

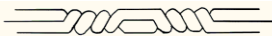
“Beatus vir qui in lege Domini voluntas eius”
 (“Blessed is the man whose will is in the law of the Lord”)
Psalm 1, the opening song of the Psalter

Alexandru MOLDOVAN*

*“Blessed is the man that feareth the Lord;
he shall delight greatly in His commandments”*
(Ps 111, 1)

Psalm 1 represents the lyrical overture through which we are introduced in the delightful and fascinating world of the Psalter. The song begins and ends with the first, respectively, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, comprising the whole arch of letters and of life. Being a hymn dedicated to the Law of the Lord, Psalm 1 is, at the same time, a song dedicated to the authentic life, to the righteous life, to the pure life, to the life lived according to the Law of the Lord, presented in the psalm through the metaphor of the tree of life. The tree of life is present in the very first page of the Holy Scripture: “And out of the ground made God to spring up also every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden” (Gen 2, 9), but it also appears on the last page of the Bible in the Book of Revelation, being in the heaven towards

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which the history of our salvation heads: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev 2, 7). The tree of life is present in the centre of the first page of the Psalter as well. In his commentary on the Book of Psalms, the French poet, playwright and essayist Paul Claudel wrote: “I am not interested in corrupt and decayed friends, in the company of mean and difficult people, in the books that give off the heavy smell of dishonesty and immorality! I prefer this book inspired by the Holy Spirit and this living proof in the darkness of the night, instead of the suggestions made to me during the day. All that is green, all is brought back to life by the spring rain; this tree, situated at the centre of this hymnic composition prophesies the prosperity of its fruits. Everything else is dust, trifling and deceitful things, which are meant to delude me! Just a waft and everything ends”.

The enthusiasm with which Psalm 1 was welcomed in the divine worship and in the tradition of the Church is due more to its position or status as *prologue* or *overture* of the Psalter¹, than to its actual poetic value, which is, on the whole, rather modest. The bibliography for this psalm is rather vast, and its character of *hors ligne* text, solitary and independent is attested not only by the fact that it is *orphan* that is, without a title and beside the collection, but also a strange reference present in the Western text (Codex D) of the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 13, 33, in the speech uttered by Saint Paul the Apostle in Antioch, in Pisidia, the great apostle quotes verse 7 in the second Psalm: “as it is also written in the first psalm”, whereas in all the other manuscripts we find the variant “as it is also written in the second psalm”. In the Babylonian Talmud (9b-10a) Rabbi Yehudah Shimon ben Pazi says the following: “the Psalm «Blessed is the man » and the

¹ L. SABOURIN, *The Psalms: Their origin and meaning*. New York, Alba House, 1974, p. 371.

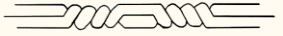


psalm «Why did the nations rage» constitute a single pericope or a unity”.

In the First Apology (I, 40), Saint Justin the Martyr quotes the two psalms during his argumentation, applying them according to Christian hermeneutics, to Messiah, the Righteous par excellence, thus uniting the subjects of the two compositions.

It is obvious that in the early centuries of Christianity, there occurred a process of fusion between the prologue of the Psalter (at present Psalm 1) and the first and solemn psalmic composition (at present the second Psalm), thus offering the synthesis of the two hermeneutic perspectives to the whole book, that is, the anthropological-moral one of a righteous, pure and temperate life (Ps 1) and the theological-messianic one of hope (Ps 2). There existed an element which encouraged this process: the two psalms are *enclosed* or enframed, at the two extremes, by two macarisms: “Blessed is the man” and “blessed are all they that put their trust in Him” (Ps 2, 12).

A modern exegete, William H. Brownlee, supposes there is an older fusion of the two psalms, determined by the ritual coronation of the king. Thus, psalm 1 was a sort of *mirror of the prince*, who wanted to become a king, an ideal portrait of the sovereign who prepared for his enthronement (according to Ps 100), a guide of good governing, whereas the second psalm represented the proper ritual of the coronation. From this perspective, it is easy to imagine the prosperity of these psalms in the Christian milieu, which read them in a Christological key. This certainly contributed to their success. As we will see further, the exquisite tree laden with fruit is the Cross of Christ, the sign or symbol of life and of salvation, as “through the Cross, joy has come into all the world”. Psalm 1 must be connected to the mystery of Christ, as He is the perfect man, Who has not walked or stood in the counsel of the ungodly.



We will further analyse this short psalmic composition “written in a xylographic style, with nuances of black and white”². Through its didactic and colourless simplicity, this lyrical elaboration seems to replace an ison of melodic line, which accompanies the whole collection of prayers of the Psalter³.

1. The literary aspect of the psalm

It has been said about this psalm that it resembles a gracious portico, subsequently leading to a perfect and monumental architectural marble ensemble. Others compared it to “a pupil’s homework”⁴, to a page elaborated attentively and accurately, but lacking originality, resembling a seminar paper conceived around the fundamental theme of Jehovism, theme illustrated through two programmes of life, through two different destinies, presented in an antithetical parallelism.

The first issue the biblical exegetes and commentators have attempted to solve, analysing this *overture* of the Psalter is its literary genre.

In the Mesopotamian cultural area were found several texts in which the sovereign or the king is compared to the tree of life planted by God Himself near the river that watered the garden of Heaven (Gen 2, 9-10). The Babylonian Targum identifies “the tree planted by the streams of waters” in Ps 1, 3 with the tree of life present in the garden of Eden. This determined some biblical commentators to affirm that we are in front of a royal text,

² G. EBELING, *Sui Salmi*. Brescia, Editrice Queriniana, 1973, p. 16.

³ Gianfranco RAVASI, *Il Libro dei Salmi, Commento e attualizzazione, Vol 1, Salmi 1-50*. Bologna, Edizioni Dehoniane, 2015, p. 71.

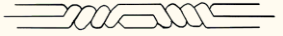
⁴ P. AUVRAY, *Le Psaume 1. Notes de grammaire et d'exégèse*. RB 53/1946, p. 365-371.



enclosed in a mythical and ritualic frame, to which sapiential elements were added along the way, wisdom being a prerequisite of the sovereign's treasury. The text accounts about King Solomon that God gave him “wisdom exceeding much and largeness of heart even as the sand that is on the sea shore” and that “Solomon abounded greatly, beyond the wisdom of all the ancients and beyond all the wise men of Egypt” (3 Kings 5, 9-10). Subsequently, the exegetes claim, the royal psalm was recomposed, and the king was replaced by the righteous and blameless man. Anyway, the royal symbolism does not represent the thematic nucleus of the psalm, but an imaginative support of the author's power of creation.

Perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of the psalm is that of sapiential nature, Psalm 1 being able to be quite easily placed into the category of sapiential psalms called by the biblical commentators psalms dedicated to the Law or Torah, such as Psalms 18 and 118, psalms which were most likely created by wise men, as praise to the divine Revelation. However, this aspect cannot be generalised, as Psalm 1 is generic; the beatitude expressed in its very first words resembles, but it is not identical with the blessing and it is not a prerogative of sapiential literature, but it is specific to the worship language, in which it constitutes a particular literary genre – that of macarism – which is much older than that of sapiential beatitude.

Psalm 1 presents a variety of registers, which undoubtedly includes the liturgical one, although in a more subtle form. We must not insist in a direction and force its affiliation to a certain genre, as long as it offers a variety of genres. The commentators that highlight the liturgical aspect of the psalm consider it a hymn sung by the Ancient Hebrews at the feast of the renewal of the Covenant between God and His people, Israel, celebrated (one does not know exactly how - each year or once every seven years – Deut 31,10) at the Feast of Tabernacles. N. Quesson hastened to



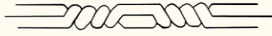
write: “Psalm 1 is part of the ritual of the Covenant and it was recited or sung at the Feast of Tabernacles, when the renewal of the covenant took place; Psalm 1 represents a prophetic announcement of the blessings associated to faithfulness, but also of the curses towards those who were unfaithful”⁵. Nevertheless, the incertitude around the existence of such a feast in the Hebrew worship makes this hypothesis even more fragile.

The debates and controversies among the biblical exegetes and commentators as concerns Psalm 1 urge us to approach its content with a certain malleability, due also to its position in the book: Psalm 1 cannot be framed and circumscribed in an accurate *sitz im leben*, as it opens this kaleidoscope of psalmic compositions. Undoubtedly, its dominant tonality or its specific timbre is of sapiential nature, but its general aspect is much more nuanced. Its image painted in white (the good) and in black (the evil), with well highlighted limits, is influenced by the didactic tone it has. The author’s call is simple and it goes beyond the canons of wisdom, but also beyond those of prophecy or of cultural exhortation: Psalm 1 invites man to decide whether he is with God, with His Law and His Word, or against Him, as the fundamental condition of beatitude consists in total transparency, in bright clarity, in steadfast determination and in complete and perfect faith in God.

Our life must be anchored where the vital element (God) can offer it the vital nourishment (His Word and His Law). No creature, no tree, no man has life in itself: we depend on the place where our life has its roots. This is the reason why the psalmist affirms that man’s beatitude and infelicity depend on the place where man anchors his soul and heart, in order to rejoice in the life-giving sap, just as the tree does with its roots⁶. Hence, Jesus

⁵ Noel QUESSON, *Il messaggio dei salmi*, I. Roma, 1979, p. 14.

⁶ G. EBELING, *Sui Salmi. Meditazioni*, p. 13.



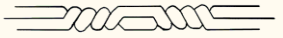
said: “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you” (Jn 15, 5-7).

The literary structure of Psalm 1, which opens this *prayer book* of the Bible consists of two units or elements. This binary structure between good and evil, between blessing and curse, structure resembling the one in Luke 6, 20-26, but less rigorous and symmetrical, represents the distinctiveness of this overture. The author of the psalm favoured the portrait of the righteous, depicted in vivid nuances, whereas the portrait of the ungodly is pencilled in a very simple manner. Everything is subject to the rule of antithetic parallelism.

The psalmist mentions two ways, two options, two choices or two possibilities, two destinies that are antithetic: the decisive choice belongs to man. However, as we have already mentioned, emphasis is laid on the first way: the way of the righteous and on the first portrait, the positive one.

The balance between the two parts is not perfect, but the diptych in Psalm 1 is quite harmonious. It is supported by an abundant constellation of symbols, among which predominates the spatial symbol of the two ways, which although clearly defined in verses 1 and 6, occupies the whole background of the psalm. The symbol of the two ways is a classical one in the pages of the Holy Scripture⁷. The way is a synonym for *life*, for *attitude* and for *vital energy*, for *power* and *dominion*. The two ways open in front of man and he can choose in absolute freedom which one

⁷ A. A. ROEST CROLLIUS, *DeReK in the Psalms*, in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 4 (1974), p. 312-317.



he will follow: “Behold, I have set before thee the way of life and the way of death” (Jer 21, 8). This teaching is present in the sapiential literature of the Old Testament: “He hath set fire and water before thee; thou shall stretch forth thy hand unto whatsoever thou wilt. Before man is life and death, and whatsoever one he desireth shall be given him” (Sir 15, 16-17) or “My son, let not the ungodly lead thee astray, neither consent thou unto them if they entice thee, saying, ‘Come with us... cast in thy lot with us [...] Walk not thou in the way with them, but turn aside thy feet from their paths” (Wisd of Sol 1, 10-11. 15). Often, the antagonism between the two ways is illustrated with the help of the binomial *light-darkness*: “the ways of the righteous shine as the light; they go on and shine until the day be fully come. But the ways of the ungodly are dark; they know not how they stumble” (Wisd of Sol 4, 18-19). The teaching of the two ways is also present in the deuteronomist theology: “Behold, I have set before thee this day life and death, good and evil [...] I call both heaven and earth to witness this day against you that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose thou life that both thou and thy seed may live!” (Deut 30, 15. 19). The fundamental decision for life means: “to love the Lord thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to keep His ordinances and His judgments” (Deut 30, 16), just as Psalm 1 suggests, placing the Law of the Lord in the centre of the way of the good.

This symbol dominates a whole paragraph in the Community Rule of Qumran, in which the juridical aspect is conjugated to the eschatological one (1 QS III, 13 – IV, 26)⁸. The symbol was adopted by the Egyptian culture as well. An inscription on the tomb of the high priest Petosiris, who lived between 380-343 BC

⁸ Luigi MORALDI, *I manoscritti di Qumran*. Torino, Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1971, p. 141-146.

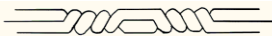
goes like this: “I shall guide you on the way of life, on the good way of the one that obeys God. Blessed is the one whose heart directs him on this way. The one who walks resolute on the way of life has laid his foot on stone and shall not stagger in his way. The one who fears the Lord is blessed on earth”.

Christ the Saviour Himself uses the metaphor of the two ways in the well-known Sermon on the Mount: “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Mt 7, 13-14; Lk 13, 24; Jn 14, 6). In the Book of the Acts, the way par excellence is *the Gospel* and *the Church of Christ* to which all the people are called, without distinction. Actually, Christianity itself is called *Way*⁹, whereas the contrast between the two ways occupies completely the first part of the Didache, which is the oldest Christian post-biblical literary work that has survived. This work was also called *The Book of the two Ways*¹⁰. This teaching was also taken over by the Epistle of Barnabas, under the strong influence of *the way of life* and of *the way of death* in the Didache. This work mentions *the way of light* and *the way of darkness*, the first one guarded by the angels of God and the other one by the angels of Satan. The first means following and practising the Christian teachings. In order to follow this way, one must love God, fear Him, glorify Him, and be pure at heart and in the Spirit¹¹.

⁹ Acts 9, 2; 16, 17; 18, 25-26; 19, 9; 22, 4; 24, 22.

¹⁰ Constantin VOICU; Lucian Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie (Patrology)*, Vol 1. București, Basilica Publishing House, 2015, p. 67-69.

¹¹ Constantin VOICU; Lucian Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie (Patrology)*, Vol 1. București, Basilica Publishing House, 2015, p. 121.



A well-known page from the Quran, the very first chapter (*Surah Al-Fatihah*) goes like this: 1. “In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful [...] 5. It is You we worship and You we ask for help, 6. Guide us to the straight path, 7. The path of those upon whom You have bestowed favour, not of those who have evoked [Your] anger or of those who are astray”¹².

Besides the symbol of the two ways, one must also remark the vegetal symbol – that of the tree of life – present in the sapiential extra Biblical literature as well. This symbol appears in a text in the book of the prophet Jeremiah: “Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope shall be the Lord. And he shall be as a tree that thriveth by the waters, and he shall cast forth his root toward a moist place; he shall not fear when heat cometh, and there shall be upon him shady branches” (Jer 17, 8), but also in the book of the prophet Ezekiel: “And by the stream upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow every tree for meat. It shall not wax old thereon, neither shall the fruit thereof fail. It shall bring forth firstfruit of the newness thereof, because their waters issue out of the sanctuary, and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the ascent thereof for health”(Ezek 47, 12).

The symbol of the tree of life is connected to the cosmic symbolism of water. It already appears in the renowned work entitled *Instruction of Amenemope*¹³, an Egyptian text partially

¹² *Coranul* (The Quran), *Sura Al-Fatihah*, 1. 5-7. Translation, introduction and notes by George Grigore. București, Herald Publishing House, 2010, p. 19.

¹³ In the right moment there rose in Egypt a teacher that many called *the son of man*, and others Amen-em-ope. This prophet grew in knowledge and understanding to the measure of the one that differentiated the righteous from the sinner, he taught people that their sins will be punished and he announced them salvation through an appeal to the solar deity. The teachings of this

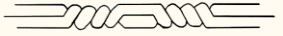
introduced in the Holy Scripture in the Proverbs of Solomon (22, 17-24, 22), in an edition of the 6th century BC, but it is certainly older than this. In this sapiential text, the fiery person is compared to a tree that grows in an open, desert and dry place, which is used as fire wood: “the flame or the blaze is its cerement”, whereas the wise, virtuous and meditative man, who knows how to guard his mouth and tongue is compared to “a tree that grows in a garden, is in blossom, gives fruit and flourishes, to the delight of its master” (VI, 1-12)¹⁴.

According to the Holy Scripture, the righteous man is like a vigorous tree that partakes in the life of God. The living water is the symbol of God - the symbol of the Holy Spirit – the text evoked earlier, in Ezekiel 47, 12, mentions water that springs out of the sanctuary, and Psalm 91 affirms that “the righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, and increase like a cedar of Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God” (v. 12-13).

Thus, the tree is the symbol of the righteous in the Old Testament, but also the symbol of the Torah. The symbol of the tree of life indicates eternity, everlastingness or eternal life. The triumph of the righteous is also the triumph of the Lord of the Most High. In the Book of Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach, after identifying wisdom with the Torah, the author describes it as a splendid and luxuriant garden, full of exotic and Mediterranean trees, watered by a dense network of water canals (Sir 24, 12-17. 28-29). The Torah or God’s Law, thus becomes the vital lymph

wise prophet were translated in Hebrew and were considered *sacred writings* long before the Old Testament was written. Subsequently translated in Greek, they penetrated the Hellenistic religious philosophy. The philosopher Philo of Alexandria had a copy of this work. According to *Dictionar biblic*, Oradea, Cartea Creștină Publishing House, 1995, p. 395.

¹⁴ Sergio DONADONI, *La letteratura egizia*. Firenze-Milano, Sansoni-Accademia, 1967, p. 247-248.



which nurtures and gives vigour to the righteous, who, being connected to this vital source, “shall still bring forth fruit in a ripe old age” (Ps 91, 14).

This symbol appears in the manuscripts of Qumran as well. In Hymn VIII we find these words: [For Thou didst set] a plantation of cypress, pine, and cedar for Thy glory, trees of life beside a mysterious fountain hidden among the trees by the water, and they put out a shoot of the everlasting Planting. But before they did so, they took root and sent out their roots to the water course that its stem might be open to the living waters and be one with the everlasting spring” (1 QH VIII, 5-8). The symbolism of the tree appears in the pages of the Quran, too: “Have you not considered how Allah presents an example, [making] a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches [high] in the sky? It produces its fruit all the time, by permission of its Lord. [...] And the example of a bad word is like a bad tree, uprooted from the surface of the earth, not having any stability”¹⁵.

Christ the Saviour Himself compared the Kingdom of heaven to the grain of mustard seed. Although it is the least of all seeds, it grows to become a tree (Mt 13, 31-32); the righteous and the sinners are also compared to the good and to the bad tree; He described the communion with him through the image of the vine and the branches (Jn 15, 1-8), and Paul the Apostle described Israel and the Church of Christ as an olive tree and its graft (Rm 11, 16-24), inviting all Christians of his time to be “rooted in Christ” (Col 2, 7; Eph 3, 17) and to give “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5, 22)¹⁶.

¹⁵ *Coranul* (The Quran), *Surah Ibrahim*, 14. 24-26, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

¹⁶ Gianfranco RAVASI, *I Salmi*, Vol 1. Bologna, Edizioni Dehoniane, 2015, p. 77.



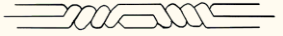
The vegetal symbolism of the psalm can be associated to the agricultural and negative symbol of the chaff. The vigorous, healthy, green tree is opposed to the vacuity of the dry, light and inconsistent chaff. A long biblical tradition compares malice to this useless and inconsistent reality¹⁷.

Righteous Job uses this image in his polemic with the theology of this psalm, in order to deny the fact that evil-doers “shall be as chaff before the wind, or as dust which the storm hath taken up” (Job 21, 18). This metaphor is also to be found in a famous page of Iliad’s fifth chant¹⁸, and at the synoptic evangelists in the prophetic announcement of the judgment that Christ will make, which tree is good and which is bad, which wheat is good or which is chaff before the wind: “Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Mt 3, 12; Lk 3, 17).

Before starting the exegesis of the psalm, with its two images: the portrait of the righteous and of his way and the portrait of the ungodly, we will mention a few symbolic paradigms. Verse 5 contains the juridical symbolism through the image of the judgment, but Psalm 1 offers an interesting series of varied symbolical paradigms. The cosmic symbolism: the air, the wind, the ground, the dust or the wheat. The ground with all it has, represents the universe of man; it is a sign of stability, and the tree whose root is well fixed into the ground near the streams of waters represents the image of fertility, of fruitfulness and of justice. Malice is volatile, inconsistent, and as instable as the dust

¹⁷ Ps. 17, 46; 34, 5; 82, 13-14; Amos 9, 9; Osea 13, 3; Isaiah 17, 13; 29, 5).

¹⁸ HOMER, *Iliada (Iliad), Cântul al V-lea (Fifth chant), 490*. Translation by George Murnu; Introductory study and notes by D. M. PIPPIDI, București, Literatură Universală Publishing House, 1967, p. 96.



or as the dry chaff blown by the wind, it is the symbol of infertility.

A careful reader observes in Psalm 1 the temporal symbol: we have a linear time, which is that of the ripening of fruit (v. 3), a time which increases progressively and which ends in the season of fruit. Then there is a cyclical, continuous time, which ends in itself, symbolised in the text by the expression “day and night” (v. 2). Thus, we have a cyclical and a linear time altogether: it is that of the seasons and of picking fruit, a time which is repeated each year, but which has finality annually (v. 3). The righteous is associated with meditating upon the Law of the Lord, a gesture rewarded by the Lord through abundant fruit and through a blessed finality. On the contrary, the sinner is subject to an idle spinning or to a sterile twist and ends in the sieve and in being scattered or wasted.

Psalm 1 also offers us an obvious quantitative symbolism: the righteous is a solitary, lonely and isolated individual, he can be marginalized, ignored, a nonconformist, he has his own convictions, whereas the ungodly is represented by the masses; the ungodly get together, in groups of interests, in organizations. However, in the end, the wicked and the ungodly will be thrown in a terrible, unbearable solitude, not having the courage to rise up in a gathering, that is to be vertical, dignified and to defend themselves.

What is also prominent in this psalm is the dynamic symbolism which suggests movements and positions. We have in verse 1 the progressive sequence of three movement verbs: *to walk*, *to stand* and *to sit*, which indicate the three stages of a dynamic process: the journey, the walking and the arrival. At the other pole is the ungodly, associated with the chaotic movement of the wind and with destruction.

Psalm 1 represents a meditation upon our existential options. Reading it, reciting it and meditating upon it every day,



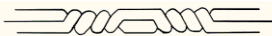
we will see in front of the eyes of our soul a whole script of our human existence: the ground, the water and the wind are present in the picture of the psalm in order to indicate space; the day and the night, the seasons, in order to indicate time; the process of planting, the ripening of fruit, the leaves and the chaff in order to indicate the manifestations of life. The author’s interest then turns to the symbol of the road and of the journey, which indicates man’s free option and progressivity or growth, as we can choose to walk on a road or not. It is our choice and our decision.

The inspired word of the Psalmist calls “blessed” the man that seeks God, the man that meditates upon the Law of the Lord, the man that takes God as solid foundation of his life, the man that brings fruit in the Lord. And then, can we, who are in the law of grace, ask ourselves “what is beatitude and where can we find it”?

2. Psalm 1 – An exegetical reading The first portrait: the righteous and his way (v. 1-3)

Just as in the Saviour’s renowned Sermon on the Mount, the behaviour of the righteous is placed under the sign of a blessing, although in this case, the tone is rather sapiential and less prophetic: “Blessed is the man that feareth the Lord; he shall delight greatly in His commandments” (Ps 111, 1). Instead of urging, as prophets did, instead of blessing, as priests did, the Psalmist announces joy to the one that abandons himself, full of trust, in the arms of the Lord (beatitude is a real and efficacious fact, just as the blessing): “Blessed is the man whose help is from Thee; he hath made ascents in his heart [...] o Lord God of hosts, blessed is the man that hopeth in Thee” (Ps 83, 6. 13).

Man’s beatitude does not come out of a formalist fulfillment of moral prescriptions, but out of the love that God shows man and out of the answer in love that man addresses his Creator. The proposal of the Psalmist is an invitation to joy.



Blaise Pascal wrote: “No man is as happy, as virtuous or as amiable as the authentic Christian”¹⁹. This is the case in a genuine religiosity.

The way of the righteous is first presented in a negative way: “Blessed is the man that hath not walked not in the counsel of the ungodly nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of the pestilent” (v. 1). These are three fundamental attitudes²⁰, which oppose progressively some faces of evil. The Psalmist presents a real *theology of the temptation or of allurements*, already developed in the times of the Exodus, a separatist tendency that is not pharisaic yet, but which aims at preventing the Christian from being in the company of the ungodly or of the iniquitous: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”(1 Jn 2, 15-17; 1 Cor 5, 9-13; 6, 14-20).

The faithful man assumes the risk of being considered an eccentric, a strange individual, isolated from the rest of the world, in minority. The chameleonic temptation of imitating the world, the general behaviour of society, of embracing the opinion of the

¹⁹ B. PASCAL, *Pensieri, Opuscoli, Lettere*. Milano, Editrice Rusconi, 1978, p. 696.

²⁰ “The Psalmist proposes, thus, three deeds worth being kept: not to walk in the counsel of the ungodly, not to stand in the way of sinners and not to sit in the seat of the pestilent. Following the nature of things, the Psalmist put order in his things. First we counsel, then we remember what we counselled and finally we observe the advice. Hence, first of all it is a bliss to have pure thoughts, as the counsel we have in our heart is the root of the deeds we do with the body.”. According to SAINT BASIL THE GREAT, *Tâlcuire duhovnicească la Psalmi (Commentary on the Psalms)*. București, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă Publishing House, 2009, p. 17.

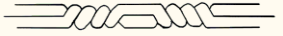
majority is very strong. In general man is versatile, instable and changeful. The author defines the sinful milieu through three terms. The first term is rather general – *the ungodly*. The second one is *the sinner* (in the sense of missing the target, the purpose or the meaning of one’s life), the one or the ones whose life, apparently glorious, is unsuccessful! The last term is *the pestilent*, the scornful, the disdainful. These are the ironic, the slanderer, the defamatory, the ruffian, the wrangler, the babbler and the garrulous. These are not the people that express criticism, be it harsh, caustic, severe or crusty against the powerful, as this is the way biblical prophets acted, too (Amos 5, 1-2; Is 1, 10-17). The word has a theological nuance: it refers to the one that scorns even God and the holiest things, joking about His interest in the world and in the man He created (Ps 13 and Is 5, 19)²¹.

There is here another nuance that has to be highlighted. The text in Proverbs 22, 10 mentions *rattlers* or *babblers* who cause quarrels in assemblies. The text in Isaiah 29, 20 mentions the ones that make people sin through words, that is, slanderers; the slanderer destroys social life and creates chaos and hatred between people.

The separation or the estrangement from all these is reflected in the text of the psalm with the help of three verbs which are in an obvious progress. The first verb is *to walk* or *to go* (the righteous does not walk with sinners). The verb *to walk* is followed by the verb *to stop* or *to stand* in obedience; and finally, a verb which indicates the passive consent, the verb *to sit*, *to have a seat* or *to be seated*, but which also has the meaning of connivance, complicity, agreement with the deeds of the sinners.

The three verbs have, in their turn, three local denotements. The first verb, *to go* or *to walk* is accompanied by a word which indicates, first of all, *the project*, *the advice* or *the directive*. The

²¹ Gianfranco RAVASI, *Il Libro dei Salmi, Commento e attualizzazione*, p. 80.



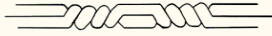
psalmist excludes, from the very beginning, any conformity of ideas, opinions, any correspondence or ideological conformity between the righteous and the sinner, as in the expression: “he walked also in their counsels” in 2 Paraleipomenon 22, 5.

The second verb, *to stop* or *to stand* is associated to “the way of the sinners” (it is the only instance when this expression appears in the Book of the Psalms). In the Book of the Proverbs of Solomon, in the very first chapter, the ungodly want to lure the inexperienced and attract him on their way: “Come with us” (Proverbs 1,11a). The word *way*, (*derek*) has several meanings and it can indicate a choice of life or certain behaviour: blessed is the man that does not stop on the way of sin or of sinners. We know that there is no man who does not err or commit sins; the sin is a possibility for each of us. It is important not to stop or linger on it, not to run in the ways of perdition. The words of the psalm blest the one that does not persevere in sin and who does not remain in the state of sinfulness.

Finally, there is the verb *to sit*, to stay comfortably in the seat of the pestilent (Ps 106, 32). The final spatial indication is the assembly, the complete and definitive regimentation in their habits and mentality. The version of the Vulgata translates: *cathedra pestilentiae* (infected places), expression translated through *the seat of the ill-natured*, or of *the hideous* or of *the pestilent*. The expression is taken over from a renowned passage in the tragedy of Jean Racine, entitled *Atalia*, a work which deals with a biblical argument, being placed within the borders of the kingdom of Judah: “You, miserable, you have sat in the chair of the pestilent” (v. 1016)²².

The measure of the authenticity of the faithful man is given by the explosive force of his capacity of being cause of scandal, which urges the wrongdoers and sinners to say: “Therefore, let us

²² “*Vous, malheureux, assis dans la chaire empestée*”.

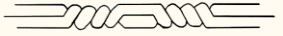


lie in wait for the righteous, because he is not for our turn and he is clean contrary to our doings; he upbraideth us with our sins against the law and ascribeth to us sins against our education [...]. He was made to reprove our thoughts. He is grievous unto us even to behold, for his life is not like other men's; his ways are of another fashion. We are esteemed of him as counterfeits; he abstaineth from our ways, as from filthiness” (Wisdom of Solomon 2, 12. 14-16a).

Now, *the way* of the righteous opposes, in a positive sense the negative description. This is characterised by the adherence to the law of God, to His word, to the Torah, which is by far a burdensome state or situation, some laws or prescriptions that man is overwhelmed with, but it is the revelation of truth, to which, man's attitude answers freely. In verse two of the psalm, the word *law* or the expression *the law of the Lord* is written twice, as if the author had wanted to underline the centrality of this in the life of the faithful man. The text of the psalm presents us a visceral celebration; it is a profound attitude, not a superficial one! This emotion, which man feels inside, is close to the feeling of the fear of the Lord which is required in the case of the servant in the liturgical act, the feeling mentioned in the second Psalm through the words: “Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice unto Him with trembling” (Ps 2, 11).

There are two terms in the text of Psalm 1, which express this attitude of the man who is faithful to the word of God. The first word is *joy, pleasure, delight* or *delectation*; a joy which means involvement or engagement on the right path, *project* or *life norm*.

Consequently, the joy of such a life does not have its roots in the peace of a legalist conscience, which is pleased that it paid the tribute (annual contribution) to God, as he paid that of Caesar in civil life, but it actually means the joy of a life with God (the joy of staying and being near God and with God every moment of

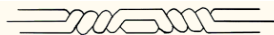


your life!). This psalm chants the beatitude of the life with God; beatitude or the joy of the personal communion with God, our total and complete adherence to God, without regrets, to the will of God, thus becomes our daily nourishment: “My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work”, said the Saviour to His disciples, and in Luke 11, 28²³ he said: Blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it (Lk 11, 28).

The words of Psalm 18, 8-10 can express this pleasant and peace-giving joy of feeling God close in your life, present in His word, present in a real way in the Holy Eucharist: “The Law of the Lord is perfect, converting souls (from the way of sin to the source of life); the testimony of the Lord is sure (it does not lure and disappoint anyone), making wise the babes; the Statutes (or Commandments) of the Lord are upright, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is radiant, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever and ever; the judgments of the Lord are true, justified altogether” (Ps 18, 8-10).

The second term connected to the Torah is more intriguing and surprising. The verb *hagah* is attested as *verbum dicendi* in the Ugaritic language, a language in which it probably meant *to count in a low voice*. In the Old Testament it is the verb used for the dove that babbles (Is 38, 14), but also for the lion that roars (Is 31, 4). For human beings, the verb indicates the action of *murmuring*, connected to the intellectual activity: “Forasmuch as I remembered Thee upon my bed, I meditated on Thee in the morning watches” (Ps 62, 7). The text in Joshua 1, 8 is the most relevant in this sense: “And the book of this law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shall meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest know to do all the things that are written therein. Then thou shalt prosper and make thy ways prosperous, and then thou shalt be wise”.

²³ Gianfranco RAVASI, *Il Libro dei Salmi, Commento e attualizzazione*, p. 81.



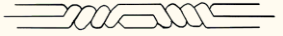
The portrait of the righteous is, finally, enlightened by the metaphor of the tree planted by the waters, taken from Jeremiah 17, 7-8 and read in an eschatological key in Targum. Some biblical commentators consider that verse 3 should be suppressed or obliterated from the text of the psalm; however, they do not have valid arguments. On the contrary, the two images: that of the tree and that of the dust or of the chaff that the wind blows, suit each other very well.

The words in the end of the verse are much more difficult to interpret - “and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper”, an abstract specification, not a figurative one, without parallel in the Book of Psalms, oriented towards the doctrine of the divine retribution. We have already mentioned the central vegetal metaphor – the tree of life – we will now emphasise a few details. Firstly, the tree opposes the shrub, but also the ephemeral grass; the tree is the symbol of vigour, of stability, of durability; it sets its roots deeply in a watered place (near the waters), *peleg* (from the word *palgu*, in the Akkadian language, which means *water canal*). In Mesopotamia there was a highly developed system of irrigation, because of the draught that came from April to November.

This image appears rather frequently in the pages of the Holy Scripture (Ezek 17, 5; 19, 10; Ps 91, 12-14) and it suggests vitality. The tree of the steppe – tender, dry and fragile, with a grey stem, was often used as fire wood, whereas the fruitful trees had lymph, they had rich canopy and plenty of fruit, being never used as fire wood²⁴.

The man that did not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, who did not stand in the way of sinners and who did not sit in the seat of the pestilent is like a tree planted by the waters. The habit of agriculturalists of transplanting from the nursery garden to the

²⁴ Gianfranco RAVASI, *Il Libro dei Salmi, Commento e attualizzazione*, p. 82-83.



place of cultivation becomes a sign of the experience of the righteous that is introduced in the vital stream of the holy community, from where it receives the word of God and love²⁵. The tree offers its roots “in his season”, without giving fruit that are easily dried and which are not ripe: “And by the stream upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow every tree for meat. It shall not wax old thereon, neither shall the fruit thereof fail. It shall bring forth firstfruit of the newness thereof, because their waters issue out of the sanctuary, and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the ascent thereof for health”(Ezek 47, 12). The godly man gives fruit “in his season”, determined by God, living an existence governed completely by the rhythm suggested by the Creator. His foliage is rich and always green: the righteous has an indestructible vitality, which also continues in the period of crisis, of drought, of trial, of aridity and dryness, such as old age: “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree, and increase like a cedar of Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in a ripe old age, and happy shall they be to show that the Lord our God is upright, and that there is no unrighteousness in Him” (Ps 91, 12-15).

The optimism that characterises the portrait of the righteous that seems to deliberately ignore the anxiety and obscurity of Psalm 72 or of Righteous Job is in the tradition of divine retribution, a doctrine which occupies a generous place in traditional Hebrew wisdom.

Verse 3 says about the righteous: “whatsoever he doeth shall prosper”²⁶, words which represent the final emblem of this

²⁵ Edmund JACOB, *Immortality*, in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, II. New York, Abington Press, 1962, p. 688-690.

²⁶ A literal translation would be: “*brings to fulfilment all his deeds*”. Some exegetes say that the implicit subject in this text would be God or Christ the Saviour.

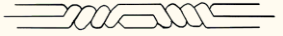


poem on the beatitude of the righteous man that accomplishes good deeds. Beyond a certain eudemonism (conception or doctrine which considers that the purpose of human behaviour is happiness, obtained through a life dominated by reason, not by ephemeral pleasures; Epicurus, Helvetius, Diderot, Feuerbach and so on), specific to the theory of divine retribution, the first three verses of the psalm celebrate a brave faith, which is optimistic and serene, despite all antagonist evidence; a faith which is lived with the firm, steadfast, unabated and consistent conviction that the laws of Christian and spiritual life must be the same as the ones established by God.

3. The second portrait: the sinner and his way (v. 4-6)

The second image of the diptych starts with the help of a symbol that we have already analysed, that of the chaff, a symbol which is in an antithetical parallelism with the symbol of the tree or of the green and vigorous tree. This symbol is preceded by a categorical negation, by an explicit *No*, directed against the ungodly, a *No* which was doubled in the Septuagint: “The ungodly are not so, not so!”; probably because the translators noticed the fracture in the first stanza of the psalm, which lacks a verb. The same Greek version of the Old Testament extends the image of the dispersal “on the face of the earth”. The sweeping, blustery and violent wind that is presented in the image described in verse 4 is the sign of the implacable wrath of the supreme Judge, of the absolute Master of history, Who abandons the sinner to the swirl and whirlwind.

This is how the negative assertion in verse 5 begins, placed in a judicial atmosphere, and this may be the reason why it was subject to divergent interpretations. Everything gravitates around the verb *qûm*, whose meaning is that of rising up in a trial in order to protect your cause. Some exegetes consider that this term

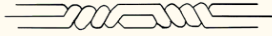


alludes to the act of social and cultural excommunication: the sinners will not be able to take part in the life of the community²⁷. Others see in it an allusion to an eschatological perspective: the sinners will have no word of exculpation, in the sense that they will not be able to rise up at the final judgment and say something in their defense and will be definitively excluded from the community of the righteous (Malachi 3, 1-4; Isaiah 33, 14-16; Daniel 7, 22; Wisdom of Solomon 3, 7). Going beyond the limits of traditional theology, the Psalmist foretells the eschatological teaching presented in the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon, in chapter 5²⁸. Moreover, the Septuagint and the Vulgate made a step forward in this direction of interpretation, growing out of the way of expression or of the tone of the original text. Applying to the verb *qûm* a sense ignored in the Old Testament and in the Qumran literature, the authors of the Septuagint translated it in the following way: “The wicked (the sinners) will not resurrect in the life hereafter”. The Fathers of the Church took over the meaning of the term in the Septuagint and said that the text of Psalm 1 makes reference, indirectly to the resurrection of the righteous, a teaching that appeared late in the theology of the Old Testament (Daniel 12, 2; 2 Maccabees 7, 9. 11. 14. 23. 29. 36), denying, at the same time, the resurrection of sinners, a doctrine which appeared very close to the epoch of the New Testament, through the *Psalms of Solomon* (3, 10. 12), work dated between 63 and 30 BC.

Coming back to the words of Psalm 1, we consider that the Psalmist alludes in a simple way to the judgment that God the Lord will make at the end of the ages, an act surrounded by mystery, already present and operative in the troubled vesture of

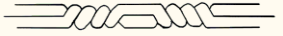
²⁷ P. AUVRAY, *Le Psaume 1. Notes de grammaire et d'exégèse*. RB 53/1946, p. 365-371.

²⁸ Gianfranco RAVASI, *Il Libro dei Salmi, Commento e attualizzazione*, p. 84.



the events that occur in history. According to the Christian teaching, this judgment will be sealed by the word of Christ at the Universal Judgment, however, the judgment is already in act through the attitude that people adopt versus the word of Christ: “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (Jn 3, 19). Our faith is *eschatological* and *historical* at the same time; the faith in a final judgment that will be done by the absolute Master of history, a judgment that is already in act and is operating among people.

The image dedicated to the sinner or the ungodly ends in a conclusive proverb: “for the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, and the way of the ungodly shall perish” (v. 6), which synthesises the dialectic of the two ways and which justifies the affirmation in verse 5: “Therefore the ungodly shall not rise up in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous”. The contrast between the destiny of the sinner and the destiny of the righteous appears frequently in the pages of the Holy Scripture. The Lord *knows* or *is acquainted with* (meaning *to take care*) the way of the righteous: “The Lord knoweth the ways of the blameless, and their inheritance shall be forever” (Ps 36, 18). The verb *jada* (to know) in Hebrew has a varied semantic collection of meanings: intellect, will, passion, affection, tenderness, care, providence, active involvement. This word has the same meaning as the verb *to love* used by prophet Osea and the verbs *to choose* or *to prefer* used by prophet Amos. The whole existence of the faithful man, of the righteous man is under the sign of God’s consideration and love: “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee (Jer 1, 5; 29, 11), therefore “Let not thy foot be moved and let not thy keeper slumber” (Ps 120, 4). This very personal expression in the pages of the Holy Scripture left deep marks in oriental spirituality. The Egyptian faithful felt the peace that came from a relation or from an intense connection



with their god. The victory Stela of Amenhotep, the second Pharaoh of the 18th dynasty (1557-1530 BC), kept in the Egyptian Museum of Turin (n. 48), contains this confession: “The one who entered your holy sanctuary with a troubled and sad heart, goes out blissful and full of joy [...] Blissful is the one that has you in his heart! Desolate is your opposer!”

On the other side is the way of sinners or of the ungodly, a way destined to ruin; the Lord allowed the ungodly to go “according to their heart’s desires; and they shall walk in their own ways” (Ps 80, 11), for “the desire of the wicked shall perish” (Ps 111, 10b). It is a dead end, a way which leads nowhere, an escapeless way, a way destined to collapse.

4. The Christian hermeneutics of Psalm 1

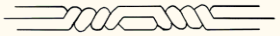
The connection between psalm 1 and psalm 2, on which we have a testimony in the *Western* text (codex D) of the Book of the Acts (13, 33), which quotes verse 7 in psalm 2 saying: “as it is written in the first psalm”, also confirmed by some words in the Babylonian Talmud (9b-10a) which belongs to Rabbi Yehudah Shimon ben Pazi, but also by Saint Justin the Martyr in *Apology I, 40*, which quotes the two psalms, applying them, according to the Christian interpretation, to Messiah Christ, the Righteous par excellence, favoured the Christological interpretation of psalm 1. “Beatus vir”, faithful to his choice, dedicated in an accomplished way to the word and law of the Lord and Saviour Christ. He Himself followed, without diversion, the way to which he dedicated completely and he proposed man the two ways and a decisive choice for one of them: for life or death. In his commentaries on the Psalms, Saint Basil the Great writes: “There are two ways that oppose each other: one is large and broad, the other one is narrow and strait. The guides are two as well, and each one attempts to attract to itself. The smooth and inclined

way has a sly guide, an evil demon, which lures towards perdition the ones that follow it; the arduous way with ascent is guided by a good angel, who takes the ones that follow him to a blissful end through the hardships of virtue”²⁹.

The Christian reading of Psalm 1 – and especially of verse 3 – attracted the attention of biblical commentators. The tree planted by the streams of waters is connected to the tree of life present in God’s heaven, both in the first and in the last book of the Holy Scripture (Gen 2, 9 and Rev 2, 7; 22, 2). Saint Justin the Martyr says that this tree is the symbol of the Cross (an allegorical interpretation cherished in the tradition of the Church). The tree planted by the streams of waters has been considered in Tradition as the symbol of the Cross, the life-giving wood that bears fruit in our life which is washed by the water of the Holy Baptism. Hence, we have a first symbol: paschal and baptismal. The Christian drinks from the water of life or from the immortal stream when he receives the Body and Blood of Christ: “Receive you the Body of Christ; taste ye the Fountain of Immortality”.

The Christological symbol of the tree became an ecclesiological-baptismal one. In the Epistle of Barnabas: “And again He says in another prophet, The man who does these things shall be like a tree planted by the courses of waters, which shall yield its fruit in due season; and his leaf shall not fade, and all that he does shall prosper. Not so are the ungodly, not so, but even as chaff, which the wind sweeps away from the face of the earth. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in judgment, nor sinners in the counsel of the just; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish (Ps 1, 3-6).

²⁹ SAINT BASIL THE GREAT, *Tâlcuire duhovnicească la Psalmi (Commentary on the Psalms)*. București, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă Publishing House, 2009, p. 17.



Mark – says the author of this work – how He has described at once both the water and the cross. For these words imply, Blessed are they who, placing their trust in the cross, have gone down into the water; for, says He, they shall receive their reward in due time: then He declares, I will recompense them. But now, He says, their leaves shall not fade. This means, that every word which proceeds out of your mouth in faith and love shall tend to bring conversion and hope too many”³⁰.

Saint Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, in *Epistle 73*, asserts: “The Church, setting forth the likeness of paradise, includes within her walls fruit-bearing trees whereof that which does not bring forth good fruit is cut off and is cast into the fire. These trees she waters with four rivers, that is, with the four Gospels, wherewith, by a celestial inundation, she bestows the grace of saving baptism. Can any one water from the Church's fountains who is not within the Church? Can one impart those wholesome and saving draughts of paradise to any one if he is perverted, and of himself condemned, and banished outside the fountains of paradise, and has dried up and failed with the dryness of an eternal thirst?”³¹.

Despite all this, beyond these hermeneutical allegorising dilatations, Psalm 1 represents the expression of a dialectic relation with the New Testament. And for a Christian, just as in the case of any man coming into the world, the choice of one of the two ways, in complete freedom, is fundamental. However, the

³⁰ *Epistola zisă a lui Barnaba (The Epistle of Barnabas) XI, 6-8*. In *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici (Writings of the Apostolic Fathers)*. București, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române Publishing House, 1995, p. 152-153.

³¹ Saint Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, *Scrisoarea LXXII (Epistle LXXIII), X. 3*. In *Scrisori (Epistles)*. București, Sofia Publishing House, 2011, p. 364.

choice of the word of God suggested in Psalm 1 is not as paradoxical as that suggested by the evangelical beatitudes (Mt 3, 3-12). In the message of Jesus, the way of the Christian is not as attractive as a garden in blossom, the way proposed by Him is not as attractive as this. On the contrary, this way involves a radical overthrow on the scale of traditional values; in a spiritual language this important act which the Christian has to do is called *metanoia* and it implies the renewal of the mind, the fundamental orientation of our life towards good, truth and beauty, that is, a gesture or an act through which man reaches *theosis*. The tree of life is the cross of Christ, and the wisdom of God is, at first sight, foolishness and offense (1 Cor 1, 17-21). Jesus was faithful to the word of the heavenly Father, however, when he was on earth, free from any integralist temptation, he sat gladly at the table with publicans and sinners, as Healer and Saviour.

The Psalmist rejected categorically the risk of contamination with evil; Jesus, instead, assumed it, being convinced that the Gospel means light and healing for the ones who are in the darkness of sins. In Christ we do not see a Man who keeps aloof from the sinners and the wicked, one that separates Himself radically from the human community. He approaches sinners, joins sinners, does not shame to eat with sinners, assuming the risk of being scorned for this: “He was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner!” (Lk 19, 7). Nevertheless, He entered the house of sinners not in order to be guilty along with these, but in order to bear the sins of the world³².

³² G. EBELING, *Sui Salmi*. Brescia, Queriniana, 1973, p. 18.