

**HYMNOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY,
CASE STUDY: THE AKATHISTOS HYMN**

BY
LEENA MARI PELTOMAA

HYMNOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY, CASE STUDY: THE AKATHISTOS HYMN¹

BY
LEENA MARI PELTOMAA, Ph. D.

The question of hymnography as theology is a complicated matter which has hardly been discussed profoundly within Byzantine studies so far. Since hymnography belongs to the genre of poetry, it is regarded as something other than theology in the proper sense. It is clear that a hymn has to meet the artistic expectations of its audience, but why should we think that this is achieved at the expense of its theology? Obviously the dilemma arises from the poetic language, which often is metaphorical throughout. The following reflection attempts to explore the theological validity behind poetical expressions.

Recently Johannes Koder has inquired into the hymnography-theology relationship within the field of Romanos research. His study, «A Hymnographer as Theologian», will be presented in the forthcoming volume of *La Théologie Byzantine*. Koder who combed the corpus of Romanos was no theologian but a poet, composer and recitative Preacher. «Therefore his works are not to be seen as independent theological assertions but (among other things) primarily as the means by which the accepted or even debated outcomes of the theological discussion of his time are disseminated».² With one exception the hymnography of Romanos was not kept up in Orthodox liturgy: the kontakion composed on the Nativity of Christ, ἡ παρθένος σήμερον.³ Theologically its tone does not

1. This paper was discussed in the XX International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Paris 2001, at the Round Table on «Byzantine Theology: Methods and Literary Genres».

2. *La Théologie Byzantine I*, eds. G. Conticello and V. Conticello, Paris.

3. No 1, On the Nativity I (Mary and the Magi), in: P. Maas & C. A. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica*. Cantica, Oxford 1963.

differ from the other works by him. I think that it is first of all the poetical beauty of the hymn which secured its permanent place in the feast of Nativity, for it puts into words the experience of Mary and the Magi before the mystery with an unparalleled freshness. Be that as it may ἡ παρθένος σήμερον is an example which leads me to consider the grounds on which Byzantine hymnography as poetry can be considered as theology.

I made reference to Romanos in order to give perspective to an instance in which, unarguably, great poetry is theology and theology is great poetry. My case study is the Akathistos,⁴ the most famous Byzantine hymn, which needs no introduction for Greek theologians or Byzantine scholars. The hymn has behind it a long research history, the most intensive phase of which was nearly a hundred years ago. I have been working on the Akathistos for more than ten years.⁵ On the basis of my research I have been forced to conclude that its theology is usually conceived too narrowly, for the examination of its theological contents has been reduced to a few dogmatical lines. Thereby the way in which its theological frameworks and dogmatical premises form a whole is disregarded: the theory of recapitulation, Alexandrian soteriology and Alexandrian Christology, typological method of interpretation, mystical theology and ascetical ideology. It is this complex from which the author of the Akathistos proceeds according to a clear schema, presenting the subject of the Theotokos in relation to the doctrine of the incarnation of God the Logos.⁶

The main concern at the beginning of the conciliar epoch of patristic Christology, in Ephesus (431), was the doctrine of the incarnation of God the Logos. The Christological emphasis of the controversy over the Theotokos was on how the incarnation physically took place, and therefore the attention of the texts of the Ephesian period is focused on what happened in Mary's womb. Such is the focus of the Akathistos, too.⁷ The repetition in detail of the Christological teaching of Cyril of Alexandria and the Mariological teaching of Proclus of Constantinople proves that we are dealing with a consciously drawn-up depiction of the object of doctrinal dispute. The series of salutations addressed to Mary

4. C. A. Trypanis, «The Akathistos Hymn», *Fourteen Early Byzantine Cantata (Wiener Byzantinische Studien 5)*, Wien 1968, 17-39.

5. The result of my research is published by Brill Academic Publishers: *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn (The Medieval Mediterranean 35)*, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2001. The argumentation in this article is based on it.

6. Cf. *Ibid.* 35-36.

7. *Ibid.* 61.

as the Theotokos justify the assumption that they are an indication of the triumphant post-Ephesian atmosphere due to the victory over the heresy.⁸ To the early Byzantine people, who heard such salutations, it was at once clear the hymn is about a victory, for, in Roman society, acclamations had for centuries been an important means of proclaiming political power.

The methods the Byzantine theologians used when working on writings which convey divine teaching varied. In the Akathistos there are no direct quotations from holy scriptures, from either the Old or New Testament. However, the hymnographer's patristic vantage points is easy to reconstruct. It is the theory of recapitulation that we know from Irenaeus' work *Adversus haereses* which forms the framework of his depiction of the incarnation.⁹ According to this the incarnation signifies redemption from the Fall and its consequent effects, and is a sign of Christ's second coming at the end of time. In this explanation Mary is conceived as the second Eve, by whose obedience the «correction process» of the Fall is put into effect. The first four strophes of the Akathistos justify Mary's position as the second Eve in the divine plan of salvation, suggested by the very first salutations: «Hail, through whom joy shall shine forth» / Hail, through whom the curse shall cease; / Hail, recalling of fallen Adam; / Hail, deliverance of the tears of Eve». Χαῖρε, δι' ἧς ἡ χαρὰ ἐκλάμψει· / χαῖρε, δι' ἧς ἄρα ἐκλείπει· / χαῖρε, τοῦ πεσόντος Ἀδάμ ἢ ἀνάκλησις· / χαῖρε, τῶν δακρυῶν τῆς Εὕας ἢ λύτρωσις· 1.6-9).

With respect to the salvation of humankind the meaning of the restoration as a new creation is to be understood as meaning that humanity is given the opportunity of making a new start in Christ. And that is exactly the point of the Akathistos. The «image and likeness of God», in which Adam was created, but which was lost in the fall, was restored in Christ, the second Adam. The culmination of the hymn, strophe 13, presents this «new creation»: «A new creation has the Creator revealed, / manifesting himself to us, his creatures». (νέαν ἔδειξε κτίσις ἐμφανίσας ὁ κτίστης / ἡμῖν τοῖς ὑπ' αὐτοῦ γενομένοις, 13.1-2). Strophe 14 shows that the salvation of human beings is inseparably connected with the «new creation»: «Seeing this strange birth, let us become strangers to the world, / turning our minds to heaven. / To this end the High One / appeared on earth as a humble man, / wishing to draw to the heights those who cry to him: «Alleluia». (Ξένον τόκον ἰδόντες ξενωθῶμεν τοῦ κόσμου, / τὸν νοῦν εἰς οὐρανοὺς μεταθέντες· / διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ ὑψηλὸς / ἐπὶ γῆς ἐφάνη ταπεινὸς ἀνθρῶ-

8. Ibid. 54-114.

9. Ibid. 130 n. 43.

πος, / βουλόμενος ἐλκύσαι πρὸς τὸ ὕψος τοὺς αὐτῶ βοῶντος· / Ἀλληλού-
ϊα.)

Strophe 18 completes the idea of salvation by saying: «Wishing to save the world, the Maker of all things came to it of his own free choice. / And because as God he is our shepherd, / he appeared for us, among us, like us; / and calling like by means of like, as God he hears: «Alleluia». (Σῶσαι θέλων τὸν κόσμον ὁ τῶν ὄλων κοσμήτωρ / πρὸς τοῦτον αὐταπάγγελτος ἦλθε· / καὶ ποιμὴν ὑπάρχων ὡς Θεός· δι' ἡμᾶς ἐφάνη καθ' ἡμᾶς ὁμοίος· / ὁμοίῳ γὰρ τὸ ὁμοίον καλέσας ὡς Θεὸς ἀκούει· / Ἀλληλούϊα.) The emphasis is laid on the explication: God calls human beings through the likeness – ὁμοίῳ τὸ ὁμοίον καλέσας. This passage discloses the intertwining ideas of deification and imitation. Deification means essentially that «God made himself human, that we might be made divine», as Athanasios of Alexandria's famous formulation reads.¹⁰ It is plain that in the Akathistos the ideas of recapitulation, deification and imitation are intertwined.¹¹ They form a natural and coherent view or a theological synthesis, which provides a solid basis for the explications of Christological and Mariological teaching.

Nevertheless, the author of the Akathistos considers knowledge which comes through illumination, as real theology: «We see the holy Virgin as a torch full of light, / shining upon those in darkness. / For by kindling the immaterial light // she guides all to divine knowledge / illuminating the mind with brilliance...» (Φωτοδόχον λαμπάδα τοῖς ἐν σκότει φανεῖσαν / ὀρῶμεν τὴν ἁγίαν περθένον· / τὸ γὰρ αἴυλον ἄπτουσα φῶς / ὀδηγεῖ πρὸς γνῶσιν θεϊκὴν ἅπαντας / αὐγῇ τὸν νοῦ φωτίζουσα..., 21.1-5): «The Virgin, yearning to grasp a knowledge unknowable...» Γνῶσιν ἄγνωστον γνῶναι ἢ παρθένος ζητοῦσα..., 3.1); «Hail, initiate of sacred counsel». (χαῖρε, βουλῆς ἀπορρήτου μύστις, 3.6) «Hail, you who reveal lovers of wisdom as unwise». (χαῖρε, φιλοσόφους ἀσόφους δεικνύουσα, 17.8). If these thoughts were not expressed in connection with the Virgin, it might be impossible to work out who among the early representatives of mystical theology influenced the hymnographer. The Marian context, however, makes it easier to find the source. It is evident that the author of the Akathistos follows Gregory of Nyssa and his treatise «On Virginity».¹² It is from there that the essential aspects of the Virgin of the Akathistos is derived. In terms of relation between these two works, it can be asserted that ascetical teaching of the

10. *De Incarnatio Verbi* 54.3, ed. Ch. Kannengiesser, SC 199, Paris 1973: Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηνθρῶ-
πησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν.

11. Cf. *The Image*, 189.

12. *De Virginitate*, ed. M. Aubineau, SC 119, Paris 1966.

Akathistos reads as follows: the goal of someone living in virginity is to become «a new creation», to become like Christ, transformed by the renewal of the mind, by obeying the heavenly calling and following Christ according to the model of the virginity of Mary. Although it is clear that the Akathistos is in tune with Gregory's idealism, it is a matter for a further investigation, to what extent it in fact reflects Gregory's teaching.¹³

The first twelve strophes of the Akathistos depict the events connected with the birth of Christ mainly on the basis of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. In referring to the content of the hymn the opening part is often described as «historical». The concluding part again is described as «theological», because it concentrates on the significance of the incarnation.¹⁴ Such a division does justice neither to the early Christian way of thinking nor to the author's command of theological matters. Indeed, it is in the opening portion that the theological testimonies are presented which show that the subject of discussion is God's appearance on earth. There was no need for the hymnographer to repeat the prophecies associated with the birth of the Messiah in the New Testament, because it is self-evident that the Christian audience knew them from patristic tradition. Accordingly the Old Testament prophecies, too, are inherently present in the Akathistos' depiction of the incarnation, although they are not explicitly referred to. The practice of presenting testimonies originates in the tradition of typological interpretation and is an indication of the author's theological grasp of the matter. The fact that the Gospel stories are handled poetically and with emphases differing from the original texts by no means lessens the theological value of the first twelve strophes.

The author uses conventional rhetorical practice in placing the most important issues at the beginning, middle and end of the composition. In the middle, in strophe 15, we find the Christological focus of the Akathistos:¹⁵ «The uncircumscribed Word was present wholly among those below, / yet in no way absent from those above. / For a divine condescension occurred / –not a descent accordng to place– / and a birth from the Virgin, seized by God...» (Ἦλος ἦν ἐν τοῖς κάτω καὶ τῶν ἄνω οὐδ' ὄλωσ / ἅπῃν ὁ ἀπερίγραπτος Λόγος / σύγκατάβασις γὰρ θεϊκῆ, / οὐ μετάβασις δὲ τοπικῆ γέγονε / καὶ τόκος ἐκ παρθένου θεολήπτου..., 15.1-5). The subject of the incarnation is the Logos. It is an approach which conforms to the Alexandrian tradition, in which the *locus*

13. Cf. *The Image*, 213-14.

14. *Ibid.* 33.

15. *Ibid.* Chapter «Christology».

classicus was John 1.14: «The Word became flesh».¹⁶ According to the Akathistos the uncircumscribed Logos was whole, and at the same time, above and below. The word «whole» connotes both God and human being. The juxtaposition «above» and «below» reflects indivisibility and consubstantiality. This kind of expression is associated with the discourses around the Council of Nicea (325) and the first Council of Constantinople (381). The condescension of the Logos is described by the word *συγκατάβασις*, which Alexandrian theologians preferred. Moreover, it is affirmed that the condescension is by no means a movement from one place to another (οὐ μετάβασις δὲ τοπικὴ γέγονε, 15.4).

This negative affirmation is one of the most important arguments for dating the hymn. Until now a number of researchers have assumed that it is directed against Apollinarianism, since P.F. Krypiakiewicz had already shown this almost a century ago. As to line 15.4, he was right. It is clear, however, that the hymn as a whole is not directed against Apollinarianism as Krypiakiewicz assumed, but against Nestorian heresy.¹⁷ As a matter of fact, the negative affirmation οὐ μετάβασις δὲ τοπικὴ γέγονε is a proof of the Theotokos controversy. From its beginning up to its end Cyril had to refute the accusation of his Antiochian opponents that he taught like Apollinarios. Cyril's letter to John of Antioch, which is known as the «agreement of peace», reveals the point of the issue: «So when we say that Our Lord Jesus Christ is from heaven and above, we do not mean that his holy flesh was brought down from above and from heaven».¹⁸ It is precisely for this historical reason that the author of the Akathistos sees it as necessary to emphasize that the descent of the Logos did not occur from one place to another. Otherwise it would be a pointless comment in the context of Alexandrian-Cyrrillian Christology.

Although the controversy over the Theotokos led to the council held in Ephesus, the term was not defined there –actually no council has ever defined it explicitly– and that is why its meaning in the Ephesian context has to be postulated from the conciliar documents and the Christological homilies of that period.¹⁹ The expression that characterizes the homilies of the Ephesian context

16. Καὶ ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο.

17. Ibid. 99. Cf. P. F. Krypiakiewicz, *De hymni Acahisti auctore*», BZ 18 (1909) 357-82.

18. Ep. 39, ACO I.1.4.15-20; PC 77.177D-180A: «Ὅταν δὲ λέγωμεν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἄνωθεν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, οὐχ ὡς ἄνωθεν καὶ ἐξ οὐρανοῦ κατενεχθείσης τῆς ἁγίας αὐτοῦ σαρκός τὰ τοιαῦτα φημέν.

19. Cf. L. M. Peltomaa, «The Akathistos Hymn and the Mariology of the Council of Ephesus», *Studia Patristica*, Vol. XXXV, edited by M. F. Wiles, E. J. Yarmold, Louvain 2001, 304-308.

is the word *χώρα*, the «place» or «space». It is a paraphrase of the womb of Mary which contained God who according to definition is uncircumscribed. This paradox conflicts with Antiochian logicism. Therefore, it does not appear accidentally and in two versions in the homily Cyril delivered during the Council of Ephesus, which begins with an *enkoinon* to the *Theotokos*.²⁰ In the *Akathistos*, after the passage where the manner of the incarnation and the nature of the *Logos* is described, it is told that «there was birth from the Virgin» (*τόκος ἐκ παρθένου*, 15.5). And after that is declared: «Hail, container of the uncontainable God». (*χαῖρε, θεοῦ ἀχωρήτου χώρα*, 15.6). This concept, put into the most important Christological passage, indicates its great theological significance. It would be an error to consider it «just a metaphor». The sentences: «Hail, tidings doubted by unbelievers; / Hail, undoubted boast for believers». (*χαῖρε, τῶν ἀπίστων ἀμφίβολον ἄκουσμα· / χαῖρε, τῶν πιστῶν ἀναμφίβολον καύχημα·* 15.7-8) suggest it to be a disputable issue. In this Christological context, in which the main concern is the doctrine of the incarnation, the issue can be none other than the position of Mary as the *Theotokos*. It is clear that strophe 15 exposes systematically the subject of the doctrine. As a matter of fact strophe 15 is a Christological tract despite its poetical language and rhetorical style.

I already noted that one of the theological premises of the *Akathistos* is typological method. The hymnographer has used it in order to argue for the theological position of Mary. Originally by means of typology prefigurations of types were looked for in Old Testament Scripture which were then applied to the Christ of the New Testament. In the *Akathistos*, however, typology is used to define the dogma of the *Theotokos*. Without exception the concept «*Theotokos*» refers to the womb, not to the person of Mary, e.g. «Hail, womb of the divine incarnation» (*χαῖρε, γαστήρ ἐνθέου σαρκώσεως*, 1.15). In the end of the hymn the weightiest arguments for the *Theotokos* are presented. According to strophe 23 the Lord himself taught «us all» to salute the *Theotokos* with the following epithets: «Hail tabernacle of God the Word / Hail greater than the Holy of Holies / Hail, ark gilded by the Spirit». (*χαῖρε, σκηνὴ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ Λόγου· / χαῖρε, ἅγια ἁγίων μείζων· / χαῖρε, κιβωτὴ χρυσοθεῖσα τῷ πνεύματι* 23.6-8). These Old Testament types: tabernacle, the Holy of Holies which was a part of it, and the ark where the covenant of the Lord was put, confirm the inner coherence of the Old and New Testament. The author of the *Akathistos* sees that the womb of the *Theotokos*, in which the Lord dwelled, corresponds to the

20. Hom. 4. *PG* 77.992-6; *ACO* I.1.2.102-4.

tabernacle he ordered Moses to make during the Exodus. Thus these epithets of the Theotokos, σκηνή, ἅγια ἁγίων and κιβωτός, written in typological tradition are Christological testimones. It is indisputable that they did not arise in resources provided by classical rhetoric for the enrichment of poetical language. I have observed, however, that in searching for their meaning the rhetorical classifications «habitations» or «architecture» have been used. It is difficult to see what is the use of such categories, which are conceptually outside Christian thinking. Even though the hymn's language is metaphorical, the starting-points of the interpretation should be the Bible and its interpretative traditions, the creeds and Christian rhetorical conventions. Theology as a scientific discipline emerged through them and hymnography is one its manifestations.

The Akathistos reveals a coherent theological view. Its contents form an integrated whole, carefully composed. Theologian Hermann Goltz, my colleague «en Akathistos»,²¹ agrees with me. He says: «The Akathistos is throughout a dogmatical work». Goltz characterizes it as poetical theology in order to test the appropriateness of the definition. In terms of rhetorical diction the Akathistos is a masterwork. At the same time its poetical language and metaphors have become a stumbling block for many interpretations. If the definition proposed by Goltz is going to be used, it should be made clear that «poetical theology» does not imply a theology of its own kind. Rather, the point is that poetical style, aesthetics, and metaphorical language are no obstacles to the expressions of theological meanings – on the contrary. For it is easy to assume that precisely on account of its poetical diction the Akathistos might have served as a «model» for the kontakion, namely, in spreading dogmatic or theological principles for a broader audience.

21. *Akathistos: Hymnen der Ostkirche*, Leipzig 1988.