

The Study of the Sacred Page as the Soul of Theology (cf. DV 24)

in the Light of St. Cyril of Alexandria's Exegesis of Ps 94,11

1. Question

« The Study of the Sacred Page ought to be, as it were, the Soul of Theology » (DV, 24) : this is the directive given to the theologian by the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, n°24. What are the practical implications of such a recommendation? The metaphor of the « soul » implies a living presence of the study of Scripture at the very heart of the theological act. So on what conditions can the study of Scripture be the soul of theology?

The reading of the exegesis of a Church Father, and a great commentator of Scripture, St. Cyril of Alexandria, sheds remarkable light on these questions.

Cyril did not raise the question of the study of Scripture as the soul of theology : he is, in the same movement, exegete and theologian. Passionate defender of the unity of the Incarnate Word, Cyril of Alexandria is above all a pastor who tirelessly comments on the Scriptures in the light of Christ¹. His exegesis of the Psalms is characteristic : « In an extraordinary way, the psalmic text, as he writes in the *Prooemium* of his *Commentary*, is almost inebriated with narratives concerning Christ the Savior of us all »².

The detailed study, throughout Cyril's works, of Ps 94, the invitatory psalm, and particularly of its last verse : « I swore in my anger : “They shall not enter my rest” » (v. 11), while allowing us to discover how Cyril has let himself be seized by this « christological intoxication », enables us to observe some essential hermeneutic attitudes in operation. These features of Cyril's exegesis are likely to inspire today's researcher with a way of studying

¹ See : J. A. MCGUCKIN, « Cyril of Alexandria : Bishop and Pastor », *The Theology of St Cyril of Alexandria. A Critical Appreciation*, ed. Th. G. Weinandy et D. A. Keating, London – New York, T&T Clark, 2003, pp. 209-236.

² « ε)caire/twj ge mh\n h(th=j mel%diζaj suggraph\ mononouxii kai katamequ/ei toiļj perii tou= pa/ntwn h(mw%/zn swth=roj Xristou= dihgħ/masi » (*Prooemium*, éd. G. MERCATI, « Il Proemio inedito di S. Cirillo Alessandrino al suo Commento del Salterio », *Osservazioni a Proemi del Salterio di Origene, Ippolito, Eusebio, Cirillo Alessandrino e altri, con frammenti inediti* [StT, 142], Città del Vaticano, 1948, p. 140, lines 14-15).

Scripture which may be theological, in other words, which may allow exegesis to become the soul of theology.

2. Texts

What are the available texts ? The Cyrillian exegesis of Ps 94 can be read at first in his *Commentary on Psalms*. Migne's edition offers two columns on Ps 94:1-10 (PG 69, col. 1240-1241). Their authenticity has been verified³. Nevertheless, whatever may be the prestige in which a monument as the *Commentary on Psalms* has been wrapped and the difficulty of using it safely, it represents only one of the many literary forms in which Ps 94 can be found among Cyril's abundant works. In the Cyrillian corpus accessible today we have listed thirty quotations of one or the other verses of the Psalm⁴.

The dossier of texts is still to be completed, since Ps 94 is the subject of an exegesis inside the New Testament itself. In the frame of an exhortation, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews offers the longest psalmic quotation in the New Testament : in chapters 3 and 4, he quotes Ps 94 in its second part (v. 7d-11) and comments it in the light of Christ. This rereading made by Hebrews of Ps 94,11 is itself quoted and interpreted by Cyril in fifteen passages of his works⁵.

Thus joined to the *Commentary on Psalms*, this dossier of texts allows us to realize the diversity of passages in which the Psalm and its rereading by Hebrews are quoted by Cyril.

³ Except for col. 1241 D (lines 8-13) on v. 10, the abstracts devoted to the commentary of Ps 94,1-9 correspond indeed to the monophysit collection of the chain III, which attributions are quite safe (see : M.-J. RONDEAU, *Les Commentaires patristiques du Psautier (III^{ème}-V^{ème} siècles)*, t. 1, p. 132, and : G.M. VIAN, « Il "De Psalmorum titulis" : l'esegesi di Atanasio tra Eusebio e Cirillo », *Orpheus* 12 [1991], p. 101, note 37).

⁴ Following the more probable chronological order, those passages can be thus classified (we put in square brackets the quoted verses of Ps 94) : *De adoratione*, Book XI [v. 1a] ; *Festal Letter* I (414) [v. 1] ; *Festal Letter* V (417) [v. 1] ; *Glaphyra on Genesis*, Books III [v. 7bc] and V [v. 7bc] ; *Festal Letter* VIII (420) [v. 6a] ; *Commentary on Zachary* 8:4-5 [v. 1] ; *Commentary on Isaiah* 1:9 [v. 11], 43:1-2 [v. 7d.8a], 44:1 [v. 5] ; *Festal Letter* XI (423) [v. 1a.6a] ; *Festal Letter* XII (424) [v. 1] ; *Thesaurus*, chapters IV [v. 7bc], XXXII [v. 7bc] and XXXV [v. 6.7abc] ; *Dialogues on the Trinity*, III [v. 6a.7bc], V [v. 6.7] and VI [v. 6-7] ; *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Book II, chapter v [v. 6], Book IV, chapter III [v. 11] and Book VI [v. 6a] ; *Festal Letters* XV (427) [v. 1a], XXIII (435) [v. 1a] and XXV (437) [v. 1.6].

⁵ The fifteen selected texts can be thus classified : *De adoratione*, Books VII ; X ; XVI ; XVII ; *Festal Letter* VI (418) ; *Glaphyra on Numbers*, Book II ; *Commentary on Amos*, 6:3 ; *Festal Letter* IX (421) ; *Commentary on Isaiah*, 56:6-8 and 58:13-14 ; *Thesaurus*, chapter XXXII ; *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Book IV, chapter VI and Book V, chapter III ; *Treatise Ad Dominas* ; *Treatise Contra Nestorium*. The *Commentary on the epistle to the Hebrews* does not appear in this list since in the fragments today accessible include only commentaries on Heb 3:1.12 and 4:12.14, which are of secondary interest according to our topic.

They appear, indeed, in theological dialogues such as the *De Adoratione in Spiritu et Veritate* and the *De Trinitate Dialogi*, in exegetical commentaries represented by the *Glaphyra on Genesis* and *on Numbers*, the *Commentaries on Zachary, Amos and Isaiah*, and the *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, in the strongly doctrinal work such as the *Thesaurus de Trinitate*, in the doctrinal treatises *Ad Dominas* and *Contra Nestorium*, or again in those pastoral writings like the *Festal Letters*. The chronological order of all those works makes us notice quotations of Ps 94 all throughout the literary and pastoral work of Cyril ⁶.

After having synthesized the content of the Cyrillian interpretation of Ps 94 and especially of its v. 11, we will present the way in which this hermeneutical act is done. It will then be possible to shed light on the fundamental questions asked at the beginning.

3. Content of the Cyrillian interpretation

The richness of the Cyrillian interpretation can only be fully discovered against the background of how the Bible itself understands Ps 94.

A procession song, Ps 94 / 95, interpreted in its very coherence within the Hebraic psalter, ends with the imminence of fulfillment : the entrance of sons in the intimacy of divine rest is awaited, today, provided that they do not become hardened, provided that they know how to read the signs given by God, that is to say, to listen to the one who speaks through them.

This hope of the sons is fulfilled by the entrance of the Son in the rest. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews testifies to this fulfillment : in the place of divine rest, the believers, partakers in Christ, will enjoy a sabbatical celebration, a sabbatismo/j (Heb 4:9). Fulfillment has till to be deployed, today, in the time of the Church.

The interpretation given by Cyril of Alexandria of Ps 94:11 and of its interpretation in Heb 3-4 takes part in this revelation. The global movement of the Psalm, according to the detail of the Cyrillian exegesis, can be thus summarized : « Come, let us confess our faith in the mystery of the Incarnation, and let us thus enter in the promised rest ! ».

⁶ Let us remind that Cyril became patriarch of Alexandria in 412 and died in 444.

Dissident Christians, Jews and pagans, all are invited to confess Christ ⁷. They are called to enter his rest through taking part in his offering ⁸. This rest, promised to the saints for the end of time, is the rest of the origins ⁹, the celebration of the feast to which God the Creator and Father calls all his children ¹⁰. In the context of the Vth century, where the eschatological waiting has become discreet, the study of the fluctuations of the Cyrillian exegesis, acknowledging by turns the actuality of the entrance in the rest and its future dimension, shows how attention given to the permanence of Israel's cult and hope, so present in Alexandria, revives Christian hope.

4. Features of Cyrillian interpretation

Four main attitudes seem to be characteristic of the Cyrillian interpretation of Ps 94.

To enter in the body of the Scriptures, and go towards Christ

What matters, first of all, is to enter the body of Scriptures and to turn towards Christ. This movement enunciated in the last words of the Psalm, taken up by the Epistle to the Hebrews, and which consists in *entering in* or *going towards*, is the very movement of Cyril's exegesis. The study of his interpretation of the Psalm and of Heb 3-4 requires us to enter the ecclesial memory of Scripture.

⁷ « Let them come, those who are wandering, and let them move forward toward the light of truth, let them acknowledge with us the Word of God become man ; let them confess that he is God and Son of God in truth – ,Hke/twsan toiζnun oi, planw̄ menoi, kaii pro|j to\ th=j a)lhqeiζaj e)rxē/sqwsan fw'ζj: e)piginwske/twsan meq' h(mw'ζn to\ n e)nanqrwph/santa tou= Qeou= Lo/gon: o(mologeiz twsan oĀti kaii Qeo/j e)sti kaii Qeou= Ui,oj kata\ a)lh/qeian » (*In Ps.*, 94,5 ; PG 69, col. 1241C).

⁸ « It is ourselves that Christ has brought to rest, and he has persuaded us to celebrate the sabbath in a spiritual way (...). So, we ourselves will surrender to Christ all our earthly worries, fulfilling the spiritual sabbatical rest. (...) And following, so to speak, Christ's steps, as it is written (1 P 2:21), we will sacrifice ourselves, (...) giving ourselves to him as a fragrant offering – ,Hma=j de\ kate/pausen o(Xristo|j, kaii Sabbatiζein a)ne/peise nohtw'ζj, ... Ou)kou=n e)pigeiζwn me\ n spoudasma/twn kaii h(meilj au)toii katalh/comen e)n Xrist'%, to\ n nohto\ n plhrou=ntej Sabbatismo\ n, ... ,Epo/menoi de\ w\Dsper toij iāxnesi tou= Xristou=, kata\ to\ gegramme/non, e(autou|j i,ereu/somen, ... e(autou|j de\ ma=llon ei'j o)smh\ n eu)wdiζaj a)natiqe/ntej au)t'%) » (*De adoratione*, XVI ; PG 68, col. 1012B-D).

⁹ « Thus one died for all, so that, snatching us from the jaws of death and of our sins, he would deliver us from punishment and hard work and bring us back to this rest of our origins – kaii eiāj u(pe\ r pa/ntwn a)pe/qanen, iāna h(ma=j qana/tou kaii a(martiw'ζn e)celw'Ūn, poinh=j a)palla/cv kaii po/nwn, kaii th\ n e)n a)rxai|j a)na/pausin di' au)tou= kerda/nwmen » (*De adoratione*, XVII ; PG 68, col. 1109A-B).

¹⁰ « God the Father having gathered us for a spiritual banquet, (...) and having as choir master, the one in honor of whom we celebrate this feast-day meal, raising our praises, let us say : "Come, let us rejoice for the Lord, let us shout for joy to God our Saviour" (Ps 94:1) – Ou)kou=n sunageiζrontoj h(ma=j tou= Qeou= kaii Patro|j ei'j pandaisiζan th\ n noht\ n, ... kaii au)to\ n eĀxontej xorosta/thn to\ n e)j' %O telou=men th\ n panh/gurin, a)namel%dou=ntej, le/gwmen: "Deu=te, a)galliasw̄ meqa t'%) Kuriζ%, a)lala/cwmen t'%) Qe'%) t'%) Swth=ri h(mw'ζn" » (*Festal Letter XXV* ; PG 77, col. 904A-B).

Because Cyril inhabits Scripture, the exegesis of one passage drives him tirelessly to the evocation or study of other texts, with an admirable coherence. This comes from what unifies and organizes this ecclesial memory : the confession of Christ, the Incarnate Word. The unity of the Cyrillian hermeneutic is one of a movement *towards*. The studied verses make sense, that is they have a direction, a « goal – skopo/j ». The attentive research of the skopo/j of Ps 94, like that of the precepts related to sabbatical rest, allows us to discover the direction in which those verses converge with all of Scriptures, that is, Christ in his salvific act. Sabbatical precepts indicate in figures what Cyril, with the Epistle to the Hebrews, proclaim as being the reality : the rest of the saints in the last day, through their participation in Christ's offering.

Listen to the Word today

Cyril makes his own the biblical injunction to listen, strongly enunciated in the psalmic oracle, amplified by the Epistle in the today of Christ. Familiar with psalmic prayer, an attentive listener of the Apostle, who is for him the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Cyril does not stop listening to the Word. He interprets the Psalm and its interpretation by the Epistle in the today of Christ, which is the today of the Church of which he is the pastor. Confronted with the Arian and Nestorian crisis, he has to account for the faith in the unity of Christ, Word of God made flesh for men's salvation.

The unfolding of meaning constituted by the Cyrillian exegesis of the Psalm and of its rereading in Heb 3-4 participates in this confession of faith. According to Cyril, the Psalm is not less inviting in confessing Christ than the New Testament exhortation which comments it.

The Cyrillian exegesis thus shows how the interpreter's commitment is necessary in order to discover the meaning of the Scripture. His exegesis, which is a free act, is a confession of faith.

Reading the signs

The Word is to be listened to, today, in reading the signs. The psalmic oracle recalls one memory of the trial which is constituted by the right interpretation of the signs given by God.

The Epistle bears witness to the way Christ has gone through the trial, obeying the Father's will recorded for him in the scroll of the book, according to the words of Ps 40 (see : Heb 10:7).

The Cyrillian exegesis, in its very freedom, takes part in Christ's obedience to Scripture. It realizes a remarkable balance, half-way between the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools. Cyril carefully studies the signs of the letter to discover their goal, the *skopo/j*. Keeping the value of words as signs, a value that is necessary and yet transitional, he excels in the reading of texts, in the passage from figures to reality. The shadows of the Law must be scrutinized with respect since they sketch out the reality.

Thus the words of Ps 94 are carefully studied, to recognize in them a call to confess Christ in his Incarnation and in his paschal victory. King and Lord, Christ is the Creator and Pastor whose work is magnified by the v. 1-7 of the invitatory.

If the Cyrillian texts commenting the Psalm are discreet about the nature of the rest made accessible today, they open up its perspective, not only to Christians but as also to Jews and pagans, invited to convert to Christ.

His rereading of Heb 3-4 testifies also to this constant passage from signs to reality. In Heb 4:9, *sabbatismo/j* was wrapped with the new strength of an *hapax*. Cyril does not absolutize the word, which he sometimes takes as a simple synonym of sabbatical rest. He ties it up however with the reality envisioned by Hebrews and even clarifies it. If in the Epistle the christological dimension of rest is discreetly formulated, Cyril clearly explains how the confession of faith allows us to enter in the rest *of Christ*. To take part in the act through which Christ the priest offers himself to the Father allows the disciples to enter with him in the rest of the last days.

To interpret the signs in order to praise

Finally, the first verses of the Psalm invite us to a celebration of praise. The Cyrillian exegesis is rythmed by praise ; the countless doxologies by which Cyril takes pleasure in ending his analysis of the biblical text bear witness to this. Each verse quoted and read in faith

is Word of God ; it makes one of the harmonics of Christ's mystery resound in the community of the faithful. To use an image dear to Cyril, it is like the notes of the trumpet of the salvation which vibrate and resound in the ecclesial memory of the Scriptures ¹¹.

Thus, the examination of the Cyrillian interpretation of the verse 11 of the Invitatory Psalm suggests to the theologian of today a way of studying Scripture which allows exegesis to be theological. Through faith, the careful and docile study of the inspired letter permits the theologian to enter the obedience of the Son of God. Listening to the inspired text as Word of God, he discovers its meaning and is able to interpret it in the actuality of the Church. Thus he produces a theological act of which the study of the Scripture is, as it were, the soul.

¹¹ « The blessed David, calling us to a noble assembly, invites to sing the canticle of victory for Christ who came here on earth for our sake and who, by his cross "has destroyed the power of death" (Heb 2:14), saying: "Come, let us rejoice for the Lord, let us shout for joy to God our Saviour" (Ps 94:1). (...) Let us give a piercing cry, let us sound the sacred trumpet of the Church, and with a clear and forceful proclamation, let us announce the coming of our holy feast – Ὁ μεῖν οὐρανὸν μακαρίοις Δαβὶδ εἰς τὴν καλὴν ἡμερὰν συναγαγὼν ὁ μὴ γινώσκων τὴν ἡμερὰν τῆς ἐπιδημίας τοῦ Χριστοῦ, καὶ διὰ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῦ θανάτου καταργήσας τὴν ἐξουσίαν τοῦ θανάτου: "Deu=te, a)galliasw̄ meqa t%½ Kuriζ%, a)lala/cwmen t%½ Qe%½ t%½ Swth=ri h(mw'zn". ... me/ga ti kekrago/tej kaii diapru/sion, th̄n i,era'n th=j 'Ekkh̄siζaj kinh/swmen sa/lpigga, eu)sh/m% de\ kaii perifanesta/t% khru/gmati th=j a(giζaj h(mw'zn e(orth=j th̄n parousiζan katamhnu/swmen » (*Festal Letter I* ;PG 77, col. 401A-B et 409B ; SC 372, pp. 142 and 156).