
THE LITURGICAL USE OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS AS EXPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT

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Abstract

The ancient Jews brought no original contribution in the field of fine arts. As far as architecture was concerned, their most remarkable edifices had been the work of foreigners. Figurative painting and sculpture were missing, due to the commandment forbidding any kind of ‘graven image’ or pictorial representation. The art enjoying the greatest appreciation and popularity with the Jews was music, always present on various occasions.

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1. Religious music in the spirituality of ancient Jews

In the temples, liturgical practices involved chanting, instrumental music, as well as ritual dancing. Psalms were chanted in a recitative form – with the intonation indicated by neumes marked above the text – either by a single person, or responsorially by one person and the congregation, or by a choir. The number of professional musicians was enormous: out of 38,000 Levites, 4,000 were musicians, divided into 24 groups with 12 group conductors. Musicians formed a separate category and were educated in the music school of the Temple of Jerusalem. There were great vocal-instrumental ensembles both at the great Temple, and the royal court. In the synagogues, the music was exclusively sung by human voices. The royal court in Jerusalem had professional musicians as early as 700 B.C. When the country was conquered by the Assyrians, King Sennacherib required musicians, both men and women, as part of the tribute [1].

According to the Old Testament accounts, music was one of the arts Jews cultivated assiduously. „To the old Jews, music was the very breathing of the soul of a people whose religion governed all daily activities.” [2]

The Old Testament music was centred on what is known as psalm chanting. Psalms constitute a particular type of religious songs and prayers, included in the Old Testament and ascribed by religious tradition to King David, who would recite them to the accompaniment of a plucked string instrument [3]. Researchers have found that not all psalms were authored by David, but most of

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them, however, are his work. It is worth mentioning that the psalms were read in a particular way, namely recited in a chant-like manner, that is having a beat (metric structure) and a tune, „which originated the principle of psalmody, of psalm chanting” [3].

Old Jewish worship included several types of psalmody:

1. solo singing by the cantor – the singer leading the religious service;
2. solo singing by the cantor with responses given by the congregation as a choir;
3. choir singing by the congregation [3, p. 72].

2. Psalms - conceptual remarks

In the history of music, „psalms are one of the oldest kinds of lyrical productions [3].”

Psalms express the full range of feelings and states, conveying man’s profound faith and love for God. Emotions range from the most exultant joy to utter despair... The most sobering, realistic view on human experience is intertwined with unwavering faith in the love of God [4].

The psalms’ content is markedly musical, with several music genres, evincing a characteristic musicality, to express praise and supplication, as well as thanksgiving to God and a permanent call to show religious sentiment selectively, through chanting [5]. Psalms were sung on the accompaniment of instruments: „Praise the Lord with harp; sing unto him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings” (Psalm 32.2); „Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery” (Psalm 80.2) [5].

The term ‘psalm’ is derived from the Greek *psalmos*, translating the Hebrew .mizmor’, a word that occurs 57 times in the book of Psalms [6]. Other psalms are also named chants, ‘maschil’ = poem, ‘miktam’ = song, ‘šigaian’ = song, ‘thehilab’ = praise, ‘thefila’ = prayer. In the Greek language, ‘psalteryon’ (psaltery) was the name of a string instrument, and thus the term *psalm* designated a poem recited or intoned on the accompaniment of a string instrument. Psalm tunes and the instruments accompanying them are explicitly indicated in an introduction of sorts, which is found at the beginning of each psalm, an introduction known as superscript [1, p. 37].

Musical directions are titled ‘lamnaṭeah’ – from the verb ‘naṭach’, *to supervise*, thus meaning ‘for the leader/head singer’ [1, p. 37-38], ‘director of music/chief musician’ [7] or ‘choir conductor’ [8].

Seven psalms [6, p. 58] include in their title the term ‘bineghinot’, from ‘neghinot’ which in Psalm 77.7 and Jeremiah’s *Lamentations* designates a string instrument, coming from the verb ‘naghen’ – playing an instrument [9]. In contrast, the terms ‘shir’ and ‘mizmor’ mean *singing*.

Another indication provided at the beginning of psalms is Jelamed’ (Psalm 60/61) meaning *to teach*, that is, „rehearsing voices and instruments before performing” [7]. The superscript of Psalm 5 provides the mention ‘el

hanechilot' = upon the *nechilot* [6, p. 39], indicating the tune according to which the psalm was to be chanted.

Some phrases indicate the pitch in performing the chant. Thus the high-pitched voice (soprano) is designated by the term 'alamot' = the maiden voice. The lowest voice (bass) is designated by the word 'alhasheminit', that is, the lowest octave. The term 'sela', occurring 71 times in 39 psalms and three times in the book of Habakkuk, derives from 'salari' = lifting, and might indicate a pause between two stanzas or a moment when the instrumental accompaniment is intensified, when a stanza follows another or when the voice is raised, a kind of ekphonesis sung by one person, following a stanza concluding the psalm [6, p. 41]. Another phrase is 'shir hamâloth' = song of ascent, or song of steps, the title of 15 psalms (120-134/121-135) also known as gradual psalms, as these psalms were intoned while climbing the 15 steps of the temple [1, p. 37].

The Psalter book, also known as 'The book of Praise' in Hebrew ('Sefer tehilim' or 'Tilim') contains 150 canonical psalms, each of them an expression of supplication, praise of God, man's inner musings, thanksgiving, hope and belief in God, and God addressing man. However, „while in the Torah God's voice sounds harsh and threatening, and while in the books of the prophets it is strong, loud and awesome, in the psalms the divine voice has an ineffable sweetness” [10].

3. Usage of the psalms in Jewish worship

For the Jews the *Psalter*, or *the Book of Psalms*, became the hymnal and prayer book of the synagogue, and is divided into five sections, each ending with a doxology. The psalms render the torment and tribulations of the Jews, their lapses, their wanderings across the promised land, their joys and sorrows, their comfort and help, their hopes and aspirations, their sinning and fervent repentance, the human insignificance and the greatness of the merciful God, the peace that soothes any troubled mind.

Saint Basil the Great says that the *Psalter* „contains all that is useful: it prophesizes the truth, reminds of historical events, provides norms and directions for life, teaches us what to do; it is a common treasure of good advice, a fundamental guidebook and a primer for those beginning their lives, a source of spiritual progress for the mature ones, and of strength for the elderly” [11]. To Blessed Augustine, „the psalms are the serenity of soul, the sign of peace, the curbing of passions, the control and bridle of anger, the school of moderation and restraint, the bond of friendship... the common source where each of us can find the virtues they lack and the remedies they need” [12].

Psalms are employed as prayers, chanted by a solo singer or with accompaniment, with indications of the occasion of their composing or the person commissioned to compose the music for the psalm.

In the past, the rabbis and some of the Church Fathers and writers ascribed to David all the psalms included in the Psalter. Every psalm has its own beauty and richness of truths, but *Psalms 50/51* stands out as 'the most beautiful of all

repentance acts'. Philo describes *Psalms 50/51* as „the prayer of a heart that deeply regrets its failings, implores the remission of sins and complete renewal” [13]. It is „the prayer beyond words”, a cry of suffering and joy, thirst, and love for God [14].

During its history, the Jewish people produced a specific literary genre: the *psalms*. They were doubtlessly generated by collective piety, circulated among the tribes and were slowly integrated into the official divine service. They accompanied the succession of events, the evolution of institutions and the mutations of religious concepts. Layers of new elements were superimposed, the metric structure was altered according to the times' taste, the contents was organized in keeping with the new ways of thinking: spontaneous, sensitive, passionate at times during the age of the prophets; hieratic, solemn, impersonal, once the monarchy was established; codified and ritualized during the rabbinic Judaism.

The Psalms can be understood only together, as an aggregate signifying the crystallization, the endurance, the survival, the fruit of Israel's life. The Psalms doubtlessly mark a particular time and express a particular state of affairs. The Psalter book was a more or less official collection of liturgical chants and hymns, employed in Jerusalem during the period of the second Temple, in the 4th century B.C. The Psalms are the main pillars of Jewish and Christian worship [1, p. 40].

„A *Psalm* is a poem as finely polished as a diamond, crafted and shaped by generations of worshippers who poured into it their turmoil, their hopes and their feelings. The psalm is a treasure condensating the entire life of a nation. It employs numerous literary devices, such as the acrostic in Psalm 119, where each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet.” [1, p. 40] Often psalms are accompanied by methodological indications. The term *psalm* means: „an air played on a string instrument”, and Israel had specialized artists: the Book of Chronicles mentions the sons of Asaph, Heman and Yetudum as singers whose role was as honourable and praiseworthy as the prophets'. The Psalms extol God in a selfless manner, making no petitions or requests, but being centred only on Yahweh and his praise [1, p. 40].

The distinction between cosmic hymns and historical hymns lies in the fact that the former celebrate the creator God, the master of Heaven and Earth. The reasons invoked are the beauty of nature, its bounty and organization (Psalm 104/105). The next two psalms celebrate God in the history of Israel. Royal psalms were written for the enthronement ceremonies or the kings' anniversaries. They were sung by the same artists and listened to at the court and in the sanctuary. There are also didactic, sapiential, prophetic, apocalyptic psalms: the Song of Moses, the song of Anna, the song of Hezekiah, the hymn of the three young men [1, p. 40].

The psalms are lyrical productions [15] whereby the author conveys the feelings dominating his soul at the moment of writing, and they are also religious poems. They give poetic expression [16] to the emotions felt by one's soul in the contemplation of God and the divine things.

A landmark in the modern study of the *Psalms* is the work of H. Gunkel, written in the second half of the 20th century [17]. The author deems it very important to operate the distinction between the various categories (*Gattungen*) of psalms depending on: a) the worship contexts generating these psalms ('certain divine services', and not particular events in the history of the nation or the life of the author); b) the thoughts and modes of expression shared by various psalms; and c) recurrent elements of style, form and illustrations, serving these different purposes. He identified the following main types: hymns of praise; personal thanksgivings; collective lamentations of certain groups; and individual lamentations. In addition, there are smaller categories such as: entrance liturgies, blessings and curses, wisdom psalms, royal psalms; his categorization also includes mixed types. Gunkel's classification has been widely accepted, and his insistence on the importance of this approach has been rarely questioned or challenged [17, p. 78-79].

Whereas Gunkel saw most canonical *Psalms* as 'descendants' of the original psalmody of Israel, S. Mowinckel deemed them to be products of active worship [18]. He aimed to reconstruct the Israelite rituals and feasts, celebrated at dates he had identified with certainty in the history of this nation, independently from any confirmation of the *Pentateuch*. His first studies on the *Psalms*, published in the 1920s, insisted much on a so-called festival of Yahweh's coronation as King, a festival supposedly celebrated on the New Year's day, somehow similar to the Babylonian festival *akitu*. He claimed that this festival could be traced in about 40 psalms, as well as the *Old Testament* eschatology. This theory was immediately accepted and taken up by other Biblical scholars, especially the British and Scandinavian members of the Myth and Ritual School, in the 1930s, who made extensive use of compared religion in order to reconstruct in detail a ritual drama of the fight and wedding between divine characters, and shaping destinies, which would explain many of the exclamations of pain or triumph in the book of *Psalms*, as well as most of its allusions to seas and springs, enemies and monsters, defeat and victory, and the king's attributes and activities [18]. However, not all Biblical scholars who acknowledged their indebtedness to Mowinckel, fully agreed with him and much less with those who had taken his methods to the extreme. Mowinckel himself ceased to attach so much importance to the motif of the Ascension in his later writings, compared with the early ones, and other scholars who signalled the influence of the New Year festival on the book of *Psalms* considered that the main notion emphasized by the psalms is the renewal of the covenant [19] or the re-assertion of God choosing Zion and the house of David [20]. But the legacy of Gunkel and Mowinckel can be identified in the efforts of most commentators to place each psalm into the correct category and in the fact that almost all psalms are deemed to be ecclesiastic [21].

This is at variance with the opinion that doubtlessly, the psalms had been compiled and used in worship and, in many cases, written especially for this purpose. This opinion assumes that even those psalms believed to have originated in episodes in the life of David (e.g. Psalms 51-60), or attested by the

New Testament as his compositions (e.g. Psalms 16-69; 109-110), are based on the ritual drama or were anonymously created for the worship situations that could occur in the life of any individual, the kings of the house of David, or the people's assembly. Thus concerning Psalm 51, despite the opening assertion which is also present in the Hebrew text, some Biblical scholars claim that it is not the prayer made by David after his sinning with Bathsheba, and also Psalm 110, although Lord Jesus Christ mentions it, they claim it is not the work of „David inspired by the Holy Spirit” (as the Lord states in Mark 12.36). Within this broader school of thought, however, there are various opinions regarding the classification of individual *Psalms*, and is easier to ascertain who did not write the psalms, than who did write them [22].

We think that the attempt to place the psalms within their historical context must be based only on the evidence available. Let us also remember that a psalmist can speak (as Peter shows in the Acts of the Apostles 2.30 and the following) as ‘a prophet’, being aware of God’s promises and of what will occur beyond his lifetime.

4. Liturgical dimension of the psalms in Christianity

To the Jews, the *Book of Psalms* was the „most authentic expression of a profound spirituality” and it was precisely for this reason that in the divine worship the *Psalms* were chanted, music being regarded as the loftiest form of prayer [23]. Saint Basil the Great points out that: „Indeed, the prophets teach us some things, history books teach us other things; other books teach the Law, and yet others provide the counsel of *Proverbs*; but the *Book of Psalms* contains what is profitable in all of these, it prophesizes about the future, it reminds us of the past, and briefly, it is a common treasure of good teachings, giving to each of us what suits him, according to his efforts. [...] And it does so by directing souls gently and pleasantly, prompting them to think wisely. [...] The psalm brings about peace of mind, silencing the turmoil and the noise of thoughts; it calms down the anger and turns the immoderate into moderate people. The psalm makes friends, unites those who are estranged and reconciles the enemies. Indeed, who can be the enemy of another man, who has joined him in the praise of God? Thus psalmody engenders the supreme good, which is love. The psalms contain the perfect teachings about God: the announcement of the coming of Christ in the body, the dread of the Judgment, the expectation of resurrection, the fear of punishment, the promise of glory, the revelation of mysteries, all are gathered – like in a great common treasure – in the book of *Psalms*.” [23]

Beside the generic title of the book, most *Psalms* bear their own titles. However, as many of the specific terms in the titles and contents were already unintelligible for the Jewish translators of the *Septuagint* (3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.), any commentary necessarily has a degree of uncertainty [21].

The term with the highest occurrence is *mizmor*, ‘a psalm’, a term suggesting some musical accompaniment. ‘A song’ (*sir*) is a more general term, not confined to the worship practices. In the book of *Psalms*, it is often

associated with *mizmor* (e.g. Psalm 48, title) and there are fifteen consecutive ‘Songs of Ascent’ (Psalms 120-134), most likely songs chanted by pilgrims or the processions made for festivals. Thirteen psalms bear the subtitle *maskil*, which seems to mean ‘providing words of wisdom or exhortations’. The respective psalms (32- 42, 44-45, 52-55, 74, 78, 88-89, 142) except for Psalm 45, have a very reproachful tone. The title, however, might not concern the contents or context of the *Psalms*, but their literary style. This is still a matter of debate, an unsolved enigma. Six psalms are called *miktam*, a word translated in the *Septuagint* by ‘inscription’, while the versions of the *Vulgata* translate it (equally unlikely) as ‘a gold psalm’ (from *ketem*, ‘gold’) [21].

S. Mowinckel, however, calls our attention on the Akkadian term *katamu*, respectively *to cover*, suggesting that it is a reconciliation psalm, as he classifies all these psalms (16, 56-60) as lamentations [18, p. 92-93]. The ‘cover’ sought here, however, is not reconciliation but protection and defence, and in this case the most plausible meaning is ‘a plea for protection’; in today’s words, we may almost term it ‘a distress call’ [24]. Other titles are: ‘a prayer’ (17, 86, 90, 102, 142), ‘praise’ or ‘doxology’ (145) and ‘a grief song’ (*siggayon*, Psalm 7) [21]. This latter term is quite unclear; it has been associated with *sgh*, to wander or stray, and the Akkadian *ssgu*, to howl or weep [18, p. 144]. But in Psalm 7, although the situation is distressful, man responds with remarkable faith and hope.

Many musical directions specify *lamenasseah*, ‘for the director of music/chief musician’ (see Psalm 41 and the following, etc.), which seems to point to a special collection of psalms (55, disseminated throughout all the five books) much more carefully written than the rest. But this translation is not certain and many other meanings have been suggested for this Hebrew term, derived from a root that can be translated as ‘to excel’, ‘to last’ or ‘to shine’. The *Septuagint* translates it by ‘until the end’; Mowinckel, „to make Yahweh have mercy/ make His face shine”, to mention only two possible meanings.

Among the musical instruments prescribed in the titles there are *neginot* (strings) and *nehiltot* (‘flute’), while the pitch of the voice or instruments is probably indicated by the term *alamot* (Psalm 46), - literally ‘maidens/girls’ - and *seminit* (Psalms 6 and 12), ‘an octave lower’ – literally ‘the eighth’, based on the text of I Corinthians 15.20 and the following, a passage known to be enigmatic.

Some terms, usually associated with the preposition *âal* (‘according to...’), have been understood as either liturgical directions, or indications of tunes. The most important examples are below.

- a) *Gittith* (*gittit*, 8, 81, 84), a word derived from *Gat* or wine, or the press for olives or grapes;
- b) *Muth-labben* (*‘al-mut labben*, 9), ‘death of the son’ (but with the vowels rendered as *‘alamot labin*, as L. Delekat suggests [25], it might be translated as ‘soprano for clarity’);

- c) “The deer of dawn” (*'ayyelet ha-sahar*, 22); but the *Septuagint* translates it as ‘aid coming at dawn’ (cf. *'eyaluti*, ‘my help’, in verse 19 (20, Hebrew), as B.D. Eerdmans shows [26]);
- d) ‘Lilies’ (*sosanim*, 45, 69, 80), ‘Lily of the witness or the covenant’ (*susan 'edut*, 60); but instead of ‘lilies’, the *Septuagint* translates as „those who make changes” (*sessonim*);
- e) „The dove on the remote oak trees”, or „The silent dove in remote places” (*yonat 'elem rehoqim*, 56), might be the closing line of Psalm 55;
- f) „Do not destroy” (*al-tashet* 57-59, 75) is an expression employed in vineyards, also found at Isaiah 65.8. It is believed to be the name of a song for the vintage, and its tune. But the same words appear, much more significantly, in the *Deuteronomy* 9.26, which may be the reason for using it both in Isaiah 65.8b and in this title.
- g) „Mahalath” (*mahalat*, 53, 88) seems to be derived from the term *hlh*, either ‘to be sick’, or ‘to appease’. It can be a rhyme from a song, lending the name of the tune, while the additional word (*le'annot*) in the title of Psalm 83 may mean either ‘responsorial/antiphonal singing’ or ‘to harm/humiliate’. See, however, the following paragraph arguing against the notion of tune names [21]. The preposition ‘*al*’ (‘according to’), placed before most of the terms in the paragraph above, actually means ‘on’ [21]. This is why Mowinckel relates the above titles, from a. to g., to worship practices, ‘on (during) which’ these psalms are to be sung [18, p. 145]. Thus, e. refers to a ritual such as that of *Leviticus* 14.5-7, where one bird was sacrificed, and another allowed to fly away, and g. indicates a ritual for the sick. Similarly, (*'al-yedutun*) (62, 77) does not mean the cantor Yedutun (2 Chronicles 5.12) but designates an act of confession, during which psalms were sung. Mowinckel’s suggestions are mere speculations. The most questionable example he provides is the title of Psalm 22, which he thinks is about sacrificing a deer, an animal that could not be sacrificed (*Deuteronomy* 12, 15, etc.).

Selah (*sela*) occurs 71 times and is still an enigma: it often appears to mark a division within a psalm, possibly as a sign for the worshippers to ‘raise’ (*sll*) their voices of the sound of their instruments, for a refrain or an interlude.

Higgaion (*higgayon*, 9, 16 (17, Hebrew) just like *Selah*, is obviously a musical indication. It is a term employed in Psalm 92.3 (4, Hebrew) for the sound of a string instrument [21].

We mention that the ‘Hodayot’ – *Songs of prayer and thanksgiving* – include over 40 hymns modelled on expressions occurring in the Book of Psalms. The canonical psalms served as models for old Jewish hymns. At least two psalms of the New Testament, the Exaltation of the Mother of God (Luke I, 46-55) and the Blessing of Zeccharias (Luke I, 68-79) led to the emergence of canonical prototypes [1, p. 43].

Biblical texts relate music to the worship process (Isaiah 30.29). Not only do many psalms describe an instrumental accompaniment, but they equally seem to indicate a vocal-instrumental performance. Generally, the psalms address

various topics such as human needs, human distress, divine pathos and greatness, as well as the virtues and joys of spiritual life. The ample use of Psalms in the Jewish and Christian tradition leads us to believe that they were quite extensively employed in early liturgies [1, p. 44].

Besides the mentions of psalms in the Bible, their use in the services celebrated at the second Temple is recorded by the Dead Sea scrolls and the writings of the early rabbis. According to the rabbinic code, a psalm was sung at the Temple every day. Hebrew tradition has the psalms correspond to the creation. Psalm 24 was chosen for Sunday, the first day of the week, as it praises the divine initiative in the act of the genesis; on the second day, Psalm 48 praised God for having divided the waters; on the third day, Psalm 82 glorifies the position of God as the Judge of the entire Earth; for the fourth day, Psalm 94 was chosen, extolling the revenge upon the persecutors of Israel, on the day when the Sun, Moon and the stars had been created; on the fifth day, Psalm 81 exalts the wonders of Creation; on the sixth day, Psalm 93 glorifies the craftsmanship of God, having accomplished the miracle of man's creation. On the Sabbath day, Psalm 92 represents the Jewish liturgy that includes the daily recitation of these psalms [1, p. 44].

5. Conclusions

Since ancient times, the *Psalms* had a major role in the creation of Christian hymnography. The first Christian churches inherited the psalm intonation and chanting from the Jewish synagogue. The early Church Fathers asserted that Jesus would recite psalms (Psalm 22.2). Historically, the Psalms date from different periods and come from different sources, so they provide a variety of perceptions of God and religious interests. Each psalm asserts that God is just, and consequently reveals a special interest in justice and correctness.

Although the Jewish and Christian traditions saw in the Psalms the expression of David's musings and piety, that is, the manifestation of human spirit, they have been perceived as a source of divine revelation of the future, to both the good and the evil people. Both Jews and Christians found in a great number of psalms the announcement of Messiah restoring the human nature.

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