CHAPTER 11

THE DOCTRINE OF THE THEOTOKOS IN GREGORIOS PALAMAS

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The Life of Gregorios Palamas

Fortunately, for the purposes of the present disquisition, Philotheos Kokkinos (d. 1379)—first a Hesychast monk and then Patriarch of Constantinople—penned Gregorios’ biography in great detail. Within its pages the piety of Palamas’ family comes to the fore as the foundation for Gregorios’ religious trajectory. While Byzantine hagiographers often made recourse to tropes to fill in unknown aspects of saints’ lives, Kokkinos’ biography of Gregorios represents the research of a monastic companion who accessed many contemporary and authentic materials. On this account, Gregorios’ parents served as his youthful paradigm leading him to invoke the Theotokos regularly. An outstanding example is Gregorios’ adolescent custom of making three prostrations before an icon of the Theotokos before his school lessons in order to overcome difficulties inhibiting his oral reading and exposition of his materials (Vita 10.1–10, 436). This early experience of Marian patronage readily accounts for his lifelong association of the Theotokos with philosophical and theological studies (Bianchi 2012: 174). Not only was Gregorios trained in the trivium and quadrivium, typical of the Byzantine enkyklios padeia, but he also underwent studies in the philosophical wisdom of various schools from antiquity, for example, of Stoics and Skeptics (Vita 3.1–27, 429–30). Later, he directly engrossed himself in logic and philosophy from the corpus Aristotelicum (Erismann 2015: 131–5; Lerodiakonou 2006: 225). His interest in Aristotelian science will become

1 The latter highlights Palamas’ argument against Barlaam, where Palamas considered Aristotelian logic an ‘antidote’ to heal the wounds inflicted by serpent-philosophers who bite theologians with (bad) logic. For Palamas’ peculiar theory of the eternal principles validly employed in an apodictic syllogism
surprisingly relevant to Palamas’ mature characterization of Mary as a metaphysician who abandoned ‘first philosophy’ for a superior contemplation of the divine light. At twenty years old Gregorios embraced a vocation to the Hesychastic life on Mount Athos (Meyendorff 1974: 28–32). While he is mainly known for his prolific writings in defence of monastic practices on the Holy Mountain (sc. 1335–57) against a series of Byzantine opponents over a period of more than two decades, his homiletic material presents a goldmine for his teaching on Mary. Of course, Byzantine piety necessarily included liturgical hymns, offices, and icons in honour of the Theotokos. In addition to these normal means of encountering the Theotokos, Palamas became more profoundly affective in Marian piety after an experience of a vision of the Theotokos in his first years on Athos. As Kokkinos records, Mary appeared directly to Gregorios while he was awake and in the same manner as the austere artistic depictions of her in the icons of Athos. She was described as one who took special care of Palamas’ physical and communal needs in ‘the abundance of her providence’. She led him to be protected from all bodily illness in response to his prayer to overcome the annoyances of the body in order to devote himself to spiritual things without bodily distraction (Vita, 34.26–42). Clearly, Gregorios’ spiritual formation was heavily indebted to his personal experience of the Theotokos in prayer. What is more, Gregorios’ very first work—a biography of Peter the Athonite—portends the Marian flavour of his future theological works by emphasizing the traditional account of the monastic foundation of Mt. Athos. Therein, the Theotokos personally chose and blessed the Holy Mountain, securing for it future graces (Bianchi 2012: 173). As the Theotokos was to the fore of his spirituality, Palamas presented Mary to his fellow Christians as the proto-Hesychast after whom all monastics are modelled (Bianchi 2012: 176, 181–5).

The Marian Writings of Gregorios Palamas

As with patristic writers of the first millennium who wrote in Greek, Palamas expounded his Marian reflections in sync with the Byzantine liturgical cycle. His extant Marian discourses are reducible to the following: Homily 14 (On the Annunciation), Homily 18 (On the Sunday of the Myrrhbearers), Homily 37 (On The Most Venerable Dormition), Homily 42 (On the Saving Nativity of Mary), Homily 52 (On the Entry I), Homily 53 (On the Entry II), and Homily 57 (On the Assembly of the Fathers). Scholars have taken much interest in Palamas’ aforementioned homiletic material (Jugie 1952: 225–40; Dvornik 1958: 87–112; Spiteris 1996: 553–84; Toniolo 2008: 333–96; Bianchi 2012: 171–86; in theological argumentation, see especially Fyrigos 2015: 205–13. Additionally, Palamas adjudged the form of the apodictic syllogism a valid tool for theological demonstration. Cf. Nikephoros Gregoras, Nicephorae Gregorae historiae byzantinae libri postremi, 30.15.

2 See also Gambero 2012: 302 for Palamas’ second Marian vision.
Gambero 2012: 299–318). Reviewing the literature to date, there is general agreement that quite a number of Palamas’ Marian doctrines reflect traditional Byzantine piety. In this chapter, however, I will explore reflections that appear to be peculiar to Palamas.

First, Palamas’ earliest discourse On the Entry I (scripsit c. 1341) was probably an elaboration of a shorter homily written c. 1333 (Bianchi 2012: 175). Occasioned by a controversy involving a celebrated anti-Palamite, Nikephoras Gregoras, some Byzantine humanists began denying the historicity of Mary’s entry into the Jewish temple of Jerusalem in order to serve its cultic ritual. In response, Palamas addressed challenges to the facticity of Mary’s prepubescent life according to the Protevangelium of James (Gambero 2012: 300). While this first- or second-century life of Mary had proved controversial since patristic times, it nonetheless served as the incontestable foundation for much of Byzantine hymnography for feasts of Mary. Recently, however, contemporary archaeological and Jewish studies have managed to call into question a number of unfair criticisms levelled against the Protevangelium that were typical of the twentieth century. Some scholars have begun to argue for the plausibility of a surprising number of claims within the text, effectively reopening the question of authenticity of the Jewish institutions attested in this early Marian text (Nutzman 2013: 551–78). For his part, Palamas employed his rhetorical skills to defend the hymnographic, patristic, and iconographic tradition that was firmly rooted in the basic narrative of the Protevangelium.

While scholars are generally agreed on Palamas’ enthusiastic embrace of the Virgin in her role as ‘Mediatrix’ of all graces to humanity, this has not often led to the discussion of what Kokkinos describes as Mary’s ‘providence’ (Spiteris 1996: 168–9; Likoudis 2007: 142–3). This doctrine begins with what is sometimes Scholastically proposed as ‘the absolute primacy’ of Mary in the divine mind, but is more descriptively delineated by Palamas as Mary’s predestination to the highest graces and greatest glory (Homily 52.6). In this scenario, the divine mind prioritized Mary as first creature in the actual, if only contingent, economy of creation. In this role, she serves as primary and exemplary cause (αἰτία) of human nature and as its final cause (Homily 14.15). As such, she is the woman for the sake of whom creation operates according to the plan of the divine mind. All humanity is predestined in a manner whereby it participates to a lesser degree than Mary in the divine light, mysteries, and charisms of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, all the baptized can still participate in the divinity ‘through her’, which is visibly symbolized by her exclusive mediation of human flesh to the immaterial Word so that he might partake in humanity (Homily 37.18). Still, this dignity cannot be awarded to her in isolation, but only under her designations of ‘God-mother’ and ‘Virgin-mother’, implying the inseparability of Mary’s identity from her vocation to bear Jesus according to the divine...
economy. In this vein, Palamas elaborated the burgeoning tradition of what is termed ‘absolute primacy’ or the primacy of the Incarnation in the divine plan apart from any consideration of Adam’s fall and human sin.\(^3\)

In the contingent order of creation, divine motherhood predestined Mary to be the point of moral (viz., her fiat at the Annunciation) and physical (viz., the substance of her flesh) mediation between creature and creator (Homily 52.8.13–14; Jugie 1952: 236–7). Wherefore, iconic images of Mary (e.g. the burning bush) appropriately prefigure Marian mediation of the divine light (Homily 14.14–15). Being a divinized creature, she mediates to the world the uncreated light of Tabor whose very subject dwelt in her physical womb (Homily 14.14–15). Paradoxically, in accord with a common patristic axiom, the uncontaminable God was contained in utero and clothed within Mary’s flesh (Homilies 37.17–18; 53.40). Furthermore, Palamas makes explicit the implication of this privileged role, namely, it demands that Mary always enjoyed every virtue possible to human nature so as to be worthy of such participation in divine life. This reflection even leads Palamas to suppose Mary to be someone supernaturally capable of rational acts from the time when she was conceived in Anna’s womb, saying: ‘The virgin had the most discerning judgment even before her birth’ (Homily 53.26).

In contemporary literature such speculations have led to numerous discussions of Gregorios’ doctrine of original sin in relation to Mary’s conception in the womb of Anna. On this score, we can bypass older discussions that incorrectly presumed Palamas to be ignorant of Augustine’s De trinitate. Instead, a number of studies have demonstrated that Planudes’ Greek translation of Augustine served as a principal source for Palamas, forcing Gregorios to confront Augustinian references to the physical transmission of sin via male seed in concupiscent acts of reproduction (Αὐγουστίνου Περὶ Τριάδος 1:lv; Flogaus 1996: 275–97; Demetracopoulos 1997). Augustine held that parents somehow physically passed on original sin to soul and body in coitus. In Palamas’ epoch, coeval Latins had majorly abandoned such physicalist explanations of original sin in the academic literature of the schools. What is more, Schoolmen under the influence of Ambrose of Milan and Ps.-Augustine or Fulgentius of Ruspe assumed that Augustine employed the term ‘guilt’ (culpa) to describe the status of infants in utero, whereas the highly legalistic Augustine opted to use only the Roman legal term reatus to designate someone legally (but not necessarily morally) liable for a violation of law. For his part, Palamas ignored a similar confusion of terms in Planudes’ mistranslation of an Augustinian passage wherein Adam allegedly passed on ‘guilt’ (culpa or ἐνοχή) to his progeny through physical seed.\(^4\) Instead, Palamas reformulated the Greek passage of Augustine to affirm that Adam passed on extrinsic ‘liability’ for the familial debt that he had incurred to God by his transgression of a covenant (Homily 16.16–17.34). Yet, instead of summarily rejecting Augustinian imagery of original sin as a genetic disease, Palamas

\(^3\) For the list of influential Fathers (especially Pseudo-Dionysios and Maximos Confessor), who embrace this doctrine, see Bucur 2008: 199–216.

repurposed Augustine’s biological explanation by changing it into a metaphor. In this vein, he maintained the idea that Adam is the root of some viral infection in the human race. The metaphor was employed to speak about a satanic poison (ἰός) of original sin, as something passed down through human generation, which was selectively and gradually cleansed in the genetic branch of Mary’s ancestors (Homily 52.2–3). Palamas described this kind of purification as a burgeoning sanctification of Mary’s lineage from sin. This primary or lexical notion of purification obviously signifies the cleansing of persons from some impurity. In the case of Adam’s progeny, the purification of Mary’s lineage from sin intensified as generational reproduction neared the historical conception of the Virgin in Anna’s womb. Nevertheless, this lexical sense of purification from impurity proves inapplicable to Mary. For their part, John the Baptist, Joachim, and Anna were the most purified human beings until the conception of Mary. For Mary’s case, Palamas revived a theologoumenon of Gregory Nazianzen describing the Theotokos as one who underwent an equivocal kind of cleansing that was a species of grace. Because the textus receptus of Luke’s Gospel reported that both Jesus and Mary were together ‘purified’ in the temple (Luke 2:22), Nazianzen proffered an exegesis to explain how Jesus was able somehow to be cleansed. Like Fathers before him, Nazianzen knew of a kind of metaphorical cleansing of the Spirit that indicated an intensified participation in grace along with external glory (light, miracles, etc.). He applied this second kind of purification, bereft of sinful implications, to the human nature of Mary and Jesus equally, implying that their humanity enjoyed total holiness and purity without further qualification. These diverse definitions of purification were rigorously distinguished from each other in patristic literature (Candal 1965: 241–76; Kappes 2014: 17–169). Elsewhere, in the Greek East, a subsequent development occurred by means of Pseudo-Dionysian expansion of the term to apply to immaculate angels purifying one another by the act of passing on supernatural knowledge (Pseudo-Dionysios 1991: 3.2; 13.4). Subsequent to medieval translations of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus into Latin, medieval Schoolmen took up this description of purification from the Areopagite to explain the manner by which Mary had been purified at the Annunciation. For his part, Palamas applied the Ps.-Dionysian sense of purification from divine light for the angels as key to interpreting the purifying of the apostles (on Tabor) and all just persons (by mystical participation in this experience), after which human beings become purified in their hearts. However, like Ps.-Dionysios, such purification implies an equivocal action wherever it touches upon sinful beings, namely, cleansing them of their moral defects. Conversely, Jesus’ and Mary’s privileges rest on separate foundations, where the former enjoys sinlessness due to the hypostatic union and sinlessness by nature (κατὰ φύσιν), while the latter participates in these same attributes of human

5 Gregory Nazianzen, In theophania (PG 36.325); De testamentis et adventu Christi (PG 37.462).
6 Numerous Latins of the thirteenth century may be cited, but Aquinas serves as the relevant author for our purposes (cf. Summa Theologiae, III.273). Cf., e.g., Ps.-Dionysios, De coelesti hierarchia, 8.2.
7 The origin of this purification is the overshadowing and divine light per Pseudo-Dionysios, Epistulae, 5.3. Cf. Hom., 35.10; Triads, 1.3.26–37, 39. For one example of the apostles’ purification of heart, see Triads, 1.3.43.
holiness in a relative sense according to grace (κατὰ χάριν) (Homily 44.4). These distinctions provided a solid basis upon which Jesus’ and Mary’s purifications by the divine light could be built, as if both were functioning in an angelic manner. Conversely, this very same light diversely purifies sinners unto justification. The purification of sinners begins to take place through asceticism and prayer, culminating in the liturgical rite of baptism, which is a sacrament participating the initiate in the divine light seen at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. Palamas’ theology includes Ps.-Dionysios’ doctrine of purifying rites in his De ecclesiastica hierarchia.8 Given these distinctions, Palamas was capacitated to confront the challenges of Augustinian traducianism and sinful flesh (caro peccati) that describes bodies and souls ‘infected’ by original sin, especially since this might be thought to affect Mary. Like Augustine, the Greek patristic tradition employed metaphors that implicate male seed as a carrier of sin in utero.9 Christ’s exemption therefrom was due to his seedless conception. Christ’s unique status in this regard is especially emphasized in Scripture (2 Cor. 5:21) and Byzantine hymnody, wherein Palamas would have been accustomed to hear Jesus called ‘the only sinless one’ (μόνος ἀναμάρτητος) (Homily 14.5).10

Yet, what can be said of Mary in this regard? While citing Augustine’s De trinitate, Palamas argued that Mary was devoid of ‘desire for the flesh’ when conceiving Jesus, but continued: ‘For he was the only one neither shapen in iniquity nor conceived in sin (LXX Ps. 50:5), that is to say, in the fleshly pleasure, passion and unclean thoughts that belong to our nature defiled by transgression’ (Homily 16.5). While Palamas clearly refused to associate any taint or imperfection with Mary during the whole of her existence, it is nonetheless true that he never systematically resolved the tension between inherited liability to passions and death—in some way related to natural copulation—and Mary’s privileged existence. The most obvious place to locate such a resolution would have been in On the Saving Nativity of Mary. Curiously, this festal sermon of Palamas is bereft of citations from John Damascene’s magisterial homily for the same feast. At the outset of Byzantine speculations (and perhaps liturgical celebrations) on the conception of Mary, Damascene had managed to overcome presuppositions that pleasurable coitus and conception must convey original sin by contrasting such ‘ancestral fornication’ to Joachim’s deposit of ‘all-pure sperm’ into the womb of Anna.11 For his part, despite Palamas’ theory of the gradual purification of male seed in Mary’s ancestors before her conception, his sermon lacks the relevant citation from Damascene. An initial

8 E.g., Homily 57.16. Cf. Pseudo-Dionysios, De ecclesiastica hierarchia, 2.1; 2—Theoria 1.
9 This exegesis was universally inspired by LXX Ps. 50, starting with Origen, Homily on Luke, 9:88–90. Posteriorly, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil the Great, and Cyril of Alexandria developed Origen’s exegesis in their own explanations of the passions and sin in the process of conception when interpreting LXX Ps. 50:5: ‘Behold, for I was conceived in lawlessness and my Mother conceived me in sins’. Cf. Homily 16.5.
10 Cf. the hymn of orthros: Ἀνάστασιν Χριστου, in Anthologion, 44.
11 See Damascene’s Oratio in nativitatem 8.31, for ‘προγονική πορνεία’, and ibid., 2.14 for ‘Ἰωακεὶμ . . . κατεβλήθησε πέρμα πανάμωμον’. NB: besides the theologically inspired adjective ‘all-pure’, Damascene otherwise employs a technical phrase in Byzantine medicine meaning: ‘sperm was deposited’.
analysis of the sermon suggests that Palamas composed it using oblique citations from memory (perhaps lacking access to a library). Whatever the case, Palamas’ problem was very different than that of coeval Schoolmen. Palamas directly confronted purely Augustinian traducianism and physicalism, while Schoolmen were always engaging an amalgamation of authentic and pseudepigraphous texts, mainly derived from Fulgentius of Ruspe or Ps.-Augustine. While misattributions to Fulgentius had taken place centuries prior, authentic works of Augustine were also combined with such pseudepigraphy only to be filtered through the more advanced theories of original sin in the works of Anselm of Canterbury. In the Latin West, with such complex readings, competing theories of original sin arose involving complex treatments of will, intellect, and flesh. A number of these questions fall entirely outside the scope of Palamas’ interest.

Next, I turn to what is sometimes presented as a peculiar doctrine of Palamas on Mary and the Resurrection. While modern and contemporary authors have highlighted Palamas’ doctrine of Mary as the first witness of the Resurrection, they are sometimes unaware of how often this tradition was attested in medieval patristic authors, Byzantine biographies of Mary, and liturgical texts. For example, Palamas’ doctrine parallels numerous statements and arguments from The Life of Mary attributed to Maximus the Confessor. On this score, Palamas attempted to smooth out competing traditions. At present, a definitive assessment of Palamas’ sources must be delayed until the publication of an edition of John Geometer’s (tenth-century) biography of Mary, which could prove to be another of Palamas’ sources for this theme. Still, Palamas’ sermon is unique for a number of reasons. First, his homily exegetes the Gospel read at the Divine Liturgy on the second Sunday after Easter, while older literature mentions Mary’s primary witness to the Resurrection in relation to the Triduum and Easter. Second, Palamas incorporates his celebrated penchant for angelomorphic themes into his description of Mary who saw the resurrected Christ along with divine light and an angel at the tomb. Pre-Nicene Christians interpreted Angel of the Lord appearances in the Scriptures, along with visions of cloud, light, overshadowing mountains, and other overshadowings, as encounters with the presence of the divinity, often the pre-Incarnate Jesus. Palamas chose to discuss Mary’s life, as commemorated in the liturgical calendar, linking her vision of the Resurrection to the divine light that is a typical feature of theophany. While medieval authors, such as Nikephorous Choumnos, might have mediated angelomorphic exegesis to Palamas, he could have just as easily rediscovered this exegesis during his own patristic studies undertaken to defend Athonite Hesychasm from Barlaam the Calabrian, Gregory Akindynos, and Nikephoras Gregoras (Makarov 2017: 343–60).

12 E.g., see Πεντηκοστάριον χαρμόσυνον τήν ἀπό τοῦ Πάσχα μέχρι τῆς τῶν ἁγίων πάντων Κυριακῆς ἄνηκουσαν αὐτῷ ἀκολουθίαν (Rome: s.n.: 1884), 11. The megalynarion for paschal season, taken from the eirmos of the ninth ode at orthros, speaks of Mary’s experience of the resurrected Lord in the metaphor of the sun shining on her as the prototype of Zion. This hymn is interpolated into the Eucharistic anaphora after the epiclesis during this season along with an introductory remark suggesting that Mary’s experience of light was at break of day on the morning of the Resurrection.

13 For the two leading scholarly treatments of this text relevant to my comments, see van Esbroeck 1986 and Shoemaker 2012.
Finally, in preparation for exploring Mary’s vocation as metaphysician or philosopher par excellence, Palamas appears to take his point of departure from Origen’s angelomorphic exegesis of Scripture in relation to Mary. Origen connected the Tabor experience to Mary, in that she had been the prototype for overshadowing experienced by Peter, James, and John at the Transfiguration (Mark 9:7). Ingeniously, this nebulous overshadowing (νεφέλη ἐπισκιάζουσα) of persons at the Transfiguration symbolizes for all Christians their chance to participate in Mary’s prototypical experience.14 When comparing the divine overshadowing of Mary’s womb (Luke 1:35) to the theophany on Mt. Tabor, Mary’s overshadowing and conception is interpreted to constitute the prototype for human metamorphosis, anticipating Tabor and even the Resurrection (Homily 37.5).

Palamas noted, like Origen, that the Apostles on Tabor participated in Mary’s overshadowing by the divine cloud. Mary is the prototype of all overshadowing, as well as the fulfilment of Old Testament prefigurements thereof, as with the example of two divinely overshadowing angels (i.e. the Son and Spirit) on the Ark of the Convent (Homilies 35.9–12; 53.44–5; 58.7).15 Palamas’ reference to Mary as the Ark undergoing overshadowing draws on Jewish and Christian angelomorphism which noticed that the exclusively divine activity of overshadowing was attributed to the two angels on the Ark who ‘overshadow’ the place where Yahweh becomes present. Palamas’ Marian exegesis of Hebrews simply develops the implicit liturgical emphasis on overshadowing angels upon the Ark in the lectionary’s festal epistle for The Entry (Heb. 9:1–7).

In the same vein, Patristic discussions of Moses, in line with Philo, Clement, and Origen of Alexandria, developed the notion of Moses as ‘lawgiver’ (ἐπόπτης) in the Septuagint along philological and philosophic lines, with the result that Moses constituted the most highly initiated priest (ἱεροφάντης) into the mysteries with power to see divine things (ἐποπτεία).16 Taking his cue from St Paul’s angelomorphic exegesis of Moses passing through the cloud (Exod. 19:19, 24:15–18), as a type of baptism and divine vision (1 Cor. 10:2), Palamas writes that Paul described himself to be one of the guardians (ἐπόπτης) of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1).17 Thereafter, Paul experienced a divine

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15 Cf. LXX Exod. 25:20, 40:34–9; Heb. 9:5.
16 Such references from Philo of Alexandria are ubiquitous. For the patristic adoption of this theme, see Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, 5.11.673; Le protreptique, 2.25.1; Origen, Fragmenta evangelium Ioannis (in catenis), fragment 32; Contre Celse, vol. 1, 5.25–7, 7.48. Palamas applied the office of hierophant or priest to Fathers (Gregory Nyssa, Dionysios, and Maximus) for their doctrine of the essence and energies of God as successors to Moses by seeing the light of Tabor.
17 Palamas associates ἐποπτεῖα with ‘initiation’ of baptism reflecting an exegetical tradition as old as Clement’s Le protreptique, 12.120.1, which culminates in Byzantine hymnody. Palamas’ association of Paul’s lexical term for a steward (ὑπηρέτης) of the mysteries with divine energies and ‘epoptic’ eyes can be traced to Origen, as discoverable in Turner 1923, 1–15. See Anthologia, 774, 786–88, for examples of how this tradition is ubiquitously received in Byzantine liturgy. For example, the Apostle Thomas is called guardian (ὑπηρέτης) of the mysteries of the Word, acting as guardian (ἐποπτείων) of divine mysteries in the prosomoia stichera of his festal vespers. Elsewhere, the eksapostelarion of the Apostle James describes him the ‘initiator’ (μύστης) and custodian of Christ’s mysteries just after the prosomoia of vespers commemorate James’ spiritual vision of the divine light of Sinai via grace from the Spirit. The prosomoia are a dramatic anticipation of the hymn Phôs hilaron sung as the last beams of light shine in
vision of the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2) (Homily 11.14). Accordingly, Palamas’ development of Mary within the context of angelophanies and the light of Tabor dynamically develops pre-Nicene exegesis of Scripture, where the prophets are styled practitioners of prefigurative liturgical and ascetical purification, of purifying liturgical rites, all of which result in divine vision (θεοπτία) (Homilies 13.3–4, 37.4). For Mary’s part, as one higher than Moses and the apostles, she is the locus par excellence wherefrom divine light radiates. Hence, she is the maximal source of liturgical and Hesychastic grace as one who sees divine things (ἐπόπτεια) beyond even the philosophical science of metaphysics (Homily 53.52–3).18

Accordingly, Palamas’ concerns about Hellenic learning enter here. In his early debates with his first theological opponent, Barlaam the Calabrian, the first stage of discussions touched upon Hellenic and Hellenistic notions of apodictic and dialectical syllogisms, as well as on the nature of knowledge in the true wise man (ὁ σοφός).19 On the first issue, Palamas endorsed the usefulness of syllogistic reasoning against Barlaam, whereby theological propositions of the saints serve as certain premises to arrive at infallible conclusions. This novel position among Byzantines argues that premises formed from saintly wisdom may function as certain and necessary knowledge to form syllogistic premises. On this score, in his Triads, Palamas uniquely cited the liturgical Akathist hymn in honour of the Theotokos, identifying her as the very source from which Hesychasts gain their wisdom over and above Neo-Platonic theurgy and metaphysics (Triads, 2.2.1). Palamas, obliquely referring to Mary’s womb, interprets St Paul to pit the wisdom of God in Mary against the philosophical ‘wisdom of the flesh’. Palamas cited key stanzas, which run thus: ‘Hail, vessel of wisdom. Hail, storehouse of wisdom’s provision! Hail, you who apodictically demonstrate so-called lovers of wisdom (viz., philosophers) to be unwise’20 Below, we explore Palamas’ development of this ‘Marian metaphysic’ further. There, Palamas will again cite the Akathist, expanding these same arguments in his Homily 53 (On the Entry II). For his part, Barlaam rejected Palamas’ endorsement of syllogistic theology, since he understood the syllogism in its originally Aristotelian presentation, where the apodictic nature of syllogistic reasoning depended on premises reflecting naturally known propositions by the human intellect from first principles (Fyrigos 2015: 205–13). As the subject of debate changed, Palamas and Barlaam also disputed on their theories of pagan knowledge and learning. For his part, throughout his Triads, Palamas emphasized the errors of the various philosophers, mired as they were in material and changeable beings, in contrast to the spiritual the evening, which are symbolic of the light radiating from the risen Christ (equated by Palamas to the radiating light of Christ at Tabor).

18 Epoptic vision of the divine light is the outstanding characteristic of Christ the ‘hierophant’, in whose light the sacraments initiate the neophyte into epoptic vision. Cf. Pseudo-Dionysios, De ecclesiastica hierarchia, 1.1; 3. Subsequently, the term is ubiquitously used in Byzantine liturgy, especially referring to apostles, as priests and theologians.

19 For a summary of Palamas’ early philosophical position, see Fyrigos 2015: 205–13.

20 Akathist, stasis 3, oikos 17, stanzas 1–2.
knowledge of the Fathers and Hesychasts who obtain knowledge conveyed in vision of the divine and uncreated light.\textsuperscript{21}

Towards the end of this phase of the debate, Palamas became a bishop and his pastoral work provided him with a relatively irenic context for considerations on the Hellenic and Hellenistic traditions of philosophy. To develop this more nuanced teaching, he presented youthful Mary as someone created with all the theoretical knowledge of the metaphysician and with every natural virtue of the Stoic sage. Although excelling philosophers, Mary surpassed, by her own choice, their virtues, for she was satisfied only with a theory and praxis of what is beyond even the highest science of first philosophy, ‘even though the purpose of the most excellent part of philosophy is knowledge’ (Homily 53.51). Also, while Palamas concentrated on the traditional monastic endorsement of divine vision (\textit{θεοπτική}), he explained this to convey the idea of going beyond every lower science in order to behold the distinct attributes and the light of God. Palamas, not unlike his predecessors, grafted this Christian version of Neo-Platonic contemplation onto the prophets, who had additionally seen theophanies, but had also been ‘prepurified’ by asceticism in order to see the divine light.\textsuperscript{22} The purifications of these patriarchs reach their culmination in Jesus who was purified in the Jordan and who then passed this purification on to the rest of humankind via the Holy Spirit descending onto the baptismal waters (Homily 52.7). The action of the prophets equally prefigures Mary ‘the (pre)purified’ super-visionary who is imitated by the apostles and all Christians through their baptismal ‘prepurification’ in preparation for vision at Holy Communion (Homilies 38.10; 53.44; 57.6). Consequently, Mary becomes the sacramental prototype of Hesychastic participation in the mysteries, for the patristic tradition designates her infusion of overshadowing grace, too, as purification followed by the Incarnation (Homily 18.10). In this interplay between philosophy and liturgy, we clearly detect the Proclean undercurrent of theurgy as the means for going beyond the world of sense and discursive reason and for contemplating things beyond the world of matter.

In this vein, returning to philosophy, Mary’s supernatural vision inspires Palamas to draw attention to Mary’s religious science of theoptics or divine vision in relation to metaphysics. For Palamas, Mary’s initial gifts of grace quite literally perfected all of her

\textsuperscript{21} Palamas partially coincides with Summa Theologiae I.1.2, where theological doctrine proceeds ‘from clear principles known by the light of a superior science, which is the science of God and of the blessed’. Aquinas, like all major Schoolmen of the period, elsewhere held that Paul had (and potentially others) beheld the beatific vision on earth. Similarly, throughout his works, Palamas supposes Paul’s vision (2 Cor. 12:2–4) to be beatific. Unlike Schoolmen, Palamas’ Triads and other works are convinced of unreliability of knowledge derived from material being, but similar to Aquinas, he holds that the blessed obtain the science of theology and that theology is derived from experience. Aquinas remains ultimately unreconcilable, however, by connecting the wayfarer’s theology to that of the blessed in heaven—just as a science such as music is subordinated to mathematics—Palamas develops a commonly agreed premise so that the blessed and wayfarer may equally enjoy a theology of experience, instead of a wayfarer science subordinated to that of the blessed.

\textsuperscript{22} Homily 13.4: ‘Moses having fasted on the mountain for forty days, flew up to the height of divine vision (\textit{θεοπτίας}), he too received tablets of divine service…. Elijah too was a visionary of divine light (\textit{θεόπτης}), but he was first prepurified (προκαθαρθεῖς) through fasting.’
human faculties, whereupon she investigated the nature of her virtues by means of purely human ratiocination. In this, she served as an icon of everything that pagan sages sought to become. However, unlike the Stoic wise men, whose right reason and justice turn them into inerrant kings and lawgivers among humans, Mary abandoned this purely natural and imperfectly blessed state of philosophy in order to embrace the higher science of theoptics (exemplified by the experience of the light of Tabor) (Homily 53.49). In irenic style, Palamas seems to suppose that—like Mary—the Hesychast is not someone opposed to metaphysics, but rather a ‘purified’ philosopher who knows that metaphysics or first philosophy is not the highest science of the human mind and heart. Instead, Mary leads the Hesychast towards non-discursive contemplation of the divine energies and to obtain supernatural virtues unavailable to the purely natural wise-man (Homily 53.50–2). Palamas’ point of departure for this philosophical reflection on Mary is unmistakably the Akathist hymn to the Theotokos:

Hail, o sacramental-initiator (μυστις) of the ineffable will. Hail, o faith (πιστις) of those [aforesaid sacramental] things requiring silence (σιγης)!…Hail, you who surpass the knowledge (γνωσιν) of wise men. Hail, you who shine brightly into the minds/hearts of the faithful…. Hail, you who apodictically demonstrate so-called lovers of wisdom to be unwise…23

Understanding the Neo-Platonic and Stoic implications of this liturgical masterpiece, Palamas uniquely supplemented the Hesychastic science of theoptics by recourse to the Proclean theme of ‘noetic silence’ (νοητη σιγη) when describing Mary’s Hesychastic contemplation of the energies (εποπτεια) (Homily 53.59).24 Palamas repurposed Proclus’ theurgic system, especially his so-called ‘concluding act of the principal Chaldean sacrament’ when describing Mary’s Hesychastic contemplation of the energies (εποπτεια) (Homily 53.59).24 Palamas repurposed Proclus’ theurgic system, especially his so-called ‘concluding act of the principal Chaldean sacrament’ (Proclus, Procli Diadochi in Platonis Timaeum commentaria, 3:222; Théologie platonicienne, 4:31). The well-known Chaldean Oracles supplied a point of departure for Proclus to investigate the unspeakable contemplation in the supra-celestial realm of silence. As Fyrigos has already pointed out, the principal virtue for Palamas, especially in his Triads, is faith (πιστις) for obtainment of divine vision and salvation (Fyrigos 2015: 209–10). Unsurprisingly, this exactly mirrors Proclus who requires ‘faith’ for someone to obtain the non-discursive experience of Truth and Love upon unification with the gods in surrender to the divine light.25 Like the Proclean sacramental signs and symbols that lead one to the immaterial world, Mary’s intellect moves from the sacramental economy in Christ towards a condition of noetic stasis, wherein the intellect is empty of all rational inquiry and in possession of the divine light beyond the heavens in the purely noetic realm. The metaphysicians and Stoic sages of old were unable to possess such blessedness. In the end, Mary stood out for Palamas as the Hesychast par excellence, for she was the fulfilment of prophetic asceticism and vision and the prototype for the Apostles’ experience on Tabor, while simultaneously

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23 See Akathist, stasis 1, oikos 3, stanzas 1–6; stasis 3, oikos 17, stanzas 1–2.
25 For the Proclean interplay between theurgy, noetic silence, and divine light, see Van Den Berg 2017: 223–40.
she abandoned philosophic knowledge for the sake of participation in the higher science of true blessedness and salvation.26

CONCLUSIONS

One cannot help marvelling at the ingenious recasting of Ps.-Dionysios in Palamas’ homiletic material to accommodate Mary’s operations among the various hierarchies. There is no doubt that she acts as someone who transcends the purifying functions of the angels and the sacraments. Palamas’ Mary is herself a sacred sign and symbol and thus brings about salvation by participation in her life, which is literally the God-man Jesus Christ. On one hand, Palamas showed himself unafraid to make a cautious, if positive, use of the thought of Augustine. On the other, he boldly incorporated themes from Neo-Platonism into his homiletic and Hesychastic material going beyond Dionysian limits to form a creative synthesis of theurgy with liturgy, Proclean mysticism with Hesychasm, and Proclean contemplation of the divine with Mary’s interior life of mind and heart. Certainly, the Incarnate Christ is central to understanding Palamas’ Hesychastic system, for contemplation of the light of Jesus is the end term of all beatitude. What is more, Palamas concentrates on Mary’s life and actions in a way that underlines her fiat as a more salvific and deifying action than any theoretical or practical life of Neo-Platonic metaphysics or Stoic ethics. What is more, basing himself on his experience of the Theotokos in personal prayer and liturgical prayer of the Akathist, Palamas argued for the logic of divine wisdom, first contemplated by the heart of Mary. This provides the Hesychast with a gnosis far superior to the philosophical ‘gnosis of beings’ or metaphysics. In the end, Palamas sought to commend his intercessor and intimate friend of his youth to each Hesychast and to every Christian in order for them to excel in supernatural virtue and to obtain the blessedness of the saints in their vision of the Taboric light.27

WORKS CITED

Primary Sources


26 See Triads, 2.2.1, where Palamas innovately cites the last stanza of the Akathist above in his exegesis of Paul’s diatribes (1 Cor. 1:20, 2 Cor. 1:12) against human wisdom, i.e., Hellenic philosophy.
27 All English translations are mine unless otherwise noted.


Secondary Sources


**Recommended Reading**


