

THE DIVINE LIGHT IN THE PSALMS

– FROM THE ILLUMINATION OF THE FACE TO THE SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT (Ps 1-40)

Abstract

This study explores the theme of divine light throughout Psalms 1–40, suggesting that references to light in the psalms form a unified spiritual path that guides believers from initial enlightenment to ongoing participation in God’s uncreated radiance. Emphasizing Eastern patristic exegesis and Gregory of Nyssa’s epectasy model, the research views light not just as a metaphor but as an ontological and soteriological reality: a theophanic presence, sacramental power, and transformative grace. Focusing on nine key psalms (Ps 4:6; 12:3; 17:31; 18:9; 27:1; 30:16; 35:9; 36:6; 37:20 – LXX), the study

demonstrates a progression: God’s face imprinted on humans (restoring the divine image); awakening the ‘eye of the heart’ (spiritual sight and discernment); receiving commandments as luminous forces that illuminate and direct moral understanding; and contemplative vision leading to ontological deification. Patristic writers (Origen, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory Palamas) support a Christocentric and Trinitarian interpretation in which the Father is perceived through the Son as Light, and the Spirit transmits luminous energy. The psalms thus offer both experiential theology and practical guidance: continual prayer for light, ascetic obedience, participation in liturgy and sacraments, and communal discernment. Ultimately, the paper contends that Psalms 1–40 outline an epectatic journey in which illumination serves as a gift, a duty, and a goal—shaping, testing, and transforming the believer into the likeness of the One who is Light.



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Introduction

Light holds exceptional significance for human spiritual life, as God is described as light. Every visible sign of His glory is accompanied by a brightness that captivates those who behold it. Consequently, the longing for enlightenment, for understanding divine light, and for living effectively in its radiance is a spiritual aspiration embraced by individuals dedicated to virtue and spiritual growth. The authors of the Psalms express these themes, aiming to introduce the faithful to the theology of light and the concept of epectasy—a continual striving for divine union. The Psalmic Discourse on Light, as it appears in the Psalter, shows a thematic development that begins with illumination and culminates in deeper penetration into the luminous darkness, where God is fully revealed, and humanity joins in doxological manifestations that honour the radiance of heavenly glory.

This research explores how the discourse on divine light in the Psalms evolves through different stages of spiritual growth, as outlined by St. Gregory of Nyssa in his commentary on the psalm titles. I chose this angle to demonstrate that the epectatic perspective, which St. Gregory advocates in interpreting the Psalms, can also be applied to various theological themes. Specifically, we examine how St. Gregory's spiritual approach to interpreting the Psalms relates to a key aspect of spiritual life: the illumination and transformation of man into light. Rev. Ioan Chirilă examined this subject in a study on the Old Testament's theology of light (Chirilă 1994, 50). His research explored the theme of light in the Psalms, highlighting that individuals can partake in divine, uncreated light by cultivating virtue and continually ascending toward the One who is light, soaking in His radiance as if it were a cloak. This aligns with my interests, and I aim to verify Rev. Chirilă's insights through a detailed analysis of human development, taking them into account. In international biblical literature, there are no studies that track the development of psalmic discourse on light. Additionally, biblical scholars from the critical school generally do not employ the interpretative paradigm or patristic principles characteristic of Orthodox exegesis. For the Church Fathers, references to light in the Psalms are Christological. While some interpret the psalmic light as a direct reference to divine illumination, most Western biblical scholars view it more as a symbolic concept. Nonetheless, some researchers (P. Craigie, R. Bratcher, S.E. Tesh) have engaged with Orthodox interpretative approaches. We find it useful to cite their analyses when aligned with the Church Fathers' views, thereby reinforcing the patristic perspective through contemporary exegesis^[1].

This study employs contextualization and linguistic analysis, driven by the text's inherent approach. However, the research's specificity aligns with the methods used in Eastern Orthodoxy. Based on St. Gregory's classification, this work concentrates on the analysis of the psalms in the first of the five sections^[2] identified by the bishop of Nyssa. Specifically, it examines the discourse on light within Psalms 1-40. Out of 27 psalms^[3] referencing light in the Book of Psalms, only nine are analysed: Ps 4:6; 12:3; 17:31; 18:9; 27:1; 30:16; 35:9; 36:6; and 37:20 – LXX. Before interpreting the texts from the first psalm collection, we will outline the stages of spiritual ascent from St. Gregory's perspective to facilitate understanding of how the psalmists envisioned human growth towards or within the light.

Psalmic Discourse on Light in the First Book of Psalms (1–40)

The initial step towards perfection involves renouncing evil and firmly committing to doing good. Immediately, God grants the individual a share in His blessing as a reward for pursuing good: A novice in the virtuous life, having tasted a little of goodness through the opening section of the Psalter, comes to long for greater goodness (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1998, 145). When the divine light dwells in the soul of someone committed to changing their behaviour, it lays the foundation for them to settle in the Good and take root in God—like a tree that, once rooted, cannot easily be overturned. As long as it stays connected to the water source, it remains vibrant and fruitful. Applying this analogy to the concept of light, we can say that a person who receives the light can only enlighten and bring life to others if they stay forever linked to the Source of light.

The divine light reflected on a person's face (Ps 4:6)

The Psalmic Discourse on the Divine Light starts with a plea asking the Lord to lift the light of His face above humanity (Ps 4:6)^[4]. The psalmist prays for the Lord to manifest prosperity, peace, and mercy to all, illuminated by His face. The Hebrew term פָּנָה, symbolizing God's tangible presence (Freedman et al. 1996, 744), is inseparable from light. Any theophanic event involves the sight of a luminous light or darkness in which God reveals Himself and imprints His radiance on the faces of those who are worthy of divine sight. The Greek text captures this idea with the verb σημειόω, meaning 'to signify'. Although the Septuagint translators do not explicitly highlight the notion that the Lord's face, as a source of light, guides the way to divine illumination^[5], they lay the groundwork for interpreting the luminous mark of God's presence as visible on the

faces of those who share in divine glory. In this context, St. John Chrysostom explains that, according to the Psalmist, the light of God's face was not directly seen or shined upon but signified—much like a mark on the forehead that is visible to everyone, leaving nothing hidden. Such a mark, imbued with light and radiance, is clearly recognizable by all, demonstrating that the radiant image imprinted on the face is evident to everyone (St. John Chrysostom 2011, 49). The Church Fathers highlight how God graces the face of man with His luminous image, like how a king's image is stamped on a coin (St. Augustine 1997, 10). Building on this idea, Origen connects the Psalmic text to the episode where Moses radiated light during every conversation with God. Origen argues that, as Psalm 66 indicates, the Lord's face—radiant to those able to receive its rays—serves as the source of our understanding and enlightenment (Origen, *Selection from the Psalms*, in PG 12,1165 – Blaising et al. 2004, 35). St. Cyril of Alexandria interprets the passage trinitarianly, identifying the Son as the hidden face of God and the Spirit as the light sent to us: through the Spirit we were sealed when we were made in the original image (St. Cyril of Alexandria 1989a: 49)^[6].

The divine light is seen as the clearest sign of God's presence (Craigie 2002, 81)^[7]. Within this psalm, light should be evident on the face of the person who declares that the Lord supports him (Kraus 1988, 149). St. Augustine believes that the divine light reflected on human faces encapsulates all the goodness and truth bestowed by God. This light isn't visible to the physical eyes but only through the eyes of understanding (St. Augustine 1997, 10). Origen suggests that a person who gains the ability to see the divine light can easily notice how this light appears on the faces of those who reflect God's likeness (Origen, *Selection from the Psalms*, in PG 12,1165 – Blaising et al. 2004, 35). The presence of God's face's light upon us is seen as a sign of the restoration of the divine image in humanity, a process completed through Jesus Christ's incarnation (Bede the Venerable, *Homilies on the Gospels* 1.6, in CS 110:55 – Blaising et al. 2004, 35).

The enlightenment of spiritual eyes through divine light (Ps 12:3)

In this psalm, darkness represents death, while the light in the eyes indicates God's saving action. Without this light, the darkness would deepen, leading the person to succumb to death. The psalmist's heavy eyes can only be renewed by divine light. It is solely through this light that a person can perceive the light of life (Kraus 1988, 215). The light from the Lord's face, shining through His love, is the foundation of human life (Kirkpatrick 1905, 64). Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea states that God's face,

radiant with heavenly light, can bestow this illumination on everyone, much as the sun shines on one who looks at it. When a person sins, they turn their face away from God and naturally lose that light. This shadowed state continues until the individual turns back to face God (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Psalms* 13.3-5, in PG 23,144 – Blaising et al. 2004, 105). Fellowship in this divine light awakens a longing in the human soul to dwell in it permanently. Consequently, the Lord's continuous call to light is met with a reciprocal desire from those seeking enlightenment. The benefits of this divine light motivate individuals to request the Lord's constant presence within the soul. The illumination of the eyes (Ps 12:3) aims to keep the conscience vigilant, preventing spiritual death. The Church Fathers unanimously agree that the Psalmist's words do not refer to physical eyes, as they cannot perceive divine mysteries^[8]. The divine light cannot be seen with physical eyes but can be perceived through spiritual vision^[9]. The psalmist is not referring to a revelation of divine truths, but rather to an illumination or direct communion with the uncreated light emanating from God's Being. This radiance of the Spirit is not merely an unveiling of meanings or a transient grace-illumination, but a steady, continuous manifestation of hypostatic (personal) light within the soul.

The Lord is the source of light and enlightenment (Ps 17:31)

In scriptural language, light symbolizes prosperity, happiness, and holiness. The psalmist is confident that God will grant him all of these if his lamp or torch remains constantly lit. God's aid is compared to a light that cuts through and removes darkness, with the Lord Himself depicted as this illuminating light (Kraus 1988, 263)^[10]. In this context, the lamp does not serve as a metaphor for wisdom or knowledge; instead, it symbolizes the energy and excitement of the psalmist's life (Bratcher and Reyburn 1991, 176). Due to sin, humanity descends into darkness and loses the radiance that reflects God's image within him. As the source of light, only God can illuminate the darkness in which man has dwelled (St. Augustine 1997, 52). Bishop Eusebius interprets this as a Christological statement, affirming that Jesus Christ, who through the Incarnation rose from the line of David, is the ultimate light that enlightens all humanity through his radiance (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Psalms* 18.29,30, in PG 23,178-180 – Blaising et al. 2004, 141)^[11]. God's light within the soul determines the enlightenment of all human nature. The divine spark within awakens and begins to illuminate the depths, transforming darkness into brightness. The phrase 'Thou shalt light my candlestick' (Ps 17:31), used by the psalmist, reflects this truth and highlights humanity's dependence

on God. It signifies that humans are meant to be sources of light, to illuminate their surroundings. In this way, man is depicted as a candlestick, torch, or beacon that shines and continuously calls toward the Light and the everlasting fellowship with the One who is Light and the source of all light. St. Cyril of Alexandria emphasizes that we are not independent lights but share in the Word, which enlightens us. He explains that—since our minds can be likened to a torch, as in Psalms—light is bestowed upon us by the Lord. Ultimately, the darkness within us is only illuminated by the Only Begotten; thus, He truly is the Light, while we remain in darkness without Him (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* I.8).

God's commandments open the spiritual eyes (Ps 18:9)

The perfection of divine laws is distinctly praised in various ways. As a source of joy for the heart and illumination for the eyes, God's commandments enable humans to truly live. The brightening of the eyes probably symbolizes gaining understanding and wisdom or revitalizing the body, but most importantly, it signifies renewal of the soul (Bratcher and Reyburn 1991, 193). Peter Cragie interprets this eye illumination as a divine revelation of human truth and reality, because it is bestowed by God, the origin of life. Just as the sun offers light and warmth, divine commandments similarly brighten the eyes and enlighten those who serve the Lord (Craigie 2002, 182). St. Cyril suggests that when the Psalmist makes these statements, he is referring to the forefather Adam, who, before disregarding God's command, had a pure eye filled with the sight of God and good thoughts. He was undisturbed because he was illuminated by divine light (St. Cyril of Alexandria 1989a, 54). Archimandrite Aimilianos interprets the Greek version of this verse as: 'The commandment of the Lord [is] shining, enlightening the eyes.' This suggests that God's commandment is so bright that it radiates and commands attention. He explains that 'The commandment of the Lord' is radiant because it is a manifestation (energy) of God. Since God is luminous, the commandment isn't just a command but an emanation and a sending from His very being — an uncreated divine energy. When the Lord issues a command, He isn't merely laying down rules, but is the Lord who commands and being light, sends forth light. The command issuing from His mouth is Light from Light, emitting both gentle illumination and fire. Regarding the eyes the psalmist refers to, Archimandrite Aimilianos clarifies they are spiritual eyes^[12]. Therefore, this divine light aims to purify and illuminate the recipient's soul.

As the archimandrite mentioned, a person can choose to accept or reject it, closing their soul's eyes.

The Psalmic texts complement one another, with the discourse on divine light unfolding as we approach the Psalter's doxological endings. The Psalmist's plea for the Lord to enlighten his eyes (Ps 12:3) culminates in Psalm 18, where the eyes are filled with brightness (Ps 18:9). The Lord's commandments, through their brilliance, illuminate the eyes of those longing to meet the Lawgiver Himself. This idea appears in Philokalic writings, which recommend fulfilling commandments to meet the Commander. The path outlined by the Lord's words leads to light; as one follows it, the shining light at the end already illuminates his eyes. The Church Fathers explain that this divine light brightens the soul's eyes with clarity—not in the sense of physical vision, but as a sharper mental gaze, allowing the inner eyes to see beyond ordinary perception^[13].

The Lord is light (Ps 27:1)

The opening affirmation of Psalm 26 reveals how the psalmist perceives God: as light! (Ps 26:1). Such statements, where God is described as light, are quite unique in the Old Testament. The psalmist asks for light—seeking illumination and clarity—but rarely refers to God directly as light. Instead, he says, 'Thou art my enlightener, O Lord,' because you have removed sorrow's cloud from his eyes and filled them with the light of your divine presence (Euthymius the Zigaben and St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite 2006). Exegetes generally agree that Euthymius's statement highlights God's role in rescuing the psalmist from overwhelming darkness (Tesh and Zorn, *Psalms* 1999, 233). Darkness symbolizes fear, sorrow, and sadness, while light represents joy, life, and fostering community. Notably, for the psalmist, God is not just associated with light but is his specific light. This suggests an identification between the Light itself and the light within the Light. The psalmist sees his own reflection in the communal state; his light is so intertwined that it mirrors the divine light poured over him. This aligns with St. Gregory's statement that 'God is called the light of David,' highlighting how the light of knowledge shines upon those who are enlightened. God is called light by David because he is the light of knowledge that shines in those who are enlightened (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 2.15, in *NPNF* 2 5:133 – Blaising et al 2004, 205). Bishop Diodorus emphasizes that during times of trouble and darkness, God served as a shining beacon for the Israelites, providing them with help and hope (Diodore of Tarsus, *Commentary on Psalm 27*, in *WGRW* 9:82 – Blaising et al. 2004, 205). For the psalmist,

God is the origin of light, guiding humanity toward illumination. Darkness symbolizes suffering, sorrow, and sadness, while light signifies their opposites. The Lord provides such abundant light that any discomfort from body and soul's darkness is promptly banished. This aspect of God's nature highlights his role as a saviour, especially for those facing difficulties (see Am 5:18, 20; Mih 7:8; Is 9:1). The psalmist, confident in the Lord's proximity, rhetorically asks, 'Whom shall I fear?'

The radiance of God's face and the illumination filling man (Ps 30:16)

Seeing God's shining face signifies His merciful and benevolent presence, whereas hiding His face signifies His wrath (Kraus 1988, 364)^[14]. Archimandrite Aemilianos explains that God's face brightness reflects His personal presence:

The brightness of God is His luminous appearance, symbolizing His greatness and glory. It represents His presence, His glory, and His very self, which appeared to the children of Israel. God is Lord and has revealed Himself to us (Ps 117:27). He is the visible God of Israel, and His brightness reveals the Lord Himself, presented in brilliant radiance..." [our translation] (Aemilianos Simonopetritus 2011, 159–60)^[15]

The brightness of God is most often associated with the current idea (Ps 30:16). The face of the Lord, shining brightly, emits an unmatched light that only the righteous desire to witness. The Church Fathers believe that only those striving for perfection partake of the divine light emanating from God. St. Cyril of Alexandria emphasizes that only the humble, meek, and those filled with divine reverence are worthy of this divine manifestation. Conversely, God

turns away from those who are difficult to influence, unwilling to soften, and who disregard what pleases Him. It's understood by all rational minds that those who receive His help will overcome every temptation and scheme of their adversaries. Just as the sunrise dispels darkness and sunset brings night, releasing wild animals and evil men from their hiding places, so too does turning away from God awaken the enemies of the soul. When His divine light, referred to in Scripture as the face of God, shines, all darkness-working entities scatter. The prophet also seeks to be worthy of this, not through his deeds but through God's

mercy, because, as he states, the only path to salvation is the appearance of Your face.” [our translation] (St. Cyril of Alexandria 1990, 126)

The saint’s final statement reminds us that our salvation hinges on seeing God’s face, which he equates with bright light. When we connect this idea with what St. Seraphim of Sarov said about divine light, it clarifies things further. According to St. Seraphim, our goal in this life is to receive the Holy Spirit. His experience with Nicholas Motovilov illustrates this beautifully, showing how divine light illuminates his face as he becomes deified. When he asked Motovilov to look at him, he admitted he couldn’t because his eyes were like lightning, and his face was brighter than the sun. When he said his eyes hurt and he couldn’t bear to look, St. Seraphim realized he had also become luminous. Later, when he looked up, he grasped what it truly meant to behold such brilliance: imagine, in the glare of midday sun, a man’s face speaking to you—his lips move, you hear his voice and feel his hands on your shoulders, yet you perceive no bodies, only a radiant light scattering around and lighting the snow beneath both of you (St. Seraphim of Sarov 2013, 60–2). By relating this experience to the psalmist’s words, we see that when the Lord’s face shines upon a person, they immediately transform into light. Without this divine illumination, they cannot partake in His appearance.

The divine light forms the foundation of her vision (Ps 35:9)

God is the source of all light. Consequently, the light originates from Him, and we cannot truly see or understand anything unless we see God first. Surrounded by His divine light, we can comprehend and discover answers to our questions. Only by focusing on God can we perceive things in their true form. There is no other true source of light and truth besides God. By contemplating Him and observing the light of His glory encircling Him, we can uncover the mysteries of His creation through the uncreated light that has been visible since the beginning of the world. Everything distant from God is darkness; everything close to Him is light. Theodore of Mopsuestia highlights the importance of light for mankind, noting that without it, we cannot perceive what God has created. In darkness, we are unable to recognize or even identify what is near us. To understand our surroundings, we need light, which, in turn, is all we need to see. Through the light itself, we can see and discern everything, even the light itself. The purpose of light is to reveal God’s generosity and abundant gift (Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Psalms* 36.10a-b, in WGRW 5:405-7 – Blaising et al.

2004, 283). Syrian Bishop Sahdona suggests that the psalmist is referencing the light that emanates from the Holy Scriptures. He asserts that without this divine light, we cannot perceive God, the Light itself, nor comprehend His judgment, which is illuminated. Our active engagement with the Scriptures is beneficial, especially as it enlightens us in prayer. A soul that has been cultivated through reading and spiritual meditation becomes filled with love for God, and when it prays, it is surrounded by light (Sahdona, *Book of Perfection* 2.50-51, in CS 101:223 – Blaising et al. 2004, 283).

The sharing of God's light enables man to see the divine light himself, as the psalmist states: 'in Thy light we will see light' (Ps 35:9). This gift of sight is innate in human nature, planted by God. When God wishes, and man is prepared to perceive it, the eyes of the mind open, allowing him to perceive divine illumination. As St. Callistus observes, God fashioned the mind to see and planted Himself within creation so that, through these openings, He might appear to the intellect in a light of understanding—overcoming it, enlightening it, and drawing it toward Himself (Callistus Catafygiotes, *On the Contemplative Life*, 21). By embracing this vision, man allows himself to be surrounded by light and overwhelmed by the brilliance he perceives in all light. The divine state where light dominates the human soul is explained by St. Gregory Palamas, theologian of uncreated light:

Light is seen in light and in a similar light. And he sees, if he does not act otherwise, emerging from all else, also becomes the whole light and resembles what he sees; rather, it unites in a pure, undefiled way, light being light and light perceiving through light. If he looks at himself, he sees light; he looks at what he perceives, and that is light. This unity means making all things one, so that the observer no longer distinguishes between what he observes and himself but simply recognizes that he is a light and sees a light, distinct from all other beings. [our translation] (St. Gregory Palamas 1977, 36).

It is worth noting that the Church Fathers give this text a Trinitarian interpretation: we see the Father, the Source of Light, through the Son, the true Light^[16]. This perspective confirms that although it is not clearly stated that God is light, as St. John does in the New Testament, in the Psalmist's vision God is perceived as light.

Light represents the medium through which revelation occurs, and divine justice is manifested (Ps 36:6)

Exegetes note that the light the psalmist refers to is at its brightest, like the sun's rays at noon. Spiritually, this moment corresponds to the height of divine revelation. According to St. Ambrose, God's interventions in the world are evident because they occur through light and bring light. Everything God does shines unmistakably, making it impossible to deny or attribute these works to anyone else; God's mark is clear. He exposes justice openly, refusing to let judgment remain concealed; it will disclose the good one has chosen and the evil one has shunned, shining forth with the brilliance of the noon sun (Ambrose, *Commentary on Twelve Psalms* 37.15, in *ACTP* 61 – Blaising et al. 2004, 290). In other words, this is the outcome of divine intervention. The righteousness of the Psalmist's cause has been concealed, but it will shine brightly like the sunrise emerging from night's darkness; His righteousness, though hidden now, will become fully evident as bright daylight (Kirkpatrick 1905, 190). The influence of light permeates all human actions. Everything is illuminated; everything becomes light (Ps 36:6). The deeds of the righteous, aligned with God's works—who is Light—are seen as full of light, capable of revealing the One who commissions these actions to help humans become like Him. Venerable Euthymius reads the passage as a confessional promise: those who live by divine justice become public witnesses to God. By 'justice' he means a right verdict which God will display like a radiant light before all—since the Father, who sees in secret, will openly reward or reveal one's good deeds—and by 'judgment' he also understands the whole course of a life lived rightly, shown to the world as clearly as the midday sun (Euthymius the Zigabene and St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite, 2006).

Light symbolizes inner balance and spiritual life (Ps 37:10)

In the Psalmic context, the brightness of the eyes symbolizes optimal health. Moses is described as having maintained vigorous eyesight and strength until his death at about 120 years old, as stated in Deut 34:7. The mention of the eyes losing brightness in the psalm should not be taken literally, as doing so might suggest that the psalmist was blinded (Bratcher and Reyburn 1991, 367). Therefore, it is essential to interpret this description within the spiritual realm. Generally, issues with the eyes and the consequent weakening of vision serve as signs of physical decline for the psalmist. His eyes deteriorated prematurely, partly due to pain and partly because of enemies plotting maliciously. Some suggest that David's eyes were troubled when he was angry

at his enemies; it is believed that intense anger can disturb bodily senses and vision (Euthymius the Zigaben and St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite 2006, 101). According to St. John Chrysostom, the psalmist also describes the soul's disorders—the unrest in the mind and fear of God's wrath. He refers to the eye of the soul, the faculty of judgment and conscience, which becomes troubled when it constantly recalls its faults and fears God's anger. This living awareness brings sorrow and trembling, not calm. Yet, such disorder fosters tranquility—this fear underpins true fearlessness. A person troubled by this inner conflict can overcome any storm (St. John Chrysostom 2011, 87).

Referring to our ancestor, St. Augustine explains that even Adam could not see 'the light of His eyes.' Since this *light* was God Himself, Adam, after disobeying His command, moved into the shade and hid among the trees of Eden. He fled from God and sought refuge behind the trees, and in doing so, he lost the 'light of his eyes'—the ability to look at and enjoy God's presence (St. Augustine 1997, 107). The Church Fathers view sight as essential for fully experiencing fellowship in a theophany. Archimandrite Aemilianos highlights that the eye is man's strongest sense, stating,

Everything that is imprinted in it goes into the depths of the soul. Almost all of them start from sight. If the eye is dark, the whole body is dark. If the eye sees, everything inside us sees. If the eye learns to see God, then man lives in God. [our translation] (Aemilianos Simonopetritus 2011, 163).

Light is essential for the psalmist. Without it, he feels abandoned by God, lost in tribulation as if in a dark abyss. Psalm 37:20 mentions the loss of the light of the eyes, and Church Fathers highlight that this metaphor of vision loss helps us understand a deeper spiritual truth. When forsaken by God, a person no longer feels His care and is deprived of the life-giving light. Mystics often describe the moment when the Holy Spirit departs, leaving everything feeling lost. The divine brightness, once filling man's nature with uncreated light, is replaced by terrifying darkness. Even the brightest sunray or greatest joy becomes a pale shadow compared to the profound experience of God's direct vision.

From illumination to spiritual discernment – theological perspective

The theme of divine light in the first forty Psalms sketches a spiritual journey where illumination and discernment follow and intertwine, expressing a theology of

sharing in God's luminous life. Beginning with the psalmic text and Eastern patristic tradition, a process unfolds in which divine grace, as uncreated Light, leaves its mark on the individual who responds through repentance, obedience, and epectasy toward becoming more like God.

Light symbolizes the imprint of the divine face and the renewal of the human image. Psalm 4:6, with the plea 'let your face shine,' indicates that God's theophanic presence is engraved on the body and soul through a luminous *signing*. The Church Fathers, including Origen, John Chrysostom, and Cyril of Alexandria, interpret this light as a sign of the restoration of God's image in humans — not just a spiritual metaphor but an ontological participation in divine glory. The light on a person's face signifies the renewal of the image and the ability to reflect and witness the Presence, who is Light.

The illumination of the spiritual eyes and the awakening of conscience are discussed. In Ps 12:3 and Ps 18:9, 'eye illumination' refers not to physical sight but to the 'eye of the heart,' which perceives wisdom, discernment, and life. Grace awakens the conscience from spiritual darkness, enabling it to 'see' divine reality: commandments shine as luminous energies, and the mind gains sharper vision to distinguish good from evil. The Fathers describe this process as collaborative: God provides the light, which humans receive through repentance and obedience.

God is described as the Source and Light in passages like Ps 17:31 and Ps 27:1. The Psalms highlight the unity between God and light: He not only provides light but is the Light itself. This has salvation-related implications—drawing closer to the Source is how one receives the light that enables them to become a torch for others. The psalm depicts the believer as a candlestick lit by God—not inherently luminous but carrying the light they've received. In this view, illumination serves both as a gift and a calling: those who are enlightened are meant to display and testify to that light. The commandments are described as luminous energies and serve as a practical path of discernment (Ps 18:9; Ps 36:6). According to Patristic interpretation, God's commandments are not mere abstract rules but 'luminous' energies that illuminate the eye of the heart and guide toward life. Following the commandments fosters spiritual sensitivity, and divine justice manifests as a revealing judgment, like the sun at its peak (Ps 36:6). Discernment is cultivated through obedience; moral attentiveness becomes the key to recognizing the Spirit's activity and distinguishing truth from deception.

Seeing God and experiencing ontological transformation (Ps 30:16; Ps 35:9) highlight the goal of the Lord's face as salvation: his face's brightness not only guides but

also transforms. Patristic writings, from Seraphim of Sarov to Gregory Palamas, indicate that beholding the uncreated light results in deification—viewers become part of the light, essentially absorbing and becoming it. This concept echoes Gregory of Nyssa's idea of epectasy: spiritual ascent is an endless, progressive journey where light serves as both the drive and the destination. Light serves as a criterion for community judgment and for eschatological reality (Ps 36; Ps 37:20). The Psalms emphasize light's social and judicial roles: what is illuminated is revealed, and what is in darkness is uncovered. Spiritual discernment goes beyond personal insight to include the community's ability to identify the effects of light in people's lives. Additionally, light has an eschatological meaning: divine justice will shine openly like the midday sun, and those filled with light will enjoy eternal communion with God.

The patristic methodology, especially in Eastern traditions, employs the epectatic paradigm to articulate modern doubts about metaphor through an ontology of light. This is understood not merely as a figure of speech but as an activity of uncreated energies. Using this model clarifies the progression in Psalms 1–40: starting with awakening and the initiation of virtue, then imprinting the divine face, deepening through commandments and prayer, and ultimately participating in the uncreated light. The school trains discernment progressively—from asking for light, preserving it via obedience, to eventually perceiving with the light itself. Practical implications for spiritual life. From the theological view of the Psalms and the Church Fathers, a clear spiritual program emerges a) continual prayer and repentance for divine light; b) obedience as the main arena where this light appears (by fulfilling commandments as luminous energy); c) sacramental and liturgical practices as ways to mediate the uncreated light; d) developing discernment through communion, the Philokalic tradition, and patristic theology. Light serves both as a means and an end — it trains the heart's eye, enabling not only sight but active participation in divine life.

In Ps 1–40, light functions as a vital theological framework, fostering and confirming spiritual insight. It signifies the start of conversion, refines the heart's vision, guides ethical conduct, and facilitates the individual's ontological change. The patristic understanding, particularly the epectatic approach, offers a consistent view where illumination is more than symbolic—it's participation in God's uncreated energy. Through grace and obedient response, humans are called to perceive the light and become transformed into the image of the One who is Light.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the motif of divine light in Psalms 1–40 serves as a dynamic theological and spiritual framework that guides the believer from initial illumination to ongoing participation in God's luminous life. In the chosen psalms, light has multiple roles: reflecting God's face upon the individual (Ps 4:6), awakening and clarifying inner vision (Ps 12:3; 18:9), serving as the source and sustainer of human well-being (Ps 17:31), and acting as the moral and eschatological channel through which divine justice and mercy are expressed (Ps 36:6; 30:16). Patristic exegesis—particularly from the Eastern Church Fathers—offers a consistent interpretive approach that sees light as not just a metaphor but as an ontological participation in divine presence, through theophanic, Christological, and soteriological readings.

Using St. Gregory of Nyssa's epectatic framework clarifies how psalmic discourse depicts spiritual development: the initial call to turn away from evil and desire good results in the soul being marked by divine radiance. This radiance matures as it obediently receives God's commandments, seen as luminous energies, leading to a steady, illuminating life. The consensus among the Church Fathers that spiritual vision resides in the eye of the heart highlights the experiential and transformative nature of this light: it both reveals God and transforms the beholder into His likeness. Thus, the Psalms teach that illumination is a complex gift—both a blessing, a task, and a result—that depends on divine condescension and human openness.

The psalmic corpus portrays light as essential for both community and individual well-being: God as 'light' offers refuge, guidance, and the defeat of darkness; maintaining the soul's brightness relies on obedience and prayer, while sin and divine withdrawal cause spiritual dimming (Ps 37:20). The text's references to New Testament and early Christian traditions — such as John's light, Transfiguration theology, and the Palamite distinction between essence and energies — connect the Psalms to the broader Christian understanding of deification. This perspective encourages spiritual practices focused on attentive devotion to God: fostering inner vision through prayer, practicing ascetic obedience to divine laws, and engaging in liturgical and sacramental life that reveals the uncreated light. Thus, the study redefines the psalmic light as both the path and goal of spiritual growth: an ongoing deepening of participation in God's luminous presence that heals, judges, teaches, and ultimately transforms the believer into unity with the Divine.

Notes

[1] To examine the key perspectives on the theme of light in the Psalms, several established commentaries were consulted. These are part of recognized international series and serve as reference works for Psalm exegesis, including the *Word Biblical Commentary* and other international commentaries. Additionally, I consulted leading scholars in Psalm research, including A. Kirkpatrick, H.-J. Kraus, and E. Hengstenberg.

[2] St. Gregory's five parts are: I – 1-40; II – 41-71; III – 72-88; IV – 89-105; V – 106-150. Each part reflects a stage in the journey toward perfection: I – purgation and pursuit of virtue; II – longing for communion with God; III – attachment to God; IV – awareness of God's unchanging nature and human insignificance; V – remembrance of God's providence and expressing gratitude through doxology (see St. Gregory of Nyssa 1998, 145–63).

[3] The Hebrew concordance in psalmic writings lists various occurrences related to the root or its derivatives: to illuminate—Ps 12:3; 104:39; 118:130; to make shine—Ps 66:1; Ps 79:3,7.19; Ps 118:135; to be burning—Ps 17:28; to give light—Ps 18:8; to make luminous—Ps 117:27; light—Ps 4:6; 26:1; 35:9; 37:10; 42:3; 43:3; 48:3.19; 55:13; 77:14; 88:15; 96:11; 103:2; 111:4; 118:105; 135:7; 138:11; brightness—Ps 30:16; 138:12; full of light—Ps 75:4; illuminated—Ps 76:18; ignited—Ps 96:4; dawn—Ps 36:6; shining—Ps 148:3 (Kohlenberger and Swanson 1998, 239–40).

[4] The reference to the Aaronite blessing (Nm 6:24-26) echoes throughout this text. It symbolizes God's protection over his chosen people (Hengstenberg 2010, 69).

[5] The verb **נָשָׂא** – meaning 'to lift up' – also involves raising a marker or standard. Therefore, it seems the psalmist intended not just to show a sign of divine providence, but to provide a guiding reference that signifies the correct path (Pașca-Tușa 2018, 201).

[6] The concept of divine light imprinting on the faces of the worthy to see God appears in icon theology, where saints serve as light sources through which God continuously invites enlightenment.

[7] The Lord's face shining is 'a symbol of His presence, bright and open for dialogue and communion' (Bulai et al. 2005, 22).

[8] Origen rhetorically asked whether the psalmist was referring to physical eyes. He, along with the Alexandrian exegete, believes that divine light brightens the eyes of the mind. For them, God, as the light of the mind, illuminates the

eyes of those He considers worthy of receiving His enlightenment (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.135-37, in FC 89,96 – Blaising et al. 2004, 105). St. Augustine interprets the eyes mentioned by the psalmist as the eyes of the heart (St. Augustine 1997, 44).

[9] No one is so naive as to suppose that bodily eyes grasp divine mysteries, or that God's command enlightens literal sight, or that a mere slumber could bring about spiritual death. (Origen, *Against Celsus* VII.34). For St. Cyril, the shining of the eyes aligns with the enlightenment of the soul's senses to grasp the truth. (St. Cyril of Alexandria 1989b, 67).

[10] E. Hengstenberg describes how God's intervention in David's life, using the psalmic imagery, elevates him from darkness and lowliness—particularly under Saul—toward honour and prosperity. This divine action continually brightens the surrounding gloom, allowing God's salvation to shine upon David and his people through every challenge (Hengstenberg 2010, 310).

[11] Arnobius the Younger, using the same interpretative keys, states that Christ's mercy functions like oil, illuminating both the eye—symbolized by a torch—and the mind, which is also represented as a torch (Arnobius the Younger, *Commentary on the Psalms* 18, in CCL 25,22 – Blaising et al. 2004, 141).

[12] The Greek theologian explains that a commandment illuminates your eyes when it sheds its light, but you can choose to close your eyes and remain in darkness. The phrase 'lighting the eyes' illustrates the nature of free will in acceptance and action. Through its brightness and brilliance, the Lord's commandment prepares the soul, illuminating its deepest aspects and helping to reveal and purify passions (Aemilianos Simonopetrus 2011, 235).

[13] According to the esteemed Euthymius, the light that reaches the soul's eyes ultimately influences the physical eyes. This divine illumination guides individuals away from destructive paths, particularly those that lead to sin through sight. He explains that God's commandment illuminates the mind's eyes from a distance and, through the soul's eyes, also enlightens the body's eyes. This dual illumination helps prevent humans from wandering into sinful and abyssal ways (Euthymius the Zigaben and St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite 2006).

[14] The face of God embodies enlightenment of the observer's mind, the outpouring of divine mercy, the revelation of salvation, and His desire to draw us closer. Essentially, David pleads with the Lord for mercy amid his suffering, requesting His face be turned toward him, and an opportunity to return to the communion lost through sin. He understands that God, deserving of His gaze,

is reflected in the humble—those filled with divine fear and unwavering hope for salvation (Pașca-Tușa 2015, 144).

[15] The spiritual man who reaches a vision where everything is shining and illuminated describes this experience:

When something shines, it takes over your perception and blocks everything else. Imagine being in complete darkness and a bright spotlight suddenly turning on. You would instinctively look toward the light, but its brilliance would be so overwhelming that you'd have to close your eyes because it becomes impossible to look at it without being dazzled. [our translation] (Aemilianos Simonopetrus 2011, 163)

[16] Origen, *On Principles* I,1,1; St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratione* 31,3; St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* XVIII; Jerome, *Brief Commentary on Psalm* 36.

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