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# The Godly Light in Psalms – Theological Perspectives

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## Abstract

God reveals Himself as light from the very act of creation, as soon as He utters the words „Let there be light!” (Gen. 1, 3). This primordial light, springing from the Being of the Trinity, is the first revelation of the Image of God to the world. Ever since, humanity has known God as light even if, after falling into sin, few have been those who have found grace and could contemplate God in His unapproachable, mysterious, impenetrable light. Although there is no reference to this reality in the Old Testament, at least we know that Moses knew God as light (Ex. 3 and 32-33), because his own face had been endowed with light. Given that most references to God as Light are in the psalms, I believe it is necessary to study more carefully the texts that reveal to us the truth about godly light. I shall thus contribute to rebuilding the discourse of the Old Testament with respect to the light that appeared from the very beginning of the world in order to reveal everything.

## Keywords

Light, psalms, enlightenment, lamp, eye

## I. Introduction

In Romanian biblical literature, Father Ioan Chirilă creates an opening in this subject through a subsection of a research paper on godly light in the Old Testament (*Despre lumină în teologhisirea psalmistului David* [On Light, as Theologised by the Psalmist David]). The priest and professor aims at highlighting the way in which the psalmist “transforms the sacred space in a place of angelic worship of light – God’s raiment”<sup>1</sup>. Throughout the study, the author makes clear distinctions between light and luminaries, but especially between the Creator of light (Who is Light) and light. In this respect, father Chirilă presents two fundamental truths, namely that between primordial and astral light there is a distinction in terms of form, not of substance, and that man can become the subject of the embodiment of the uncreated light by shedding his skin cover and by being filled with light<sup>2</sup>. The One Who wraps Himself up in light as in a garment (Ps. 104) can make man a part of the unapproachable light so that he can see himself shining, being aware that God’s light is mirrored in him.

In a recent research paper<sup>3</sup>, father Ioan Chirilă, together with a team of researchers, has developed the premises launched in the aforementioned study and has analysed the way in which godly light is perceived in the texts of the psalms. The exegesis of the 27 psalms which refer to heavenly light made by the priest and professor follows the reasoning of Saint Gregory of Nyssa in relation to the structure of the Psalter: the *epektasis*<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the prayer through which the psalmist asks God to show him His

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<sup>1</sup> Pr. Ioan CHIRILĂ, “Teologia luminii în Vechiul Testament”, in: *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă din Cluj-Napoca*, 2 (1992-1994), p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> “The doxological theologising of the psalms leads us to two fundamental truths: there is an uncreated light – a shining that is different from the light created on the first day; man, as a bodily representation of creation, partakes first of the created light but, once spiritually elevated, becomes the subject of the embodiment of the uncreated light which he sees as an overflow of numerous lights that spread pure rays over everything that breathes and understands that he can only see Him if he steps beyond the cloud. In this hypostasis, man becomes a doxological, confessing reality, set free from empiricism.” Ioan CHIRILĂ, “Teologia luminii...”, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> The study “Lumina în Psalmi – de la iluminarea feței la doxologia Luminii” was accepted for publication by the editorial office of *Mitropolia Olteniei*.

<sup>4</sup> For further details, see the introductory section of *The Structure of the Psalter and the Stages of the Spiritual Life* realised by Roland E. Heine to the volume *Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 50-78.

light, to let it shine on his face (Ps. 4, 6), culminates in the doxological assertions in psalm 148. To complete this spiritual ascension, little before concluding the singing of light, father Ioan Chirilă insists on the mystery of darkness which, before God, shines like light itself (Ps. 139, 12).

In the present study, I wish to structure theologically the psalmic themes related to godly light, starting from its source (God) and all the way to the manner in which light floods those who seek to partake of the One Who lives in the unapproachable light. Given the specificity of the research and the oriental approach to the subject, it has been quite difficult to identify similar studies in western literature. Historical-critical approaches of the psalmic texts do not focus on the mystical experience of godly light. They are, nonetheless, useful to us in understanding the religious context<sup>5</sup> and in outlining a broad vision of the way in which God reveals Himself, showing His grace and light<sup>6</sup>. From this array of writings, I shall fructify in particular an idea launched by H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck<sup>7</sup> and later on by D. Flusser<sup>8</sup>, according to whom one of the Messiah's names in the rabbinic texts would be Light, as He is Himself the *lamp* that lights the path of the virtuous.

As such, in order to attain the aforementioned objectives, I shall use the method of contextualisation and of linguistic analysis wherever the texts require such an approach. However, the research method that will provide the specificity of the study is proper to the Christian East. The choice has also been influenced by the subject we tackle. The references to light made by the psalmic texts<sup>9</sup> are directed by the Church Fathers

<sup>5</sup> Paul E. DION, "YhWh as storm-god and sun-god. The Double Legacy of Egypt and Canaan as Reflected in Psalm 104", in: *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, CIII (2009) 1, pp. 43-71. John DAY, *Psalm 104 and Akhenaten's Hymn to the Sun*, in: *Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms. Conflict and Convergence*, coord. Susan GILLINGHAM, University Press, Oxford, 2013, pp. 211-28.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond J. TOURNAY, "Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms: The Prophetic Liturgy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem", in: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series 118*, trans. by J. Edward Crowley, Academic Press, Sheffield, 1991, p. 312. The author emphasises the concept of God's grace and the idea of theophany rather than that of light. It is tackled in only a few pages of one subchapter.

<sup>7</sup> H.L. STRACK, P. BILLERBECK, *Kommentar zum N.T. aus Talmud und Midrasch*, coord. J. Jeremias and K. Adolph, Oskar Beck, Munich, 1965, pp. 67, 151.

<sup>8</sup> D. FLUSSER, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1988, pp. 457-458.

<sup>9</sup> Hebrew concordance offers for the root *or* the following occurrences in the psalmic writings: *to give light* – Pss. 13, 3; 105, 39; 119, 130; *to let his face shine* – Ps. 67, 1; Ps 80, 3.7.19; Ps. 119, 135; *to light the lamp* – Ps. 18, 28; *to enlighten* – Ps. 19, 8; *to*

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towards mystical experience, something that we scarcely encounter in the writings of western biblical scholars. The study shall consist of several sections in which godly light shall be related first to God, then to man and again to the One Who transforms everything into light.

## II. God is Light

One of the most relevant texts for the subject of light is verse 1 in psalm 27. God is considered to be light, more precisely the light of the psalmist. The noun *or* receives a pronominal particle (*ori*) by means of which God's light becomes proper to the psalmist. In the present situation, we can speak of a certain identity between Light and the one who becomes light through the godly light that pours into him. In other words, we are faced with an indirect assertion according to which God is called light. This kind of assertion is unique in the Old Testament. God is frequently asked to give light or to illuminate the eyes, but is not overtly called light<sup>10</sup>. Although the Greek text uses in this context the noun *photismos* (*enlightenment*) – not *phos*, *photos* (*light*), which would have been more appropriate – some Fathers believe God is called light by the psalmist. Therefore, Saint Gregory of Nyssa claims the following about God: “He is called a light by David (Ps. 27, 1), and from thence the light of knowledge shines in them who are enlightened”<sup>11</sup>.

Even if God is called light, He is, according to the psalmist, above light. God is clad in it, like a man wearing a garment on his shoulders<sup>12</sup>. The doxological psalm of creation (104) reveals the fact that the light called on

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*make his light to shine upon us* – Ps. 118, 27; *light* – Pss. 4, 6; 27, 1; 36, 9; 38, 10; 43, 3; 44, 3; 49, 3.19; 56, 13; 78, 14; 89, 15; 97, 11; 104, 2; 112, 4; 119, 105; 136, 7; 139, 11; *bright* – Pss. 31, 16; 139, 12; *radiant with light* – Ps. 76, 4; *lighted up* – Ps. 77, 18; *enlightened* – Ps. 97, 4; *dawn* – Ps. 37, 6; *shining* – Ps. 148, 3. John KOHLENBERGER, James SWANSON, *The Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament with the New International Version*, Zondervan Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998, pp. 239-240.

<sup>10</sup> A similar text is found in Micah 7, 8, where God is called the light of the prophet. Given that a prepositional particle is used in this prophetic text, we shall have *or li* instead of *ori*. Nonetheless, we cannot find anywhere in the Old Scripture a clear statement like in John 1, 9 or 8, 12, where Jesus Christ is called Light.

<sup>11</sup> ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA, “Against Eunomius” 2.15, in: *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, trans. by Philip Schaff, Logos Research Systems, Oak Harbor, 1997, p. 133.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander KIRKPATRICK, *The Book of Psalms*, University Press, Cambridge, 1905, p. 606.

by God to arrange the created world through its radiance is for Him like a garment. The primordial light is a manifestation of the uncreated energies and identifies itself with the radiant splendour of the Being of the Holy Trinity<sup>13</sup>. This light that God Himself considered good (Gen. 1,4) is not from this world, but comes from eternity and mysteriously reveals the light of the eighth day<sup>14</sup>. The fact that the psalmist is thinking about godly light and not about astral light is confirmed both by the context of the hymn and by patristic interpretations. Theodoret, the bishop of Cyrus, claims that this radiant garment is nothing else but the unapproachable light in which God resides (1 Tim. 6,16). The radiance of this light cannot be compared to solar light. Although, through its radiance, it overwhelms anyone who tries to contemplate it, the light of the sun is but a mere shadow of the light of Him Who is in the highest. However, the unapproachable light that God wears is cloud and darkness for the one looking at it with bodily eyes. Yet, this radiant darkness remains an impenetrable mystery only for the one who remains on the outside and does not fathom the mystery of light<sup>15</sup>. It is only then that the spiritual eyes open and the face of the one who revels in the sight of God is filled with light. The reality of the enlightenment is confirmed by Moses who, after entering the darkness on Sinai, where God was, acquired so much radiance that he had to put a veil over his face, for none of the Israelites could look at him (Ex. 34, 29-35).

We retain the fact that bishop Theodoret claims there is no distinction or opposition between godly light and darkness because, for God, darkness

<sup>13</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Ioan CHIRILĂ, “Întru lumina ta vom vedea lumină (Ps 36, 9) – despre lumină și taina întinericului în care se află Dumnezeu (Ieș. 20,21)”, in: *Voi pune înaintea Ierusalimul, ca început al bucuriei mele*. In Honorem Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan la împlinirea vârstei de 80 ani, coord. Aurel PAVEL and Nicolae CHIFĂR, Editura Astra Museum, Sibiu, 2018, pp. 214-237.

<sup>14</sup> See Paula BUD, “Șabatul – mediu de transfigurare și pregustare a veșniciei”, in: *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai – Theologia Orthodoxa*, LXVI (2009) 2, pp. 223-230.

<sup>15</sup> “The Apostle also said things in harmony with this, It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light: that light is such that no one dares to come near it, the intensity of the rays turning one’s eyes away. After all, if the visible [light of the] sun forces those avidly trying to discern it to do this, who could manage to come to an understanding of the unapproachable light? He is, then, himself true light, and he is also wrapped in light like a garment, and dwells in unapproachable light, with cloud and gloom around him, and he made darkness his canopy. These things are not inconsistent with one another: the unapproachable light is the same as gloom and darkness to those unable to see it; it is impossible to discern what is in the one and in the other. The one case and the other, of course, indicate the invisible quality of the divine nature.” Robert C. HILL, *Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Psalms, 73-150*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 2010, p. 162.

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and light are the same. This reality applies both at an astral and at a heavenly level. Only for us is darkness an acute lack of light. For God, darkness is as radiant as light. Nothing can be kept secret or hide from His gaze. From a mystical perspective, darkness is in fact an overlight, a dazzling excess of godly light<sup>16</sup>. In other words, God lives both in light and in darkness, without suggesting that darkness would be an environment devoid of light<sup>17</sup>. On the contrary, the light inside the darkness is so radiant that man can no longer see anything with his material eyes<sup>18</sup>. However, in parallel with this lack of sight, spiritual sight develops. This reality was mysteriously expressed by the psalmist, according to whom light and darkness are not antagonistic: “even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you” (Ps. 139, 12).

Saint John Chrysostom explains the mystery of these words by resorting to two examples which prove that two contrary elements can coexist and, by God’s will, can lend their characteristics to each other. The first example is the dew and the fire from the furnace where the three young men were thrown (3 Tin. 1,25-26<sup>19</sup>) and the other is the plague of darkness (Ex. 10, 21-23). When referring to the episode of the punishment of the Egyptians with that frightening darkness that lasted for three days, the Antiochian hierarch claims that the darkness sent down on them also covered the land of Goshen, where the Israelis were. The only difference was that God ordained His light to cover the sons of Israel:

“Even the darkness is not dark to you; The night is bright as the day. It is well said that, if you want to, darkness is not dark, but will show what belongs to light. That is why he added «the night is bright as the day», revealing that the night will have the same properties as the day. When God wants it, the work [energy] of elements changes into the opposite and to such an extent that the opposite becomes a set of peculiar characteristics, just like the

<sup>16</sup> Basile KRIVOCHINE, “La spiritualite orthodoxe”, in: *Messenger de l’Exarchat du Patriarce Russe en Europe Occidentale*, LIII (1966), p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> Walter BRUEGGEMANN, William H. BELLINGER jr., “Psalms”, in: *New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, University Press, Cambridge, 2014, p. 583.

<sup>18</sup> Robert BRATCHER, William REYBURN, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms*, United Bible Societies, New York, 1991, p. 1126.

<sup>19</sup> The Romanian biblical reference to the first addition to Daniel, The Song of the Three Young Men.

ones inherited from the beginning of their creation. If you also want it, such will be the night and will have light just like it had darkness. It is why the prophet added: «for darkness is as light with you». [...] As for these words..., it is once again necessary to say the same thing. For darkness is as light with you, not in imagination, but in reality, for the Master of being can change the nature of things”<sup>20</sup>.

The meaning of these words is simplified if we transpose it into a mystical dimension. Darkness is not an environment where knowledge is lacking, but one of apophatic knowledge, through negation<sup>21</sup>. This fully reveals the mystery of Godhead to the extent to which God allows it. In reference to Moses’ entrance into the darkness where God was, Saint Dyonisius the Areopagite claims that only when the prophet established a connection with God could he contemplate Him, as He was visible<sup>22</sup>. Otherwise said, the darkness that shed light on Moses and that penetrated his soul represents a superior stage of knowledge. Grace floods man, opens his spiritual eyes and offers him the possibility of seeing the immaterial<sup>23</sup>.

### III. Seeing the Godly Light

I shall refer once again to Moses’ experience in order to explain another opening created by the psalmist on the path towards the mystery of light. In

<sup>20</sup> SF. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Omiliile la Psalmi*, transl. Laura Enache, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2011, p. 366.

<sup>21</sup> Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Rugul aprins*, trad. Teodor Damșa, Editura Mitropoliei Banatului, Timișoara, 1994, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> “Only then, after passing beyond the world where you see and you are seen, does Moses enter the truly mysterious Darkness of lack of knowledge; only there does he put an end to all positive sciences, does he completely free himself from all connections and sights, for he belongs entirely to Him Who is above all, as he no longer belongs to himself, nor is he linked to something alien, but he is united through everything that is best inside him with the One Who escapes all knowledge, giving up all positive sciences and, precisely due to this lack of knowledge, he knows more than one can understand.” SF. DIONISIE AGHIORITUL, *Despre numele divine. Teologia Mistica I.3*, trad. Cicerone Iordachescu și Theofil Simenschy, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 1993. According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, only when Moses strengthened his knowledge was he able to enter the darkness where the unspoken mysteries were revealed to him: SF. GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Despre viața lui Moise sau despre desăvârșirea prin virtute*, Editura Sfântul Gheorghe Vechi, București, 1995, pp. 124-125.

<sup>23</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Ioan CHIRILĂ, “Întru lumina Ta vom vedea lumină...”, p. 220.

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many situations, he asks God to show His face (Pss. 4, 6; 80, 4.8.20) as a sign of personal presence<sup>24</sup>. The psalmist knew that when God showed His face, everything would be illuminated and would be filled with light, including the face of the one who becomes an integrated part of the epiphany<sup>25</sup>. The contemplation of God's face would mark/ imprint a heavenly light on the face of the one who reaches this state of communion. Saint Simeon the New Theologian is emphatic when saying that none of those who claim to have seen God but have not experienced His light has really seen Him. This light that springs from the Trinity shines above all and transforms the ones who look at it into light: "Those whom He found worthy of seeing Him see Him as Light; those who received Him, received Him as Light. For the light of His glory precedes His face and it is impossible for Him to reveal Himself by other means than in light. Those who have not seen this Light have not seen God, for God is Light"<sup>26</sup>.

In the psalmist's thinking, the personal presence of God (signalled here by His face) cannot be separated from light, considering that, as clearly shown in all the theophanies of the Old Testament, God's Revelations are marked by the radiance of His glory. Likewise, man's partaking in the godly light cannot be ignored. According to Saint John Chrysostom, this light is revealed to everyone, no one can miss it and anyone who recognises a face has partaken in it<sup>27</sup>. Saint Augustine confirms this vision,

<sup>24</sup> Peter CRAIGIE, "Psalms 1-50", in: *World Biblical Commentary*, vol. 19, Word, Incorporated, Dallas, 2002, p. 81. Edmond JACOB, *Théologie de l'Ancient Testament*, Delachaux & Niestlé, Paris, 1955, p. 62. Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA, "Psalm 4 – Isagoge, Exegetical and Theological Interpretation (Part II)", in: *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai – Theologia Orthodoxa*, LXI (2016) 2, pp. 5-24.

<sup>25</sup> Hans-Joachim KRAUS, *Psalms 1-150: A Commentary*, vol. 1, trans. by Hilton C. Oswald, Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1988, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> SF. SIMEON NOUL TEOLOG, *Scrieri II. Cateheze*, trad. Diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2003, p. 295.

<sup>27</sup> "Just like what is marked on the forehead is visible to everyone and cannot be hidden, it is impossible for anyone not to recognise a face full of light, that radiates... The light marked, engraved and imprinted on the face is visible to everyone..." SF. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Omiliile la Psalmi*, p. 49. The same idea is also taken on by Saint Maximus when he deciphers the mystery of the enlightenment of Moses' face: "And [Moses, emphasis added], beautifully modelling himself after Him, like a letter that keeps the imitation of the archetype, descends from the mountain, showing his neighbours the grace of the glory he partook in marked on his face, fully offering and showing himself as one who has been imprinted by the godly face." SF. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambigua*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 80, trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1993, p. 15.



comparing the imprinting of light on a man's face with that of the face of the emperor on a coin<sup>28</sup>. The episode of Moses on Mount Sinai would be considered by the exegetes who analyse the texts of the psalms that allude to and directly express the psalmist's desire to be surrounded in the light of God's face as a benchmark for understanding the mystery of being filled with godly light. For Origen, God's face is the very source of man's enlightenment, for the light that floods man's face opens his heart and mind towards understanding heavenly realities: "Moreover, it is obvious from the words of Psalm 66 that the face of God, about which it is spoken and that illumines the mind of the one who is able to receive its rays, is the reason for our understanding..."<sup>29</sup>

But seeing God's face or godly light is not possible without the work of grace. The Holy Spirit, Who is also Light, opens the eyes of man's mind in order to see the heavenly light. As such, the words of the psalmist "in your light do we see light" (Ps. 36, 9) emphasise the fact that man cannot see the light if he is not filled with the Holy Spirit. God is Light and, obviously, He is also its source. Only those God wants to partake in His light will be able to experience it. Origen believes this psalmic text must be interpreted on a Christological note:

"For what other light of God can be named, in which any one sees light, save an influence of God, by which a man, being enlightened, either thoroughly sees the truth of all things, or comes to know God Himself, who is called the truth? Such is the meaning of the expression, In Thy light we shall see light; in Thy word and wisdom, which is Thy Son, in Himself we shall see Thee the Father"<sup>30</sup>.

This interpretation is influenced by the perspective of the New Testament according to which Jesus Christ is the Light of the world (Jn 14, 8). The Father can only be reached through Him and, as such, no one can

<sup>28</sup> ST. AUGUSTIN, "Expositions on the Psalms", in: *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, trans. by Philip Schaff, Logos Research Systems, Oak Harbor, 1997, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> ORIGEN, "Selection from the Psalms, PG 12, 1165", in: Craig A. BLAISING et al., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament (Psalms 1-50)*, vol. 7, InterVarsity Press, New York, 2004, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> ORIGEN, "De Principiis", in: *The Ante Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, trans. by Philip Schaff, Logos Research Systems, Oak Harbor, 1997, p. 242.

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see the Father if the Son does not want him to. Moreover, in the view of the Fathers, the light seen by those enlightened by Christ, which is the Light of the Father, is not a material light, but a spiritual one, more precisely, the light of the Holy Spirit. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, is the one claiming that only in Christ does he “see the light of the Holy Spirit in the light of the Father”<sup>31</sup>. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus reverses things slightly and says that in the light of the Holy Spirit we see the Light, namely the Son and the Father: “In the light of the Holy Spirit we see and we announce the light that is Christ, springing from the light that is the Father”<sup>32</sup>. Both interpretations have the same result, namely that God, Who is Light, can only be discovered through His light.

Seeing this miracle is first due to God, Who is also the source of Light, but also to man or rather to an existential given. Man is light from the Light. In His act of creation, God planted His radiant image in man. As a consequence, the godly light that floods him enhances the light that already exists in him, making it shine. In this respect, Saint Callistus Cataphygiota claims that “on the one hand, God has made the insightful mind and, on the other hand, he sowed His own into all that is so that, through them, like through openings, He can show himself to the mind in a light of understanding, conquering it, enlightening it and attracting it to Him”<sup>33</sup>. In other words, man carries inside him the gift of sight, which is activated only when the grace of the Holy Spirit floods him and opens the eyes of his mind. Man starts to see the light and to perceive all that surrounds him in this light. This mysterious state of enlightenment is described by Saint Gregory Palamas as follows:

“The light is seen in light and in a similar light. And the one who sees, if he does nothing differently, being outside of all the rest, fully becomes light and similar to what he sees; or rather he also unites himself to it in an unmingled way, becoming light and seeing light through light. If he looks at himself, he sees

<sup>31</sup> JEROME, “Brief Commentary on Psalm 36, CCSL 72, 205”, in: Craig A. BLAISING et al., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament (Psalms 1-50)*, vol. 7, InterVarsity Press, New York, 2004, p. 284.

<sup>32</sup> GREGORIRE DE NAZIANZE, “Discours 27-31”, coll. *Sources Chretiennes*, vol. 250, trad. par. Paul Gallay, Ed. du Cerf, Paris, 1978, p. 278.

<sup>33</sup> CALIST CATAFYGIOTUL, “Despre viața contemplativă”, in: *Filocalia*, vol. 12, trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1979, p. 421.

light; if he looks towards what he sees, that is also light. This is unification: all these becoming one, so that the one who looks can no longer distinguish between what he is looking through and the one who is looking and knows only this: that he is a light and that he is looking at a light, which if different from that of all beings.”<sup>34</sup>

#### IV. The Lighting of the *Lamp* and of the Eyes

The experience of godly light awakes inside the being of the one who was found worthy of this sight the wish to be constantly surrounded by this light. That person wants to remain in the state of communion that offers him the possibility of direct participation in the light. The sweetness of this godly grace and the need for light can be understood better by means of the image that Saint Simeon the New Theologian creates when describing man’s endless thirst for God. Although you are in the middle of the spring, you still feel a dire sensation of thirst. These feelings can be easily found in the psalms. God is asked to ceaselessly enlighten the face and the eyes of the psalmist. In addition, the hagiographer creates a new image. God is seen as a constant source of light that keeps alive the godly light that was poured into man. God is called to light the lamp of man (Ps. 18, 28) who, by distancing himself from the source of life, plunges into darkness. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea understands the request of the psalmist as a sharp cry for salvation from the darkness that surrounds him:

“You yourself, Lord, who are the true light, having been united with the lamp coming forth from me in a certain mysterious way, are going to light that very lamp. Even the shadows with which I was once covered you will scatter entirely so that their memory does not enter my mind”<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> SF. GRIGORIE PALAMA, “Despre sfânta lumină”, in: *Filocalia*, vol. 7. trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1977, 36.

<sup>35</sup> EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, “Commentary on Psalms 18.29.30, PG 23, 178-180”, in: Craig A. BLAISING et al., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament (Psalms 1-50)*, vol. 7, InterVarsity Press, New York, 2004, p. 141. See also ST. AUGUSTIN, “Expositions on the Psalms”, p. 52.

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Besides this dimension that illustrates man's dependence on the heavenly source of his inner light, we can also notice that man himself acquires the capacity of enlightening others. Enlightened by God<sup>36</sup> through participation man himself becomes a source of light for the others. According to bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, this is facilitated by the act of embodiment through which the true Light mysteriously unites itself with human nature. In other words, our partaking of the Word that enlightens us makes us, humans, radiant like Him. However, this quality does not bestow on us the dignity of being sources of light<sup>37</sup>. Saint Cyril of Alexandria takes care not to let any of us get the impression that, if we become light, we can generate and sustain light by ourselves. Man is nothing else but a lamp:

“Therefore, we are not truly the light, but rather we partake of the Word Who enlightens us and, by nature, we are alien to the true Light, Who is the Son. [...] If, according to the psalms, the human mind was called a lamp: *For it is you who light my lamp*, how will we truly be a light? For light is added and given to the lamp. And if the darkness inside us is enlightened by the only begotten Son alone, is He not the true light and are we not darkness?”<sup>38</sup>

The psalmist is aware every time that his light comes from God. His request to partake of the light is expressed in psalm 13, where he explicitly asks that his eyes be lit up: “O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death” (v. 3). We notice here that the lack of light is associated by the hagiographer with death. In other words, light is associated with

<sup>36</sup> Hans-Joachim KRAUS, *Psalms...*, p.263.

<sup>37</sup> “Archimandrite Aimilianos states that the radiance of the saints reveals God's radiance. God's power, holiness and love are visible in the radiance of the saints. The saint is a revelation of the person of Christ. The saint is the revelation of God's radiance. The saint is the one showing and, in a way, enhancing Christ's glory. It is impossible for us to understand Christ's glory independently from the glory of the saints, for the saints and Christ are already seen as a godly-human organism, as a body.” EMILIANOS SIMONOPETRITUL, *Tâlcuiri la Psalmi*, trad. Agapie Corbu, Editura Sfântul Nectarie, Arad, 2011, p. 82.

<sup>38</sup> SF. CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 41, trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2000, p. 58.

life or, better said, with God's presence. The distancing from the source of light is similar to the distancing from light<sup>39</sup> or rather from its source, which is God. The flooding of God's light on man's face is nothing else but the source of man's life<sup>40</sup>. The Fathers of the Church provide this text with a mystical interpretation. The metaphorical meaning is completed by a mystical discourse in which the godly light is not received in a physical way. Whether they refer to the eyes of the heart<sup>41</sup>, to those of the mind<sup>42</sup> or to the spiritual ones<sup>43</sup>, the Fathers underline the fact that one's bodily eyes cannot be found worthy of such a sight, of such a deep experience in which God makes man participate in His glory. For example, Origen states that "no one is that stupid to imagine that the bodily eyes are the ones understanding the mysteries of divine law or that God's commandment enlightens the eyes from the head or (that) a sleep that brings death could take him by surprise"<sup>44</sup>.

In addition, the Fathers also insist on the effects of this (en)lightening upon man's life. Saint Cyril believes the flooding of godly light entails the enlightenment of all spiritual senses in order to be able to receive the truth revealed in its entirety<sup>45</sup>. Saint Gregory of Nyssa explains this experience of the enlightenment of the senses through Moses' experience on Sinai. Saint Basil the Great's biological brother claims that, when Moses was surrounded by light, not only were his eyes enlightened, but also his hearing. Mysteriously, Moses' hearing was filling with light as he was hearing the divine words. Thus, his whole being was revelling in light. Man entered the communion with God through a maximal revelation in both ways in which God revealed Himself to His people: by hearing and by sight:

<sup>39</sup> Hans-Joachim KRAUS, *Psalms...*, p. 215.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander, KIRKPATRICK, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 64.

<sup>41</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, "Expositions on the Psalm", p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> ORIGEN, "Commentary on the Gospel of John 13.135-37", in "The Fathers of the Church", trans. by Roland E Heine, The Catholic University Press, 1989, 89, 96 in: Craig A. BLAISING et al., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament (Psalms 1-50)*, vol. 7, InterVarsity Press, New York, 2004, p. 105.

<sup>43</sup> ORIGEN, *Împotriva lui Celsus*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 9, trad. Pr. Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1984, p. 471.

<sup>44</sup> ORIGEN, *Împotriva lui Celsus*, p. 471.

<sup>45</sup> SF. CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, "Tâlcuirea psalmilor 9-16", trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, XXXIX (1989) 5, p. 67.

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“only with the eyes the miracle of light but, what was even more wonderful, his hearing was also enlightened by the rays of this light. For the grace of light was directed towards both senses: it enlightened the sight with the radiance of its rays and the hearing with eternal teachings. However, the voice of this light stops Moses from climbing up the mountain, as he was burdened by his sandals made of dead skin. It is why, having untied his sandals, he thus steps on that ground radiant with godly light.”<sup>46</sup>

This full understanding determines the continuous partaking in the light springing from the depths of God’s Being. In the opinion of Saint Simeon the Metaphrast, the light to which the psalmist refers is a radiance of the Holy Spirit, “it is not only a sort of revelation of meanings and an enlightenment of grace, but a certain and continuous enlightenment of the hypostatic light in the souls.”<sup>47</sup>

As long as man remains in a state of communion, his spiritual sight maintains its agility. About Moses, who was found worthy of experiencing the godly light, the Scripture says that, although he was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was undimmed and his vigour unabated (Deut. 34, 7). The first detail draws our attention, for it reveals his spiritual purity in relation to God. If we correlate this reality with the statement of Saint Cyril of Alexandria, according to whom Adam “before disregarding God’s commandment, had a pure eye, full of God’s sight and of good thoughts; and he was unmarred, for he was enlightened by godly light”<sup>48</sup>, we will notice that seeing God “face to face” was the source of one’s dwelling in light. Origen nuances this perspective and says that, through this light dwelling in our soul, we acquire a very special agility: “This not in the sense that, by observing God’s commandments, we have naturally acquired a more insightful sight, but that, by doing so, we acquire a more agile eye in terms of thinking. The eyes of the inner man see more than we see with the eyes in our head”<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> SF. GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Despre viața lui Moise*, p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> SF. SIMEON METAFRASTUL, “Parafrază la Sfântul Macarie Egipteanul”, in: *Filocalia*, vol. 5 trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1976, p. 380.

<sup>48</sup> SF. CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, “Tâlcuirea psalmilor 1-8”, trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, XXXIX (1989) 4, p. 54.

<sup>49</sup> ORIGEN, *Convorbiri cu Heraclide*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 8, trad. Pr.

After the fall, the possibility of seeing God was restricted. For this reason, the placing of the cherubim at the entrance to the Garden of Eden was not by chance. Their purpose was not that of protecting Heaven from a possible abusive return of the forefathers into the holy space of communion, but that of continuously showing them how they should be in order to get close to God once again. They had to be spiritualised like the cherubim, to be made of fire, to have the capacity of receiving light and of spreading it in the darkness in which they plunged<sup>50</sup>. As such, in order to enter communion with God, Adam and Eve had to abide by the godly commandments. By obedience and by assuming the consequences of their sin, they had the possibility of meeting the One Who commands again. This is why the psalmist mentions the way in which man can recover the godly light: by fulfilling the commandments. In psalm 19, he signals the fact that the commandment of the Lord is pure and, therefore, it enlightens the eyes (v. 8).

Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra puts forward a nuanced translation of this text, based on the Greek original: “the commandment of the Lord is radiant, enlightening the eyes”. Thus, besides radiance, the Greek exegete gives the godly commandment the capacity of enlightening as well. So radiant is the commandment of the Lord that it radiates and reveals the One Who is Light as soon as man fulfils His will and thus enters into direct connection with Him:

“The commandment of the Lord is radiant because it is God’s work (energy). Since God is radiant, it is logical that the commandment is not an order, but a coming out and a sending out of God’s uncreated energy from His very existence. When speaking about *God’s radiant commandment*, he does not refer to commandments, laws, ordinances, but to God Who, while

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Teodor Bodogae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1982, p. 337.

<sup>50</sup> PHILO, *On the cherubim (De Cherubim)*, trans. by F. Colson și G. Whitaker, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2014, pp. 14-27. “The cherub is a revelation, a messenger of the One who is uncontainable, he is not a hindrance, but a discovery, a call. They are the image of ceaseless ministry towards which man has to strive and aspire.” Prof. Conf Dr. Ioan CHIRILĂ, *Fragmentarium exegetic filonian*, Editura Limes, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 106. See details in Stelian PAȘA-TUȘA, “Implicațiile teologice ale reprezentărilor heruvimilor în sanctuarul biblic”, in: *Icoană. Mărturie creștină. Totalitarism*, eds. Vasile STANCIU și Cristian SONEA, Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2017, pp. 57-72.

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speaking, commands and, as He is light, He sends out light. The commandment coming out of His mouth is *Light from Light*. From His mouth, both gladdening light and fire come out.”<sup>51</sup>

This also denotes the fact that between God and His commandments there is a very special connection. The commandments are no longer perceived as a fact outside God. These are *uncreated energies* that spring from His Being. In light of this, we can better understand the statement in the Philokalia according to which, if we want to meet the One Who commands, we first have to fulfil His commandments.

In the interpretation of the same theologian, the eyes that the light springing from the commandments fills with godly radiance are the spiritual eyes. Just like the material sun lights up the eyes of the body with its rays, God, through His arrangements, enlightens man’s immaterial eyes, through which he can participate in heavenly realities. Although every man is endowed with the possibility of spiritual sight, spiritual realities are not obligatory. God offers man the liberty of opening his eyes and seeing or of closing them. Free will is the one determining the sight of godly light, which purifies the one who receives it inside him. God’s commandment penetrates the soul, enlightens it and heals it from sin by restoring its communion with God<sup>52</sup>.

The complementarity of the psalmic texts with respect to the way in which the light flows out is obvious. If in psalm 13 the hagiographer asks the Lord to light up his eyes (v. 3), in psalm 19 we notice how this enlightenment is achieved (v. 8). The wilful fulfilment and acceptance of the commandments determines inner enlightenment and the entrance into a state of communion. The path revealed to man by the commandments leads towards light for divine arrangements or laws, being radiant, light

<sup>51</sup> EMILIANOS SIMONOPETRITUL, *Tâlcuiri la psalmi*, p. 235.

<sup>52</sup> The commandment – claims Archimandrite Aimilianos – “enlightens your eyes when casting its light. If you want to, you can close your eyes and live in the dark. The expression *enlightening the eyes* shows that the act of receiving and putting what you receive to work is characterised by free will. If you want to, God enters and never forces you. God’s commandment, through its radiance, through its glow, prepares the ground of your soul, enlightens its deepest parts and can reveal and cleanse passions. Precisely for that reason, by understanding God’s directions, we enter the area of joy, thus acquiring it. An atmosphere in which we can move forward is born. By receiving God’s commandment now, we cleanse our heart so that God Who reveals Himself becomes the One Who is in our heart.” EMILIANOS SIMONOPETRITUL, *Tâlcuiri la psalmi*, p. 235.



up just like a lamp in the dark. In order to complete the psalmic discourse on light and on its connection with the commandments, it is necessary to mention a few details from psalm 119.

The Law of the Lord, as a sum of the commandments ordained by the Lord, is considered a lamp for the feet and a light on the path of the virtuous one. We notice that the image of the lamp is repeated in this psalm to clearly highlight the manner in which the commandments of the Lord guide man's steps through the dark. The synonymic parallelism used by the hagiographer completes the content of the first image, enhancing the impact of the divine laws that light up the entire path, not only the place where the one striving for communion with God steps. Saint Maximus the Confessor motivates the psalmist's choice of calling the written law a lamp as follows: "Through the skilful combinations of various symbols, riddles and types of materials, it [the written law, emphasis added] spreads the light that burns the evil of passions before those who, through deeds, enlarge the steps of their heart against enemy powers"<sup>53</sup>. We note that Saint Maximus gives the light springing from the commandments the capacity of destroying passions. At the same time the light is received, all evil is chased away from the soul and the dark roots of sin are eliminated. The same Maximus means to emphasise that, in this verse, the psalmist leaves room for a spiritual interpretation, a Christological one. The former creates an opening in the mystical understanding, by stating that the light of the law of grace is duskless, eternifying and, at the same time, eternal:

"The spiritual law of grace was called light as it shows in a simple way, without any sensitive symbols, the eternal path on which the contemplative mind, following its course, is taken towards the highest of all goods, towards God, not allowing the determination or limitation of the movement of thought by any of the created things. For the light of the law of grace is duskless, no knowledge being able to define its all-shining rays."<sup>54</sup>

The Christological interpretation of this text is almost unanimously accepted by the Fathers. Jesus Christ is the Word of the Lord par excellence

<sup>53</sup> Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, "Răspunsuri către Talasie", in: *Filocalia*, vol. 3 trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Tipografia Arhidiecezană, Sibiu, 1947, p. 39.

<sup>54</sup> Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, "Răspunsuri către Talasie", p. 39.

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and, as such, no one can doubt His capacity of enlightening the entire world, as He considers Himself the Light of the world (Jn 14, 8).

“My Saviour and my Lord, deliver me from the darkness of lack of knowledge and of evil. This is why the Scripture called Him a lamp. For, by dissipating just like a lamp the darkness of lack of knowledge and of evil, He has made Himself a path to salvation, guiding towards the Father, through virtue and knowledge, everyone who wants to follow His steps, on a path of justice, by fulfilling the divine commandments”<sup>55</sup>.

**V. Light – the Living Environment of the Virtuous**

The acceptance of the commandments places the virtuous man into light, which becomes for him a living environment. Closeness to God coincides with man’s distancing from the dark and with his entrance into the light. The most representative image for this reality can be found in psalm 49, where the hagiographer shows that those who put their hope in material welfare are stepping away from the light and into eternal darkness, in which they are devoid of the light of God’s face (v. 19)<sup>56</sup>. The darkness the psalmist makes reference to, which will engulf all those who will never see the light, can be associated with the one described by the Saviour, namely: “the outer darkness” (Mat. 25, 30). Saint Basil the Great interprets this psalmic text in direct reference to those who rejected Christ’s light. Walking on the dark path down which their fathers had slipped, they denied themselves the delectation offered by the light:

“I believe the psalmist speaks here about the sinner; for the sinner knows God in so far as the habits of his fathers have allowed him to; by his own power of thought, the sinner does not acquire anything, nor does he add anything to the knowledge of truth [...] Those who have allowed themselves to be led by blind teachers have denied themselves the delectation of the light. [...]

<sup>55</sup> SF. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, “Răspunsuri către Talasie”, p. 63.

<sup>56</sup> Mitchell DAHOOD, “Psalms”, in: *Anchor Bible*, vol. 19A-C, Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York, 1966, p. 302.

And they thus suffer, according to God's rightful judgement, for, by wrongdoing in this life, they have hated the light."<sup>57</sup>

Let us return to the texts of the psalms, but not before emphasising another phrase of the New Testament which completes and validates the psalmic discourse on light. Those who follow Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, will not walk in darkness, but will have the "light of life" (Jn. 8, 12). The psalmist proposes a similar statement in psalm 56, where the man delivered by God lives in the *light of life*: "For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life" (Ps. 56, 13). In clear contrast with those who will never see the light, the virtuous man is already experiencing the godly light that leads towards eternal life. Any danger is overcome by the one who has chosen the path of light. Nothing can stop him from advancing towards the light until he enters the sphere of direct communion with the Life-Giver, Who is also the Father of light.

Therefore, a virtuous life is a continuous walk through light towards the Light. As he draws nearer God, the righteous man experiences the heavenly light that is sown for him (Ps. 97, 11). The Fathers underline that this light to which the psalmist refers is not material, but divine<sup>58</sup>. "If to him who hath and lacketh not, it (light) is superfluous (to be sown) – warns Saint Cyril of Alexandria. But if the Light springeth up as to one who hath it not, the Only-Begotten Alone is Light, the creature participate of Light and therefore alien-in-nature"<sup>59</sup>. Before emphasising the Christological dimension of these texts, we would like to mention that Saint Cyril, like

<sup>57</sup> SF. VASILE CEL MARE, *Omiliile la Psalmi*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 17, trad. Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1986, p. 459.

<sup>58</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, "Expositions on the Psalms", p. 497.

<sup>59</sup> P. E. PUSEY, "Commentary on The Gospel according to S. John by S. Cyril Archbishop of Alexandria", in: *A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church*, vol. 43, James Parker & Co., Oxford, 1874, p. 81. Psalm 112 clearly expresses the transcendental realities that these inspired texts mysteriously hold within their deep meanings. The light that is sown for the righteous and that scatters the darkness is nothing else but God's kind and merciful revelation (v. 4). These words point towards the necessity of God's continuous presence amongst His chosen ones who, irrespective of how righteous they are, still need the light from the Source of light. "If to him who hath and lacketh not, it is superfluous. But if the Light springeth up as to one who hath it not, the Only-Begotten Alone is Light, the creature participate of Light and therefore alien-in-nature."

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other Fathers, endows certain psalmic passages with a spiritual dimension as well, in order to determine the contemporary reader to easily find himself in the spiritual universe of the psalms. Nonetheless, this kind of understanding also attains its completion in Christ:

“[In the Romanian version of the Bible, the psalmist, emphasis added] says *was sown* instead of *is sown*. As the spiritual and godly light is sown into the mind and heart of anyone who is good and righteous. For those who strive towards good will not be kept away from the holy gifts. Thus, for the one who has acquired the acting virtue called justice, the light of knowledge was sown, which is nothing else but the light of truth, about which the Father said: *But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise*”<sup>60</sup>.

**VI. Conclusions**

The psalms develop a theological discourse in which God is considered Light. In fact, no other element would be appropriate to describe His Godhead. He is the Father of primordial, uncreated light and the Creator of the luminaries on the sky. God is the source of light and those who approach Him are filled with heavenly light to such an extent that their face radiates that light. The righteous become sources of light themselves, yet not by their nature but by participation. In the psalms, a distinction is made between the two types of light: the astral and the divine one. The most frequent references are to the latter, which gives psalmic theology a mystical character. The Fathers of the Church develop this perspective starting from the spiritual meaning of the texts, in order to introduce the faithful into the frameworks of direct communion, within light. The one who does not see this light cannot claim to have seen God. The anagogic meaning of these texts is doubled by a Christological one. Almost any text that refers to light or to the act of enlightenment is put in connection with God and, more precisely, with Jesus Christ, Who is the Light of the world.

<sup>60</sup> SF. CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, “Tâlcuirea psalmilor 91-96”, trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, XLII (1992) 1-6, pp. 132-133.

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Throughout the study, we have emphasised this dimension, but I believe a separate research project developing the relation between the psalmic light and the light of Jesus Christ is necessary.

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