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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

RITUAL IN THE PSALMS

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The Psalms are a collection of ritual hymns, i. e. they are intended primarily for ritual use. The general heading, *Tehillim*, indicates¹ that the primary ritual use for which they were intended was sacrificial. They were the praise songs to be sung at the moment of performing the sacrifice. The simplest form of sacrificial praise song, or *tahlil*, to use the old Arabic term, was the *halleluiah*, the antiquity of which as a ritual formula is indicated by the preservation of the ancient divine name *Yah*. The halleluiah psalms are developments of this sacrificial formula or praise cry, and indicate by the use of that formula their ritual purpose. It is these psalms particularly to which belongs the title *tehillim*.

It is with a collection of halleluiahs that the entire Psalter closes, hence the title *Tehillim*. The halleluiah collections are, it is true, as collections, among the latest of all the collections of Psalms. These halleluiahs are, however, in essence old, a simple development of the ancient sacrificial ritual formula; and their position in the Psalter and the designation of the Psalter as a whole by their title, *Tehillim*, evinces the primary intention and theory of the collection of the Psalms as a whole, namely as sacrificial hymns, a ritual hymnody.

The ritual sacrificial use of a number of Psalms is indicated by their headings: 30, 38, 70, 88, 100, 102, 105-107, 118, 136, 138, 145, and all the *tehillahs* and *halleluiahs*; perhaps also 8, 9, 22, 32, 81, 84. A ritual, if not a sacrificial use is indicated further in the case of 45, the marriage hymn, the *al-tashheths*, 57-59, 75, and the various *tephillahs*.

This does not prove that these Psalms were written for the uses indicated in the headings, but it is evidence that they were so used, and it is further evidence that they were so used at the time the present collection was completed. These headings are combined in books 1, 2 and 3, but not in 4 and 5, with other

¹ *JBL.*, vol. XXIX, part I.

headings containing musical notes and instructions pertaining to ritual use. These ritual and musical directions became obsolete and largely, if not altogether, unintelligible, but with a faithfulness familiar in liturgical history, they were preserved as a part of the Psalms to which they were attached. This stage had been reached some time before the LXX translation was made, as the unintelligibility of those notes to the compilers of that translation testifies, and apparently even before the compilation of Chronicles. It had been reached before the collections of the 4th and 5th books of Psalms were made, and before the Psalter was completed by the combination of those books with the earlier collections united in books 1-3, as is testified to by the absence of such ritual and musical directions in the 4th and 5th books, which are by general consent the most ritualistic, and the least occasional part of the Psalter.

Besides these notes contained in the Hebrew Psalms themselves we have also notices and traditions of the liturgical use of certain Psalms contained in the LXX and in the Talmud, as for instance the proper Psalms for the days of the week in the LXX, the Passover and other festival Psalms in the Talmud; but these notices and traditions are all much later than the former.

More important is the evidence which some of the Psalms contain in themselves of the particular purpose for which they were used, and this is frequently evidence also of the purpose for which they were composed, and that they were composed for ritual purposes, so the *halleluiahs* and *tehillahs*² and the Thank-offering Psalms.³ Psalms 3 and 4 were for the regular morning and evening sacrifice; 5 and 6 rituals to be used in connection with the sin-offerings (Lv. 4 ff.), and for a similar purpose, or for thank-offerings in connection with deliverance from evil, 7, 12-14, 17, 32, and many more, for this general category is numerous. 16 and 30 were more specifically for deliverance from sickness; 18 was a royal sacrificial triumph hymn; 20 for the sacrifice before battle, and 21 for the thank-offering after

² 111-117, 135, 145-150. 109 is headed as a *tehillah*, and v. 30 is plainly a sacrificial praise cry; but the Psalm is far from being a *halleluiah*.

³ 100, 105-107, 118, 130, 138. These are indicated as thank-offering hymns by their content as by their titles; 106 being indicated as both a *tehillah* and a *todah*, or thank-offering.

battle. 24 is a liturgy for the return of the Ark after battle; and 68 an elaborate ritual of the going forth of the Ark. 61 is for the royal vows or free-will offerings (cf. vv. 6 and 9), 65 for the offering of the first-fruits, and 67 a thank-offering for a bountiful harvest. Vows, peace-offerings, freewill and thank-offerings of various kinds are indicated in a number of Psalms.*

While the title *Tehillim* suggests primarily a collection of hymns for the sacrificial ritual, and while many hymns of the Psalter are indicated by their headings or by infernal evidence as meant for use in the temple ritual, there are others which are specifically indicated for use on other occasions. Some of these would seem to have been special liturgies for festivals in the community life. Such notably is 45, designated in its heading, as by its contents, a wedding hymn. Of this nature perhaps are the *gittith* hymns, 8, 81, 84, if these are meant to be sung at the vintage; but both 81 and 84 appear intended for use at some *haj* or pilgrim feast, as does also the double psalm 42, 43. The *al-tashheth*, or "destroy not" psalms, 57-59, 75, were connected in some way with the vintage, and it may not be fantastical to suppose that the men who plucked or trod the grapes were in pretence dealing with their foes, "washing their feet in the blood of the wicked," the wine that is red, whose dregs their foes shall drain. 78 is for such instruction as is ordered in Deut. 11 from a father to his children on an occasion like the Passover; and 88 and its ilk for national fasts.

Apparently also the Synagogue made itself felt in the Psalter, and we have a number of Psalms whose use seems to have been entirely instructional. Of such is the great Praise of the Law, Psalm 119. The alphabetic acrostic form in this and other cases was for mnemonic purposes, similar in intent to the beads in rosaries used in various religions. The appearance of this mnemonic device in Psalms of the earlier books (cf. Ps. 9, 10, 34, 37) suggests that even at a relatively early period Psalms were composed and used for personal and group purposes quite unconnected with sacrifice. They were liturgies, however, although not part of the sacrificial ritual. For that reason they were included in the Psalter.

The Psalter may be described, then, as a collection of liturgical

*So, in addition to those already noted, 86.

poems or hymns, primarily for the sacrificial ritual, but containing also hymns for use on other occasions and for other purposes.

A fairly early tradition ascribed the origin of Temple Psalmody as of heroic lyrics to David, and ultimately the Psalter as a whole was ascribed to David, as legislation was ascribed to Moses, and gnomic literature to Solomon. There was in due time an effort made to assign the composition of the Psalms to specific occasions, precisely as in the history of Christian liturgies we find an effort to assign the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimittis and the Te Deum to specific occasions. The existence in the Book of Samuel of some poems ascribed to David on specific occasions suggested the method of doing this, and accordingly we find a number of headings of Psalms in the first three books, and notably in the collection of the Prayers of David in book II (51-72), stating the supposed occasion of the composition of the Psalm. These headings are taken from the Book of Samuel, and apparently therefore antedate the composition of the Book of Chronicles, a conclusion confirmed by the fact that no such headings are to be found in the last two books of Psalms.

Modern scholars with one accord reject these headings as unreliable, *ex post facto* guesses; but while rejecting the individual headings, they have practically accepted the principle on which those headings were based and proceeded on that same principle to furnish new headings of their own. They have treated the Psalms not as hymns composed or used for liturgical purposes, but as occasional poems composed to celebrate some historical event; not as hymns composed like Wesley's to be sung by choir or congregation, but as a national anthology, the lyrical effusions of court poets celebrating the triumphs or bewailing the misfortunes of king or people. This mistaken principle of identification of the Psalms as occasional lyrics led inevitably to a further mistake in identification of their date and occasion by their contents, as that penitential Psalms must indicate a period of calamity, and joyful and triumphant Psalms a period of prosperity. This method of treating the Psalter has largely vitiated modern criticism and commentation on the Psalms, and led us into a pathless wilderness of subjective and conflicting vagaries. The true key to the method of study of the Psalter is to be found in the history of liturgies. The study of the hymns

of the Christian Church, of Wesley, Luther and their ilk, and of the great olden hymns, the Kyrie Eleison, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis, Gloria in Excelsis, and Te Deum, their origin and growth and cause and use, their conservation of the ancient, their adaptation to new conditions, doctrines and rituals throws much light upon the Psalter. Of equal if not greater importance is the study of the ancient ritual hymns of India and Persia, Egypt and Babylonia, and especially of the last, because of their closer affinity to the Hebrew Psalter.

We possess considerable collections of Babylonian liturgies and ritual hymns, covering in all a period of 3,000 years or thereabouts, in origin Sumerian, adapted and often translated, but still to the last mainly Sumerian, just as Roman hymnody is still mainly Latin in thought and form, and largely in language. The first thing we notice about these hymns is their persistency. One Sumerian hymn, originating in Nippur presumably as early as 3000 B. C., contains a colophon stating that it was copied in 97 B. C. It was apparently still in use at that period. That it was an act of religious merit to preserve and to propagate these hymns is shown by a prayer of Ashurbanipal, attached to a series of tablets containing liturgical hymns, in which he claims favor from the gods because he has had these tablets copied for his library. But while they thus persisted as ritual hymns they did undergo changes to adapt them to use in new conditions. Hymns originating at Nippur were changed by the addition of other verses to make them suitable for use in other temples, especially in Babylon.

A priori, in view of the persistence of ritual and liturgies in general, we should expect something of the sort in the case of Hebrew ritual and liturgies. This is, roughly speaking, the oldest element in religion, and the most persistent. We have abundant evidence of the existence before the Exile of Temple psalmody in connection with ritual acts, and especially with sacrifice. It would be an astonishing thing if all this were cast away, and a new psalmody created at a time when the greatest efforts were being made to restore the ancient Temple, and to collect and conserve the ancient writings and the ancient traditions. In point of fact, as has been already incidentally pointed out, the very latest Psalms in the Psalter retain an otherwise obsolete name of the divinity, and are in fact extremely

primitive in form, mere developments, and iterations of the *halleluiah*. There is, I believe, evidence in the Psalms themselves that old Israelite hymns were adapted to a new use in the Jerusalem Temple in precisely the same way in which the hymns of Nippur were adapted to the use of Babylon. This principle has been recognized in the critical analysis of the prophets Amos and Hosea, and verses applying the Israelite prophecies to Judah and Jerusalem identified as insertions, redactionary glosses on old material. But the critics have failed to recognize the same process of adaptation in the Psalter, where the hymns of Dan, and Shechem, and Bethel have been adapted for use in Judah and Jerusalem, and here a comparison of the old Babylonian liturgies is most illuminating. So, for instance, in a "Psalm on the flute to En-lil" (Langdon, *Babylonian and Sumerian Psalms*, XXXII), En-lil is besought to "repent and behold thy city." Nippur, and the Temple E-Kur, its parts, gates, store-houses, etc., are enumerated, following which come similar lines with Ur and Larsa taking the place of Nippur. That is, this hymn, originally a Nippur hymn, was later adapted for use in the other temples also. This is very common in these hymns. To a similar adaptation of a hymn of one temple to use in the ritual of another I would ascribe the appearance of Jerusalem in Josephite or Danite⁵ hymns (cf. Pss. 48 and 79); the appearance of the same psalm in a Yahwistic and an Elohistie recension (cf. 14 and 53, 40 and 70), or the occasional appearance of Yahweh in an Elohistie Psalm.

Sometimes these old Sumerian-Babylonian hymns correspond singularly in minor matters of ritual with the Hebrew. Commentators have noted in the case of Psalm 10 that it commences with a half verse, which is a sort of caption to the Psalm.⁶ But this is a customary method in Sumerian. So, for instance, a hymn is headed:

"Of the Lord his word, his word."

This is the theme, and the poem proceeds to tell what his word has wrought, in iteration and reiteration:

⁵ For discussion of Danite origin of Korah Psalms, cf. *Essays in Modern Theology and Related Subjects* (Seribner, 1911), V, The Sons of Korah.

⁶ Among other Psalms commencing with a half verse are 16, 23, 25, 66, 100, 109, 139.

“Of the Lord his word afflicts the folds with trouble.

“The word of Anu his word, etc.,

“The word of Enlil his word, etc.”

Or again :

“The princess, the princess wails over the city in sorrow.”

After which follow a long series of repetitions in which the princess is named, as: “the Queen of Nippur wails over the city in sorrow, etc., etc.” It reminds me of the songs, and especially the war songs, among my Arabs at Nippur. One, a chief or leader, would spring forward, stamp, leap in the air, brandishing his weapon, and chant a line. All would dance about, brandishing their weapons and repeating this, until the chief or a leader gave another new motif. Somewhat similar in idea are the hymns cited above.

A marked characteristic of the old Sumerian hymns is the series of honorific names with which they frequently commence, those of Enlil being regularly seven in number, fairly well conventionalized and traditionalized. Compare with this the opening of the 18th Psalm, with its series of honorific names of Yahweh. Honorific names are introduced also at other points in Babylonian hymns, or their equivalents in the form of repetitious phrases containing titles in various form, reciting deeds and attributes, or possessions, as temples, walls, etc. The object is to appease the deity by these recitals, and so bind him to the appeal of the suppliant. Even penitentials often contain material of this description to such an extent that at first sight they seem like exultations. For a similar use of honorific titles, deeds, etc., in the body of the hymn compare Psalms 62, 65, 66, 68, 71, 73, 77, 89, and notably the *halleluiahs* Psalms at the close of the Psalter.

At or near the end of many of these old Babylonian liturgies we find a summons to sacrifice :

“Unto the temple of god upon a lyre let us go with a song of petition.

“The psalmist a chant shall sing.

“The psalmist a chant of lordly praise shall sing.

“The psalmist a chant upon the lyre shall sing.

“Upon a sacred tambourine, a sacred *lilissu* shall sing.

“Upon the flute, the *manzu*, the consecrated lyre shall sing;”

Or again :

“Father Enlil, with song majestically we come, the presents of the ground are offered to thee as gifts of sacrifice.

“O Lord of Sumer, figs to thy house we bring; to give life to the ground thou didst exist.

“Father Enlil, accept the sacred offerings, the many offerings,”

Or :

“We with offerings come, let us go up with festivity,”

which resembles most strikingly the Hebrew.

Many of the Hebrew psalms exhibit a similar composition, and a similar purpose. So in Psalm 65, after the purification of the worshipper (v. 4), we find him entering God's courts with offerings of fruits of the earth (5); then follows an outburst of praise of God's miraculous bounty, containing a recital of His marvelous works and signs, which cause those of distant lands to stand in awe (6-9); from His heavenly rivers He waters the earth, making grain to grow and gladdening the ground (7-14); and at the very end comes, as so often in the Sumerian, the call to shout and sing, or play instruments, as the gifts are actually presented in sacrifice. In 66 it is a presentation of vows of whole burnt-offerings, bullocks, rams and goats (vv. 13-15). Perhaps the actual method of presentation of the sacrifice and the relation of the Psalm as a liturgy to that sacrifice are most clearly exhibited in Psalm 118. This is a thank-offering ritual. After a long processional ceremonial, and responsive chanting connected therewith, we come finally, near the end of the Psalm, as seems to be commonly the case in the Sumerian sacrificial liturgies which we possess, to the actual sacrifice, indicated by the remains of a rubric directing that the sacrifice be offered (v. 27), and followed by the sacrificial praise song which Jeremiah tells us was in use in the Temple in his day (33:11).⁷

Frequently Psalms end merely with an outburst of praise,

⁷ See Notes on some Ritual Uses of the Psalms, *JBL.*, vol. XXIX, Part II, 1910, where I note that Psalm 100 also ends in the same way, also 136 and 138.

singing and making melody on various instruments to the Lord, like the first of the Sumerian psalms cited above. This would seem to be the *tehillah* of the Psalm, to be sung at the actual sacrifice. Cf. Psalms 18:50, 33:11, 71:22-24, 73:25-28, 74:21-23. In 77 the *tehillah* or praise cry is apparently the grand hymn of the thunder storm with which that psalm closed (vv. 17-21). At least this follows immediately after the point at which from some other analogies we should expect the sacrifice, namely the point of favorable answer; here, that God has redeemed Jacob and Joseph. Sometimes the sacrifice seems to be indicated at an earlier point in the Psalm, however, and sometimes the whole psalm constitutes a *tehillah*, as in the case of the *Halleluiahs* at the close of our collection of Psalms. The following seem to me to indicate with a reasonable degree of plainness the point at which sacrifice was offered: 21:14, 22:26-30, 27:6, 28:5-6, 29:9, 30:13, 31:24-25, 32:11, 35:27-28, 44:9, 47:6-9, 48:10-12, 51:21, 52:11, 61:6-9, 66:11 ff., 109:30.

Certain stock phrases or ritual formulae occur over and over again in the Sumerian as in Hebrew Psalms; and occasionally we find the same formula in both. The phrase "how long" is one of continual use in the Babylonian hymns, and is recognized so clearly as a specific ritual phrase that lamentations or penitentials are frequently designated as "how longs"; or more fully "how long thy heart." The same formula is used in Hebrew psalmody, most notably in Psalm 13, where four half verses commence with an "how long!"³

These "how longs" are sometimes connected in the Babylonian as in the Hebrew by calls to God to show himself, and followed by passages which seem to show an answer to the prayer. Such is a hymn entitled: "Like the sun arise." All is destruction; no libations are offered; the psalmist speaks no word; the "how long thy heart" is stilled; in city as in temple all is desolation. So it goes on for forty lines, and then comes a broken and fragmentary clause, the rest being lost, but enough to indicate the nature of the part lost, and to show us why the hymn was entitled "like the sun arise," viz.—"Thou turnest back, thou causest to abound, thou bringest to an end," etc. This psalm is apparently a liturgy to accompany a sacrifice for deliverance from dangerous sickness. The success of

the sacrifice is indicated in the last verse, which assumes a favorable answer.⁹

Certain divine titles are common to the Babylonian with the Hebrew psalms, as steer, bull, hero, shepherd; and certain activities, such as casting down the mighty and exalting the poor or the lowly.¹⁰ These have become in both cases stock phrases of the ritual; so also the stretching forth of the arm, the lifting up the head or face of the deity, which arrests heaven itself. Some other phrases from the Babylonian hymns, such as "from the rising of the sun to the setting of the sun," are strikingly similar to those used in Hebrew poetic language.

More important for our purposes is the use of the *word* or *spirit*. In a number of the Sumerian liturgies, originally from Nippur, which Langdon calls *er-šem-ma* psalms, the word or spirit of Enlil seems to be the cause of disaster. (At times it is almost hypostatized, as in some of the Hebrew Psalms.) Temples and houses are destroyed, and great havoc wrought. Langdon supposes the destruction to be wrought by external foes, such as the Elamites, and these psalms to be penitentials after or against foreign invasions. In almost all, if not all cases, a careful examination fails to reveal outside foes. It is the storm, the rain, the thunder and lightning which have wrought the destruction. It is Enlil, lord of the storm demons, whose word and whose spirit work devastation in the rain floods of winter, which wash down walls, and bring disaster on the mud-built towns and temples. To me, who have twice wintered in Nippur, these *er-šem-ma* psalms seem very natural and vivid pictures of

⁹ For "how long" cf. also *JBL.*, vol. XXIX, part II (1910), p. 118.

¹⁰ (cf. with this Psalm 40, among others. Note the frequent use of קוֹפָה; so, for instance, 9:20, 10:12, 17:13, קוֹפָה, and similar words and phrases in the Psalms as ritual indications, i. e. as marking a particular point in the liturgy to be accompanied by ritual acts.

¹¹ Cf. also a series of hymns and prayers found in the Theban Necropolis, from the time of the 19th Egyptian dynasty, 1350-1200 B. C., which express the religion of the poor, and which are very illuminating for comparison with some of the Hebrew Psalms. The general spirit of these hymns, memorials for deliverance from trouble caused by their own sins, from the bondage resulting from those sins, setting forth the sweetness of the love and mercy of the gods, with an ardent desire to make this known to all men, reminds one much of our Psalms. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, vol. III, Part II (April 1916).

the winter storms and their devastation, terror and misery, bringing back many occasions where I could well imagine priests and people supplicating in just such lamentations. The following verses taken from one of these liturgies, originally of Enlil from Nippur, later adapted to Babylon and Marduk, will, I think, establish the correctness of my interpretation :

“The word which stilleth the heavens on high,
 “The word which causeth the earth beneath to shudder,
 “The word which bringeth woe to the Annunaki,
 “His word is an onrushing storm, which none can oppose,
 “His word stilleth the heavens and causeth the earth to retire,
 “Mother and daughter like a reed mat it rends asunder.
 “*The word of the lord prostrateth the marsh in full verdure.*
 “*The word of the lord is an onrushing deluge,*
 “His word rendeth asunder the huge *sidr* trees.”

The similarity of this passage to the pictures of the storm in Psalms 18 and 29, especially the latter, cannot fail to strike any reader. In general, I fancy, these *er-šem-ma* psalms were penitential liturgies to avert Enlil's wrath and the devastation of his winter storms, or else to be used in connection with the annual repairs and restorations of temple and town at the close of the rainy season. And this, I think, throws light on some of the Hebrew penitential psalms which have been supposed to indicate conditions of national disaster, oppression by a foreign enemy, and the like. They indicate rather foes of another sort; they are a part of the ritual, the hymns and liturgies accompanying the sacrifices offered for release from calamities due to unwitting sins, to overcome the evil spirits of disease and disaster invoked by the wily imaginations of enemies, to avert pestilence, famine, cloud bursts and much more due to the wrath of God or to demon powers. They are frequently exaggerated in their representations of calamity and sin after the convention of liturgies.¹¹ They are to be studied first and fore-

¹¹ Psalm 35 is a good example. The first few verses sound like a battle hymn, but what follows shows that it is really a liturgy not against foreign warriors, but against machinations of neighbors and consequent calamities. It must be remembered to what extent calamities were supposed to be due to the workings of evil spirits invoked by secret devices of enemies. A considerable number of Psalms are, I fancy, liturgies connected with sacrifices

most in connection with the calendar of feasts and fasts, the sacrificial ritual and the temple services, not in connection with the political and military history of Israel.

This does not mean that there is no national element in the Psalms, and that they were utterly divorced from the political life of the nation. That undoubtedly played its part, and the history and economics of Israel are reflected in the Psalter; but essentially the Psalms are ritual hymns, and their occasion and their use are to be determined not so much by the study of the political life as by the study of the religious practices of Israel. They are to be connected not primarily with military events, and the deeds and disasters of great leaders, but with the needs and experiences of worshippers and the requirements of the leaders and directors of that worship.

intended to procure deliverance from calamities resulting from such adversaries. Such are 5, 6, 7 (a thank-offering for such deliverance), 12, 19, 22, 36, 52, 66. 53 and 55 are of this general type, but more exactly, perhaps, exorcisms; and the latter has in fact an alternative, supplementary form, with a rubric directing that it may be used in case of failure of the first form (vv. 21 ff.). In other Psalms the calamity is recognized as due to the guilt of the individual himself, as 25 and 32. Sometimes the calamity is clearly specified as dangerous sickness, as in 13 and 30. These Psalms are often liturgies to be used with the thank-offerings for deliverance from calamity in sickness or from other causes.

NOTE:—The translations of Sumerian hymns in this article are taken from Langdon's *Sumerian and Babylonian Psalms*. While these translations perhaps leave much to be desired in the matter of accuracy, they may, I believe, be trusted for the general purpose for which they are here used.