

An Excerpt from

Scripture As Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church

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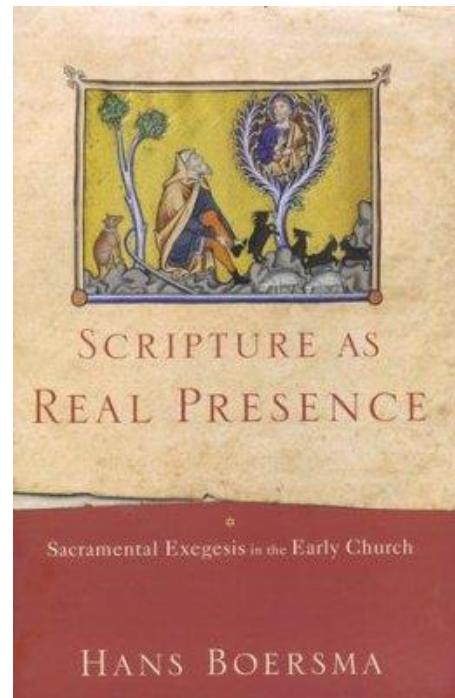
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Restoring Harmony: Virtue and Emotions in the Psalms

The foregoing discussion makes clear that, for the fathers, virtue is not only a moral category; it is also an aesthetic one. Virtue beautifies the soul, producing a person whose character and life are in tune with the melodic principles of the universe. It is quite understandable, therefore, that virtue took center stage as a hermeneutical category in biblical interpretation. The church fathers were quick to ask how the biblical text can instill virtue. They asked this question not because they are preoccupied with God as the divine lawgiver, whom we are to obey in everything we do—though saying this would obviously not be wrong in itself. Rather, they highlight the notion of virtue as a key to interpretation because they believed that the biblical text, much like music, serves as a sacramental means uniting our lives with the harmonious character of the universe and so ultimately with God himself.

The emphasis on virtue is particularly clear in the Alexandrian tradition (notably Clement and Origen) and among the Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus), who in this respect built, at least in part, on the first-century Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, Philo. Gregory of Nyssa casts his entire *Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms* as a treatise on virtue, writing in the preface, “You enjoined us to investigate the meaning to be observed in these inscriptions, so that their capacity to lead us to virtue might be obvious to all.”¹ Gregory begins the first chapter of part 1 with the words, “The goal of the virtuous life is blessedness.”² He then explains the five books of the psalms as five stages of ascent in the growth of virtue. And in part 2, where he explains the Septuagint’s headings above the psalms, he begins by insisting that also these inscriptions are meant to lead us on in virtue: “For these too make a significant contribution to us in respect to the way of virtue, as can be learned from the meaning itself of the words



¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions*, I.24 (p. 83).

² *Ibid.*, I.25 (p. 84).

which have been inscribed.”³ Gregory is convinced that the psalms are all about teaching us the virtuous life; as a result, the theme of virtue runs throughout his commentary. Gregory’s brother Basil is hardly different. Commenting on the two “ways” depicted in Psalm 1, St. Basil explains: “Leading us on wisely and skilfully to virtue, David made the departure from evil the beginning of good.”⁴ Both Cappadocians regarded virtue as an important aspect, perhaps even as the leading theme and purpose, of the Psalter.

This emphasis on virtue is not restricted to the Alexandrians and the Cappadocians. It is also present among the Antiochenes. When Theodoret of Cyrus (c.393–c.458/466)—who likely wrote his *Commentary on the Psalms* between 441 and 448⁵—comments on the word “blessed” in Psalm 1, he explains that this epithet “constitutes the fruit of perfection as far as virtue is concerned.”⁶ “The practice of virtue has as its fruit and goal the beatitude from God.”⁷ And speaking of the psalm’s metaphor of a tree growing by the riverbanks, he explains: “You see, champions of virtue reap the fruit of their labors in the future life; but like a kind of foliage they bear sound hope constantly within them.”⁸ At least in part, the church fathers let their exegesis be guided by the question of how a particular reading advances one’s growth in virtue. Interpretation for them was less a matter of historical investigation (what the text *meant*) than it was the pursuit of a spiritual purpose.⁹ Sometimes, the fathers may make us feel uncomfortable by their relative neglect of the historical level of meaning. They were right, however, to search the Scriptures to see how they can be “useful” in ridding ourselves of earthly passions and how they can assist our growth in the life of God;¹⁰ in other words, they rightly focused on what the text *means*.

Personal appropriation is not only a matter of growth in virtue, however, even if that is the overriding and ultimate concern, especially for the Cappadocians. The church fathers were also keenly aware that the Book of Psalms reflects a broad range of human emotions, and they believed it quite legitimate to try to locate one’s own inner experiences in them. Athanasius’ *Letter to Marcellinus* contains a long

³ Ibid., II.69 (p. 124).

⁴ Basil, *Exegetic Homilies*, 157. See also *ibid.*, 160, 161.

⁵ Robert C. Hill, “Introduction,” in Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms: Psalms 1–72*, trans. Robert C. Hill, Fathers of the Church, 101 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 4.

⁶ Theodoret of Cyrus, “Commentary on Psalm 1,” 47.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 49. See also *ibid.*, 50.

⁹ Cf. John J. O’Keefe’s comment: “When Theodoret says that interpretations of the psalms that overemphasize *historia* help the Jews but offer nothing nourishing to those who have faith, he means these interpretations are insufficiently Christian” (“Theodoret’s Unique Contribution to the Antiochene Exegetical Tradition: Questioning Traditional Scholarly Categories,” in *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms*, ed. Brian E. Daley and Paul R. Kolbet [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015]), 191–203, at 196).

¹⁰ The “usefulness” of the biblical text is an important consideration for many of the church fathers in determining its meaning. See Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 226–29; Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Analogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68–69.

section in which he reflects on how one can make the psalms one's own. Athanasius praises the Psalter for having "a certain grace of its own."¹¹ He then comments that

it contains even the emotions of each soul, and it has the changes and rectifications of these delineated and regulated in itself. Therefore anyone who wishes boundlessly to receive and understand from it, so as to mold himself, it is written there. For in the other books one hears only what one must do and what one must not do. And one listens to the Prophets so as solely to have knowledge of the coming of the Savior. One turns his attention to the histories, on the basis of which he can know the deeds of the kings and saints. But in the Book of Psalms, the one who hears, in addition to learning these things, also comprehends and is taught in the emotions of the soul.¹²

Athanasius puts himself forward here as a pastor and physician of the soul, who is aware that one cannot read the psalms without making the various emotions of the psalms one's own. And so he comments that "the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs."¹³ Recitation of the psalms, for Athanasius, leads to deeper knowledge also of oneself.¹⁴

¹¹ Athanasius, "Letter to Marcellinus," no. 10 (p. 107).

¹² Ibid., no. 10 (p. 108).

¹³ Ibid., no. 11 (p. 109).

¹⁴ Paul R. Kolbet notes that Athanasius prescribes psalm recitation for therapeutic purposes as an integral part of his overall ascetic program ("Athanasius, the Psalms, and the Reformation of the Self," in *Harp of Prophecy*, ed. Daley and Kolbet, 75–96).