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Symbolism of God’s Protection over the Chosen People during the Journey to the Promised Land in Origen’s Homilies to Psalm 77(78)

Abstract: The article analyzes selected literary motifs of Psalm 77 which were used by Origen to formulate more-than-literal interpretations. The methodology of research on the processes of creating allegorical and symbolic associations has been applied to the following literary motifs: the separation of the waters of the Red Sea, the cloud and the pillar of fire leading the Israelites through the wilderness, water from a rock, and manna from heaven.

Keywords: Origen, symbolism, Exodus, Psalm 78(77), allegorical interpretation

In the tradition of Israel, the journey of the Chosen People from Egypt to the Promised Land was an event of a paradigmatic dimension. Mentioned at the Passover meal, it was actualized in every generation, especially as the Jewish people experienced exile or oppression. Hence, both in historical texts (e.g., Judg 6:7–9), prophetic (e.g., Ezek 37:12–14) and wisdom literature (e.g., Wis 18:5–19:22), we have reinterpretations and references to this historical theme.

There is also a text in the Book of Psalms that fits in with this tradition. It is Psalm 77 (according to the Hebrew numeration 78), of a didactic nature, situated in the historical context of the Israeli monarchy. It is dated at the time of Hilkiyah’s reform (8th century BC) or later. The author of the psalm, interpreting the history of the

Exodus from Egypt, critically presents the attitude of his ancestors, emphasizing their unfaithfulness to God.¹

The events accompanying the journey through the desert, starting with the separation of the waters of the Red Sea, through the cloud and pillar of fire accompanying the Israelites, water from the rock and manna from heaven, were an expression of God's protection and care for Israel. They also developed rich symbolic associations in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Christians read them primarily in the Christological-ecclesial key. It is Christ who brings mankind out of the land of Satan (Pharaoh), to lead his Church through the desert of this world to the Promised Land of the Kingdom of Heaven. During this journey, he nourishes him with the manna of the word of God and the Eucharist.

Origen composed nine homilies to Psalm 77, recently published on the basis of the Greek *codex Monacensis Graecus 314*,² and one reworked by Jerome.³ God's mercy seems to be one of the key themes of Origen's homilies to Psalm 77.⁴ Its concrete expression is caring for the Israelites during their wandering through the desert to the Promised Land. In this article, using the methodology of research on the processes of creating allegorical-symbolic associations,⁵ we will analyze selected literary motifs of Psalm 77 which were used by Origen to formulate more-than-literal interpretations.⁶

¹ For exegetical analysis, cf. W.L. Lane, *An Exegetical Study*. For the interpretation of Israel's history in Ps 77(78), cf. B. Weber, *Psalm 78*; J. Gärtner, *From Generation*.

² *Die neuen Psalmenhomilien*; for English translation: Origen, *Homilies on the Psalms*.

³ *Tractatus sive Homiliae in Psalmos*.

⁴ Cf. L. Perrone, *Origen's Interpretation*, 153–159.

⁵ Cf. K. Bardski, *Słowo oczyma Golebicy*; K. Bardski, *Alegoryczno-symboliczna*. As an example of the application of this methodology to the study of patristic texts, cf. K. Bardski, *The Motif of Jacob's Ladder*.

⁶ An interesting article has been devoted to the Origen's interpretation of Psalm 77, but it does not deal with the allegorical-symbolic interpretation, cf. J. Solheid, *Scripture and Christian Formation*.

1. He broke apart the sea and lead them through (Ps 77:13a)

The miraculous parting of the waters of the Red Sea is expressed in both the Hebrew text and the Septuagint with verbs that indicate the particular drama of the action. The Hebrew פָּרַק and the Greek διέρρηξε could be translated *break apart, split, separate*. Origen transfers the divine action with the emphasis expressed in this way to the level of individual human life. Interpreting more-than-literally, verse 13a uses the second person singular, addressing the listener directly (Ἐὰν δὲ νοήσας – *if you understand*).⁷ But the very waves and the depths of the sea are the *bitterness and brine of the business of life*.⁸ Origen uses the phrase $\text{βιωτικῶν πραγμάτων}$ to refer to any involvement in matters of worldly existence, as opposed to $\text{πνευματικῶν πραγμάτων}$, *spiritual activities*.

From the dialogue with the listener, referring to the image taken from Exod 14:22, Origen proceeds to a rhetorical question, asking himself: *What else should I pray for than that God may break apart the sea of the business of life and make the waves stand like a wineskin, and that I may pass through all things that have become walls on my right and on my left?*⁹ Then, still using the conjunctive, our Author expresses the desire that God would open the waters of the sea for him¹⁰ and that he might see the spiritual Egyptians¹¹ – that is, Satan and the powers of hell – plunged into the depths.

At the end of the passage referring to Ps 77:13a, Origen adds a new more-than-literal interpretation of the divided sea. These will not only be the *business of life*, but especially *persecutions, afflictions, dangers, tight circumstances*.¹² However, when presenting such a symbolic association, he moves from the individual to the collective level, using the first person plural. It encourages people to pray together in the

⁷ Hom. 3 in Ps 77:1; Perrone, 384; Trigg, 319.

⁸ τὸ πικρὸν καὶ τὸ ἀλμυρὸν τῶν βιωτικῶν πραγμάτων (ibidem).

⁹ τί ἂν ἄλλο εὐχοίμην ἢ ἵνα διαρρήξῃ τὴν θάλασσαν τῶν τοῦ βίου πραγμάτων ὁ θεὸς... καὶ πάντα διαβῶ γινομένων μοι τειχῶν ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ ἐξ εὐωνύμων (Hom. 3 in Ps 77:1; Perrone, 385; Trigg, 320).

¹⁰ τοῦ θεοῦ διανοίγοντός μοι αὐτήν (ibidem).

¹¹ τοὺς πνευματικοὺς Αἰγυπτίους (ibidem).

¹² ἐν διωγοῖς, ἐν θλίψεσιν, ἐν κινδύνοις, ἐν στενοχωρίαις (ibidem).

face of such threats.¹³ We could therefore say that this is an ecclesial interpretation. The commentator relates not so much to the individual aspect of the spiritual life of the listener or himself as to the social context of the Church in the times of persecution.

The literary motif of the separation of the sea is symbolically interpreted in an abbreviated form also in Origen's Homily to Psalm 77, reworked by Jerome. Here, however, the Author limits himself to the individual dimension, placing the commentary in a monastic context: *Until today, o faithful monk, when you are taken out of Egypt, the sea is parted and thus you are led through.*¹⁴ Origen leaves the listener a wide margin of freedom of interpretation. He does not specify what the sea could symbolize, nor which way the addressee of the comment, the *faithful monk, will be led through*. We can suppose that also here he means *business of life*, that is, all cares related to worldly existence, from which the monk, departing to the desert, is freed.

2. During the day he led them with a cloud (Ps 77:14a)

The Psalm verse alludes to Exod 16:10. The Israelites, looking towards the desert, see the glory of the Lord in the cloud that shows them the direction of their journey. In the Hebrew text, the expression וַיִּנְהַגֵם בְּעָנָן suggests the instrumental use of the preposition בְּ, so the translation should be: *guided by a cloud* or *with a cloud*. Meanwhile, the literal translation of the Septuagint ἐν νεφέλῃ can be read *in a cloud* or *inside a cloud*.

It seems that this is how Origen read the verse, since he reminiscently associates the oracle Isa 19:1 with it: *Behold, the Lord rides on a light cloud and comes to Egypt*. The Hebrew text here contains the Most Holy Name of יהוה, rendered in the Septuagint by the word κύριος (*Lord*). Hence, in his spiritual interpretation, the Alexandrian reaches for the Christological key: it is the Savior who rides the cloud and guides Israel through the desert. By using the

¹³ Εὐχόμεθα τοῖνον καὶ ἡμεῖς (ibidem).

¹⁴ *Usque hodie, o monache Fidelis, quando educeris de Aegypto, interrumpitur mare, et sic educeris* (Hom. 11 in Ps 77:13)

term σωτήρ Origen admits a peculiar ambiguity. It can be understood in the historical sense as the *Liberator*, that is, God who frees from Egyptian bondage, and also in the Christological sense as the *Savior*, that is, Jesus Christ.

The association of Ps 77:14a with Isa 19:1 appears both in the homilies contained in *Monacensis Graecus 314* and in those reworked by Jerome.¹⁵ However, the further course of interpretation takes a different direction.

In Jerome's work, we find salvation history symbolism developed in two stages. First, the Author associates the cloud with the Savior's body, which was light because it was not burdened by any sin.¹⁶ In this body, He comes to accomplish the work of salvation. Such a formulation could, in the eyes of Jerome, seem to be Nestorian, hence a second interpretation is added immediately, preceded by the words *aut certe* (or certainly), according to which the cloud is the Blessed Virgin Mary, in her virginity "unburdened" with human seed. In Her womb Christ, the God-man, came into the world.¹⁷ This interpretation, fully consistent with the Ephesian dogma, cannot raise any doctrinal doubts.

Codex Monacensis Graecus 314, starting from the same reminiscence association with Isa 19:1, presents a different interpretation. It does not refer to the work of salvation accomplished in the past, but shows Christ, who now (νῦν) rides the cloud and guides us.¹⁸ However, there is one condition, namely – according to Ps 77:14a (ἡμέρας, *by day*) – only then can we experience the Savior's guidance when we are in the light of the day (ἐν τῷ φωτὶ τῆς ἡμέρας). Then we can take advantage of the blessing and the promise expressed by Ps 120:6: *You will not be struck by the sun by day, nor by the moon by night.*

¹⁵ Hom. 3 in Ps 77:2; Perrone, 385; Trigg, 321; Hom. 11 in Ps 77:14.

¹⁶ *Nubem levem, aut proprie Salvatoris corpus debemus accipere, quia leve fuit et nullo peccato praegravatum est...* (Hom. 11 in Ps 77:14).

¹⁷ *aut certe nubem levem debemus sanctam Mariam accipere, nullo semine humano praegravatam* (ibidem).

¹⁸ νῦν πάρεστιν ἡ νεφέλη καὶ ὁδηγεῖ ἡμᾶς (Hom. 3 in Ps 77:2; Perrone, 385; Trigg, 321).

In both of the above interpretations, we see a common inspiration, consisting in juxtaposing the text of Ps 77:14a with Isa 19:1. It probably comes from Origen. It remains debatable, however, to what extent the interpretation in the context of the salvation history, pointing to echoes of Christological disputes, is a later work of Jerome.

3. *All night with a light of fire (Ps 77:14b)*

The second verse in the form of an elaborate parallelism containing both synonymous (*cloud – light of fire*) and antithetical (*day – night*) motifs continues the thread of Israel being led by God. The “day-night” antithesis can be interpreted as merism, expressing the fullness and perfection of God’s care over Israel.

This time, *Codex Monacensis Graecus 314* and Jerome’s re-elaboration are based on other reminiscence associations, although both interpretations are of a Christological nature.

Codex Monacensis Graecus 314 begins with the quotation of Luke 12:49: *I came to throw the fire upon the earth, and how I wish it to be already kindled*. Based on this verse, Origen develops the concept of spiritual fire, literally referred to as intelligible fire (τὸ νοητὸν πῦρ). His prefiguration was the situation the Israelites found themselves in when the darkness overwhelmed Egypt.¹⁹ Then the light that accompanied them allowed them to move in spite of the all-encompassing darkness. For Origen, of course, this foreshadowed the situation of Christians in his contemporary world. Not without a Gnostic flavor, in the spirit of the prologue of the Gospel of John, he presents Christians as those who, in a world plunged in the night of ignorance (ἀγνοία),²⁰ fight the powers of darkness²¹ and are the only ones to walk in the light. *We are not in this darkness*, Origen concludes, *but in the light, thanks to the true light, Jesus Christ and our Lord*.²²

¹⁹ Cf. Exod 10:21–23.

²⁰ πάντα ἀγνοίας πεπλήρωται (all things are full of ignorance; Hom. 3 in Ps 77:2; Perrone, 386; Trigg, 321).

²¹ Origen evokes Eph 6:12.

²² οὐκ ἐσμὲν ἐν τούτῳ τῷ σκότῳ ἀλλ’ ἐν φωτί, διὰ τὸ ἀληθινὸν φῶς, Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ κύριον ἡμῶν (Hom. 3 in Ps 77:2; Perrone, 386; Trigg 321).

The Jerome's rework of Origen's commentary on Ps 77:14b begins with a reference to other passages in the Bible, namely Ps 138:12 (*And darkness is not dark to you, and night is like light to you*) and Deut 4:24 repeated in Heb 12:29. (*Our Lord is a consuming fire*). On their basis, he develops a moral interpretation, referring to the two-fold action of fire: lighting and burning. Christ's fire illuminates the righteous and burns (consumes) sinners.²³

Thus, while in the case of the commentaries to Ps 77:14a one can find connections between *Codex Monacensis Graecus 314* and the Jerome elaboration, the commentaries to Ps 77:14b differ completely both in terms of symbolic references and biblical reminiscence.

4. Broke apart a rock in a wilderness and gave them drink in a great abyss, and brought forth water from a rock (Ps 77:15–16a)

Verse 15 begins with the same word as verse 13. In the Hebrew text it is the verb בָּקַע, used this time in the imperfectum (יִבְקַע), to emphasize the continuity and multiplicity of actions, while in the Greek text it is διέπηρξε, whose meaning was discussed in section 1 of this article. The only translation difference between the Hebrew text and the Septuagint is that the plural צְרִיִם (*rocks*), which appears in the base of the translation of verse 15, is changed to the singular πέτραν (*rock*) in the Greek text.

Codex Monacensis Graecus 314 presents a two-stage allegorical interpretation of the verse. First, Origen referred to the personal experience of the recipient of the biblical text. Anyone who reads it – especially Christians who are familiar with the elegant classical literature – may experience dryness (ξηρά ἐστὶ τὰῦτα – *these things are dry*),²⁴ consisting in the difficulty of understanding some passages. In this sense, the Scriptures can be compared to a hard rock.²⁵ Only

²³ *Ignis duplicem habet naturam: et lucet et urit. Si peccatores sumus, incendit; si iusti, lucet nobis* (Hom. 11 in Ps 77:14).

²⁴ Hom. 3 in Ps 77:3; Perrone, 387; Trigg, 322.

²⁵ In a cross-sectional view, based on numerous testimonies of the Fathers of the Church, the problem of difficulties in reading the meaning of the Bible is discussed by J. Naumowicz, *Orzech i laska*.

with God's help is it possible to split this rock so that the life-giving streams can flow from it: *if God should grant, the rock, the hardness of the Scriptures, is struck and waters come out and rivulets flow down.*²⁶

Commenting Ps 77:15a (*and brought forth water from a rock*) Origen moves on to the second symbolic interpretation of the rock theme. This time he will refer to the allegory of Paul from 1 Cor 10:4 (*for they drank from the spiritual rock accompanying them. And that rock was Christ*). While in the case of Scripture the reason for the association with the rock was the difficulty in understanding some passages, in the case of Christ the association refers to His human nature, in reference to which Origen cites the Song of the Servant of the Lord from Isa 53:2–3: *We saw him, and he did not have either form or beauty, but his form was dishonorable, abandoned by the sons of human beings, a human being in a calamity and in trouble and knowing how to bear infirmity*. In presenting both of the above interpretations – scriptural and Christological – Origen quotes the text of the Septuagint. It is worth noting, however, that they take on particular clarity when we refer to the Hebrew Bible. First, the plural of **סִלְבָּנוֹת** (*rocks*) corresponds better with the many difficult passages of Scripture demanding God's light. Second, in the Hebrew text of Ps 77:15a, we come across another term used for rock, namely **סֶלֶבֶת**. It is synonymous with **סִלְבָּנוֹת**, from the verse 14, and hence both can be translated into the Greek *πέτρα*. Origen, however, gives these two rocks a different allegorical meaning, which becomes more understandable in the light of the Hebrew text.

5. He rained down manna on them to eat, giving them bread from heaven (Ps 77:24)

Although the manna is mentioned only in verse 24, we already have allusive references to it earlier, which were used by Origen to create symbolic associations. The theme of the table set in the desert (Ps 77:19) has been actualized in a very general way: God, *having*

²⁶ ἐὰν ὁ θεὸς διδῶ, τύπτεται ἡ πέτρα, τὸ ξηρὸν τῶν γραφῶν, καὶ ἐξέρχεται ὕδατα καὶ χεῖμαρροι κατακλύζουσι (Hom. 3 in Ps 77:3; Perrone, 387; Trigg, 322).

*made a table full of spiritual foods, he sets it before us.*²⁷ In subsequent homilies, Origen explains what these spiritual foods prefigured by manna and quails are.

Of course, according to John 6:51, Jesus Christ himself is for Origen the bread from heaven.²⁸ However, our author does not specify whether we receive Him in the Eucharist, in the Word of God, or otherwise. Writing about consuming the Logos, however, he presents interesting conditions.

Firstly, the Logos is the necessary food for the soul. Failing it, the soul is possessed by death, that is, subjected to sin: *The soul, accordingly, as I said, being mortal by logos, receives nourishment so as not to die; when nourishment is kept away, a death inimical to life lords it over the soul. And to the extent that you are nourished, death cannot lord it over you, but whenever you lack nourishment, then you will die. Lacking nourishment you sin, but sinning you die.*²⁹

Secondly, the nature of the Logos (λόγου φύσις) as spiritual food is changeable, adapting to the needs and possibilities of the one who eats it.³⁰ This idea appears in relation to the manna also in Wis 16:20–21, but Origen does not cite the passage in question. It cannot be excluded that he draws from Midrashic traditions prevalent in early Judaism.³¹ His interpretation is similar to that found in his 7th Homily to the Book of Exodus, where, with the help of numerous examples, he develops the theme of the Logos' taste adapting to the spiritual needs of a Christian.³²

²⁷ πλήρη ποιήσας τράπεζαν πνευματικῶν βρωμάτων παρατίθησιν ἡμῖν (Hom. 3 in Ps 77:4; Perrone, 388; Trigg, 323).

²⁸ Comprehensive study of manna traditions in the Old and New Testaments: J. Lemański, *Od manny na pustyni*.

²⁹ Ἡ ψυχὴ τοῖνον, ὡς εἶπον, λόγῳ οὔσα θνητὴ, ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ ἀποθανεῖν τροφὴν λαμβάνει, κωλοῦσης τῆς τροφῆς τὸν ἐχθρὸν τῆ ζωῆ θάνατον κρατῆσαι τῆς ψυχῆς. Καὶ ὅσον γε τρέφῃ, οὐ δύναται θάνατος κρατῆσαί σου· ὅταν

δὲ ἀτροφῆσῃς, τότε ἀποθανῇ. Ἀτροφῶν γὰρ ἀμαρτάνεις, ἀμαρτάνων δὲ ἀποθνήσκεις (Hom 4 in Ps 77:6; Perrone, 397; Trigg, 331).

³⁰ μετεκρινάτο τοιαυτὴ δὲ τοῦ τρέφοντος τὴν ψυχὴν λόγου φύσις πρὸς τὴν δύναμιν τοῦ τρεφομένου μεταβάλλουσα (Hom 4 in Ps 77:9; Perrone, 402; Trigg, 334).

³¹ Cf. J.L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 618–619.

³² Cf. *Homilien zum Hexateuch in Rufins Übersetzung*, 216.

Thirdly, Origen draws attention to the detail that the Israelites had to leave their tents in order to eat the manna. Allegorically, in a truly Platonic spirit, tents symbolize corporeality. So, in order to be nourished by the Logos, as the bread that came down from heaven, it is necessary to transcend one's own flesh and come to the spiritual reality: *The manna does not come to us when we stay where we are, but when we go outside the tents... If our body, in which our soul is confined, is the tents, the soul must no longer be in the flesh but in the spirit.*³³ In other words, the condition for sharing the saving benefits of the Logos is Christian maturity, which consists in what Origen repeated several times in his homilies, namely, to be not in flesh (ἐν σαρκί), but in spirit (ἐν πνεύματι).³⁴

Conclusion

Summing up, we can say that, at least to the extent that we have looked at the allegories about the Exodus and the desert wandering, the homilies contained in *Codex Monacensis Graecus 314* formally correspond to the method of creating symbolic associations proper to Origen. The dominant key is the Christological approach. Every allegorical construction is intended to lead to the mystery of Jesus Christ. Thereafter, strong emphasis is placed on distinguishing the carnal and historical from the spiritual. While the historical events accompanying the departure from Egypt and the wandering through the desert constitute the starting point and the necessary basis for proper exegesis, the real value and significance for Christian life lies in their more-than-literal reading in the light of the New Testament and the life of the Church. Finally, assuming that the entire Bible is

³³ Οὐ καθεζομένοις δὲ ἡμῖν ἔρχεται τὸ μάννα, ἀλλὰ ἐρχομένοις ἔξω τῆς παρεμβολῆς... Εἰ δὲ ἡ παρεμβολὴ τῷ σῶμα ἡμῶν, ἐν ᾧ ἐνεῖρκται ἡ ψυχὴ, δεῖ τὴν ψυχὴν μηκέτι εἶναι ἐν σαρκὶ ἀλλ' ἐν πνεύματι (Hom 4 in Ps 77:10; Perrone, 403).

³⁴ L. Perrone (*Origen's Interpretation of the Psalter*, 159) ends his article with a quote expressing the essence of what Origen expects from his audience: *Those who listen to these words should put wings, they should lift up themselves, they should be no more in the flesh, they should be in the spirit!* (Οἱ τούτων ἀκούοντες τῶν λόγων πετερούσθωσαν, ἐπαίρέσθωσαν, μηκέτι ἔστωσαν ἐν σαρκί, γενέσθωσαν ἐν πνεύματι! Hom. 4 in Ps 77:8; Perrone, 399).

one book – what modern exegesis calls the canonical approach – the spiritual meaning of individual literary motifs emerges primarily when given verses are interpreted in the light of other passages of the Bible.

The care and protection God granted to the people of Israel during their journey through the desert to the promised land, primarily symbolize for Origen the assistance Jesus Christ offers to every individual Christian and to the whole community of the Church in their journey towards the Kingdom of heaven, especially in the middle of torments and adversities caused by sin and persecutions.

Symbolika Bożej opieki nad Ludem Wybranym podczas wędrówki do Ziemi Obiecanej w homiliach Orygenesza do Psalmu 77(78)

Abstrakt: W artykule przeanalizowano wybrane motywy literackie Psalmu 77, które posłużyły Orygenesowi do sformułowania interpretacji ponaddosłownych. Metodologię badań nad procesami tworzenia skojarzeń alegoryczno-symbolicznych zastosowano w odniesieniu do następujących motywów literackich: rozdzielanie wód Morza Czerwonego, obłok i słup ognia prowadzący Izraelitów przez pustynię, woda ze skały oraz manna z nieba.

Słowa kluczowe: Orygenes, symbolizm, Eksodus, Psalm 78(77), interpretacja alegoryczna

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