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Echoes of “the Voice”

Psalm 29 in the Fathers

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I STATE AT THE OUTSET THAT I HAVE, FOR SOME TIME NOW, BEEN approaching the topic assigned me with fear and trembling. I confess straightaway, since it would soon become apparent in due course anyway, that, like Ben Johnson with respect to ancient languages, I have little grounding in the writings of the Fathers and even less in the ins and outs of their use of scriptural texts. Indeed my sense of trepidation over being able to do justice to my assignment lay hard upon me from the first day I began to work on the topic at hand when, thinking it wise as a stepping stone to be able to say anything at all on Psalm 29 in the Fathers of the Church. I first gave myself the task of becoming acquainted with what others have written on the Fathers’ methods of interpretation and exegesis. I was increasingly struck by the realizations not only of how much material on the subject there is to digest, but of how little I understood even the small bit of it that time and other constraints permitted me to read. I have been aided immeasurably in writing the chapter by Larry Swain, doctoral candidate in Medieval Studies at the University of Illinois, and Chris Weimer, doctoral candidate in Classics at the University of Memphis, who provided translations of the Latin Fathers. So I emphasize that this chapter is a preliminary report on the use of Psalm 29 by the Fathers. All I will be doing here is to answer several very basic questions about the psalm and the Fathers that will provide data for those who wish to delve more deeply into the questions of the methods, aims and peculiarities of Patristic exegesis.

These questions are:

1. Who among the Fathers quotes the psalm and in which of their works?
2. How extensive is their quotation?
3. What according to the Fathers who quote the psalm, is the nature of the voice that is spoken of in Psalm 29?
4. If the voice is regarded as an utterance, who is it, according to each of the Fathers who quote the psalm, who stands behind the “voice” that the psalm celebrates?
5. On what occasion, according to the Fathers, does the “voice” sound out?
6. What are the “waters” upon which the voice “rests”?
7. Toward what end does the voice sound out?

Where Are Quotations of the Psalm to Be Found?

The “early Church Fathers” are here taken to mean those who wrote prior to the sixth century CE. Thus, significant expositions of Psalms by John of Damascus, Cassiodorus, Gregory the Great, and Bede are not taken into consideration here. The Greek Fathers who quote and/or use the psalm are Athanasius, Diodorus of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuetia, Basil of Caesarea, Cyril, Didymus Caecus, Ephraem, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa, Hippolytus, John Chrysostom, Oecumenius, Origen, Procopius, Severianus, and Theodoret of Cyrus. The Latin Fathers are Ambrose, Chromatius, Rufinus, Jerome, Augustine, Peter Chrysologus, Arnobius Junior, and Maximus of Turin.

Psalm 29, while not one of the most quoted of the psalms, appears many times in early church literature. Athanasius quotes or uses Ps 29 six times in his *Expositiones in Psalmos* (27.152.39, 49; 153.5, 9, 24, 34) and once in his *Quaestiones ad Antiochum ducem* (28.689.20) and once in his *Epistula ad Marcellinum de interpretatione Psalmorum* (27.13.16). Diodorus quotes it some twelve times in his *Commentari in Psalmos*; Theodore quotes it some six times in his *Expositio in Psalmos*. Basil quotes it twelve times in his *Homiles on the Psalms* (29.284.24; 288.38; 289.19, 39; 292.41; 293.26; 297.10, 36; 301.24, 30, 39; 304.48), in his *Psalmum* (30.73.28; 76.23, 36, 41; 77.23; 80.23), and in his

Homiliae in hexaemeron (6.3.19). Cyril cites it once in *Commentarius in Isaiam prophetam* (70.948.45), as does Didymus Caecus in *De trinitate* (39.681.30) and Ephraem in his *Sermo de Virtutibus Vitiis* (144 147.2). Eusebius quotes Ps 29 nine times in his *Commentaria in Psalmos* (23.252.8; 256.1, 15, 34; 257.9, 17, 18, 27, 30) and once in his *Commentarius in Isaiam* (1.62.30). Gregory of Nyssa cites it once in his *In diem luminum* (9.237), Hippolytus once in his *De theophania* (7.11) and John Chrysostom once in *In sanctam theophaniam seu baptismum Christi* (50.808.13). Origen quotes the psalm four times, three times in *Selecta in Psalmos* (12.1289.42; 1292.1) and once in *Fragmenta in Psalmos* (28.9.1). Theodoret has seven citations in his *Psalmos* (80.1064.21; 1065.5, 20, 36; 1068.12, 21; 1069.20).

In the Latin West Ambrose of Milan quotes Psalm 29 in chapter 12 of his *Apology for the Prophet David* (12.58–59) and in chapter 5 of *De Mysteriis*. Chromatius cites Ps 29 in chapter 3 of his *Tractatus on Evangelii S. Matthaei* (19 iii), Rufinus in his *Commentarius in LXX Psalmos* (Ps 28), Jerome in his *Breviarum in Psalmos* and his *Commentary on Isaiah*, Peter Chrysologus in his *Sermo CLX: De eisdem*, Arnobius Junior in his *Commentarii in Psalmos* (Ps 28), and Maximus of Turin in his *Sermones de Tempore* (Sermo X: De S. Epiphania iv). The most influential of all church Fathers, Augustine of Hippo deals with Ps 29 in his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (Ps 28) and his *Sermones de Tempore* (Sermo CXXXVII).

The Extent of the Quotation

How extensive the quotation of the psalm is in any of the works depends largely on the nature of the work in which quotations from the psalm appear. If the work is a commentary or a sermon on the psalm itself, as is the case for example with Theodoret's *Interpretatio in Psalmos* or Augustine's *Enarrationes*, we find all of its verses referred to and discussed in some fashion. If the work is a sermon that was composed for a particular occasion within the festal calendar or a discourse on, or an exposition of, a matter of doctrine, or a commentary or exposition of a biblical book other than the Psalms, as is the case in Gregory of Nyssa's *In diem luminum*, Maximus of Turin's *Sermo X: De S. Epiphania iv*, Peter Chrysologus' *De eidem*, Didymus Caecus' *De trinitate*, and Chromatius in his *Tractatus on Evangelii S. Matthaei*, the quotation is usually limited to one verse and that primarily is verse 3 of the psalm, that is taken

up as proof text for, or an illustration of, the doctrine or issue under discussion.

The Nature of the Voice

At the heart of Psalm 29 stands a series of declarations concerning a “voice.” It is a voice which is “upon” (Greek: *epi*) and “over” the “waters” (Ps 29:3) and which reveals the glory of the God of Israel. It is “powerful” and “majestic” (verse 4). It breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon (verse 5); it hews out or divides flames of fire (verse 7) and shakes the wilderness (of Kadesh; verse 8). It makes the deer to calve, and strips the forests bare (verse 9).

It seems quite clear that the background of the language employed here is to be found in the language associated with Baal and his “holy voice” and that for the psalmist this “voice” was a thunderstorm in which the power and majesty of Yahweh as lord of nature manifests itself (Kraus 344–51; Craigie 245). But for the majority of the Fathers who quote Ps 29, the “voice” which the psalm celebrates is a *verbal utterance*. Only Diodorus, Theodore, Theodoret and Basil entertain the idea that “the voice” is, or might be, something other than spoken words. Basil notes that while there are grounds for taking it as a proclamation, it is more likely that it should be viewed as a great and terrifying noise. Diodorus and Theodore declare that “the voice” is a metaphor for the power that God displayed when, as reported in 2 Kgs 19:35–36, he sent his destroying angel to decimate the Assyrian army that during the reign of Hezekiah had been poised to attack Jerusalem. While concurring with both his Antiochene and non-Antiochene predecessors regarding the nature of “the voice,” Theodoret goes beyond each of their views and asserts on the basis of the description in verse 5 of “the voice” as something that sounds out “in power” and “in majesty,” that “the voice” mentioned in Psalm 29 has another referent as well, namely, the grace of the Spirit that at Pentecost filled “the apostles with power and might” and rendered “puny men magnificent.”

How is this to be explained? In Basil’s case it is because of an understanding on his part that Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture and that the meaning of words in any part of the biblical text is to be determined by the usage of those words elsewhere in Scripture:

In many places you might find the word "voice" occurring. Therefore, for the sake of understanding what the voice of the Lord is, we should gather, as far as we are able, from the divine scripture what has been said about the voice; for instance, in the divine warning to Abraham: 'And immediately the voice came to him: He shall not be your heir . . .' And in Moses: "And all the people saw the voice and the flames . . .' Again, in Isaiah: 'The voice of one saying: Cry . . .' With us, then, voice is either air which has been struck [i.e. thunder] or some form which is in the air against which he who is crying out wishes to strike. Now, what is the voice of the Lord? Would it be considered the impact on the air? Or air, which has been struck reaching the hearing of him to whom the voice comes?

In Diodorus's and Theodore's case, it is because of their assumption that the meaning of a given psalm could only be obtained by contextualizing it within the "historia" outlined in 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings, and more particularly, that Psalm 29 is a prophecy or retelling of the events recounted in 2 Kgs 19:35–36. In Theodore's case, it is because of his belief that:

On the one hand this Psalm fits the time of King Hezekiah. On the other hand, it is about the king of us all who eradicates the error of idolatry and who illuminates the economy with rays of divine knowledge

particularly when gentiles are converted to the Gospel and undergo baptism at the hands of those "modern" sons of God who, in the tradition of the "sons of God" spoken of in Ps 29:1, which is to say: the apostles, who began to fulfill their commission given them by Jesus to bring to the Lord "the sons of rams," that is to say: the gentiles, after they had been filled by the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to "go and baptize" the nations.

The Author of the Voice

As one would expect, given the explicit identification in verse 3 and elsewhere within the psalm of this "voice" as the voice of "the Lord," we should hardly be surprised to find that all the Fathers, both those writing in Greek from the East and those writing in Latin from the West, would assume or declare that the author of the voice is none other than the God of Israel. Nor would we be surprised, given both (a) when the

Fathers who quote the psalm wrote and (b) the fact that they are all in one way or another trinitarians, if not in fact ardent adherents of Nicean creedal formulations of this doctrine, that they would speak of the author of the voice as “the Father.”

And this they do with two exceptions: Augustine and (with some reservation) Basil. Both Augustine and Basil identify the author of the voice as *Jesus*. Augustine does this on the basis of his view not only that Jesus was the subject of the Psalms, but that Jesus was *the true David as well as “Lord.”* In other words, the entirety of the Psalter is not only Christ-centered, but *Christ-authored* (Byassee 54–96). Thus, for Augustine the references in Psalm 29 to the “voice of the Lord” are to be read as “the Voice of Christ.” That Augustine’s Trinitarian theology posits that anthropomorphic references to God in the Bible are references to Jesus as the Christ would also make a human voice for God the voice of Christ.

Basil sees Jesus as the author of the voice spoken of in Psalm 29 on the basis of (a) an understanding that the “many waters” over which Psalm 29 says the “voice of the Lord” sounds are “those made holy by [Christian] baptism” and (b) his belief that in commissioning his disciples to “Go . . . baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” Jesus left behind a “voice” that was to be sounded out upon the waters in which catechumens immersed themselves when they underwent baptism.

Perhaps, even in a more mystic manner the voice of the Lord was upon the waters when a voice from above came to Jesus as he was baptized. “This is my beloved Son.” At that time, truly the Lord [Jesus] was upon many waters, making the waters holy through baptism: but, the God of majesty thundered from above with a mighty voice of testimony. And over those to be baptized a voice left behind by the Lord is to be pronounced: “Go, therefore,” it says, “baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Therefore, “the voice of the Lord is upon the waters.”

On What Occasion Does the Voice Sound Out?

For reasons of space I limit my focus to what the Fathers say regarding “the voice” spoken of in verse 3. Most of the Fathers who quote the

psalm note or assume what we have just seen Basil attest to: that the voice spoken of in this verse was that which the Synoptic evangelists tell us was sounded out at Jesus' baptism (Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22). That is to say, the "voice of the Lord" is the divine declaration that Jesus was God's beloved and favored son that, according to the evangelists, was heard when, immediately after Jesus' immersion by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, the heavens were opened and the Spirit descended upon him. The reason for this is not only that they found in the Synoptic accounts of Jesus' baptism language and themes that are highly reminiscent of the language and themes of Psalm 29, a heavenly voice sounding out over (and upon one in) waters, but because of a shared general hermeneutical assumption that the Psalms are at the very least, if not primarily, prophetic. In them one finds prefigurements of the life of Jesus. We see this plainly, for instance in Gregory of Nyssa's remark that "in writing in his book that passage . . . The voice of the Lord is upon the waters, the voice of the Lord in majesty," the "inspired David" was "foretelling also the voice which the Father uttered from heaven upon the Son at his baptism."

Moreover, there is also the fact that the declaration within the psalm regarding the might and majesty of the voice "fits" with certain theological assumptions about the significance of Jesus' baptism which, among a number of the Eastern Fathers, was viewed as the occasion both of a cosmically regenerating and renewing theophania, and, for the believer, of the reception of the power of the "sacrament" of baptism which Jesus' baptism initiated. As Hippolytus notes

The beloved generates love, and the light immaterial the light inaccessible? This is my beloved Son." He who, being manifested on earth and yet unseparated from the Father's bosom, was manifested, and yet did not appear. For the appearing is a different thing, since in appearance the baptizer here is superior to the baptized. For this reason did the Father send down the Holy Spirit from heaven upon him who was baptized. For as in the ark of Noah the love of God toward man is signified by the dove, so also now the Spirit, descending in the form of a dove, bearing as it were the fruit of the olive, rested on him to whom the witness was borne. For what reason? That the faithfulness of the Father's voice might be made known and that the prophetic utterance of a long time past might be ratified. And what utterance is this? . . . "The voice of the Lord on the waters, the God of

glory thundered; the Lord upon many waters.” And what voice? “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” This is he who is named the son of Joseph and (who is) according to the divine essence my Only-begotten. “This is my beloved Son”—He who is hungry and yet maintains myriads; who is weary, and yet gives rest to the weary; who has not where to lay his head, and yet bears up all things in his hand; who suffers, and yet heals sufferings; who is smitten, and yet confers liberty on the world; who is pierced in the side, and yet repairs the side of Adam. (*De theophania* 7.11)

And Ambrose:

Why do you marvel if you see the sacraments of baptism? When [David] said above, where he describes the Passion of the Lord, the Lord feeds me, and nothing is wanting for me: in the verdant place there he lays me down, out of the water of refreshment he leads me (Ps. 22.2). And in another place: The voice of the Lord over the waters, the God of majesty thunders. (*Apology for the Prophet David*, ch. 12)

Is it not that you ought to doubt [that Christ is present in baptism], when clearly the Father calls to you in the Gospel who says, “Here is my Son in whom I am pleased; the Son calls, on whom also the Holy Spirit descended as a dove, and the Spirit itself calls who descended as a dove; David calls, “The voice of the Lord on many waters, the God of majesty thunders, the Lord over many waters.” (*De Mysteriis*, ch. 5)

But there are exceptions to this view. There is, as should be expected, Augustine, who, as we have seen, regards the psalm as something spoken by *Jesus himself about himself and the nature and aim of his activity in the world* during his ministry. And there are, as we have also already seen, the Antiochene exegetes Diodorus and Theodore, who, while accepting that the voice is the voice of God, declare that the occasion for its sounding was God’s rout of the siege made by the Assyrian king Sennacharib against Hezekiah’s Jerusalem.

What Are the “Waters” upon which the Voice Sounds?

With respect to the question of the nature of the “waters” spoken of in Psalm 29, the Fathers are divided, with some overlap, into six camps. According to the Fathers, the waters represent:

1. The Jordan River in which Jesus was baptized (Theodoret, *Commentary* on Ps 29:3).
2. The water with which catechumens are baptized.
3. The Gentiles who are brought by the preaching of the disciples and their successors into baptism.
4. The "saints" from within whom, in fulfillment of John 7:38, "rivers (that is: spiritual teaching which refreshes the souls of the hearers) flow.
5. The church (Augustine, beginning of comments on Psalm 29)
6. The hordes of the Assyrians spoken of in 2 Kings 19.

Who among the Fathers stands where is largely dependent upon what the nature and who the author of the voice is thought to be and what the Father envisages as the occasion in which the voice sounds out.

To What End Does the "Voice" Sound Out?

Here too Patristic views are varied. Many Fathers say, along with Ambrose, that the purpose of the voice sounding out is to show that baptism is fully efficacious in the removal of sin and that Christ is fully present in the sacrament. But Chromatius says that it has another aim: to confirm that the Old Testament points to Jesus and that in him prophecy is fulfilled. Theodore and Diodorus note that it was to rout the forces of Sennacherib and to demonstrate God's faithfulness to his promise to shield and save from any siege that the Assyrian king intended to lay against Jerusalem. Theodoret claims that it was to sanctify not only the Jordan but all other waters used elsewhere to administer baptism as well as to prophesy "the power imparted to apostles at Pentecost to preach salvation to the nations and offer those delivered by the Gospel message from idols to God." And Augustine declares that it is to demonstrate that the church is being perfected in this world and is the divine instrument through which Jesus displays his divinity.

Final Observations

I mentioned at the outset that I have little competence in matters Patristic, let alone the field of Patristic hermeneutical approaches to,

and interpretation of, Scripture. So I am loathe to offer any conclusions about what is indicated by way of the methods, aims and peculiarities of Patristic exegesis from what I have outlined above. However, two things seem to be clear:

1. All of the Fathers, even those from schools of exegesis that stress examining the original/historical context of a text as a proper methodology for gaining a sound understanding of that text, work from an unquestioned assumption that biblical texts are alive. That is to say: biblical texts have a meaning that is relevant for, and which speaks to, their own times.
2. The explanation of the first observation is that no early church Father in either the East or West ever thought that the ultimate aim of biblical exegesis was anything other than a pastoral one or that it should ever be understood except to edify those for whom he wrote.

Whatever else may be derived from the data I have brought forward in the preceding pages I leave to the experts to adduce.

Appendix: A Verse-by-Verse Reading by Augustine of Psalm 29

Heading: The speaker ["David"] is Jesus concerning the perfection of the church in its struggle with the devil.

Verse 1: Using the Greek translation of "Bring to the Lord the offspring of rams," this is seen as a call for Christians to present themselves before God as the fruit of the preaching of the Apostles.

Verse 2: By glory and honor is meant the good works of the Christian. The glory of his name is a reference to the spreading of the Gospel through the world. One is to worship God in one's own heart is the interpretation of "in holy splendor."

Verse 3: The voice and the waters are the preaching of the word of God the Father by Jesus to the peoples who are struck by awe and convert.

Verse 4: Here the voice in strength is that word of God now residing in the believers.

Verse 5: Breaking cedars is the humbling of the proud, while the cedars of Lebanon are the most splendid and noble persons of this world being confounded by God who raises up the humble and brings down the mighty. Here Augustine contrasts Jews and Gentile Christians.

Verse 6: The reference to the calf is taken as a comment on Jesus’ crucifixion at the hands of the powerful of this world. The Latin translation, from the Greek, has a unicorn for the second line and this is taken to be a reference to Jesus as the only beloved Son of God, who emptied himself of his glory to become human.

Verse 7: The voice cutting through fire is taken to be Christ passing safely through the conflicts and persecution to bring love to those who follow him.

Verse 8: The voice shaking the wilderness is the Gospel converting the Gentiles. Kadesh (which sounds like the Hebrew word for “holy”) is understood to refer to the Holy Scriptures.

Verse 9: Using a translation with “perfecting the stags” this verse is understood as Jesus bringing correct understanding of the Scriptures, while in the church all are born again into eternal hope thereby praising the Holy Spirit for the gift of Christ.

Verse 10: The flood is taken as a reference to Noah’s flood where God protected Noah, so God protects the Christians in this world and then will reign over them forever.

Verse 11: Strength will be given by God to withstand the turbulence of this world and in Christ will the Christian find peace.

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