

The Role of Psalms in Interpretation of the Mystery of the Ascension

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Abstract

The article considers the reception of the Mystery of the Ascension, as an integral part of the Liturgy of the early church. The relevance of this research is to highlight the special role of the psalms for the development of theology of the Ascension. In particular, it concerns the relationship of the patristic prophetic understanding the Mystery of the Ascension in the psalms with the development of the theological paradigm of the Ascension. The problems of this theme at the previous studies is the lack of theological reflection of the liturgical using the psalms, in the light of the early Fathers thought. In view of this, the author concentrates on a biblical exegesis of Christ's Ascension. To comprehend this goal, the paper considers the psalms passages about the event, according to early Christian thinkers and its theological reflection. This study demonstrates the close relationship between liturgical content of the psalms for understanding the event of the Ascension and its theology. The author shows that the theological vision of the event and its interpretation from the early Christian thinkers was holistic, and it formed the basis of accepting the Mystery of the Ascension in primitive Church.

Keywords: the psalms, the Ascension, glorification, Parousia.

Psalms played an extremely important role in liturgical practice of Judaism. In Judaism psalms had mainly ritual meaning, being an indispensable part of the Old Testament cult¹. Equally, psalms occupied a prominent place in the spiritual life of the Christian community. Because, according to A. Baumstark: «The primitive Church take over the whole of the Old Testament from the Synagogue, but it make the Psalter it's most primitive and venerated song-book»². That is why psalms were used in the Christian exegesis for the explanation of God's plan of salvation.

1) Psalm 109.

According to B. Bobrinskoy: «In the comprehension of the Ascension theme the leading part was played by three messianic psalms:

Psalm 23 (24), 7-10, which presents a dialogue between angels and their exhilaration by coming the glorified Christ into heaven. This theme does not appear in the New Testament, but the Fathers of the Church often employed this psalm concerning the Mystery of the Ascension;

¹ Cf. S. Mowinckel. *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*. New York 1967, p. 24.

² A. Baumstark. *Comparative Liturgy*. London 1958, p. 107.

Psalms 67 (68), 19, tells about entering the Messiah into the heavenly altitudes and captives' release;

And finally and primarily psalm 109 (110), 1-4, which proclaims the position of the Messiah-King on the right-hand side of God and his victory over the enemies»³.

Therefore, among the psalms «which were applied by later Christian exegetes to the Ascension of Christ. They are psalms 24, 47, 68 and 110»⁴, psalm 109 is taking a special place. The first verse of this psalm: «The Lord's revelation to my Master: "Sit on my right: I will put your foes beneath your feet"»⁵, which is often cited or mentioned in the New Testament demonstrating the importance of its apprehension as a messianic prophecy in the apostolic times. In particular, St. Luke mentions it six times – two of them in his Gospel (20, 42-43 i 22, 69), but in the Acts – four times already (2, 33; 2, 34-35; 5, 31; 7, 55-56). The exclusiveness and importance of this psalm in understanding the Mystery of the Ascension consists not only in a direct or indirect citing in the New Testament but also in the fact that Christ Himself uses it in the conversation with Pharisees (Mt. 22, 42-46). This psalm was perceived as a prophesy of the future glorification and reigning of the Messiah even in earlier times. And «rabbinic exegetes often interpreted Ps. 110 messianically, and that custom was probably established among Jews of Jesus' time. The rabbis were inclined to develop this line of exegesis with visions of a messiah whose work and victories were earthly»⁶. Instead, in the light of the evangelic story, this psalm acquires an exclusive meaning in the comprehension of the Mystery of the Ascension. And starting with St. Apostle Peter's sermon on the Pentecost Day (Acts 2, 33-35), verses of psalm 109 (particularly the first one) are associated in commentaries of all Christian authors with the Mystery of Christ Ascension, as a fulfillment of this messianic prophecy. In particular, St. Justin the Martyr in his *First Apology* says, «Ὅτι δὲ ἀγαγεῖν τὸν Χριστὸν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν ὁ Πατὴρ τῶν πάντων Θεὸς μετὰ τὸ ἀναστῆσαι ἐκ νεκρῶν αὐτὸν ἔμελλε, καὶ κατέχειν ἕως ἂν πατάξῃ τοὺς ἐχθραίνοντας αὐτῷ δαίμονας, καὶ συντελεσθῆ ὁ ἀριθμὸς τῶν προεγνωσμένων αὐτῷ ἀγαθῶν γινομένων, καὶ ἐναρέτων, δι' οὓς καὶ μηδέπω τὴν ἐπικύρωσιν πεποίηται. ἐπακούσατε τῶν εἰρημένων διὰ Δαβὶδ τοῦ προφήτου. Ἔστι δὲ ταῦτα. Εἶπεν ὁ Κύριος τῷ Κυρίῳ μου. Κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου, ἕως ἂν θῶ τοὺς ἐχθρούς σου ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου. Ῥάβδον δυνάμεως ἐξαποστελεῖ σοι Κύριος ἐξ Ἱερουσαλήμ. καὶ κατακυριεύει ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἐχθρῶν σου. Μετὰ σοῦ ἡ ἀρχὴ ἐν ἡμέρᾳ τῆς δυνάμεώς σου ἐν ταῖς

³ B. Bobrinskoy. *Życie liturgiczne*. Warszawa 2004, s. 127-128. It should be noted that «the numbering of the Hebrew is one higher than that of the Greek». See: *The Book of Psalms*. Introduction / introduced by Henry Wansbrough. London 2009, p. 9. Here psalms: 23, 46, 67 i 109 are meant in the Greek and Slavonic translation respectively. Further on in this research, just this numeration is used.

⁴ J. G. Davies. *He Ascended Into Heaven*. New York 1958, p. 18. As we see, J. G. Davies adds to this list psalm 46, also associated with the Ascension event by other Christian authors.

⁵ Ps. 109, 1. See: *The Book of Psalms*.

⁶ D. Hay. *Glory at the Right Hand. Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*. Nashville 1973, p. 33.

λαμπρότησι τῶν ἁγίων σου. Ἐκ γαστροῦ πρὸ ἑωσφόρου ἐγέννησά σε»⁷ («And that God the Father of all would bring Christ to heaven after He had raised Him from the dead, and would keep Him there until He has subdued His enemies the devils, and until the number of those who are foreknown by Him as good and virtuous is complete, on whose account He has still delayed the consummation—hear what was said by the prophet David. These are his words: “*The Lord said unto My Lord, Sit Thou at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool. The Lord shall send to Thee the rod of power out of Jerusalem; and rule Thou in the midst of Thine enemies. With Thee is the government in the day of Thy power, in the beauties of Thy saints: from the womb of morning have I begotten Thee*»)⁸. Here St. Justin says about Christ’s place at the right hand of the Father and that His Ascension has occurred. But he associated it with Parousia – the eschatological motive of the Ascension. This tendency is observed in the majority of early Christian authors. For example, Tertulian also associates psalm 109 with the Ascension in the context of Parousia. At the same time, he separates the oikonomia of Persons of the Holy Trinity in the Mystery of Ascension, saying: «Filius ascendit in superior caelorum qui et descendit in interiora terrae. *Hic sedet ad dexteram Patris, non Pater ad suam. Hunc uidit Stephanus cum lapideratur, adhuc stantem ad dexteram Dei, ut exinde sessurum donec ponat illi Pater omnes inimicos sub pedibus suis. Hic et uenturus est rursus super nubes caeli talis, qualis et ascendit. Hic interium acceptum a Patre munus effudit, Spiritum sanctum*»⁹ («It is the Son, too, who ascends to the heights of heaven, and also descends to the inner parts of the earth. “*He sitteth at the Father’s right hand*” – not the Father at His own. He is seen by Stephen, at his martyrdom by stoning, still sitting at the right hand of God where He will continue to sit, *until the Father shall make His enemies His footstool*. He will come again on the clouds of heaven, just as He appeared when He ascended into heaven. Meanwhile He has received from the Father the promised gift, and has shed it forth, even the Holy Spirit»)¹⁰.

In verse 4 of the psalm there is one more messianic prophecy: «The Lord has sworn an oath he will not change. “You are a priest for ever, a priest like Melchizedek of old»¹¹. This verse which concerns the coming Messiah, foresees that «this person would have a priestly as well as a kingly role. Like the mysterious king of Salem in days of yore, he would unite the functions of the two historic institutions»¹². And though Judaism had some prophetic vision of Messiah as a High Priest¹³, it still could not explain this combination. However, for Christian

⁷ PG. 6. 396-397.

⁸ P. Schaff. *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. Edinburgh 1867, p. 276.

⁹ Q. S. F. Tertulliano. *Adversus Praxean* / A cura di G. Scarpato. Torino 1959, p. 157.

¹⁰ P. Schaff. *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian by Tertullian*. Grand Rapids 1885, p. 1096-1097.

¹¹ Ps. 109, 4.

¹² D. Farrow. *Ascension Theology*. Edinburgh 2011, p. 6.

¹³ Cf. Zech. 4, 11 -14 (PDF Version of the King James Holy Bible).

understanding the combination of King and Priest was embodied in the Person of Jesus Christ, Who was glorified and ascended. St. Justin in his *Dialogue with Trypho* says that Jewish people associated this psalm with the rule of Hezekiah, though, as St. Justin states, Hezekiah had never been a priest. Thus, verse 4 of psalm 109 concerns Christ – the Everlasting Priest of God («αἰώνιος ἱερεὺς τοῦ Θεοῦ»)¹⁴. Later, in the rabbinical literature, this psalm was treated impersonally, as a prophecy concerning the whole Israel¹⁵. But it is «the Ascension shows Christ to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament offices of King, Priest and Prophet. As the King’s Son, he sits at the Father’s Right Hand [...]. As the Great High Priest, he ever intercedes for his people [...], and as Prophet, through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, he is enabled to enter utterly and completely into the life of mankind»¹⁶. This enabled those for whom Jesus is a prophesied Messiah to say that the psalm confirms the glory of Christ and that the Church exists in the power and guidance of glorified Christ¹⁷. That is why this psalm, according D. Farrow, «became the touchstone of Christian messianism»¹⁸.

2) Other psalms.

Psalm 23, «which according to Jewish exegesis referred to Solomon»¹⁹, in the Christian interpretation is associated with the entering of the Risen Christ into heavenly glory. Therefore St. Justin says: «Κύριος οὖν τῶν δυνάμεων [...] οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ Σολομῶν, ἀποδέδεικται. ἀλλὰ ὁ ἡμέτερος Χριστὸς ὅτε ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀνέστη καὶ ἀνέβαινεν εἰς τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ταχθέντες ὑπὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἄρχοντες, ἀνῆξαι τὰς πύλας τῶν οὐρανῶν, ἵνα εἰσέλθῃ οὗτος ὃς ἐστὶ Βασιλεὺς τῆς δόξης»²⁰ («The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory. Accordingly, it is shown that Solomon is not the Lord of hosts; but when our Christ rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, the rulers in heaven, under appointment of God, are commanded to open the gates of heaven, that He who is King of glory»²¹. And though J. G. Davies remarks that «By connecting these psalms with the Ascension, Justin added little to the New Testament interpretation of the doctrine, but he did lay the basis of all future exegesis»²², but the verses of this psalm:

O gates, lift high your heads; grow higher, ancient doors,

Let him enter, the king of glory!

¹⁴ PG. 6. 545.

¹⁵ Cf. D. Hay. *Glory at the Right Hand. Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*, p. 20.

¹⁶ B. K. Donne. *Christ Ascended*. Scottish Academic Press 1983, p. 54.

¹⁷ A. W. Zweip. *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology / Supplements to Novum Testamentum 87*. Leiden 1997, p. 126.

¹⁸ D. Farrow. *Ascension Theology*, p. 6.

¹⁹ J. G. Davies. *He Ascended Into Heaven*, p. 73.

²⁰ PG. 6. 553-556.

²¹ P. Schaff. *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, p. 337.

²² J. G. Davies. *He Ascended Into Heaven*, p. 73.

Who is the king of glory? The Lord, the mighty, the valiant,
the Lord, the valiant in war.

O gates, lift high your heads; grow higher, ancient doors.

Let him enter, the king of glory!

Who is he, the king of glory?

He, the Lord of armies, he is the king of glory²³,

were equally perceived by many Christian authors as pertaining to the Ascension. So, Tertulian states the following on the basis of verse 7, says: «Christiano caelum ante patet quam via; quia nulla via in caelum, nisi cui patet caelum; quod qui attigerit, intrabit [...]. Si unquam legisti apud David: *Auferte portas, principes, vestri, et subleventur portae aeternae, et intrabit rex gloriae*»²⁴ («Heaven lies open to the Christian before the way to it does; because there is no way to heaven, but to him to whom heaven lies open; and he who reaches it will enter [...]. If you have ever read in David, “*Lift up your gates, ye princes, and let the everlasting gates be lifted up; and the King of glory shall enter*»)²⁵. Instead, St. Athanasius The Great in his work *De Incarnatione Verbi*, by using the same verse 7 of the psalm combines the sacrificial aspects of the Crucifixion and Ascension: «Ἦλθε δὲ ὁ Κύριος ἵνα τὸν μὲν διάβολον καταβάλῃ, τὸν δὲ ἀέρα καθάρισι, καὶ ὁδοποιήσῃ ἡμῖν τὴν εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἄνοδον, ὡς εἶπεν ὁ Ἀπόστολος, διὰ τοῦ καταπετάσματος, τοῦτ' ἔστι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ. τοῦτο δὲ ἔδει γενέσθαι διὰ τοῦ θανάτου. ποίῳ δ' ἂν ἄλλῳ θανάτῳ ἐγεγόνει ταῦτα ἢν τῷ ἐν ἀέρι γενομένῳ, φημὶ δὴ τῷ σταυρῷ; Μόνος γὰρ ἐν τῷ ἀέρι τις ἀποθνήσκει, ὁ σταυρῷ τελοιοῦμενος. Διὸ καὶ εἰκότως τοῦτον ὑπέμεινεν ὁ Κύριος. Οὕτω γὰρ ὑψωθείς, τὸν ἀέρα ἐκαθάριζεν ἀπὸ τε τῆς διαβολικῆς καὶ πάσης τῶν δαιμόνων ἐπιβουλῆς λέγων. Ἐθεώρον τὸν Σατανᾶν ὡς ἀστραπὴν πεσόντα. τὴν δὲ εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἄνοδον ὁδοποιῶν ἀνεκαίνιζε λέγων πάλιν. *Ἄρατε πύλας, οἱ ἄρχοντες, ὑμῶν, καὶ ἐπάρθητε, πύλαι αἰώνιοι*. Οὐ γὰρ αὐτὸς ὁ Λόγος ἦν ὁ χρήζων ἀνοιξέως τῶν πυλῶν, Κύριος τῶν πάντων ὢν. οὐδὲ κεκλεισμένον ἦν τι τῶν ποιημάτων τῷ ποιητῇ. ἀλλ' ἡμεῖς ἤμεν οἱ χρήζοντες, οὓς ἀνέφερον αὐτὸς διὰ τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος αὐτοῦ. Ὡς γὰρ ὑπὲρ πάντων αὐτὸ προσήνεγκε τῷ θανάτῳ. οὕτω δι' αὐτοῦ πάλιν ὁδοποίησε τὴν εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἄνοδον»²⁶ («While the Lord came to cast down the devil, and clear the air and prepare the way for us up into heaven, as said the Apostle: “Through the veil, that is to say, His flesh”—and this must needs be by death—well, by what other kind of death could this have come to pass, than by one which took place in the air, I mean the cross? for

²³ Ps. 23, 7-10.

²⁴ Tertulliano. *Scorpiace* / A cura di G. A. Bernandelli. Firenze 1990, 128-130.

²⁵ P. Schaff. *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian by Tertullian*. p. 1120.

²⁶ PG. 25 A. 140.

only he that is perfected on the cross dies in the air. Whence it was quite fitting that the Lord suffered this death. For thus being lifted up He cleared the air of the malignity both of the devil and of demons of all kinds, as He says: “I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven;” and made a new opening of the way up into heaven as He says once more: “*Lift up your gates, O ye princes, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors.*” For it was not the Word Himself that needed an opening of the gates, being Lord of all; nor were any of His works closed to their Maker; but we it was that needed it whom He carried up by His own body. For as He offered it to death on behalf of all, so by it He once more made ready the way up into the heavens»²⁷.

Similarly, in psalm 46, the verse: «God goes up with shouts of joy; the Lord goes up with trumpet blast»²⁸, was connected with the Ascension. Christian authors also saw an allusion of this Mystery in it and this association first appeared in St. Justin the Martyr²⁹. According to J. G. Davies, this psalm described a ritual procession, «which ascended the hill of Zion and escorted both the ark of Yahweh and the Davidic king into the Temple precincts [...]. There is a certain incongruity in the presence in this ritual of both Yahweh, of whom the ark was the focal manifestation, and of the king, who was His adopted son»³⁰.

Psalm 67 was among the oldest ritual songs and hymns in Judaism³¹. This psalm was first commented on in the context of the Ascension event by St. Apostle Paul who wrote in his *Letter to the Ephesians*: «But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things»³². Later, many Fathers treated this verse in the way as St. Apostle Paul did. For example, St. Irenaeus of Lion using this verse 18 in his work *Contra Haereses* says: «*Ascendens enim in altitudinem Dominus per passionem, captivam duxit captivitatem, dedit dona hominibus, et contulit credentibus in se [...], veritatem et incorruptionem donavit*»³³ («through means of suffering *ascending into the lofty place, led captivity captive, gave gifts to men, and conferred on those that believe in Him [...], truth, and bestowed the gift of incorruption*»)³⁴. Tertulian uses psalm 67 and its interpretation by St. Apostle Paul by saying that after His Ascension Christ sent the gift of the Holy Spirit on people: «*Accipe nunc, quomodo et a Christo in caelum recepto charismata obventura*

²⁷ P. Schaff, H. Wace. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Vol. 4: St. Athanasius: Select works and letters.* Michigan 1892, p. 211.

²⁸ Ps. 46, 6.

²⁹ Cf. PG. 6. 556.

³⁰ J. G. Davies. *He Ascended Into Heaven*, p. 19-20.

³¹ Cf. H. Gunkel. *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel.* Macon 1998, p. 10.

³² Eph. 4, 7-10.

³³ PG. 7. 778.

³⁴ P. Schaff. *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, p. 639-640.

pronuntiarit: Ascendit in sublimitatem – id est in caelum – captiuam duxit captiuitatem – id est mortem uel humanam seruitutem – data debet filiis hominum – id est donatiua, quae charismata dicimus»³⁵ («Now hear how he declared that by Christ Himself, when returned to heaven, these spiritual gifts were to be sent: “*He ascended up on high,*” that is, into heaven; “*He led captivity captive,*” meaning death or slavery of man; “*He gave gifts to the sons of men,*” that is, the gratuities, which we call charismata»)³⁶.

The Old Testament is a typological example in its projection of the New Testament. That is why Christians perceive it in the light of the evangelic Good News and see the prototypes of evangelic events in it. And the words «according to the Scriptures» that later appear in the Creed, mean first of all according to the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament³⁷. Thus, “taking to heaven” some biblical personalities and also prophetic revelations enable one to see how the Mystery of the Ascension of Christ was foreseen in the Old Testament. They give the ability to accept the Ascension event as a historical fact demonstrating at the same time a timeless eschatological meaning of the Ascension. As J. Granados summarizes: «The Old Testament proves to be essential for expressing the mystery of the Ascension of Christ»³⁸. And the role of psalms in interpreting the Mystery of the Ascension is decisive. That is why, the Christian exegesis derives its interpretation from the prayer, being not just a theological contemplation but a vivid ontological experience contained in the Liturgy of the Church.

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³⁵ SC. 483. 184.

³⁶ P. Schaff. *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian by Tertullian*. p. 766.

³⁷ G. Florovsky. *The Fathers of the Church and the Old Testament / Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*. Vol. 4. Belmont 1975, p. 32.

³⁸ J. Granados. *The First Fruits of the Flesh and the First Fruits of the Spirit: The Mystery of the Ascension / Communio: International Catholic Review*, 38 (Spring 2011), p. 10.

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