* 246a and *Republic* 4. 440-442. As for the later Aristotelian tradition: the beginning of chapter 89 of Evagrius’ *Praktikos*, where the virtues are divided among the soul’s three divisions is modeled closely on an anonymous first-century peripatetic treatise, *On Virtues and Vices*, ed. Bekker, *Aristotelis opera*, v. 2 (Berlin, 1891): 1249a 26 - 1251b 37.

<sup>37</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 89; SC 171: 680-4.

<sup>38</sup> EVAGRIUS, *scholion 2 On Psalm 107.3*, Pitra, AS 3, 107.3: 220

<sup>39</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Peri Logismon* 17; SC 438: 210.

<sup>40</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 89; SC 171: 680.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 682.

<sup>42</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Praktikos* 25; *De oratione* 12, 13, 24, 25.

<sup>43</sup> EVAGRIUS, *scholion 4 on Psalm 23.7*, PG 12.1268.

before the other *arrows* are sent; if according to Paul “whoever would draw near to God must first believe that He exists”. (Heb 11.6).<sup>44</sup>

Agricultural imagery such as “fruit” reminds the reader that “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace;” (Gal 5.22) while “leaves” are a symbol of “patient endurance, courage, [...] blessing, silence, and praise.”<sup>45</sup> Mention of anger (*thumos*) in Psalm 6 invites deeper reflection on the proper use of righteous indignation, adapting a saying from Clement of Alexandria: “Indignation is an impulse of desire in the civilized soul rising up for defense”.<sup>46</sup>

The virtue of gentleness (*praotes*) is emphasized in Psalm 24. “the gentle are those who put an end to the faithless warfare of anger and desire in their souls, and to all that is subject to the passions.”<sup>47</sup> The same virtue is associated with the “path” of freedom from wrath (*aorgesia*) in Psalm 131. “For *gentleness* is [the state] of being undisturbed by wrath when confronted by the loss of perishable pleasures.”<sup>48</sup> Both of these hint at the spiritual goal of *apatheia*, symbolized by the “peaceful borders” of Psalm 147. “*The borders of peace* are said to be *apatheia* of the soul.”<sup>49</sup> Unlike the ascetical treatises, where *apatheia* is a principal goal of the *praktikē*, in the *Scholia on Psalms* *apatheia* is less as a goal than a starting point from which the *gnostikos* begins the ascent to spiritual vision and knowledge. Thus the invitation in Psalm 4 to “sacrifice the sacrifice of justice and hope in the Lord” invites the observation: “The *sacrifice of justice* is the reasoning soul’s *apatheia*, offered up to God; while *hope* is eager expectation of true knowledge.”<sup>50</sup>

One of the *logoi* of the *praktikē* that frequently recurs in the *Scholia on Psalms* is the “*logos* of abandonment.” Cries of anguish and pleas for divine assistance in the Psalter permit Evagrius to explain that God sometimes abandons the soul, not in condemnation but rather out of mercy.<sup>51</sup> Sometimes abandonment feels like the withdrawal of divine providence,<sup>52</sup> However, this seeming abandonment is not withdrawal of divine or angelic assistance, but is rather a providential act of God that serves to test or prove the tempted soul. Thus the lament in Psalm 37, “my nearest [relatives] stood afar off” evokes the observation: “certain holy powers withdraw in the time of temptation so that the one tempted may be proven or punished”<sup>53</sup> Another providential effect of abandonment is its power to humble the soul and turn it back to God: “Sometimes *a man is turned back to humility*” (Ps. 89.3), when [God] abandons him on account of his sin.<sup>54</sup> Finally, the claim in Psalm 36, “I have not seen the just one forsaken” invites Evagrius to explain that abandonment may reveal hidden virtue, as in the case of Job: “because the just are indeed abandoned for a [brief] time for the sake of

---

<sup>44</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 6 on *Psalm* 44.6, PG 12.1429

<sup>45</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 5 on *Psalm* 22.1

<sup>46</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 1 on *Psalm* 6.2, Pitra, AS 2 (Paris, 1884), 6.2-3: 456 . Adapted from clement of Alexandria: “wrath is the impulse of concupiscence in a mild soul, prominently seeking irrational revenge,” *Strom.* 5.5.27-28.

<sup>47</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 3 on *Psalm* 24.4, PG 12.1269

<sup>48</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 1 on *Psalm* 131.1, PG 12.1649; Pitra, AS 3, 131.1,1: 329.

<sup>49</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 2 on *Psalm* 147.3, PG 12.1677.

<sup>50</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 5 on *Psalm* 4.6, Pitra AS 2, 4.6.1: 453. In scholion 2 on *Psalm* 1.1 Evagrius writes similarly, “*blessedness* is *apatheia* of the soul together with true knowledge of things that exist,” PG 12.1085

<sup>51</sup> In *Gnostikos* 28 Evagrius recommends study of “the five reasons for abandonment”, a doctrine that was taken up and adapted by later monastic authors, including Maximus Confessor, (*Centuries on Charity* IV. 96), and Pseudo-Damascene (cited by Nicetas: PG 96.1412). This doctrine ultimately derives from Origen, who discussed it in the context of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (*De principiis* 3.1, *De oratione* 29.17). J. Driscoll discusses Evagrius’ teaching on providential abandonment in “Evagrius and Paphnutius on the Causes for Abandonment by God”, *Studia Monastica* 39 (1997): 259-286.

<sup>52</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 8 on *Psalm* 93.18, PG 12.1553.

<sup>53</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 8 on *Psalm* 37.12, PG 12.1368. Evagrius cites and interprets Psalm 37.12 in the same way in *Antirrhethikos* VI.17.

<sup>54</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 1 on *Psalm* 89.3, Pitra, AS 3, 89.3(1): 167.

testing, the Lord says to Job: ‘do not think I have dealt with you for any other [reason], than that you might appear just’” (cf. Job 40.3).<sup>55</sup>

---

## 5. THE COSMOS *in the* PSALTER

---

Evagrius expected the *gnostikos* to read and pray the Psalter *sub specie aeternitatis*, in the light of a divine origin and eternal destiny. His scholia interpret the words and events of the psalms as symbols and allegories of the great cosmic drama of fall, Incarnation, and ultimate eschatological reunion of all reasoning beings with God. This is the subject of *theoria physikē*, contemplation of the inner workings of God’s creation; and it embraces the whole natural order, including the nature of demons, angels, judgment, providence, successive cosmic ages, and the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Scholia concerned with such lofty matters do not necessarily arise, however, from a correspondingly exalted text. The origins of sin and the demonic powers were discernible to Evagrius in images as mundane as the “curdled milk” of Psalm 118. He explains: “Just as there was [a time] when the curd was not a curd, so there was [a time] when the demons were not evil. For if the milk is older than the curd, this indicates that virtue is older than vice.”<sup>56</sup> The existence of different species of demons was perceptible in the nations that “encircled” ancient Israel in Psalm 117. “Concerning the demons, one kind *encircles* the *praktikos* the others *encircle* the contemplative: the first are repelled by justice; the second by wisdom.”<sup>57</sup> Further details concerning the different types of demons were evoked by the images of “sea” and “the depths”:

Ps.134.6. *All that the Lord willed he did in Heaven, and on earth, and in the sea, and in the depths.*

*Scholion 2.* Just as Heaven is a dwelling for the holy powers, so is the earth for human beings. For [Scripture] says, “The heaven of heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He has given to human beings.” (Ps 113.16) And just as in the figuratively-interpreted “seas” dwell the demons which oppose us; within them as well is “the dragon you made to play in them.” (Ps 103.26) So also in the allegorically-interpreted *depths* there are the subterranean demons, to which the terrestrial demons pleaded in the gospels that Christ would not send them. (cf Mt 8.31) The more accurate knowledge of their worlds and their various bodies is stored up in the *logoi* concerning judgment.<sup>58</sup>

The “*logos* of judgement (*krisis*)” that Evagrius mentions in this scholion does not refer to punishment or condemnation: it describes, rather, God’s gift to all reasoning beings of the bodies and environments (“worlds”) they require in order to make spiritual progress.<sup>59</sup> “Judgment” describes a series of progressive transformations. The “first judgment” was God’s original providential creation of the material universe in response to the *kinesis*, the “movement” or fall of the reasoning beings he had brought into being. Subsequent to this first judgment all reasoning beings undergo a series of transformations through which each receives a new body and environment suited to its changed spiritual state. The final judgment designates the complete transformation that will restore all things to union with God. Evagrius explains this almost at the beginning of the *Scholia on Psalms* in his comments on the first Psalm:

---

<sup>55</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 20 on *Psalm* 36.25, *Pitra*, AS 3, 36.25(1): 11-12.

<sup>56</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 30 on *Psalm* 118.70, *PG* 12.1600-01.

<sup>57</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 2 on *Psalm* 117.10, *PG* 12.1580.

<sup>58</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 2 on *Psalm* 134.6, *PG* 12.1653; *Pitra*, AS 3, 134.5-6.3: 333-334.

<sup>59</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 275 on *Proverbs* 24.22, *SC* 340: 370.

Ps.1.5. *Therefore the ungodly shall not rise in judgment, nor sinners in the counsel of the just.*

*Scholion 8.* *Judgement for the just* is the passage from a body for asceticism to an angelic one: but for the *ungodly* it is the change from a body for asceticism to a darkened and gloomy one. For the *ungodly* will not be raised in the first judgment, but rather in the second.<sup>60</sup>

Evagrius hoped that meditation on the *logos* of judgment would enable the *gnostikos* to interpret the rich diversity of the cosmos, including the unique qualities and circumstances of each person, as God's gracious gift of a specific environment and body that will facilitate the return of each reasoning being to the divine unity from which all have fallen. The complexity and variety of creation and of human experience reflected in the varied imagery of the Psalter would thus serve as a constant reminder to the *gnostikos* of the diverse paths and circumstances that lead to God.

Closely related to the *logos* of judgment is what Evagrius called the *logos* of providence. As has already been noted, even the experience of seeming abandonment by God may be understood by the contemplative as a divine act of providential care. The mediators of God's providence are human beings and angels, who are metaphorically described in the Psalms as God's "hand:" "now, 'hands' mean the providence of God;"<sup>61</sup> "and the holy angels are the beneficent *hand* of God, through which God providentially cares for the sensible world, which [angels] are opposed by the demons who do not wish *all men to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth* (1Tim 2.4)."<sup>62</sup> The angels are also exemplars and mediators of that higher knowledge of God that in the Psalter is called God's "face:"

Ps.4.7. *The light of your face has been manifested to us.*

*Scholion 6.* Now the angels continually see *the face* of God, while human beings [see] *the light of his face*. For *the face of the Lord* is spiritual contemplation of everything that has come to be on the earth, while *the light of His face* is partial knowledge of these things; since according to the wise woman Tekowitha, David was "like an angel of God", seeing everything upon the earth (cf 2Sam 14.20).<sup>63</sup>

---

## 6. CHRIST in the PSALTER

---

The theme encountered most frequently in the *Scholia on Psalms* is Jesus Christ, whom Evagrius explicitly mentions at least once in 107 of the 149 psalms on which he comments, referring to Christ by name, by title, or by citation of Christ's words from the gospels.<sup>64</sup> Of the numerous instances where Evagrius refers to Christ by quoting Christ's words in the gospels, most frequent are citations employing the phrase "I am" (*egō eimi*), all but two of which are taken from Christ's "I am" statements in the Gospel of John.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 8 on *Psalm 1.5*, PG 12.1097-1100.

<sup>61</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 1 on *Psalm 94.4*, PG 12.1555.

<sup>62</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 7 on *Psalm 16.13*, (cf PG 12.1221)

<sup>63</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 6 on *Psalm 4.7*, *Pitra*, AS 2, 4.7(1): 453-4. The same interpretation and citation from 2 Sam. is found in scholion 7 on *Psalm 29.8*, PG 12.1296.

<sup>64</sup> The title *christos* is explained or employed in 159 scholia, and of 130 scholia in which Evagrius comments on the title *kurios*, he applies this title to Christ in the majority of instances. Christ is invoked as "savior" in twenty-four scholia and the name "Jesus" appears in eight.

<sup>65</sup> These citations are distributed fairly evenly throughout the *Scholia on Psalms*, appearing 31 times in 29 different scholia: 'I am the life' (Jn. 11.25, 14.6) is used in nine scholia; 'I am the way' (Jn. 14.6) in eight; 'I am the truth' (Jn 14.6) in five; 'I am the bread which came down from heaven' (Jn. 6.41) in four; 'I am the good shepherd' (Jn. 10.11,14) in two; 'I am the light of the world' (Jn. 8.12, 9.5) once; 'I am (lit. "it is I") - do not fear' (Mk 6.50) once; and 'I am your salvation' once.

An association between Christ and the Psalter is common in patristic authors; however Evagrius' approach differs significantly from that of his predecessors and contemporaries. Evagrius' constantly-recurring references to Jesus Christ in the *Scholia on Psalms* only rarely represent what M-J Rondeau termed "prosopological" attribution to Christ of the sentiments expressed in the psalm.<sup>66</sup> Instead, Evagrius invokes the person or sayings of Christ in order to explicate the inner meaning of the psalm, that *dunamis* which he considered the goal of undistracted psalmody and which reveals the *logoi*, the divine purposes, concealed beneath the images and words of the psalms.<sup>67</sup>

In the *Scholia on Psalms*, Evagrius particularly identifies Christ with the wisdom of God,<sup>68</sup> especially the "richly diverse wisdom" of Ephesians 3.10.<sup>69</sup> He thus offers Christ as the exegetical key to the Psalter in a wide variety of ways. Sometimes his only explication of a verse consists of a brief citation of Christ's words from the gospel, such as the "I am" sayings described above. More often he presents Christ as the underlying meaning of images that recur throughout the Psalter, such as "king", "shepherd", "judge", "wisdom" and "sun". In his exegesis of Psalm 126.1 Evagrius offers a rationale for this approach, explaining that Christ will be perceived and comprehended in various ways according to one's level of spiritual maturity:

Ps. 126.1. 1 *Unless the Lord builds the house, in vain do they labor who build it; unless the lord keeps watch over the city in vain does the watcher keep vigil.*

*Scholion 2.* Insofar as the soul may be compared to a house, it possesses within itself the Christ as master of the house; if it then becomes a city it possesses within itself the Christ enthroned as king. And if it then becomes a temple, it possesses the Christ within itself as the existing God. For it is through the *praktikē* that it acquires him as master of the house, through natural contemplation as king; and finally through *theologia* as God [...]<sup>70</sup>

Thus at the level of *praktikē* Christ is "master of the house": he provides a model of correct behavior as well as ethical instruction in the struggle to avoid sin and attain virtue. To this level correspond many of the scholia that describe the struggles of the *praktikē* in general terms,<sup>71</sup> as well as scholia that mention particular virtues and vices. At the level of *physikē* Christ is "enthroned as king" of his "city": that is, the universe which he created. The majority of Evagrius' *Scholia on Psalms* are concerned with this level. They encourage the reader to interpret the words and images of the Psalter as symbols of the great cosmic drama of creation, fall, and redemption. Evagrius'

<sup>66</sup> In her study of patristic commentaries on the Psalter Rondeau coined the term *l'exégèse prosopologique* to describe the widespread interest of early commentators in the question, "whose face (*prosōpon*) lies behind the psalm?" Or put more simply, "who is praying the psalm?" She points out that patristic exegesis of the Psalter often begins with the determination whether a text should be regarded as David's prayer, as the prayer of Jesus Christ, or as our own prayer. M.-J. RONDEAU, *Les Commentaires Patristiques* vol. 2, pp. 21-89.

<sup>67</sup> See part 7, below: explication of scholion 1 *on Psalm* 137.1.

<sup>68</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholia 3 *on Psalm* 21.7(1); 6 *on Psalm* 21.15(2); 8 *on Psalm* 21.19(1); 1 *on Psalm* 30.2(2); 1 *on Psalm* 32.1(1); 2 *on Psalm* 33.3(1); 15 *on Psalm* 34.26(2); 10 *on Psalm* 76.15(1); 2 *on Psalm* 79.5(1); 3 *on Psalm* 84.10(1); 9 *on Psalm* 93.15(1); 2 *on Psalm* 118.3; 4 *on Psalm* 131.6(2); 4 *on Psalm* 135.23; 3 *on Psalm* 141.6(3). This identification of Christ with the wisdom of God is also found in *Kephalaia Gnostica* II.2; II.21; III.3; III.11; II.81; IV.4; IV.7; V.5; and V.84.

<sup>69</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholia 8 *on Psalm* 44.10, and 1 *on Psalm* 122.1.

<sup>70</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 2 *on Psalm* 126.1, PG 12.1641-1644.

<sup>71</sup> Christ is example or teacher of the *praktikē* in: scholia 4 *on Psalm* 18.9; 1 *on Psalm* 26.2; 2 *on Psalm* 27.2; 1 *on Psalm* 30.2; 8 *on Psalm* 32; 9 *on Psalm* 32; 15 *on Psalm* 42.23; 3 *on Psalm* 44.4; 4 *on Psalm* 44.5; 6 *on Psalm* 44.6(1); 13 *on Psalm* 67.19; 7 *on Psalm* 85.11; *on Psalm* 100.8; 13 *on Psalm* 108.19; 25 *on Psalm* 118. 61; 2 *on Psalm* 119.4; 4 *on Psalm* 119.7; 1 *on Psalm* 126.1; 4 *on Psalm* 136.7; 5 *on Psalm* 136.9; 1 *on Psalm* 143.1; 5 *on Psalm* 143.7-8

frequent evocation of the person and sayings of Christ enables the language and imagery of the Psalter to reflect Christ's work as creator, redeemer, and cause of our sanctification.

A few scholia reach beyond *physikē*, the saving action of Christ in creation, and hint at *theologia*, contemplation of the divine nature and acknowledgement of Christ as "our God".<sup>72</sup> In addition to these are five scholia in which Evagrius employs a unique definition of Christ as "the Lord who with God the Word has come to dwell among us."<sup>73</sup> In his explanation of Psalm 104 Evagrius employs this definition in order to highlight both Christ's relationship with creation and his unique status:

Ps. 104.15. *Do not touch my anointed ones*

*Scholion* 10. Because those who are kind partake of Christ they are called "kind" (*chrēstoi*); whereas the Christ who partakes of the Father is called "Christ" [*Christos* / *anointed*]. By "Christ" I mean the Lord who, with God the Word, has come to dwell among us.<sup>74</sup>

In this scholion Evagrius distinguishes Christ from created beings. He does this by contrasting two similar words: the title, *ho Christos*, "the anointed one"; and the appellation, *hoi chrēstoi*, "the kind ones" or "the honest folk". This contrast between *christos/annointed* and *chrēstos/kindly* is traditional patristic wordplay that Evagrius may have encountered in Clement of Alexandria<sup>75</sup> or Didymus the Blind,<sup>76</sup> and which he evidently enjoyed, since he makes use of it both here and in scholion 7 on Psalm 33.91.<sup>77</sup> In order to engage in this wordplay Evagrius paraphrases the text of Psalm 104.15, changing the object of the sentence from "my anointed ones" (*christoi*) to "those who are kind" (*chrēstoi*).<sup>78</sup> He explains that the title *Christos* signifies that Christ "partakes of the Father" (*tou patros metechōn*). He employs the verb *metechō*, "to partake in, share" or even "to have communion" in something, to define Christ's anointing: the title *Christos* signifies Christ's relationship of communion with the Father. In an analogous way, but at a significantly lower spiritual level, "those who partake of Christ" (*Christou metechontes*) are "kindly folk" (*chrēstoi*). Evagrius establishes a link between these two analogous but distinct forms of communion through

---

<sup>72</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 7 on Psalm 47.15(1.3): "The Christ is our God who shepherds us," PG 12.1441. Scholion 1 on Psalm 49.2(2): "For our God is the Christ", PG 12.1449 and PG 27.229-232. Scholion 4(b) on Psalm 49.6(2): "The divine judge is the Christ," PG 12.1452, PG 27.232. Scholion 10 on Psalm 76.15. "You are the God who works wonders [...] This is the Christ; for Christ is the power and the wisdom of God. (1Cor 1.24)," PG 12.1540.

<sup>73</sup> Evagrius employs this definition five times with minor variations in the *Scholia on Psalms*: scholia 7 on Psalm 44.3; 10 on Psalm 104.15; 2 on Psalm 118.3; 5 on Psalm 131.7; and 4 on Psalm 88.7(2). A. Guillaumont maintained that this formula and the scholia containing it attest to a "*christologie très particulière*" that contributed to Evagrius' eventual condemnation for heresy. Refoulé has undertaken a detailed study of Evagrius' christology, generally agreeing with Guillaumont's findings in 'La christologie', pp. 251-266. Their findings and conclusions are accepted by Grillmeier (*Christ in Christian Tradition*, pp. 377-384). Recent Evagrian scholarship (Bunge, Dysinger Casiday) has generally emphasized that Evagrius' definition would have been considered at least marginally orthodox from the perspective of late fourth-century christology, if not by the standards of later councils; although some scholars (Konstantinovski) continue to favor Guillaumont's conclusions.

<sup>74</sup> Evagrius, scholion 10 on Psalm 104.15, PG 12.1564. Evagrius' wordplay and distinctions (*christoi/chrēstoi*) is not apparent in the version of this text in the PG; it only becomes clear when corrected by the version in MS Vat. Gr. 754, f. 258v.

<sup>75</sup> CLEMENT, *Stromateis* 2.4.18.3.1; 6.17.149.5.

<sup>76</sup> DIDYMUS, *De Trinitate* 39.712.6.

<sup>77</sup> In commenting on the verse, "Taste, and see that the Lord is kind (*chrēstos*)", Evagrius explains, "If the Lord is tasted, it is through faith that he is tasted; and if he is kind (*chrēstos*), it is through knowledge that he is [known as] Christ (*christos/ anointed*)," PG 12.1308.

<sup>78</sup> His decision to paraphrase the biblical text in this way is noteworthy since he was unquestionably familiar with another time-honored wordplay that would have permitted him to leave the text intact. The comparison between Christ's title and the baptismal chrismation which allows the newly-baptized to be called *hoi christoi*, "the christs", is extremely common in patristic sources: indeed, Evagrius was present in Constantinople when Gregory Nazianzen preached his Fifth Theological Oration which makes this very point.

his concluding definition of Christ as “the Lord who, with God the Word, has come to dwell among us”. By employing this definition Evagrius draws attention to both Christ’s mediation of communion with the Father (his coming among us) and his role as the unique manifestation of God the Word.

---

## 6. THE BLESSED TRINITY *in the* PSALTER

---

For Evagrius the highest *gnosis*, and thus the most exalted form of biblical exegesis concerns *theologia*, doctrine and experience of the Blessed Trinity. Shortly after the Second Ecumenical Council in 381 he wrote a treatise on the Trinity, *The Letter of Faith*, that until recently was attributed to Basil and considered an orthodox *precis* of Cappadocian theology.<sup>79</sup> In later years he became more cautious, preferring to hint at aspects of the divine nature and eschatological reunion with God in obscure passages of the *Kephalaia Gnostica* and the *Great Letter*. However, these doctrines together with their subjective counterparts in what Evagrius called “pure prayer” are readily discernible in the *Scholia on Psalms*.

Although he uses the term “doctrine” (*dogma*) in his definition of *theologia*<sup>80</sup>, “knowledge of the Blessed Trinity” in Evagrius’ sense is not primarily doctrinal: it is, rather, an ever-deepening relationship. Eschatological union with the Blessed Trinity is the goal and limit, the fulfillment and proper end of all human and angelic *gnosis*. Evagrius responds to the plea of Psalm 38.5, “Lord make me know my limit (*peras*)” with the assertion, “The *limit* of reasoning nature is the knowledge of the Holy Trinity.”<sup>81</sup> This limit or end, however, is not static. In words that may reflect Gregory of Nyssa’s doctrine of eternal progress in heaven,<sup>82</sup> Evagrius responds to a reference to God’s unlimited greatness in Psalm 144 with a succinct meditation on the limitless, infinite nature of *theologia*: “The contemplation of all [created] beings is *limited* (*peperatōtai*): only knowledge of the Blessed Trinity is *unlimited* (*aperantos*); for it is essential wisdom”<sup>83</sup> The dynamic image of spiritual progress in heaven recurs in his explication of Psalm 144, where Evagrius evokes Origen’s notion of heaven as a classroom<sup>84</sup> where all will learn (or teach) whatever is necessary for a deepening union with God that both reflects the dynamic unity of persons in the Blessed Trinity and fulfills the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17.

Psalm 144.13. *You kingdom is a kingdom of all the ages: and your dominion through all the generations of generations.*

5. If the *kingdom* of God is the contemplation of beings and of ages to come, then it is rightly said “*Your kingdom is a kingdom of all the ages*”. And even more does *generation to generation* unto *the ages* signify that some will be teachers and others students. But in the Blessed Trinity *generation to generation* is a way of saying that all will become one in God, according to the prayer of Christ when He says, “Grant to them that they may be one in us, just as you and I, Father, are one” (Jn 17.21)<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> KALVESMAKI, Joel, “The *Epistula fidei* of Evagrius of Pontus: An Answer to Constantinople,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20 (2012): 113–139

<sup>80</sup> EVAGRIUS, *Gnostikos* 18, cited above. See Gehín’s defense of *dogma* as the most probable rendering of the Syriac and Armenian versions of the text, SC 344: 114

<sup>81</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 3 on *Psalm* 38.5, PG 12.1388-1389.

<sup>82</sup> Gregory writes of eternal *epektasis*, “straining forward” towards God: GREGORY OF NYSSA, “Homily 12 on the Song of Songs”, *Canticum canticorum (homiliae 15) Gregorii Nysseni opera*, vol. 6, ed H Langerbeck., (Brill ,Leiden 1960), 291, 352.

<sup>83</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 2 on *Psalm* 144.3, Pitra AS 3, 144.3(2): 354.

<sup>84</sup> ORIGEN, *De Principiis*, Bk. 2, 6.

<sup>85</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 5 on *Psalm* 144.13, Pitra AS 3, 114:13(1-2): 355-6; PG 12.1673.

A foretaste of this eschatological union is perceptible in the present life, first in the ascent from *praktikē* to *gnostikē*, and then in the progressive movement from contemplation of corporeal and incorporeal beings to contemplation of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. In his comments on Psalm 54 Evagrius portrays this as ascent on “the wings of a dove”: “Wings are the holy wings of the contemplation of corporeal and incorporeal [beings] by which the *nous* is raised up to be at rest in the knowledge of the Holy Trinity.”<sup>86</sup> Evagrius uses the terms “knowledge” (*gnōsis*) and “contemplation” (*theōria*) of the Blessed Trinity interchangeably; however, both terms become increasingly metaphorical the nearer one draws to God. True knowledge of God reaches beyond images, words, and conceptual understanding.<sup>87</sup> True “vision” of God is only possible when sense-images and even the concepts and *logoi* of angelic “incorporeal natures” are transcended. Nevertheless, Evagrius insists that this highest *gnosis* can indeed be described as a kind of vision, an experience of “seeing” the Blessed Trinity:

Psalm 138.7. *Where shall I go from your Spirit? and where shall I flee from your countenance?*

Scholion 3. There is no *place* that is without the knowledge of God and the *logoi* of beings: for the *nous* fleeing from corporeal beings then experiences their *logoi*; [...] And if the *nous* breaks beyond the *logoi* of incorporeal natures, it then sees the Holy Trinity, which is limitless (*aperantos*) knowledge and essential wisdom.<sup>88</sup>

For Evagrius this possibility of “seeing” the Trinity is associated with his conviction that the *gnostikos* is capable of apprehending God in a spiritually-perceptible light within the *nous*, at the deepest level of the self where the person is most fully the image of God.<sup>89</sup> This experience of mystical, inner light is not as prominent a theme in the *Scholia on Psalms* as is in more advanced texts; however Evagrius hints at it in his description of a “sun of justice” that all reasoning beings bear within their *nous*. In Psalm 148 mention of the “heaven of heavens” evokes: “The noetic *heaven* is reasoning nature that carries within itself the ‘sun of justice’.”<sup>90</sup> More prominent in the *Scholia on Psalms* are descriptions of the precondition for this spiritual vision: namely, “angelic” undistracted psalmody and “pure” imageless prayer:

Psalm 137.1. *and before the angels I will chant psalms to you*

Scholion 1. To *chant psalms before the angels* is to sing psalms without distraction: either our mind is imprinted (*tupoumenou*) solely by the realities symbolized by the psalm, or else it is not imprinted. Or perhaps he who *chants psalms before the angels* is apprehending the meaning (*dunamis*) of the psalms.<sup>91</sup>

Here Evagrius offers three definitions of chanting psalms “before the angels”, which he equates with undistracted psalmody. In the first phrase he states that undistracted psalmody refers to two

<sup>86</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 2 on *Psalm* 54.75, PG 12.1466.

<sup>87</sup> Evagrius positively describes “one ignorance which has an end (*peras*) and another without end:” *Praktikos* 87, SC 171: 678. However, it should be noted that such explicitly apophatic language is rare in the *Scholia on Psalms*, where the term “ignorance” (*agnosia*) is generally understood negatively, paired with “vices” (*kakia*) to describe the manifestation of evil in the reasoning intellect.

<sup>88</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 3 On *Psalm* 138.7, Pitra AS 3, 138.7: 342.

<sup>89</sup> EVAGRIUS mentions the “light of the *nous*” in: *Praktikos* 64, *Gnostikos* 45, *De oratione* 74, *Skemmata* 25, *Kephalaia Gnostica* 5.42, *Antirrhetikos* 2.36, *Peri Logismon* 30, 37, 40, 43. Columba Stewart discusses this theme in “Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, 2 (2001): 173-204.

<sup>90</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 3 On *Psalm* 148.4, PG 12.1680.

<sup>91</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 1 On *Psalm* 137.1, Pitra, AS 3, 137.1: 340.

seemingly opposite experiences. Either the mind is passive with regard to the psalm's inner meanings and receives only their impressions; or it receives no impression at all, presumably because it is solely attentive to the God to whom the psalm bears witness. In the first definition Evagrius recommends that during psalmody the mind, which is particularly subject to being formed and impressed by external matters, should focus attentively and exclusively on what the psalm. The mind should thus be receptive during psalmody; capable, like wax, of being imprinted (*tupomenos*) by the matters "signified" or "symbolized" by the psalm. By attending exclusively to the realities signified by the psalm, the mind will be formed and shaped only by them. The second definition, according to which the mind is not imprinted at all, alludes to the final goal of psalmody and indeed of every spiritual practice: namely, that the mind be occupied solely with God who, being incorporeal, leaves no imprint on the *nous*.<sup>92</sup>

In the second phrase Evagrius provides a third definition of undistracted psalmody that complements the first but is less passive. Undistracted psalmody is not merely a willingness to be "stamped" by the matters symbolized by the psalm; it is also an active search for the *dunamis*, the "meaning", the "potentiality" or even the "power" of the psalm. In other words, undistracted psalmody is exclusive attentiveness to the inner meanings of the psalm, those meanings that the *Scholia on Psalms* are intended to reveal.

There thus emerges something of Evagrius' purpose in composing the *Scholia on Psalms*. Undistracted psalmody attentive solely to the inner *dunamis* of the psalm is no easy task. The rich variety of images and events found in each psalm, as well as the poetic beauty of the Psalter can captivate the mind and distract it from the real end of psalmody: namely, God himself, the only legitimate "distraction" of the soul.<sup>93</sup> Undistracted psalmody requires the ability to move backwards and forwards through the history of salvation amidst the rich diversity of creation while perceiving this complexity and variety as a reflection of God's "manifold wisdom". Evagrius' exegetical methods become comprehensible when the *Scholia on Psalms* are viewed as a guide to the practice of undistracted psalmody and an encouragement to that higher state he calls "pure" or imageless prayer:

Ps. 140.2 *Let my prayer be set forth as incense before you.*

*Scholion 1. His prayer is set forth like incense who is able to say: we are the fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing (2Cor 2.15). And one form of prayer is "a conversation of the nous with God."<sup>94</sup> with the nous remaining unstamped. And by "unstamped" I mean that at the time of prayer the nous is completely without corporeal fantasies. For only words and names [of corporeal things] stamp an imprint on our nous and shape the meanings of what is sensed, while the nous at prayer ought to be completely free of what is sensed. And the concept (*noema*) of God necessarily leaves the nous unstamped, for He is not corporeal.<sup>95</sup>*

The image of incense, floating and seemingly incorporeal enables Evagrius to reflect on the nature of pure, wordless prayer in which the innermost self, the *nous*, is attentive only to God, free from distractions, "unstamped" by external concerns or temptations. In the liturgical practice of the late fourth century, and especially in monastic communities, opportunities for such prayer recurred

<sup>92</sup> See scholion 1 on *Psalm 140.2(1)*, cited below, on the susceptibility of the *nous* to being imprinted or molded (*tupoō*) by the external world through the senses.

<sup>93</sup> In *On Prayer 34* Evagrius uses the term "distracted" in a positive sense: "For what is higher than conversing with God and being occupied in [lit: 'being distracted by' (*perispasthai*)] communion with him?" Tugwell, p. 8, PG 79.1173.

<sup>94</sup> Evagrius employs this same definition of prayer in *On Prayer 3*: it is taken from Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.7.7.38.6*.

<sup>95</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 1 on *Psalm 140.2*, PG 12.1665; Pitra, AS 3, 140.2(1):148.

regularly, almost incessantly, throughout the day and night. The term *psalmodia* referred to corporate or private chanting of psalms, interrupted at regular intervals by pauses for prayer. These pauses occurred at the end of psalms or between divisions in longer psalms, and generally entailed a change or a series of changes in ritual posture. The prayer offered during these pauses could be vocal or silent and of variable duration (although generally not protracted), depending on circumstances, local practice, and whether the monk lived alone as a hermit or with other in a community (*coenobium*).<sup>96</sup> The intimate relationship between chanted psalmody and the pauses for prayer which punctuated it was such that late fourth century sources often refer to the practice of psalmody as “the psalms and prayers” or simply as “the prayers”. Evagrius’ emphasis on undistracted psalmody and imageless prayer are an invitation to the *gnostikos* to use the *Scholia on Psalms* as a guidebook for entry into either the contemplation of God’s diverse glory in creation, or the transcendent experience of God that silences all speech and unites into simplicity all thoughts and images.

---

## 7. CONCLUSION: READING THE BOOK of GOD

---

Evagrius wrote the *Scholia on Psalms* as a handbook for the Christian *gnostikos*. Chanting the psalms with the aid of the scholia would evoke within the *gnostikos* reflection on an intertwining spiritual dynamic: *praktikē*, the ongoing struggle for virtue, *apatheia*, and *agape*; and *theōretikē*, contemplation of the origin, nature, and final goal of the universe, and rest in the experience of pure prayer. But the scholia were intended to be more than an aid to the *gnostikos*’ personal spiritual progress. Such an experience of the Psalter would enable the *gnostikos* to apply new-found exegetical skills to the “book” that consists of each individual’s personal salvation history:

Ps.138.16 [2] *And in your book all shall be written.*

*Scholion 8.* The book of God is the contemplation of corporeal and incorporeal beings, in which the pur[ified] *nous* comes to be written through knowledge. For in this book are written the *logoi* of providence and judgment, through which book God is known as creator, wise, provident, and judging: creator through the things that have come from non-being into being; wise through his *logoi*, concealed within them; provident, through what is accomplished for our virtue and knowledge; and furthermore judge, through the variety of bodies of the reasoning beings, and through the multiform worlds and the ages they contain.<sup>97</sup>

In this scholion Evagrius describes a “Book of God” in which the *nous*, the deepest level of each person, is somehow inscribed with the mysteries of angels and divine *logoi*. This notion of the individual *nous* and the whole of creation together constituting a “divine book” did not originate with Evagrius; and it would enjoy a long and fruitful history in the later history of Christian spirituality, becoming a commonplace among medieval authors and their later admirers. However, for Evagrius, unlike many later authors, the concept of a book of God that contains both the external creation and the interior cosmos of ideas (*noēmata*), is not simply an attractive metaphor: rather, it

---

<sup>96</sup> Cassian describes the monastic practice of psalmody interspersed with intervals for prayer in *Institutes* 2.5-8. Bunge discusses the implications of this practice for Evagrius’ texts on psalmody in *Das Geistgebet, Studien zum Traktat ‘De oratione’ des Evagrius Pontikos* (Cologne: Luthe, 1987): 13-14. Elsewhere Bunge speculates concerning the *Sitz im Leben* of the *Scholia on Psalms*: he concludes that these texts and Evagrius’ recommendations of undistracted psalmody are less applicable to the common recitation of the monastic office in communities than to the more leisurely, solitary meditation on the Psalter practiced by hermits like Evagrius in the privacy of their cell. “‘Der Mystische Sinn der Schrift’ Anlässlich der Veröffentlichung der Scholien zum Ecclesiasten des Evagrius Pontikos’, *Studia Monastica* 36 (Rome: Collegio Sant’ Anselmo, 1994), 142.

<sup>97</sup> EVAGRIUS, scholion 8 on *Psalm* 138.16, PG 12.1662.

reflects both Evagrius' pastoral methodology and his conviction that the arts of biblical exegesis and spiritual guidance are profoundly interrelated. Evagrius' approach to both biblical exegesis and spiritual guidance may be summarized as an attempt to perceive and describe everything in the light of a divine origin and an eternal destiny; or as Columba Stewart has described it, within a "unified vision of everything."<sup>98</sup> As a biblical exegete Evagrius' *gnostikos* would discover in the Book of Psalms symbols and allegories of the great cosmic drama of fall, Incarnation, and eschatological reunion of all reasoning beings with God. As spiritual guide the *gnostikos* could then, as it were, look up from the Bible to perceive the movements and experiences of each disciple and pilgrim as part of the "Book of God", a miniature iteration and reflection of the universal cosmic journey towards reunion. Thus the drama of each soul's inner struggle would be illuminated by the sweeping movements and symbolic imagery of biblical salvation history.

---

<sup>98</sup> STEWART, "Imageless Prayer": 174.