

## David's Psalms in the worship of early Christians

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**Abstract:** *Words to strengthen in faith, resting verses for the wounded, and exhorting to live with God, the Old Testament Psalms claim their place among the immortal chanting of mankind because of the frequency with which they appear in common and individual prayers, from their birth to today. The present paper wants to highlight the idea that David's Psalms in the cult of the early Christians represent a space of communion that we, Christians today, are also part of. The spiritual aspirations of mankind over time and the appreciation of Old Testament texts argues the twinning of souls (in God) beyond time.*

Key-words: *psalm, Christianity, early music, religious.*

### 1. Introduction

In The Scriptures, music is portrayed as art that opens the gate to heaven, having the power to cross the distance between the Lord's infinite and human space. The holy books testify that music must accompany the ritual in the Church, this traditional fact leading to brilliant creations throughout the history of music, which we can enjoy today. "*All of them were singing under their father's direction in the temple of the Lord from cymbals, psalteries, and harps, to the services of the Lord's temple*"(Chronicles 25, 6).

One of the Old Testament poetry books of great artistic and spiritual value is the Book of David's Psalms, an inheritance of which the composers of all ages have come close with deeply religious feelings and have intensified the words of psalms through various musical treasures. "*The Book of Psalms is a public treasure of good teachings, revealing to everyone, after his diligence, what is right for him*" (Saint Basil 2011, 365)

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## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. About David's Psalms

Son of Jesse, as the Scripture tells us, David is considered to be the father of the Psalms. The reign of King David is a symbol of the ideals of the Israelites, but also a foresight of the kingdom of the only Lord - Jesus Christ. As it appears to us in the first two books of the Old Testament - Kings, our "*Orpheus musician, the first beautiful writer of good works*" (E. Zigabenu and Saint Nicodim, 21), King David set up a golden age in which God's will was fundamental.

The experiences of his life - worldly victories, trials and spiritual falls, eternal return to divine mercy - are cumulated in the biblical poetry of the Book of Psalms. A great merit of King David is that he has given the existing cult a new dimension - the doxological one. Skilful in harp playing and gifted with the grace of poetry, he introduced the song of psalms in the Jewish temple, as it appears from the following verses: "*They brought the ark of God and set it inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and they presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before God. After David had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord. Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each Israelite man and woman. He appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the Lord, to extol, thank, and praise the Lord, the God of Israel: Asaph was the chief, and next to him in rank were Zechariah, then Jaaziel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obed-Edom and Jeiel. They were to play the lyres and harps, Asaph was to sound the cymbals, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests were to blow the trumpets regularly before the ark of the covenant of God. That day David first appointed Asaph and his associates to give praise to the Lord in this manner:*

*„Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;  
make known among the nations what he has done” (Chronicles 16, 1-8).*

The universality and complexity of the archaic songs allow them to be attributed both to David entirely and to other authors in fear of God. The rabbis recognized the merit of the Psalms of David, in the same opinion as St. John Chrysostom, Saint Eftimie Zigabenu and St. Augustine. In contrast to the above-mentioned ones, St. Elias, Saint Hippolyte, Saint Athanasius, Origen, and Blessed Jeronim are the ones who recognize several authors of psalms, as their title indicates. Some of the psalms mention Asaf, a contemporary of David, as writer, other writings refer to the sons of Core, singers at the temple in Jerusalem. Moses and Solomon are also among the supposed authors of the writings of the immortal Book of Psalms. Regardless of the paternity of songs, one certainty is their plurivalency, the doctrine contained in the ancient testament poetry that we are talking about is a synthesis of all Scripture.



Fig.1. David's statue (Jerusalem)

In addition to historical-paternal indications in the title of the psalms, we mention the musical ones. The word psaltery is the word ψαλτηριον (Ciudin 2002, 250), which for the beginning had the meaning of a stringed musical instrument; later this name was attributed to a song accompanied by a string instrument, then to define a song of praise to God. "**Psaltos** is God, to whom and for whom the psalms are sung; **psalmos** is the making, that is, the word that sings and its sweetness; **psalmodos** is the maker of the psalms, as David, and the **psaltodos** is the choir of the ones that sing the psalms; and the **diapsalma** means the change of the voice, or the delay of the song, until the grace and the breath of the Holy Spirit were given in the mind and heart of the singer." (E. Zigabenu and Saint Nicodim, 36) The *diapsalma* and *sela* words from the titles of the psalms indicated a change in the musical discourse. Whether we are speaking of a silence to acquire the senses heard, or of changing dynamics, translators unanimously recognize the need for contrast in the natural flow of the psalm with the above-mentioned indications.

55 of the psalms begin with the expression *lamenaṭeah* - a word translated by modern exegetes as - choral master. It is understood, in this context, that the psalms mentioned were addressed to the solo interpretation. The word *bineghinot* in the psalm title referred to the *neghina* - a string instrument, or *naghen* - to sing with the instrument. Thus, an accompanying song of the Psalms was required. I would also like to mention two phrases referring to pitch, with the translations from the Hebrew language quite uncertain about these aspects. *Alamot* meant the women's voice, so *al-alamot* indicates a psaltic song in an acute register, in contrast to the *al-ḥašeminit* that signaled a chant in the low register (Chirilă 2003, 288).

As a literary genre, the psalm is part of the biblical lyrical poetry, the style of versification being driven by the principle of parallelism. The latter may be

synonymous or antithetic. Synonym parallelism has the role of strengthening and clarifying an idea expounded by another one added to the discourse: "*Lord, not with your wrath to rebuke me, nor in thy wrath to strive me.*" (Psalm 6) The antithetic realizes the emphasis of an idea by joining an opposite fact, as in the following example: "*Righteousness exalts the nation, but sins shake the seed*" (Proverbs 14).

According to the topics discussed, the psalms can be categorized as follows:

1. Dogmatic psalms – they emphasize the greatness of God, His attributes and are texts of praise.
2. Psalms of moral essence - which draw lines in the faithful conduct and have a pedagogical purpose.
3. Psalms of thanksgiving - in which gratitude is given for the Lord's benefits.
4. Psalms of repentance - through which the mercy and forgiveness of the Lord is required for all human sins.
5. Messianic Psalms - which foretell the coming of the Savior and His Kingdom.
6. Historical Psalms depicting a history of Israel.
7. Psalms of Stages - songs sung by pilgrims near the temple in Jerusalem (Psalm 119 - Psalm 133).

## 2.2. David's Psalms in the worship of early Christians

Essential in understanding the concept of psalmody in the cult of the early Christians is the distinction between the monastic cult and the cathedral one (of the towns). When we talk about ancient monastic liturgy, we focus on the intimate content of prayers, beyond the ceremony of service. As the writings of the fourth century reveal, the psalms in the life of the monks were recited, in the order of their appearance in the Bible, individually or in groups, while all those present at the service assimilated the words heard and executed bows of reverence to the ground. The Psalms were thus an occasion for personal meditation and sacrifice for God (Taft 1993, 66-73).

"*Le mouvement psalmodique*" was born in the 5th century when new non-bible chants began to appear in the cathedrals, their refrains being adjacent to the psalms, and their music being set to biblical texts. The movement to which we refer includes the monks' attempt to stop the development of these customs, to keep the Christian rite as pure as possible (Froyshov 2000, 229-245). Only after a century, the new type of psalmody began to be accepted in the monastic environment, and gradually the monastery and cathedral services aligned to the same course. From the diary of the Egeria pilgrim (7th century), we find out that in Palestine monastic servants met in cathedrals, so taking habits from one Christian environment into another appears natural (Egeria 1982, 234- 254).

*„The offices of the secular (i.e., nonmonastic) or “cathedral” churches were totally different in spirit, structure, and content from the purely monastic offices.”* The cult of the laics was defined by symbolism and ceremonial. The psalms were antiphonally sung, there were known hymns in the service, and the desire to achieve imposing worship led to the existence of special characters on the different parts of the cult service (psalmist, deacon) (Taft 2003, 7-33).

Regardless of the psalms' intonation environment, they had a place of honor in the cult of the early Christians, being recognized as divine inspirational texts, used by the apostles and the Savior himself. Psalms' lyrics were found on the lips of the martyrs as Saints Crispin and Crispian at the time of their sacrifice for God, under the reign of Diocletian, The Holy Martyr Theodore found power, at his death, in the words of Psalm 33 (*"I will praise the Lord all the time"*), and in the letter of the pilgrims Paula and Eustochium to Marcella, referring to holy places (year 386), the significance of singing the psalms in people's homes and in churches is mentioned. Regarding the chanting of psalms, Saint Nicetas of Remesiana (335-414) said: *"Here is what is most precious, here is the spiritual sacrifice greater than all the sacrifices of animals! And rightly so. If, indeed, the irrational blood of the animals is poured there, spiritual praise, soul and self-consciousness are sacrificed here"* (Alexe 1969, 170).

*"Teach your child to sing psalms full of philosophy - especially for wisdom growth, find advice from the very beginning in the Book of Psalms,"* (St. John Chrysostom 1902, 109) said St. John Chrysostom. The Psalms were an education for the little ones, their text being easier to assimilate through singing. Regarding this, St. Ambrose pointed out that: *" We sing (psalms) for pleasure, but we learn for our instruction. The teachings given by force do not last, but what you have learned with pleasure, once entered into the soul, is no longer gone"* (Vintilescu 1937, 222).

Christians were invited to sing psalms to God all the time, for the mind to be full of pure thoughts, and the soul of the music of the angels. The will to praise God in psalms was and will be the generator of positive energy, which helps us climb the stairs to holiness. *"Singing together is like a chain that leads to union; unites the people in the single choir symphony"* (Saint Basil 2000, 7-9).

### 3. Conclusions

Words to strengthen in faith, resting verses for the wounded, and exhorting to live with God, the Old Testament Psalms claim their place among the immortal chanting of mankind because of the frequency with which they appear in common and individual prayers, from their birth to today. In conclusion, we want to refer to David's Psalms in the cult of the early Christians as a space of communion that we,

Christians today, are also part of. This idea brings to light humanity with spiritual aspirations - as an organic thing of yesterday and tomorrow.

*"The composition of the human body is in the form of psaltery and musical harmonic instrument for the ascension of the hymn of our God. The deeds of our body that lead to the glory of God are psalms when the body, in harmony with reason, makes us do nothing dissonant in our movements. And singing is all about the high contemplation and theology"* says Saint Basil. The symbolic approach to singing strengthens the assertion that music is the art of contacting God, that man is able to imitate supreme creation through honest and pure-musical interpretation.

Composers vibrated to the meanings of David's Psalms, made musical micro-cosmos from a prophetic and missionary gesture of spiritual discovery, personal acts through which the world subjectively transforms into various musical dressings with biblical essences.

Theologians were attracted by the dogmatic, didactic and spiritual aspects of David's Psalms, but we consider it the duty of the musicians to give importance to these poems so used in the history of music, to pay attention to the evolution of the psalm as a musical genre.

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