

HEALING ENCHANTMENTS: THERAPEUTIC PSALMODY in EARLY CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM¹

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1. HIPPOCRATIC MEDICINE and EARLY CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM

Among the famous aphorisms attributed to Hippocrates is a series of injunctions that summarizes the fundamentals of the medical art (*technē*).

The Art is threefold:

The patient,
the disease,
and the physician

The physician is the servant of the art,
and the patient must battle the disease
[together] with the physician²

Ἡ τέχνη διὰ τριῶν,
τὸ νόσημα,
ὁ νοσέων,
καὶ ὁ ἰητρός·

ὁ ἰητρὸς, ὑπηρέτης τῆς τέχνης·
ὑπεναντιοῦσθαι τῷ νοσήματι τὸν νοσεῦντα μετὰ τοῦ
ἰητροῦ χρή·

This text from the Hippocratic treatise *Epidemics* is paraphrased in a *kephalaion* (saying, or chapter) attributed to the disciples of Evagrius Ponticus, the author with whom we shall be chiefly concerned in this paper:

203. There are three concerns:
the physician,
the medications,
[and] the patient. [...]

[If one who takes the medication is not healed, is either because of the doctor's prescription, or because of the ineffectiveness of the medicine, or because of his own indiscipline.]

The physician of souls applies [medication] that is appropriate [to each], and his commands are adapted to the passions [...];

it is therefore because of his own indiscipline that the sick person does not recover his health.³

(203) Τρία [γε μὴν] εἰσὶ πράγματα,
ὁ ἰατρός,
τὰ φάρμακα
ὁ πάσχων·

ὁ οὖν λαβὼν τὸ φάρμακον καὶ μὴ ἰαθεῖς, ἤτοι παρὰ τὴν τοῦ ἰατροῦ πρόσταξιν ἢ παρὰ τὴν τῶν φαρμάκων ἀσυμφορίαν ἢ παρὰ τὴν ἰδίαν οὐκ ἰάθη ἀταξίαν·

ὁ δὲ τῶν ψυχῶν ἰατρός καταλλήλως προστάσσει, καὶ τοῖς πάθεσιν αἱ ἐντολαὶ αὐτοῦ

κατάλληλοι· παρ' ἰδίαν τοιγαροῦν ἀταξίαν ὁ ἄρρωστος οὐχ ὑγιαίνει. ^[p. 262]

¹ Portions of this paper contain research previously published by the author in: *Psalmody and Prayer in The Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, (Oxford Univ. press, 2005); “The Contemplative as Spiritual Physician: Medical Theory and Terminology In the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus,” Chapter 1 in: *Soul and Body Diseases, Remedies and Healing in Jewish, Christian and Muslim literature* (ed. C.S. Popa, Brill, 2023), pp. 15-52.

² Hippocrates, *Epidemics* Bk.1, ch.2,sec.5 li.12, (*De morbis popularibus ἢ Epidemiae*), ed. by É. Littré *Oeuvres Completes d'Hippocrate*, vol. 2 (Paris: Baillie 1840 repr. Amsterdam: Hakkert 1961).

³ *Chapters of the Disciples of Evagrius*, (SC 514, Cerf, 2007), p. 262.

Analogous aphorisms containing therapeutic models and injunctions occur frequently in early Christian literature. We will focus on the use of medical theory and terminology in the spiritual writings of Evagrius Ponticus (c.245-399), a fourth-century Christian ascetic and desert father. Particular attention will be paid to texts that suggest Evagrius' familiarity with the Hippocratic corpus and medical theories of the third-century physician Galen.

Evagrius believed that the monk who serves as a spiritual guide is also a physician of souls (*iatros pathōn*) and an imitator of 'Christ the physician' (*Christos iatros*).⁴ Evagrius was hardly the first spiritual writer to employ these metaphors. By the time he wrote at end of the fourth century there existed a well-established tradition of illustrating Christian spiritual principles through analogies based on the theory and vocabulary of classical medicine.⁵

Like his classical predecessors and Christian teachers, Evagrius frequently employs medical imagery to describe progress in and practices of the spiritual life. His metaphors accurately reflect the range of medical therapy available in his day. Ascetical practices are *pharmaka*,⁶ medicinal remedies by which Christ, whom Evagrius frequently calls the 'the physician of souls',⁷ treats, purges, and shrivels the passions.⁸ According to Evagrius, God employs a wide range of therapeutic remedies, including everything from diet⁹ (the mainstay of the Hippocratic physician) to the much more painful remedy of seeming abandonment when the disease is chronic or intractable (*dusiatos*).¹⁰ Thus Christ heals by acting in accordance with the 'title' or 'intention' (*epinoia*) of a physician;¹¹ and the wise monastic superior

⁴ For Evagrius, Christ is the 'physician of souls' (ιατρὸς τῶν ψυχῶν) in scholion 2 on *Psalm* 102:3.2, (SC 615, p. 238); scholion 6 on *Psalm* 144:15.2, (SC 615, p. 594); scholion 2 on *Psalm* 145:7.3, (SC 615, p.598); *Peri Logismōn* 3 and 10 (SC 438, pp. 160 & 186); *Letter* 42.1; 51.2; 52.4; 55.3; 57.3). Elsewhere as 'physician': *Kephalaia Gnostica* VI.20, ed. A. Guillaumont, *Les six Centuries des 'Kephalaia Gnostica' d'Évagre le Pontique*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 28.1, N° 134 (Paris, 1958); scholion 9 on *Psalm* 106:20.1, (SC 615, p. 308); *Epistula Fidei* 5.

⁵ The medical historian Owsei Temkin describes the development of this tradition in chapters 11-13 of *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians*, (London :Johns Hopkins Press, 1991), pp. 126-177. He concludes (p.177): 'By making available a wide variety of medical analogues, Hippocratic medicine became a vital part of Christian theological exegesis and pastoral practice.'

⁶ Evagrius, *Praktikos* 38, SC 171 p. 586: 'thumos requires more remedies (φαρμάκων) than desire.'

⁷ For Evagrius' description of Christ as 'physician of souls' (ιατρὸς τῶν ψυχῶν) see footnote 4 above.

⁸ Evagrius, *Peri Logismōn* 3, SC 438, pp. 160-162: 'But observe how the Physician of souls here through almsgiving heals our irascibility, through prayer purges the nous, and through fasting causes desire to atrophy.' 'Ἀλλὰ προσεκτέον ἐνταῦθα τῷ ἱατρῷ τῶν ψυχῶν, πῶς διὰ μὲν τῆς ἐλεημοσύνης, τὸν θυμὸν θεραπεύει, διὰ δὲ τῆς προσευχῆς τὸν νοῦν καθαρίζει, καὶ πάλιν διὰ τῆς νηστείας τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν καταμαραίνει.

⁹ In commenting on *Psalm* 144:15, and you give them their food in due season, Evagrius writes: 'As physician of souls (ὡς ἱατρὸς τῶν ψυχῶν) the Christ gives them food in due season,' scholion 6 on *Psalm* 144:15.2, (SC 615, p. 594).

¹⁰ Evagrius explains that God sometimes heals the intractable love of pleasure by permitting the soul to experience suffering, thus causing it to feel abandoned. *Peri Logismōn* 10, SC 438 p.186: 'But this love - or better [said] this intractable gangrene - the physician of souls heals through abandonment,' (τὴν δυσίατον γάγγραιναν ὁ ἱατρὸς τῶν ψυχῶν δι' ἐγκαταλείψεως θεραπεύει).

¹¹ Evagrius, scholion 9 on *Psalm* 106:20(1) (cf. *Pitra* 106:20, vol. 3, p. 217): 'He sent forth his word and healed them. 9. The Word healed them in accordance with the design of the physician,' (ἰάσατο αὐτοὺς ὁ λόγος κατὰ τὴν ἐπίνοιαν τοῦ ἱατροῦ).

should imitate Christ by being both a ‘commander in battle’ and a ‘physician of the passions’ (*pathōn iatros*).¹²

2. THE THERAPEUTIC RHYTHM of MONASTIC PSALMODY

Among the remedies and practices recommended the “physician of the passions” is Psalmody, the daily chanting of the Psalms attributed to King David, a practice which normally occupied a considerable portion of the monk’s day. During the latter half of the fourth century the psalter had come to occupy an increasingly prominent place in Christian worship, both in the public liturgical assembly and in private devotion. In the fourth century the Book of Psalms gradually displaced other biblical texts used at the so-called ‘canonical prayers’ which later came to be known as the Liturgy of the Hours.¹³ 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’.¹⁴ Different reasons have been adduced for the increasing popularity of the psalter; but whatever its cause, by the 380s, when Evagrius became a monk, the central place of the psalter in monastic life was well-established.

In the liturgical practice of the late fourth century, and especially in monastic communities, the term *psalmōdia* referred to the corporate or private chanting of psalms which was interrupted at regular intervals by pauses for prayer. This alternating rhythm of chanted psalmody and silent prayer is described in detail by Evagrius’ disciple, John Cassian.¹⁵ 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 which was offered during these pauses could be vocal or silent and of variable duration (although generally not protracted), depending on circumstances and local practice. 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’.

The therapeutic benefits of psalmody had been described in detail by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, who particularly emphasized the power of psalmody to restore calmness (*ataraxia*) to souls suffering from mental confusion (*tarachē*). In his *Letter to Marcellinus*, a text with Evagrius was probably familiar,

¹² Evagrius, *De magistris et discipulis* 3, Van den Veld, p. 76.

¹³ A. Veilleux believes that in the primitive (early fourth century) Pachomian office 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*: i.e. standing with arms outstretched, prostrating, then arising for silent prayer. Veilleux, *La liturgie dans le cénobitisme pachômien au quatrième siècle*, *Studia Anselmiana* 57 (Rome, 1968), pp. 276-323.

¹⁴ J. McKinnon, ‘Desert Monasticism and the Later Fourth-Century Psalmodic Movement’, *Music and Letters* 75 (Oxford, 1994), p. 506. The same author describes, ‘that great wave of enthusiasm for the Old Testament Psalms which swept from East to West in the second half of the fourth century. 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), p. 98.

¹⁵ Cassian, *Institutes*, Bk.2 esp. chs. 7-12.

Athanasius reminds Marcellinus of the admonition to psalmody in James 5:13, ‘Is anyone among you cheerful? Let him sing praise (*psalletō*).’ He explains: ‘In this way that which is disturbing and rough and disorderly in [the soul] is smoothed away, and that which causes grief is healed (*lupoun therapeuetai*) when we sing psalms.’¹⁶ He finds a second scriptural basis for this link between *ataraxia* and psalmody in the story of King Saul, whose ‘troubled’ (*tarachon*) and ‘frenzied’ (*manikon*) disposition (*pathos*) was healed through David’s psalmody, which restored calmness (*galēnē*) to the king’s soul.¹⁷

Evagrius similarly believed that the alternating rhythm of psalmody and prayer had the power to calm spiritual disturbances, and like Athanasius, Evagrius invoked the image of David’s psalmody soothing or healing the anger and madness of King Saul.¹⁸

3. PSALMODY as ANTIDOTE

Evagrius believed that the chanting of psalms diverts attention away from tempting thoughts, permitting the mind to focus instead on what St. Paul called the “richly-varied wisdom of God (Eph 3.10)” (*polupoikilos sophia tou theou*) perceptible in the events and sentiments contained in the psalms.¹⁹ In addition to this beneficial effect, Evagrius believed that the sacred scriptures, and especially the Book of Psalms offers what might be termed specific textual antidotes, or ‘counter-measures’: that is, remedies specifically suited to the particular struggle taking place within the soul. His desire to provide such antidotes, or more literally ‘contradictions’ of specific temptations is the basis of his text *Antirrhetikos*.

Evagrius recognized that it is often impossible to find an appropriate biblical text while in the throes of temptation, he undertook to search through the whole of sacred scripture to create a collection of verses for use in *antirrhēsis*. In the *Antirrhetikos* he provides 492 brief biblical texts, usually consisting of only one or two verses, to be used as remedies against different manifestations of the eight principal *logismoi* of gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger (*thumos*), *acedia*, vainglory, and pride.²⁰ Evagrius generally intends these verses to be understood in their literal sense. His biblical weapons against the demons do not consist of the symbolic definitions and syllogisms which abound in his scholia, but are based for the most part on the straightforward biblical narrative, as encountered throughout the day in the practice of psalmody.

¹⁶ Athanasius, *Letter to Marcellinus* 28, PG 27.40-41.

¹⁷ Athanasius, *Letter to Marcellinus* 29, PG 27.41.

¹⁸ Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos* IV.22, ed., tr. Frankenberg, *Antirrhetikos, Evagrius Ponticus*, Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Neue Folge, vol. 13, no. 2. (Berlin, 1912), p. 505.

¹⁹ Evagrius, *Praktikos* 85.: “Psalmody pertains to richly-varied wisdom” ()

²⁰ The *Antirrhetikos* 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 verse is generally given as a reference, although sometimes the first few words of the verse are quoted, followed by the reference.

In the *Antirrhetikos* Evagrius cuts a broad swath through the scriptures, offering verses from all the canonical books of the Bible, choosing biblical ‘remedies’ from the sapiential books of the Bible much more frequently than the relative length of these books would warrant: there are 60 citations from Proverbs, 20 from Job, and 13 from Ecclesiastes. However the book Evagrius cites most frequently in the *Antirrhetikos* is the Book of Psalms: of his 492 antirrhetic verses, 91 (19%) are taken from the psalter.

4. PSALMODY as RESTORATION of HOMEOSTASIS (“KRASIS”/BALANCE)

Evagrius believed that the practice of psalmody has the power to restore what could be termed “physical and spiritual homeostasis” that is, one’s bodily, psychological and spiritual balance. Although he was convinced that demons cannot read the innermost thoughts of their victims; he believed they have the power to set the memory in motion and to form ‘strange fantasies’ in the *nous* by ‘striking out against the body’s *krasis*” that is, its temperament or ‘inner attunement’.²¹ This represents another of Evagrius’ borrowings from classical medical theory. The term *krasis* literally means a mixing or blending of elements to form a compound.²² *Krasis* is used in a specifically medical – physiological sense in the Hippocratic writings and by Aristotle and Galen and to refer to the mental or physical temperament of human beings: that is, to the physiological state created by the ‘mixture’ or blending of the four humors.²³ Evagrius uses *krasis* in this physiological sense in his treatise *On Prayer* 69:

When the spiteful demon is unable to move the *nous* through the memory during prayer, he strikes out against the body’s temperament (*krasis*) to create some strange fantasy in the intellect, and [thus] shape it.²⁴

Similarly, in *On Prayer* 62 he describes thoughts that originate ‘in sense-perception (*aisthēseōs*), memory (*mnēmēs*), or temperament (*krasis*)’; and in *Antirrhetikos* IV.22 he claims that chanting psalms changes ‘the temperament (*krasis*) of the body’. In this way the *krasis*, the inner ‘temperament’ or ‘attunement’ of the body may be negatively affected by demons who attack it as a means of unsettling the *nous*; but once this tactic is discerned, one may strive for a ‘re-attunement’ of the disturbed *krasis*, for example by chanting psalms, especially when *thumos* – anger, is the dominant afflicting passion.²⁵

²¹ Evagrius, *De oratione* 69, SC 589, p. 282.

²² Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 990. With regard to musical theory and psalmody it may be appropriate to note that Philo uses *krasis* in the sense of ‘attunement’ or ‘harmony’ to describe the euphonious blending of male and female voices in praise of God: Philo of Alexandria, *The Life of Moses* II, Cohn pp. 256-257.

²³ Hippocrates, *Aphorisms* 5.62; Galen, *De melancholia* 6.9.105, 6.9.124; Aristotle, *Problemata* 935.b23, 954.b8, 955.a14.

²⁴ Evagrius, *De oratione* 69, SC 589, p. 282.

²⁵ Evagrius believed that one of the chief benefits of psalmody is its power to calm misdirected or excessive *thumos*. Anger (*orgē*) indignation (*thumos*), and even hatred (*misos*) are not understood primarily as passions to be extinguished: instead, these terms describe a psychic power that is frequently present in excess or misdirected, but which should also serve important roles in the spiritual life. Evagrius employs these three terms to describe the action of the *thumikon*, the spiritual wellspring of the soul’s ability to respond to threat, which since Plato had been associated with feelings in the chest and with the heart. Plato,

In the fourth chapter of *Antirrhethikos* Evagrius invokes King David as an example of one who made use of the power of psalmody to change human physiology:

4.22. For the [tempting] thought that does not realize that singing the psalms changes the temperament (*krasis*) of the body and drives away the demon touching one on the back and cutting at the nerves and troubling every part of the body: *And whenever the evil spirit was upon Saul, David took the lyre, and played it with his hand, and Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.* (1Sam. 16:23)²⁶

In this chapter Evagrius claims that singing the psalms (literally ‘singing joined with the psalms’) changes the *krasis*, the complex and delicate balance of humors thought to be responsible for health and illness. And in *Praktikos* 69-71 Evagrius suggests that ‘undistracted’ psalmody contributes to the establishment of a new *krasis*, an *anakrasis*, a commingling or complete blending of the self with the virtues.²⁷

5. PSALMODY and TRANSFORMATION (“KRISIS”)

A central concept in the medical theory of classical antiquity that is also fundamental in Evagrius’ understanding of the importance of the Psalter is the concept of *krisis*. In the tradition inherited from Hippocrates and Galen the doctrine of *krisi*: refers to ‘critical’ days or intervals during which perilous but often subtle changes in the disease process were thought to take place. Any given illness might have a series of crises/*kriseis*, ‘critical periods’ or significant ‘turning points’ that herald a change leading either to improvement or deterioration in the patient’s condition. It was believed that medical training enables the physician to foretell the course of an illness through observation of successive *kriseis*; and on the basis of these predictions therapeutic interventions could be planned or abandoned.²⁸

Thus in the medical tradition of Hippocrates and Galen the word *krisis* cannot be - and never is - understood in its more common sense as ‘judgment’: rather, it means ‘critical point’; or even better,

Timaeus (cit. *Stephanus*), by J. Burnet, *Platonis opera*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 70b-c. In *Timaeus* Plato explains that the heart was placed in the chest by the lesser demiurges so that reason (*logos*) might call forth ‘the boiling up (*zeseien*) of *thumos*’ force’ in response to any wrong arising from without or from interior desires (*epithumia*). Plato here describes the heart as the source of the ‘boiling up of *thumos*’ force’. His depiction of *thumos* in *Timaeus* is very positive, portrayed in its ideal state as the spirited ally and servant of the ruling principle (*hēgemonikon* or *logistikon*), a relationship he depicts symbolically in the famous metaphor of the chariot in *Phaedrus* (246-248) and describes in more detail in *Republic* (4.440-444).

²⁶ Evagrius, *Antirrhethikos* IV.22, ed., tr. Frankenberg, *Antirrhethikos, Evagrius Ponticus*, Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Neue Folge, vol. 13, no. 2. (Berlin, 1912), p. 505.

²⁷ Evagrius, *Praktikos* 69-71, SC 171, pp. 652-658.

²⁸ This doctrine was based in part on the theory of *pepansis* (variant - *pepasmōs*), ‘coction’ or digestion (literally ‘ripening’) of ingested substances, which when incomplete or unsuccessful was believed to be responsible for many diseases. The successful calculation and prediction of critical days seems to have depended on the time thought to be required for *pepansis* as well as classical numerology, including musical theories of harmonic intervals. V. Langholf, *Medical Theories in Hippocrates: Early Texts and the Epidemics*, (New York: de Gruyter, 1990) pp. 79-103, esp. pp. 99-102.

‘moment of significant change’. And this is, indeed, the way Evagrius employs the word *krisis*: namely, as a fundamental transformation that facilitates movement either upwards towards virtue and knowledge or downwards into vice and ignorance.²⁹

Growth in the perception of this deeper meaning of *krisis* as “critical” or “healing” transformation represents a movement from ascetical practice to contemplative experience. Evagrius regarded this as an important goal of the *gnostikos* (‘knower’ ‘sage’ or ‘teacher’), the Christian contemplative who is called to discern the deeper significance of words such as *krisis* when they are encountered during psalmody, and also to practice the great art of spiritual healing and thus share in the therapeutic office of Christ.

Evagrius’ *gnostikos* is the spiritual physician *par excellance*, an experienced practitioner of asceticism who has learned the art of *praktikē*, the ascetical quest for virtue in the dangerous thicket of demonic *logismoi*. Such a teacher or sage has learned the art of what Evagrius calls “undistracted psalmody,” the ability to pay attention to the deeper meanings and spiritual significance of the words of the psalms.³⁰ Then, having beheld the patterns and purposes of God in both the psalter and the battlefield of his own heart, the *gnostikos* is able to carry the lessons of his own inner struggle out into the world around him through *physikē*, ‘natural contemplation’ of the divine patterns and purposes (*logoi*) within creation, especially the broken and wounded parts of creation that are the hearts of those who seek the *gnostikos*’ help.

6. EVAGRIAN PSALMODY

Evagrius describes [how the *gnostikos*] appropriates both the therapeutic and the contemplative, or mystical, power of psalmody and prayer in a carefully constructed chain of maxims in his treatise, *On Prayer* 82-85:

<p>82. Pray gently and undisturbed (<i>atarachōs</i>), sing psalms with understanding and good rhythm; then you will be like the young eagle that soars in the heights.</p>	<p>82. Προσεύχου ἐπιεικῶς καὶ ἀταράχως καὶ ψάλλε συνετῶς καὶ εὐρύθμως, καὶ ἔση ὡς νεοσσὸς ἀετοῦ ἐν ὑψεὶ αἰρόμενος.</p>
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In chapter 82 he recommends that psalmody be performed with understanding, that is perception of the deeper meaning of the words, and with good rhythm, that is attention to the musical form of chant

²⁹ This latter ‘downward’ transformation was, however, considered by many of Evagrius’ contemporaries to be a kind of well-deserved ‘judgment.’ Thus the term *krisis*, which occurs frequently in both the Septuagint Greek version of the Psalter and in Evagrius’ *Scholia on Psalms*, is invariably rendered in English translations as ‘judgment,’ a translation that unfortunately obscures the ancient medical/therapeutic implications of this term. Cf. Evagrius, *Scholia* 8 on Ps. 1:5(1); 2 on Ps 100.2(1); 5 on Ps. 118:7; 2 on Ps 134.6; 8 On Ps. 138.16(2).

³⁰ “*To chant psalms before the angels* is to sing psalms without distraction (*ἀπεριπάστως ψάλλειν*): either our mind is imprinted solely by the realities symbolized (*σημαιομένοις*) by the psalm, or else it is not imprinted. Or perhaps the one who *chants psalms before the angels* is he who apprehends the [inner] meaning of the psalms (*δύναμιν τῶν ψαλμῶν*).” Evagrius, *scholion 1 on Psalm 137:1* (SC 615, Cerf 2023), p. 540.

employed. This, he promises with enable the innermost self, the *nous*, to ascend like an eagle into the heights.

83. Psalmody calms the passions and puts to rest the body’s disharmony (<i>akrasian</i>); prayer arouses the <i>nous</i> to activate its own proper activity.	83. Ἡ μὲν ψαλμωδία τὰ πάθη κατευνάζει καὶ τὴν ἀκρασίαν τοῦ σώματος ἡρεμεῖν ἀπεργάζεται· ἡ δὲ προσευχὴ ἐνεργεῖν παρασκευάζει τὸν νοῦν τὴν ἰδίαν ἐνέργειαν.
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In chapter 83 Evagrius described psalmody is a spiritual remedy, a therapeutic means by which the passions are calmed and the body’s *akrasia*, disharmony or intemperance, is rectified. This prepares and enables the *nous* to engage in contemplation, its “own proper activity.”

84. Prayer is the power befitting the dignity of the <i>nous</i> ; it is the <i>nous</i> ’ highest and purest power and function.]	84. Προσευχὴ ἐστὶ πρέπουσα ἐνέργεια τῆ ἀξία τοῦ νοῦ, ἥτοι ἡ κρείττων καὶ εἰλικρινῆς ἐνέργεια αὐτοῦ καὶ χρῆσις.
85. Psalmody pertains to “richly varied wisdom” (Eph 3:10); prayer is the prelude to immaterial and uniform knowledge.	85. Ἡ μὲν ψαλμωδία τῆς ποικίλης σοφίας ἐστίν, ἡ δὲ προσευχὴ προοίμιόν ἐστὶ τῆς ἀύλου, καὶ ἀποκίλου γνώσεως ³¹

Here psalmody is not only therapeutic, it also provides an experience of contemplation, specifically St. Paul’s “richly-varied wisdom of God” the *polupoikilos sophia tou theou*, here described as contained in the imagery and songs of salvation that constitute the psalter. And then, having afforded glimpse of the richly-varies wisdom of creation (natural contemplation, *physike*), psalmody prepares the practitioner for contemplation of ‘immaterial and uniform wisdom’ (ch. 85), the ‘highest power’ of the *nous*. (ch 84)

For those who are making spiritual progress the alternating rhythm of psamody and prayer is much is more than a means of calming the passions and contradicting the demons. Evagrius believed the Book of Psalms affords a vision of the whole creation, including the daily struggles of the *praktiké*, as refulgent with divine meaning. The psalter can serve as a training-ground for the Christian contemplative, a kind of workshop in which the *gnostikos* learns to perceive the divine *logoi* in the events of salvation history recounted in the psalms. Once this art has been learned the *gnostikos* is able to turn from the Book of Psalms to the ‘divine book’ of creation³² where these *logoi* are perceptible everywhere, especially in the daily struggle against sin. Evagrius depicts this contemplative function of psalmody in *Peri Logismon* 17:

And if, weary from our toil, a certain *acedia* overtakes us we should climb up a little onto the rock of knowledge and converse with the psalter (cf. Ps 48:5), plucking with the virtues the strings of knowledge: let us again tend our sheep as they pasture below Mount Sinai, so that the God of our

³¹ Evagrius, *De oratione* 82, Tugwell, p. 16 (cf. PG 79.1185).

³² The contemplation of beings is a ‘divine book’ (βιβλίον θεοῦ): Evagrius, scholion 8 on *Psalm* 138:16(2). This scholion is cited and discussed below in Chapter 6.3.

fathers may also call to us out of the bush (cf. Exod. 3:1-6) and grant us the *logoi* of the signs and the wonders (cf. Exod. 7:9, 11:9-10).³³

Here Evagrius positions the Book of Psalms at the midpoint of an oscillating movement from ascetical toil into contemplative knowledge and back again into ascetical practice. From the tedium of our daily struggle we³⁴ are to ‘climb up’, to ‘take refuge’,³⁵ on the ‘rock of knowledge’ which signifies Christ,³⁶ where ‘conversation with the psalter’ cures our acedia and enables us to hear the call of God and perceive ‘the *logoi* of signs and wonders’³⁷ in the ‘pasture’ of asceticism to which we must regularly return. Here It should be added that the basis for Evagrius’ faith in the efficacy of psalmody as a spiritual remedy is his conviction that it is above all Christ who is encountered in the psalter.³⁸ Christ, the creator and redeemer of the universe who is perceptible in the ‘richly variegated’ imagery of the psalms, is also the ‘physician of souls’ whose words and presence have the power to heal.

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have considered the practice of early monastic psalmody in light of ancient medical terminology and theory. It may be helpful to conclude with a brief comment concerning contemporary medical research.

Beginning in the nineteen-seventies, and continuing to the present, there has been interest in the medical, and especially in the psychiatric community, in the electroencephalographic correlates of meditative states: that is, the patterns of brainwaves that can be measured during different forms of meditation with an electroencephalogram or “E.E.G”. I was particularly interested in this research during my own medical studies and in my early years of medical practice. In the nineteen-seventies and eighties such research tended to focus either on “transcendental meditation,” a practice loosely based on the Hindu monastic practice of reciting a mantra, or on Zen meditation, or occasionally on different forms of Yoga. More recently, research of this kind has generally shifted to studies of Mindfulness meditation, which has

³³ Evagrius, *On Thoughts* 17, SC 438, pp. 212-214, li. 32-39.

³⁴ At the beginning of *On Thoughts* 17 (SC 438, pp. 208-210, li. 1-18) Evagrius employs the second-person singular in reference to the shepherd who symbolizes the *praktikos*. Midway through the chapter (p. 210, li. 19) he introduces the first-person plural which he employs intermittently throughout the rest of the chapter, making it clear that we, his readers, are the shepherd.

³⁵ ἀνατρέχω can mean both ‘climb up’ and ‘take refuge’, Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 104

³⁶ In scholion 4 on *Psalms* 60:3(3) Evagrius’ only comment on the verse, ‘you lifted me up on a rock’ is a citation of 1 Cor. 10:4: ‘and the rock was Christ’ (ἡ δὲ πέτρα ἦν ὁ Χριστός). Driscoll discusses *Peri Logismon* 17 and other instance where Evagrius identifies ‘the rock’ with Christ, ‘the manifold wisdom of God’, in ‘Penthos and Tears’, p. 156, n. 27, and *The ‘Ad Monachos’ of Evagrius Ponticus*, p. 242.

³⁷ The phrase ‘the signs and the wonders’ (τὰ σημεῖα καὶ τὰ τέρατα) refers throughout the Septuagint and the New Testament to the events of salvation history, especially to the events of the Exodus: Exod. 7:3, 11:9, 11:10; Deut. 6:22, 7:19, 11:3, 28:46, 29:2; 3 Ma. 6:32; Ps. 77:43, Ps. 104:27, Ps. 134:9, Wis. 8:8; Isa. 8:18, 20:3; Jer. 39:20; Dan. 4:37, Mat. 24:24, Mk. 13:22, Jn. 4:48, Acts 2:19, 2:43, 4:30, 5:12, 6:8, 7:36, 14:3, 15:12; Rom. 15:19.

³⁸ Evagrius explicitly mentions Jesus Christ at least once in 107 of the 149 psalms on which he comments in the *Scholia on Psalms*, referring to Christ by name, by title, or by citation of Christ’s words from the gospels. In the remaining 42 psalms of the *Scholia on Psalms* Christ is often implicit in allegorical symbols which Evagrius elsewhere identifies with Christ.

become very popular in many branches of the health care community. In addition to E.E.G. “brainwave” studies, the availability of relatively non-invasive neuroimaging methods that measure blood flow,³⁹ glucose uptake or neurotransmitter activity (PET)⁴⁰ in different parts of the brain have encouraged researchers to tentatively attempt to map regions of the brain that are consistently active or quiescent during meditation.

To say that Christian meditative practices are not well-represented in research of this kind would be an understatement. The majority of these neurological studies focus on meditation-practices derived from the non-Christian East, especially Hinduism and Buddhism; although it is possible that in papers to be shared later in this conference we may hear of some progress in this area with regard to Christian ascetical practices.

Nevertheless, it is quite understandable that the monastic discipline of alternating psalmody and prayer has not figured prominently in neurological research. First, because scientists must necessarily define and control variables; and it must be admitted that the variations in how psalmody is practiced at least in the Christian West are highly-varied, indeed. But second, and perhaps more important is the fact that neurological researchers very often regard spiritual practices as techniques for achieving and sustaining a state of consciousness that can be studied electronically and chemically.

As we have seen, the monastic practice of psalmody is an oscillating rhythm between chanted text and silence, between attentive, receptive participation in the chant and that silent, originally-prostrate self-offering that follows each psalm. In other words, monastic psalmody is not concerned chiefly with the attainment of a particular mental or psychological state, but rather the practice of a restorative, healing, and ongoing participation in different modes of attentiveness to God. Although difficult to study and measure scientifically, I believe this ancient practice is still of great value, and deserves our close attention. Thank you.

³⁹ functional MRI

⁴⁰ (PET) Positron emission tomography uses radioactive tracers to measure glucose use or neurotransmitter activity in the brain.