

Breaking Boundaries: The Cosmic Dimension of Worship

Graham FIELD, Exeter, UK

ABSTRACT

Basil of Caesarea's *Letter 207*, to the clergy of Neocaesarea, tackles a quarrel between the parties. Although the underlying differences are doctrinal, the immediate points of contention are the singing of *Psalms* and Cappadocian monasticism. A strong theme of heavenly citizenship runs through the *Letter* and is traced from Basil's first mention of the monastics to the quotation from the hymn of *Isaiah 26* with which he opens the description of a service at which *Psalms* are sung. Though undoubtedly functioning here as a rhetorical device contrasting orderly monastic life with the disorganised attacks of his opponents, this concept lies at the heart of Basil's view of monasticism. He sees his monastics as citizens of heaven in the sense of living the ideal Christian life in which worship is central. Thus the theme of heavenly citizenship fits with ideas that associate human worship with that of angels. This association draws on a well-established Christian idea which may well have had Jewish origins, and which begins with the author of *Hebrews* being adopted and developed by later writers. The concept has its full development in the hymn of Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1786, Gregory of Nyssa's exposition of *Psalm 150* as the eschatological union of human and angelic worship, and the poetry of Gregory Nazianzen in which that eschatological future is seen as breaking through into the present.

In a letter dated to the later summer of 375 CE, Basil the Great of Cappadocia undertakes a defence to charges levelled against him by some among the clergy of Neo-Caesarea.¹ One of the points of criticism relates to the monastics, both men and women, whom Basil has established in Cappadocia. Rather than an attempt to continue a debate with its nominal recipients, a debate which has hitherto proved fruitless, the letter is, I suggest, intended as what Philip Esler terms an act of *legitimation*.² This term refers to an explanation and justification of a social institution, after its establishment, aimed at its rank-and-file membership, in this case, Basil's monastic followers, the main purpose of such an act being, as Esler explains, integration: 'Each individual in the institutional

¹ Dating by Roy J. Deferrari (ed. and trans.), *Saint Basil, Letters III*, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1926), 180-93, although Anna Silvas suggests that it was written the following year, Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* (Turnhout, 2008), 73-4.

² Philip F. Esler, 'The Socio-Redaction Criticism of Luke-Acts', in David G. Horrell (ed.), *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (Edinburgh, 1999), 123-50, 142-3.

order must feel that his life, in its various stages, is meaningful, that his biography makes sense in this institution.’

In replying to this particular criticism Basil introduces a theme of heavenly citizenship which runs through the whole of the letter. ‘I want you to know,’ he says, that I pray to have corps of both men and women, whose citizenship is in heaven’ (Γινώσκειν δὲ ὑμᾶς βούλομαι ὅτι ἡμεῖς εὐχόμεθα καὶ ἀνδρῶν καὶ γυναικῶν συντάγματα ἔχειν, ὧν τὸ πολίτευμά ἐστιν ἐν οὐρανοῖς), quoting *Philippians*.³

A little later, introducing the topic of early morning psalm singing which seems to have been another point of contention, he writes, ‘among us the people rise early from the night to go to the house of prayer’ (Ἐκ νυκτὸς γὰρ ὀρθρίζει παρ’ ἡμῶν ὁ λαὸς ἐπὶ τὸν οἶκον τῆς προσευχῆς).⁴ This can be identified as a reference to *Isaiah* 26: ‘My spirit rises early from the night to you, O God, because of the light of your ordinances upon the earth’ (Ἐκ νυκτὸς ὀρθρίζει τὸ πνεῦμά μου πρὸς σὲ ὁ Θεός, διότι φῶς τὰ προστάγματα σου ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς).⁵ This chapter of *Isaiah* is a hymn which Basil would certainly have interpreted in eschatological terms. It begins: ‘Behold a strong city ... open the gates, let a people enter that preserves righteousness and truth’ (ἰδοὺ πόλις ἰσχυρά, καὶ σωτήριον θήσει τεῖχος καὶ περίτειχος. ἀνοίξατε πύλας, εἰσελθέτω λαὸς φυλάσσων δικαιοσύνην καὶ φυλάσσων ἀλήθειαν).⁶ Despite the eschatological nature of this hymn, it’s association with the previous, present-tense, claim of heavenly citizenship strongly suggests that the Cappadocian monastics are *now* the ‘people’ of the heavenly city, those who ‘preserve righteousness and truth’. And we should note that the psalm-singing in which they are engaged is liturgy, λειτουργία, the performance of public service owed by a citizenship to its city.

In making an association of heavenly citizenship with worship, Basil is drawing on an established concept for which early Christianity found endorsement in the vision of *Isaiah*: ‘Seraphs were in attendance ... and one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”’⁷ What angels do, humanity must imitate and this remains a key text for earthly worship, while forming the basis for a view that links such worship to angelic practice.

Certainly heavenly worship, the task of angels, can be seen as providing an example for earthly practice. Thus the author of the first letter of Clement, quoting *Isaiah* 6:3, seems to be exhorting his readers to imitate the worship of angels, ‘let us mark the whole host of his angels, how they stand by and

³ Basil, *Letter* 207.2.31; *Saint Basil, Letters*, 3, 184-6; my translation; and see *Phil.* 3:20.

⁴ Basil, *Letter* 207.3.4; *Saint Basil, Letters*, 3, 186; my translation.

⁵ *Is.* 26:9, LXX, my translation.

⁶ *Is.* 26:1-2, LXX, my translation.

⁷ *Is.* 6:2, 3, NRSV.

minister to his will.’⁸ Similarly, at an early stage of Christian history, Paul uses words, very possibly taken from a Christian hymn, which also quotes *Isaiah*: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear’, though Paul, or his hymnologist, directs the submission to Jesus Christ and expands on ‘every’ with the words, ‘in heaven and on earth and under the earth.’⁹ The intention of this insertion is to emphasise the universal nature of the homage using the language and concepts of the time.¹⁰ The three adjectives, ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων, though neuter, clearly designate rational beings since only such can acknowledge divine supremacy, thus ‘the writer describes angels, human beings and demons as joining together in an act of worship.’¹¹

The author of *Hebrews*, perhaps less universalist, expands the idea in other ways: ‘But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven ... and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.’¹² While this passage, like that from *Philippians*, certainly looks forward to an eschatological future, the use of the perfect tense, ‘you have approached’ (προσεληλύθατε), suggests that that future is breaking through into the present. If we accept the view that *Hebrews* was originally a sermon, then these words were presumably first delivered in the context of Christian worship, presenting this earthly act as united with the heavenly adoration of angels and saints.¹³ Once again, we encounter an exercise in legitimation, and here on a grand scale, providing considerable support, not only for the prayers but also the faith, of those attending, as Ellen Muehlberger points out:

As the author [of *Hebrews*] populated his imagined community with a heavenly city, an infinity of angels, and even God himself, he also loaded the message to those reading the text: though they might lose heart, they should be reassured by the gathered number of those whom are part of their community – on high and of high number. The assumption that there was an angelic cohort, available in heaven, allowed writers like the author of *Hebrews* to manifest a latent majority, existing invisibly behind the apparent paucity of believers.¹⁴

Origen develops the idea by uniting angelic and human prayer: ‘Not only does the High Priest [Jesus Christ] pray together with those whose prayer is genuine but so also do the angels ... and likewise the souls of the departed

⁸ 1Clem. 34:6-7.

⁹ Is. 45:23; Phil. 2:10.

¹⁰ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43, revised by Ralph P. Martin (Nashville, 2004), 127-8; Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi*, revised edition (Grand Rapids Mi, 1983), 257-65.

¹¹ G.F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (2004), 128.

¹² Heb. 12:22-3, NRSV.

¹³ For *Hebrews* as sermon see e.g. Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford, 2004), 411.

¹⁴ Ellen Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford, 2013), 181-2.

saints who have fallen asleep.’¹⁵ To this he adds the concept of an angelic sponsor: ‘Each man’s angel ... always beholding the face of the Father which is in heaven and gazing on the divinity of him who created us, prays with us.’¹⁶

Such beliefs were, however, not exclusively Christian. Thus the Qumran *Community Rule*, speaking of ‘God’s chosen ones’ (presumably the community itself) comments that God ‘has caused them to inherit the lot of the Holy Ones. He has joined their assembly to the Sons of Heaven.’¹⁷ Similarly the *Apostolic Tradition*, in some versions, suggests that in the middle of the night, ‘all the hosts of angels worship with the souls of the righteous.’¹⁸ Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips add the suggestion that, behind the expression ‘the tradition of the elders’ quoted in *Apostolic Tradition* to justify this claim, ‘lie Jewish legends about the praise of God by the angels and all the orders of creation.’¹⁹

Further evidence for the idea of the joint worship of mankind with angels as a Christian concept based on Jewish beliefs, is found in the prayers of allegedly Jewish origin found in *Apostolic Constitutions*. One of these, after describing heavens, seas, and mankind praising God, passes on to ‘the flaming army of angels’ whose various orders and songs are detailed.²⁰ The prayer continues: ‘And Israel your earthly assembly from the nations, vying night and day with the heavenly powers, sings with a full heart and willing spirit’ (Ἰσραὴλ δέ, ἡ ἐπίγειός σου Ἐκκλησία ἡ ἐξ ἔθνῶν, ταῖς κατ’ οὐρανὸν δυνάμεσιν ἀμιλλωμένη νυκτὶ καὶ ἡμέρᾳ ἐν καρδίᾳ πλήρει καὶ ψυχῇ θελοῦσῃ ψάλλει).²¹

By the fourth-century Cyril of Jerusalem encouraged the people of his flock to envision a community of angels in order to give authority to his theological positions, to inspire certain behaviours, and ‘to bring angels into their presence as they participated in rituals.’²² In particular, the central action of the Eucharist was associated with angelic worship by the use of the song of the Seraphim. ‘As Cyril explained, by repeating the words of the angels, Christians celebrating the ritual became “participants” (κοινωνοί) in the heavenly retinue.’²³ Likewise

¹⁵ Origen, *De oratione* 11.1, Eric George Jay (trans. and notes), *Origen’s Treatise on Prayer* (London, 1954), 111.

¹⁶ Origen, *De oratione*, 11.5, E.G. Jay, *Origen’s Treatise* (1954), 114.

¹⁷ 1QS.11.8, Geza Vermes (trans.), *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London, 1998), 115.

¹⁸ *Apostolic Tradition* 41.15 in Latin, Sahidic, Arabic, Ethiopic, and the *Canons of Hippolytus*, see Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell Johnson, and Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition. A Commentary* (Minneapolis, 2002), 198-201.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 212.

²⁰ *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.35.1-10; D.A. Fiensy (intro.) and D.R. Darnell (trans.), ‘Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers’, in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha 2* (London, 1985), 669-97.

²¹ *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.35.4.

²² E. Muehlberger, *Angels* (2013), 186.

²³ *Ibid.* 187; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 5.6, Auguste Piédagnel (ed.), Pierre Paris (French trans), *Catéchèses mystagogiques, Cyrille de Jérusalem, Sources Chrétiennes* 126 (Paris, 1966), 152-4.

Theodore of Mopsuestia ‘used similar imaginative techniques to make Christian rituals into multi-layered, multitemporal events’, Muehlberger, suggests, adding that Theodore ‘directed Christians to see the rituals they watched as traces of another more important reality: the ongoing heavenly service they would join at the resurrection.’²⁴ John Chrysostom, however, sees angels as attendees at the celebration of the earthly Eucharist: ‘When he [the priest] invokes the Holy Spirit and offers that awful sacrifice ... At that moment, angels attend the priest, and the whole dais and sanctuary are thronged with heavenly powers in honour of Him who lies there.’²⁵

In this tradition, Gregory of Nyssa exhorts those who are presumably baptismal candidates: ‘Proclaim with us those things which also the six-winged Seraphim sing as they hymn with the perfect Christians’ (Φθέγξαι μεθ’ ἡμῶν ἐκεῖνα, ἃ καὶ τὰ ἑξαπτέρυγα Σεραφίμ μετὰ τῶν τελείων Χριστιανῶν ὑμνοῦντα λέγει).²⁶ The meaning of τελείων here, is not completely certain. It is possible to take it as ‘complete’ or, for a human being, ‘full-grown’ and referring to established members of the congregation. Gregory, however, sees the goal (τέλος) of human existence as blessedness, as indicated by the very first word of the book of *Psalms*, ‘blessed’ (μακάριος).²⁷ Further, noting that he contrasts ‘you’ and ‘us’ with the Seraphim and the τέλειοι, it appears that, like the author of *Hebrews* and Origen, he understands departed saints (‘the spirits of the righteous made perfect’) as joining the heavenly chorus. Thus ‘perfect’ (or perhaps ‘perfected’) as a translation for τελείων is to be preferred, and Gregory here is seeing angels and saints as worshiping in parallel to mortals, rather than attending and participating in the earthly baptism.

Gregory of Nyssa also looks forward to an eschatological joining of human and angelic worship in his treatment of *Ps.* 150:5: ‘Praise him with tuneful cymbals’ (ἐν κυμβάλοις εὐήχοις). ‘I take this to mean the union of our nature with the angels ... For such a combination, I mean of the angelic with the human, when human nature is again exalted to its original condition, will produce that sweet sound of thanksgiving through their meeting with one another. And through one another and with one another they will sing a hymn of thanksgiving to God for his love of humanity which will be heard throughout the universe.’²⁸

²⁴ E. Muehlberger, *Angels* (2013), 188, 189.

²⁵ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* 6.4, in *John Chrysostom, Six books on the Priesthood*, trans. and intro. Graham Neville (Crestwood NY, 1964), 140-1.

²⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Adversus eos qui differunt baptismum oratio*, GNO X 2.362.16-7 (*Sermones* v. 2 pt. 3), my translation.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *In Inscriptiones Psalmorum* 1.1 (5), GNO V 25.11, translation from Ronald E. Heine (Introduction, Translation and Notes), *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms* (Oxford, 1995), 84.

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptiones* 1.9 (117), GNO V 66.14-23, translation from R.E. Heine, *Inscriptions* (1995), 121.

Two passages, however, provide the image of a much closer connection between earthly and heavenly worship. The first of these is found in Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1786, a fragment of a Christian hymn.²⁹ As regards the date of this, Charles Cosgrove, having surveyed the evidence, concludes, ‘considering together the evidence of handwriting (third-century and not early fourth), lapse of time before re-use of a piece of papyrus (probably before 300), and the internal evidence (more closely associated with traditions of the fourth-century than the third), we may incline to a date close to the end of the third-century.’³⁰ Although the small fragment of papyrus is incomplete, Cosgrove argues that ‘the hymn was originally probably not much longer than what we have, consisting perhaps of only the five partially intact manuscript lines that have come down to us.’³¹

The hymn, as we have it, begins with a call for cosmic stillness, a common theme for Greek (pagan) hymns, but which is also found in Jewish tradition.³² Then, accepting Cosgrove’s reconstruction of the text and translation, we have in lines 3 to 5:

... ὑμνοῦντων δ’ ἡμῶν
 [π]ατέρα χυλιὸν ἅγιον πνεῦμα πᾶσαι δυνάμεις ἐπιφωνούντων ἀμήν ἀμήν, κράτος
 αἶνος
 [ἀεὶ καὶ δόξα θεῶ] δ[ωτ]ῆ[ρι] μόνω[ι] [πάν]των ἀγαθῶν, ἀμήν ἀμήν.

... While we hymn Father and Son and Holy Spirit, let all the powers answer, ‘Amen, amen. Strength, praise [and glory forever to God], the sole giver of all good things. Amen, amen.’³³

The ‘powers’ (δυνάμεις) are clearly angels.³⁴ Indeed what follows is very similar to the angelic hymn of *Rev. 7:12*. ‘While we hymn’, again a common way of introducing Greek hymns, also makes the hymn self-referential and in a way which is deictic; that is, as Cosgrove points out, ‘referring to the here and now of the poem’s performance.’³⁵ Intriguingly this deictic self-referentiality carries the main weight of this short hymn’s substance; the praise offered to God being sung by the earthly congregation, is actually expressed as an angelic response to that same praise. The net effect is that, while this is a hymn

²⁹ P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 15 (London, 1922), 21-5; Charles H. Cosgrove, *An Ancient Christian Hymn with Musical Notation, Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1786: Text and Commentary* (Tübingen, 2011); A.W.J. Holleman, ‘The Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1786 and the Relationship between Ancient Greek and Early Christian Music’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 26 (1972), 1-17; E.J. Wellesz, ‘The Earliest Example of Christian Hymnody’, *The Classical Quarterly* 39 (1945), 34-45.

³⁰ C.H. Cosgrove, *An Ancient Christian Hymn* (2011), 130.

³¹ *Ibid.* 65.

³² *Ibid.* 39-44.

³³ Greek text and translation from C.H. Cosgrove, *An Ancient Christian Hymn* (2011), 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 49-50.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 73, deictic self-referentiality being discussed fully in the pages 73-81.

of communal praise, the community is expanded to be much greater than the local congregation or even that of the earthly church.

A later example, from Gregory Nazianzen, appears to describe a vigil at which monastic choirs of men and women sing psalms, invoking angelic response:

Τὸ δ' οὖν ἀεὶ πᾶσιν τε γνωριμώτατον,
 Ὅρᾳς ἀγρύπνους παρθένων ψαλμοδίας
 Ἄνδρῶν, γυναικῶν, φύσεως λελησμένων·
 Οἷων θ' ὅσων τε, καὶ ὅσον θεουμένων!
 Σύμφωνον, ἀντίφωνον ἀγγέλων στάσιν
 Δισσῆν, ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω τεταγμένην,
 Θείας ὑμνωδὸν ἀξίας καὶ φύσεως;³⁶

What is surely always well known to everyone:
 you see the wakeful psalmodies of virgins,
 men and women, forgetful of the general order of nature;
 what people these are, how many and how God-inspired,
 a two-fold rank of angels, harmonious and sounding in answer,
 arrayed both above and below,
 singing hymns of God's majesty and nature!³⁷

Here we see a move from earlier ideas in which earthly worship imitates or parallels that of heaven, or looks forward to an eschatological future, and which even goes beyond the concept of angels attending silently upon an earthly Eucharist. Here, as in Oxyrhynchus 1786, communal praise includes the angels as participants in human worship, and humanity as equal partners in the angelic ('harmonious and sounding in answer'). There is even a suggestion here that the earthly singers are not merely participating in heavenly worship, or sharing with the angelic community, but are somehow transformed into angels: 'a two-fold rank of angels ... arrayed both above and below.'

There is a timeless element to this, or rather, one that is beyond time. Robert Taft criticises those who regard the liturgy of the hours as "a sanctification of time" distinct from the "eschatological" Eucharist.³⁸ On the contrary, he claims, 'the Liturgy of the Hours, like all Christian liturgy, is an eschatological proclamation of the salvation received in Christ ... the Liturgy of the Hours – indeed, all liturgy – is beyond time.'³⁹

Thus heavenly worship, initially seen as worship by angels, became, from the time of Hebrews on, the worship by both angels and saints. This provides not merely a model to be imitated by earthly mortals, but a goal to be aimed

³⁶ Gregory Nazianzen, *Carmina moralia* 10 (*De virtute*), PG 37.746.11-747.3.

³⁷ My translation.

³⁸ Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West, the Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today*, 2nd Revised Edition (Collegeville, Mn, 1993), 334.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 359.

for in the eschatological future – full participation in the continuous adoration of heaven.

These last two reasons for worship additionally provide particular justification for a Daily Office of worship. Baptism and Eucharist provide a solid basis for the cult but suffer from two shortcomings. While they certainly offer some opportunity for the formative aspect of worship, that aspect is necessarily reduced by the concentration on their essential procedures. Secondly, and more importantly, they are inescapably earthbound by their nature and symbolism, the Eschaton renders them unnecessary. The Daily Office of praise, however, already mirrors the practice of angels. Gregory of Nyssa offers a psalm-based worship which grows progressively towards the future worship of heaven, while Gregory Nazianzen sees that future as somehow breaking through into the present.