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Psalm 22 LXX in Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs

ABSTRACT

This article examines three distinct ways of reading Psalm 23(LXX 22), first in the Targum, then in the liturgy of early Christian initiation, and finally in Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs. The Targum focuses on God's protective presence in Israel's history and looks forward to the salvation to come. Reading the psalm in the context of Christian initiation draws out the contextual possibilities of the text. In his interpretation of the Song of Songs, Origen seeks elements of spiritual progress after the stage of initiation. The "inebriating cup" points to a strongly affective dimension of this process.

1. INTRODUCTION

The psalms hold an important place in the work of Prof. Kees Waaijman, to whom this volume is dedicated. For this reason, I have selected to focus on Origen's reading of Psalm 22 LXX in his Commentary on the Song of Songs, in which he addresses the spiritually advanced and focuses particularly on the aspect of spiritual progress.

By way of contrast, I will first consider the reading of Psalm 23 (MT) in the Targum and its use in early Christian initiation before focusing on Origen's interpretation of the Psalm in his Commentary on the Song of Songs.



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2. PSALM 23 (MT): REMEMBERING ISRAEL'S HISTORY AND CONTEXTUALISATION

The Targum of the Psalms was compiled possibly between the 4th and the 6th century (Steck 2004:2), but it most probably preserves more ancient interpretations.

The Targum begins with the experience of the divine care in the desert: "It is the Lord who fed his people in the desert" (v. 1). The reference to the manna added in verse 3 maintains the memory of the desert experience: "He restores my soul with manna". What follows could refer to the gift of the Law: "He leads me in the ways of righteousness".

It is the Lord who fed his people in the desert; they lacked nothing. In a place of thirst he makes me rest among the beauty of the grass; besides gentle waters he leads me. He restores my soul with manna, he leads me in the way of righteousness, for the sake of his name (vv. 1-3; Steck 2004:61).

With verse 4, one moves to the experience of the exile where one does not fear, because of God's presence (Memra) and God's instruction (rod and staff):

Even when I go into exile in the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, because your memra is my support; your straight staff and your Law – they comfort me (Steck 2004:61).

Verses 5 and 6 look forward to a return from the dispersion, while the previous verses focused on the periods of absence, the desert, and the exile. These last verses portray an everlasting dwelling in the sanctuary of the Lord, a festive meal, with manna and abundant food, the anointing of the heads of the priests, and an overflowing cup. In the historical context of the time of the Targums, a time of foreign rule, the Psalm looks forward to the restoration of Israel around the temple.

You spread a table before me, manna is raised up in front of my oppressors, you make my body fat with stout birds, and the heads of my priests with the oil of anointing; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, when I shall dwell in the house of the sanctuary of the Lord for length of days (Steck 2004:61).

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PSALM 22 LXX IN THE PROCESS OF ANCIENT CHRISTIAN INITIATION

While the Targum highlights the salvation process of the people of Israel, in the Early Church, the psalm was especially significant in the process of initiation of individuals.

Daniélou (1950) observed the use of this psalm in Early Christianity and, particularly, of its function in mystagogy. He points out how the psalm must have been sung during the Passover night after the baptismal ceremony and during the procession towards the Eucharist table: “You prepare a table before me ...” (v. 5).¹

A text from one of the sermons of Gregory of Nyssa (PG 46:692A-B), pointed out by Daniélou (1950), is a good example of how the psalm was read in light of Christian initiation. Gregory explained verses 1-4 as a commandment to first become a sheep shepherded by the Lord. In this way, those to be initiated are guided by the good catechesis towards the divine pastures and to waters of rest, in order to be baptised and so die with Christ and be buried with him. However, they do not fear this death, because it is only a shadow and image of death:

ἐὰν γὰρ καὶ πορευθῶ ἐν μέσῳ σκιᾶς θανάτου οὐ φοβηθήσομαι κακὰ
ὅτι σὺ μετ’ ἐμοῦ εἶ
ἡ ῥάβδος σου καὶ ἡ βακτηρία σου αὐταῖ με παρεκάλεσαν (v. 4)

In fact, God is with them to exhort and console them; the verb *παρεκάλεσαν* evokes, for Gregory, the figure and work of the Spirit who exhorts and consoles.

In verse 5, the references to the table, the anointing of the head and the cup evoke the other elements of the sacraments of initiation:

ἡτοιμάσας ἐνώπιόν μου τράπεζαν ἐξ ἐναντίας τῶν θλιβόντων με
ἐλίπανας ἐν ἐλαίῳ τὴν κεφαλὴν μου
καὶ τὸ ποτήριόν σου μεθύσκον ὡς κράτιστον.

For Gregory, this is the table of the Spirit as opposed to the table of idolatry where the demons afflict people. The baptismal liturgy involved the ritual of exorcism together with the commitment to turn away from Satan and to turn to God. The demons were viewed as afflicting the candidates who, until then, were driven out by the ritual of exorcism (Finn 1992:5-7).

1 Based on a text of Ambrose, PL 16:403B.

The “anointing of my head” was also regarded as pointing to the liturgical rituals. Several anointings were performed during the initiation ritual and soon the anointing of the head was connected with the Holy Spirit (Finn 1992:15-22).

Gregory (PG 46:692B) understands τὸ ποτήριόν σου μεθύσκον ὡς κράτιστον as the Eucharistic, a cup provoking “in the soul this sober inebriation lifting the dispositions of the soul from the temporary realities to the eternal”. The one who has tasted this inebriation exchanges what is ephemeral for that which has no end, in order to dwell in the house of the Lord for length of days (v. 6).

It appears that praying Psalm 22 was part of the post-baptismal catechesis together with the Song of Songs and the Our Father. However, those preparing for baptism were already taught this psalm at the time of the *traditio* and had to learn it by heart. It is not surprising then to discover that this psalm has influenced the mosaics decorating ancient baptisteries, ancient sarcophagi, and ancient texts, presenting Jesus as the shepherd (Daniélou 1950:65-68).

4. ORIGEN'S USE OF PSALM 22 IN THE SONG OF SONGS²

In reading the Scriptures, Origen is not working towards a fusion of horizons between a human author in the past and a present-day reader, as in contemporary hermeneutics, but towards an ascent from the level of the “letter” to the level of the “spirit”. It is a quest for the mystery, which is always unfinished: “as learners advance, their understanding of the divine knowledge and wisdom is perpetually renewed” (Lawson 1957:187; *Comm. Cant.* 3, 6:9).

In approaching a Scriptural text, Origen treats each verse, or at times even a line, as a complete unit with its own divine message. For instance, in *Comm. Cant.* 3, 7, Origen explores Song 2:4b, *τάξατε ἐπ' ἐμέ ἀγάπην*, and he develops it into a brief essay on bringing order in our loving. Similarly, in *Comm. Cant.* 2, 5, he recognises in Song 1:8, *ἐάν μὴ γνῶς σεαυτήν ἢ καλὴ ἐν γυναιξίν ἔξελθε σὺ*, the familiar saying, *Know yourself*, and he develops this challenge by focusing on what are, for him, the basic steps for progress in the spiritual life, self-knowledge in the realms of ethics and physics (Decock 2020). In fact, for Origen, the study of ethics and of physics are

2 For the Latin text of Origen, I am referring to Brésard *et al.* (1991; 1992).

the two preparatory steps towards the perfection of love for God, which is the subject of the Song of Songs.

In view of the importance of Psalm 22 in Early Christianity, it is not surprising that it features rather prominently in what remains of Origen's writings.³ According to the index in the *Biblia Patristica* 3 (Allenbach *et al.* 1980:157-158), every verse of this psalm is attested in Origen's writings, with verse 5 as the most common one (22 times).⁴

It is interesting to note that, in Origen's Commentary on the Song of Songs (*Comm. Cant.* 2, 4), all verses of Psalm 22 appear in the interpretation of Song 1:7 (Vg 1:6). That text reads as follows in the LXX:

ἀπάγγελόν μοι ὄν ἠγάπησεν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ποῦ ποιμαίνεις ποῦ κοιτάζεις ἐν μεσημβρίᾳ μήποτε γένωμαι ὡς περιβαλλομένη ἐπ' ἀγέλαις ἐταίρων σου.

In his translation of Origen's commentary into Latin, Rufinus reads the verse as:

annuntia mihi, quem dilexit anima mea, ubi pascis, ubi cubile habes in meridie, ne forte afficiar sicut adoperta super greges sodalium tuorum.

The whole psalm is recalled in *Comm. Cant.* 2, 4:17-22, with a repetition of verse 2 at the end of this section in *Comm. Cant.* 2, 4:23. The interpretation of this one verse in the Song of Songs becomes an opportunity for exploring the meaning of the whole of Psalm 22.

- Psalm 22:1 in 2, 4:17.
- Psalm 22:2 in 2, 4:18.
- Psalm 22:3 in 2: 4:19.
- Psalm 22:4 in 2: 4:20-21.
- Psalm 22:5-6 in 2: 4:22.
- Psalm 22:2 is taken up again at the end, in 2: 4:23.⁵

3 There is a renewed interest in Origen's homilies and commentaries on the Psalms since the discovery, publicised in June 2012, of 29 of Origen's homilies in the original Greek (Perrone 2012; Trigg 2019; Solheid 2020). Unfortunately, Psalm 22 is not among that newly discovered collection.

4 In contrast with Origen, Psalm 22 is not used in the Targum or the Canticle of Canticles.

5 There is a further reference to the shepherd in *Comm. Cant.* 2, 5:17, with a reference to John 10:11.

It is interesting to note that the popular verse, Psalm 22:5, is taken up on its own later, in the commentary on Song 2:4a: εἰσαγάγετέ με εἰς οἶκον τοῦ οἴνου (*Comm. Cant.* 3: 6:5). I will consider this in more detail later in this article.

Origen starts his discussion of Song 1:7, as he often does, with a brief consideration of the literary aspects; he pays special attention to the prosopography, that is, clarifying who is speaking to whom. He points out that, from the beginning of the book, the bride has been speaking, first to God, then to the maidens:

and acting – to use dramatic phraseology – as a sort of chorus-leader she directs her words sometimes to them [the maidens], sometimes to the Spouse; and then again answers the daughters of Jerusalem (*Comm. Cant.* 2, 4:1; Lawson 1957:118-119).

In Song 1:7, the bridegroom is presented as a shepherd and the bride is impatiently seeking the place where he is resting with his sheep. However, she fears that she may get mixed up with his companions:

Tell me, you whom my soul loved,
where you pasture your flock,
where you lie down at noon,
lest I become like one who wraps herself up
by your companions' flocks (Song 1:7 NETS).

After these brief literary comments about the story, Origen moves rapidly to the mystical understanding (*Comm. Cant.* 2, 4:4). The entourage of the bride, the dove, the queens, the concubines, and the young maidens all represent different levels of believers, different parts in the Body of Christ. Lastly, there are also souls that are called sheep; they are the lowest category according to their progress of love. Origen is particularly attentive to the issue of progress in the quality of their love for the bridegroom.

There is a question about the identity of the companions and their flocks, the ones with whom the bride does not want to associate. Origen thinks of the angels of the foreign nations (Deut. 32:8). Their flocks are their brides, the veiled ones, but the bride does not want to resemble any of these veiled ones. She considers herself superior to these in the sense that she is called to surpass them just as her bridegroom is superior to his companions. Eventually, in the last paragraph of the commentary of this verse, Origen arrives at a clear statement of how he interprets the verse and how he identifies the companions and their flocks:

So, then, the Bride of Christ enquires for His noonday resting-places and asks God for the plenitude of knowledge, lest she appear to

be as one of the schools of the philosophers, which are said to be veiled, because with them the plenitude of truth is hidden and veiled. But the Bride of Christ says: *But we behold the glory of God with open face (Comm. Cant. 2, 4:37).*

In the opening line of Song 1:7, the bride addresses the shepherd as “the one whom my soul has loved”. The mention of the “soul”, not simply “I”, means for Origen that the love of the bride for the one she loves is not merely any kind of love but the love referred to in Luke 10:27, which recalls Deuteronomy 6:5, “to love the Lord with one’s whole soul, one’s whole strength, and with all one’s heart” (*Comm. Cant. 2, 4:16*).

The function of Psalm 22 in this commentary on Song 1:7 is to give an answer to the question about place, “where you pasture your flock, where you lie down at noon”. The prophetic author of the psalm speaks about that same place. The first two verses explain the qualities of that place where the shepherd brings his sheep: lacking nothing, green places, with water of refreshment. All this stands in contrast to the idleness or inexperience of the companions (*Comm. Cant. 2, 4:17-18*). The emphasis is on healthy and pure water that brings restoration. Origen has in mind the restoration in baptism, in line with the traditional use of the psalm in the initiation ritual, probably also in contrast to the unhealthy waters offered by the companions, the different philosophical schools. This is confirmed at the end of the explanation of Psalm 22 in *Comm. Cant. 2, 4:23*: “*Illā ergo prima, id est pastoralis, institutio initiorum fuit, ut in loco viridi super aquam refectionis educaretur*”.

From Psalm 22:3 onwards, according to Origen, the issue of the static place shifts to a map for a spiritual journey, for which he follows the order of the remaining verses. The journey leads from the level of being a sheep under a shepherd to more spiritual (rational) and higher realities. This journey is the fruit of a divine work of conversion and guidance on the paths of justice: “*animam meam convertit, deduxit me super semitas iustitiae propter nomen suum*” [τὴν ψυχὴν μου ἐπέστρεψεν ὠδήγησέν με ἐπὶ τρίβους δικαιοσύνης ἕνεκεν τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ] (*Ps. 22:3; Comm. Cant. 2, 4:19*). It is interesting to note that, in one of the fragments published in PG 12, vol. 2, 1259C, Origen expands on this justice and includes “prudence and love and self-control by which one enters the kingdom of heaven”.

According to Origen, this is a journey “*ad rationabilia et celsiora*”. This process towards the tasting of higher realities of Christ as the Logos (*ratio*) will reach its climax in the inebriating cup of Psalm 22:5, as explained in *Comm. Cant. 2, 4:22* and 3, 6.

However, Origen draws attention to some of the challenges of this journey and he explains how Psalm 22:4a points to the unavoidable opposition rising up against those making progress by walking in the paths of righteousness:

He who enters the way of justice must experience struggle with those who oppose him – trusting in faith and hope the prophet says about these conflicts.

Nam et si ambulavero in medio umbrae mortis non timebo mala quoniam tu mecum es (Ps. 22:4a; Comm. Cant. 2, 4:20; Lawson 1957:124).

The last line of Psalm 22:4, “*virga tua et baculus tuus ipsa me consolata sunt*” (Ps. 22:4b; Comm. Cant. 2, 4:21), according to Origen, gratefully recalls the beneficial effects of the shepherd’s instruments, that is, the help he received earlier as a sheep under a shepherd. However, at this point, Origen wants to stress again the theme of progress from the realm of the shepherd to rational foods and mystical secrets. He thus reads verses 5-6 as the exclamation of the one experiencing this progress:

parasti in conspectu meo mensam adversus eos qui tribulant me; inpinguasti in oleo caput meum et poculum tuum inebrians quam praeclarus est. Et misericordia tua subsequitur me omnibus diebus vitae meae et ut inhabitem in domo Domini in longitudinem dierum (Ps. 22:5-6; Comm. Cant. 2, 4:22).

You prepared a table before me over against those who afflict me; you anointed my head with oil, and your cup was supremely intoxicating. And your mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life, and my residing in the house of the Lord is for length of days (Ps. 22:5-6 NETS).

As conclusion, Origen returns to verse 2 and reads it in such a way as to highlight once more the idea of progress from the sacraments of initiation to perfection:

The first life, the pastoral, was a preparatory one [*institutio initiorum*], in order that *being set in a green place, he might be brought up [educaretur] on the water of refreshment.*⁶ But the things that follow have to do with progress and perfection (Lawson 1957:124; Comm. Cant. 2, 4:23).

6 See εις τόπον γλότης ἐκεῖ με κατεσκήνωσεν ἐπὶ ὕδατος ἀναπαύσεως ἐξέθρεψέν με (Ps. 22:2 LXX). The “nourishment” could be interpreted as “education”, suggesting the idea of (preparation for) progress.

At the end of his reading of Psalm 22, Origen returns to Songs 1:7: “*ubi cubile habes in meridie ...?*”. So far, the discussion has reached the theme of progress and perfection. The theme of “midday” moves the focus of the discussion from the place (“where”) to the time (“at noon”): “in what pleasant places He keeps himself during the midday heat” (Lawson 1957:124; *Comm. Cant.* 2, 4:25).

And what she calls “midday” denotes those secret places of the heart in which the soul pursues the clearer light of knowledge from the Word of God; for midday is the time when the sun is at the zenith of its course. So when Christ, the Sun of Justice, shows His Church the high and lofty secrets of His powers, then he will be teaching her where lie His pleasant pastures and His place of repose. For when she has only begun to learn these things and is receiving from Him the rudiments, so to speak, of knowledge, the prophet says: And “God will help her in the morning early.” At this time, however, because she is now seeking things that are more perfect, and desiring higher things, she asks for the noonday light of knowledge (Lawson 1957:124-125; *Comm. Cant.* 2, 4:25-26).

In the remainder of his reflections on Song 1:7, Origen offers various texts that illustrate how the noonday is the moment of greatest clarity. He concludes:

For this reason, therefore, in the present passage the Bride desires to be enlightened with the full light of knowledge, lest going astray through lack of instruction she may be made in any respect like those schools of teachers which occupy themselves not with the very wisdom of God, but with the wisdom of the world and of the princes thereof.

5. PSALM 22:5 IN SONG 2:4A

The second verse of the Song, with which Psalm 22 is associated in Origen’s commentary, is Song 2:4a: “Bring me into the house of wine”. The relevant section of Psalm 22:5 reads “and your cup which inebriates, how noble it is”. In Origen’s commentary, the immediate context of his argument is as follows:

This is moreover the wine with which the just and holy rightly desire to be inebriated. I think too that it is on seeing these things in the spirit that Noah is said to have been drunken; and David marvels at the cup of this feast and says: “And the cup which inebrieth, how goodly it is” (Lawson 1957: 186; *Comm. Cant.* 3, 6:5),

et poculum tuum inebrians quam praeclarum est (Rufinus)
 calix meus inebrians quam praeclarus est (VUL)
 και τὸ ποτήριόν σου μεθύσκον ὡς κράπιστον (LXX).

In commenting on Song 2:4a, Origen continues his prosopographical approach and identifies the speakers and the addressees. In this instance, the bride speaks to

friends and intimates of the bridegroom to bring her into the house of gladness where wine is drunk and a banquet prepared (*Comm. Cant.* 3, 6:1; Lawson 1957:185).

Origen understands the friends as all those who ministered the Word of God from the beginning of the world. The wine of gladness is the fruit of wisdom. The imagery is that of the wisdom literature where wisdom invites all, including those who still lack understanding: "Come, eat my bread and drink the wine that I have mingled for you" (recalling Prov. 9:1-6).⁷ The gift of God's wisdom is compared to "the sweetness of a banquet and the gladness of wine" (*Comm. Cant.* 3, 6:6).

For Origen, the "*poculum inebrians*" contains the wine produced from the fruits of those who remain in Jesus, the true vine:

For no one brings forth the fruit of this vine, save he who abides in the Word, and in wisdom, and truth, and justice, and peace, and all other virtues. This is moreover the wine with which the just and holy rightly desire to be inebriated (*Comm. Cant.* 3, 6:4-5; Lawson 1957:186).

This inebriation is the gladness as the fruit of wisdom and the sweetness of the mysteries (see Crouzel 1961:184-197). The person making progress transcends the words, images and concepts of the teachings and joyfully experiences what they refer to (Brésard *et al.* 1991:51-53). This inebriation is further articulated a few pages further in the commentary as a wound of love, as being set aflame with desire or longing (3, 8:12-15). This ability to recognise and taste God's wonders depends on the progress of the learners, as they are led by longing. Therefore, this wine is constantly renewed; as they progress in understanding and wisdom, the learners will produce wine of better quality (*Comm. Cant.* 3, 6:9).

This wine is contrasted with another kind of wine, "with which sinners and those who accept the harmful dogmas of false teaching wickedly get

7 In his homilies on the Song, Origen explains that Christ addresses these words to the catechumens; "it can also be said to those who are not yet perfect" (*Hom. Cant.* 2:7; Lawson 1957:294).

drunk” (*Comm. Cant.* 3, 6:7; Lawson 1957:187).⁸ As in his interpretation of the “companions”, he again warns against the false teachings against which he has been writing:

In fighting the Valentinian doctrine of ‘natures’ predestined to salvation or damnation (*ComMt* 10:11), which denies both freedom and grace, Origen is a champion of both. He also explicitly defends freedom against Epicurean chance, Stoic necessity (*Parch* 3.5.5), and determinism based on astrology or divine omniscience (*Philoc* 23) (O’Leary 2004:115).

The sound wine of Christian teaching, on the other hand, produces a joyful and healthy inebriation. The meaning of this inebriation may also be clarified by turning to Philo, because the theme of drunkenness appears often in Philo, and there is no doubt that this inspired Origen (Lewy 1929).⁹ One text of Philo, which seems to be most enlightening, is when the *therapeutae*, in imitation of the singing of Moses and Miriam after their amazing experience of God’s works, form their own choir:

The ideas were beautiful, the expressions beautiful, and the chorus-singers were beautiful; and the end of ideas, and expressions, and chorus-singers, was piety; therefore, being intoxicated all night till the morning with this beautiful intoxication, without feeling their heads heavy or closing their eyes for sleep, but being even more awake than when they came to the feast, as to their eyes and their whole bodies, and standing there till morning, when they saw the sun rising they raised their hands to heaven, imploring tranquility and truth, and acuteness of understanding (*Contempl.* 88-89).

6. CONCLUSION

In the Targum of Psalm 23, the psalm is understood from a salvation historical perspective as God’s care for his people Israel in the past, recalling the exodus, the exile and looking forward to a renewed gathering around the temple. In the Early Church, the psalm helped articulate the elements of the initiation ceremonies. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Origen draws on the entire Psalm in *Comm. Cant.* 2, 4, where

8 For all these poisonous kinds of wine, he found an appropriate description in Deuteronomy 32:32. The same passage from Deuteronomy is also quoted in *Comm. Cant.* 1, 2:17 and 2, 3:12. Corresponding to the inebriation by a poisonous wine, there is a wound, a wound from the devil, a passion for vice (*Comm. Cant.* 3, 8:16-18).

9 Lewy discusses the following texts: Ebr. 145; Fug. 166; Leg. 1, 82; Prob. 12; Alleg. Interp. 3, 82; Opif. 71; Fug. 31; Mos. 1, 187; Contempl. 89.

he comments on Song 1:7. He focuses on the idea of spiritual progress and points out two stages in the psalm. The first stage, as sheep under a shepherd, refers to the sacraments of initiation. The second stage is the further guidance and progress towards perfection. Origen also used Psalm 22:5 in *Comm. Cant.* 3, 6 in his commentary on Song 2:4a, where the theme of the “inebriating cup” expresses the enjoyment, beyond human expectation, of tasting the goodness of the Lord in his teachings and mysteries.

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