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Notes on Some Ritual Uses of the Psalms

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1. *Tehillim*.

The Hebrew title of the Book of Psalms, *tehillim* (תהלים), is in itself an indication of ritual use. In connection with sacrifice among the ancient Arabs there was a cry of praise, called *tahlil*, from the verb *hallal*. Even in the case of the killing of wild animals, such as a gazelle, the sacrificial idea was present and a *tahlil* was uttered. The same use seems to have prevailed among the Hebrews. From the most primitive time the *tehillah*, or shout of praise, formed an essential part of the ritual of sacrifice.¹ There was the moment of silence awaiting the coming of the deity, and then the *tehillah*, or burst of praise, presumably much the same as among the Arabs. The Psalms, by their constant use of and reference to the *tehillah*, evince its importance in connection with worship; and because of its relation to so intimate a part of the worship as sacrifice, indicating as it does the coming of the presence of God in connection with sacrifice, it comes to be now and then used as a synonym for the presence of God. So we find it used as the equivalent of the *Name*.² Again we find such phrases as "Inhabiter of the *tehilloth* of Israel."³

With the development of the ritual among the Hebrews, the *tehillah*, which, as stated, is practically identical with the Arabic *tahlil*, both of them from the root *h-l-l*, was developed into a Psalm. As a Psalm title *tehillah* is applied only to Psalm 145, apparently, however, not as applying to that Psalm only, but to the last collection of Psalms in the Psalter,

¹ For the later use cf. 2 Chron. 29 26 π. ² Cf. 66 2 106 47, Is. 48 9. ³ Ps. 22 4.

viz. Psalms 145-150. Of these Psalms 146-150 begin and end with *hallelu-Yah*, which is, I presume, the original *tehillah*, the simple shout of praise to Yah. These Psalms themselves are presumably late, but in the *tehillah* on which they are based they preserve an ancient liturgical form of words. That is the reason why we have in them the more primitive form of the sacred name, *Yah* or *Yahu*, instead of *Yahaweh*. This is not, however, the only collection of *hallelu-Yah* psalms in the Psalter. 111-117⁴ and 135 also begin and end with the *tehillah*.⁵ These Psalms, with the Thank Offering Psalms, which we shall consider presently, form a large element in the last books of the Psalter, and they indicate the influences which finally prevailed in molding the Psalter. The later Psalms were in large part composed to be sung at the sacrifices in the Temple, and the Psalter as a whole came to be regarded as a part of the sacrificial ritual. Hence the name *tehillim*, a curious masculine plural of *tehillah*, the plural used in classical Hebrew being commonly the feminine *tehilloth*, was ultimately applied to the Book of Psalms as a title, in place of the earlier, less technical and more general titles applied to the earlier collections in the Hebrew, and to the whole Psalter in the Greek translation.

2. *The Tehillah of the Thank Offering.*

Besides the very simple and general sacrificial praise cry already discussed we find another, used apparently especially in connection with the thank offering, and second in popularity and familiarity only to the *hallelu-Yah tehillah*, namely the *hodhah*,⁶ which has also been embodied in a number of Psalms. Jeremiah 33 11 is evidence that the sacrificial cry used in connection with the *todhah*, or thank offering, was: "Praise Yahaweh Šabaoth, for Yahaweh is good, for His

⁴ This was a *hallel* collection, or collection of *tehilloth*, to which properly Psalm 117 was the doxology. As they stand at present the headings of some of these Psalms are lost in the endings of their predecessors.

⁵ For a technical use of the word *tehillah* in the earlier books of the Psalter cf. 65 1.

⁶ Cf. Hab. 3 2, Neh. 12 44.

mercy endureth forever.”⁷ We have in the later books of the Psalter a number of Psalms developed on this theme, which were evidently intended to be used in the ritual in connection with the *todhah*, the essential part of these psalms, constituting the actual *tehillah* for the thank offering, being the words: “Praise Yahaweh Sabaoth,” etc. In the slightly varied form we find the same cry in the last two verses of Psalm 100. This Psalm is noted in the heading as intended to be sung at the *todhah*, or thank offering, and the ritual use is not difficult to reconstruct from the words of the Psalm itself. The first three verses are a general praise song, sung apparently before the actual slaughter of the victim. The fourth verse suggests a processional movement, entering in through the gates into the courts of the Temple, and then at the moment of the slaughter of the victim, or rather immediately thereafter the proper *tehillah* (note the use of this word in vs. 4) for the thank offering. This suggestion of the ritual use contained in the words of Psalm 100 is confirmed by an actual ritual direction embedded in the text of another Psalm. Psalm 118 is evidently a processional hymn of a very elaborate character. Like Psalm 100 it indicates the entrance of the sacrificial procession through the Temple gates into the courts. Then occur the words (vs. 27 b.): “Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.” Rhythmically this is clearly not a part of the Psalm text proper. The text is corrupt; corrupted in the effort to work a misunderstood rubric into the Psalm text. The words contain an old rubric or ritual direction with regard to the sacrifice, which is to be made at this point; and the verses following are in fact the *tehillah* of the thank offering, preceded by a verse of a character similar to that which precedes the same *tehillah* in Psalm 100; and with the *tehillah* proper the Psalm closes, precisely as the Halleluiahs Psalms all close with the *Hallelu-Yah tehillah*.⁸ One Psalm, 106, combines in its theme expression the simple *hallel tehillah*

⁷ Cf. also Chronicles, and especially 2 Chron. 7 a. e, which appear to show that this formula was at that time used with other sacrifices also.

⁸ Psalm 136 presents another slight variant of the Thank Offering *tehillah*.

with the *hodhah tehillah*; and several Psalms (so 105, 106) which are clearly *todhah* Psalms, have at the close the more general *hallel tehillah*, instead of the *hodhah tehillah* proper, suggesting a certain interchangeability of the two, the more general and the special.

There are a few headings of the Psalms, as is well known, indicating ritual uses, to which those Psalms were appropriated. So Psalms 38 and 70 are designated, by the headings, for the *Azkara* or memorial offering (Lev. 24 7. 8); Psalm 22 perhaps for the morning sacrifice. These Psalms, however, do not seem to have been written primarily for the purpose of those sacrifices, but rather to have been appropriated to such use ritually after the Psalter had come to be a Temple and specifically a sacrificial hymn book. The *Hallel* and *Todhah* Psalms of the later books, on the other hand, were specifically written for sacrificial purposes and are inspired by or expansions of technical sacrificial formulæ.

3. *A Babylonian and Hebrew Ritual Phrase.*

Attention has been called to the ritual rubric in Psalm 118. Here and there we find such rubrics or ritual directions, either in the heading of a Psalm, or inserted in its text, as in this case. More often, however, no tradition has come down to us and we have to reconstruct the ritual as best we can out of the Psalms themselves. The same is very largely true of the Babylonian ritual hymns and psalms which have come down to us. A few have here and there ritual directions. More often, while it is clear that they were used for ritual purposes, the ritual direction is wanting.

There are certain curious similarities which every one has noticed between Babylonian and Hebrew Psalms, and among these there are some which belong, I think, to ritual use. Langdon, in his discussion of a "Lament to Enlil,"⁹ points out the various redactions that Psalm has undergone, which might be readily paralleled by not a few of the Hebrew Psalms. In his introduction to the translation of this Lament, he says: "The chief features of a song service were

⁹ *Babyloniaca*, Tome II.

the recitation of the so-called heroic names of the god or goddess to whom the song service was dedicated interspersed with hymns to this divinity, legends of his or her heroic deeds, and at the end a ritual to be performed. It seems evident that extensive song services of this kind, interspersed by litanies and rituals, began to be evolved by the Sumerians themselves." In fact, you find, in the Babylonian hymns and psalms, the recitation of the names of gods to the point of more than satiety. That something of the same sort existed in Hebrew ritual becomes plain when we read the Hebrew Psalms and observe the continual reference to the *name* of the divinity, as for instance in Psalm 48 11: "As is Thy name so is Thy *tehillah*." In the prelude to Psalm 18 we find in a degree the same magnification of the deity by a repetition of His names which is so common in the Babylonian psalms, except only that there is one deity mentioned in the one case with many epithets and in the other a number of different deities with a great variety of epithets. The ritual conception is the same, however, and indeed Langdon's description of a Babylonian song service would apply with that modification to more than one of the Hebrew Psalms.

In further comment on the ritual use of the Hymn to Enlil, Langdon adds: "After a few lines of lamentation . . . the scribe cites the first lines of the ancient Sumerian hymn . . . giving a Semitic translation and then says: 'Sing the 42 heroic names,' that is lines, meaning of course that the song to Enlil should here be taken into the service." This reminds one curiously of the rubric in Psalm 68 12, apparently directing certain officiants to introduce at this point a hymn (or series of hymns), which is indicated by the titles in the following two or three verses of its sections or parts (or of the separate hymns, if it is to be regarded as a series of hymns). The Hebrew Psalms, like the Babylonian, were intended for or adapted to ritual use to an extent not heretofore appreciated, I think; and in that ritual use is to be sought the explanation of not a few of those phenomena which now perplex the Psalm commentator; not only pe-

culiar headings like ללמד ("to teach"), Psalm 40,²⁰ but also some now impossible and untranslatable verses and passages in the Psalm texts themselves.

One such ritual phrase in the Psalm texts, in regard to which Hebrew and Babylonian psalmody have been mutually elucidative, is the common cry: "How long." This occurs over and over again in Babylonian penitential psalms as a ritual phrase, well understood words which do not need to have their context given. These words are used in the Hebrew in at least two cases in the same way, without any text to make sense, because they are ritually so familiar. The two cases are Psalms 6 4 and 90 13. Elsewhere in Hebrew the words are used with other words attached to them, which make in themselves a complete whole, as, for instance, in Psalm 74 9 b. 10 a.; "And there is none among us that knoweth how long. How long, O God! shall the enemy rage?" But even such verses as this are not quite satisfactory without the attribution of a special ritual significance to the words: "How long." When it is understood that these words have a ritual value, *i. e.* that they are words which are well understood in ritual use, themselves significant to the people and indicating a certain regular and definite thing in the ritual for which the Psalm was appropriated, this phraseology takes on a new meaning to the reader.

4. *The Ritual of the Penitential Psalms.*

Psalm 6, one of the two Psalms in which the words "How long" occur in what seems to be entirely a ritual use, has occasioned no little trouble, because these words taken by themselves are there undoubtedly incomplete. Literally Psalm 6 4 reads "And I (my soul) am sore vexed, and thou Yahaweh, how long?" Now I am inclined to think that this Psalm, one of the famous penitential Psalms of the Church, by the way, was part of the ritual connected with the sacrifices for unwitting sins or "secret sins," to use the phraseology so familiar to us in the Psalms. The specifications for

²⁰ Cf. also 2 Sam. 1 18 and Deut. 81 19.

the sacrifices to be offered in connection with these unwitting sins are contained, it will be remembered, in Leviticus 4 and 5. This Psalm was, I think, a ritual to be said by priest and penitent in connection with those sacrifices. If it be compared with the Babylonian penitential psalms, it will be found that in certain points it is not dissimilar in idea to those psalms, with their prayers for forgiveness for the sin which is not known to the sacrificer, and with the use of the phrase "How long" to mark some step or phase in the ritual.

Jastrow, in his *Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, following Zimmern, has analyzed ritually one of these Psalms as follows :

The penitent addressing his goddess :

I, thy servant, full of sighs, call upon thee ;
 The fervent prayer of him who has sinned do thou accept.
 If thou lookest upon a man, that man lives.
 O all-powerful mistress of mankind,
 Merciful one, to whom it is good to turn, who hears sighs !

Then the priest prays to the goddess thus :

His god and goddess being angry with him, he calls upon thee,
 Turn towards him thy countenance, take hold of his hand.

Then the penitent continues :

Besides thee, there is no guiding deity,
 I implore thee to look upon me and hear my sighs.
 Proclaim pacification, and may thy soul be appeased.
 How long, O my mistress, till thy countenance be turned towards me.
 Like doves, I lament, I satiate myself with sighs.

Then the priest :

With pain and ache, his soul is full of sighs ;
 Tears he weeps, he pours forth lament.

I would suggest a somewhat similar analysis of the 6th Psalm of our Psalter. Vss. 1-3 a. seem to be an appeal for

mercy and healing for the suppliant, and that God may turn away His wrath :

Yahaweh, rebuke me not in thine anger,
Neither chasten me in thy wrath.
Pity me, Yahaweh, for I languish away.
Heal me, Yahaweh, for my bones are vexed.
All of me is vexed sore.

Then a cry for deliverance of the penitent from the danger of death, apparently by the priest, introduced by the ritual phrase : " How long ! " (vss. 3 a.-5),

And thou, Yahaweh, how long !
Turn, Yahaweh ; deliver me,
Save me, because of Thy love.
For in death Thou art not named :
In hell who thanketh Thee ?

Then, in vss. 6, 7, the suppliant presents a new picture of his misery, or one standing for the suppliant presents it for him.

I am weary with my groaning ;
Each night wash I my bed ;
I water my couch with my tears.
Mine eye hath wasted through grief,
Hath aged because of my foes.

The ritual closes with a declaration, presumably by the priest, of the answer to the petition (vss. 8, 9), coupled with a prayer (vs. 10) for the punishment of the enemies, who are in some way connected with the calamity which had befallen the suppliant :

Depart from me, all ye doers of evil,
For Yahaweh hath heard the voice of my weeping.
Yahaweh hath heard my entreaty.
Yahaweh receiveth my prayer.
Ashamed and sore confounded be all mine enemies ;
Turned back, put to shame suddenly.

In comparing the Babylonian and Hebrew, it is worthy of note that in the Babylonian Psalms the calamity comes from a god or the gods, not necessarily with any connection with outside foes. In this and similar penitential Psalms in the

Hebrew, while Yahaweh is the source of the calamity, yet in some manner the foes of the suppliant are concerned in that calamity, and the ritual regularly involves a prayer for their destruction and overthrow.

The heading of Psalm 102, "Prayer of a man in trouble," indicates that it was ritually assigned to the same use as a penitential Psalm. In Psalm 51, vs. 9 seems to indicate a ritual act in connection with the cleansing of the penitent.¹¹

It should be added that in the long use of these Psalms in the synagogue, much that was primarily ritual has been forgotten or rubbed away; and in the case of more primitive ritual practices, for which some of them were originally composed, or to which they were adapted, their use in the Temple has effaced many of the marks of their original purpose.

5. *Selah*.

Psalm 3 appears to furnish an object lesson on the meaning of *selah* as a rubrical or ritual direction, which has, I believe, been generally overlooked. The Psalm consists of four stanzas of two full verses each. At the close of stanzas 1, 2 and 4 there is a *selah*; but none after stanza 3. The first verse of the fourth stanza (8) contains four phrases, instead of the two phrases of which every other verse is composed. The first two phrases of the last stanza (8 a.) are, moreover, doxological in character, and stand in no intimate grammatical or sense relation to the rest of the verse. These phrases occupy in relation to the third stanza the same place which the *selah* occupies in relation to each other stanza, and are in fact the *selah*. The Psalm originally consisted of three stanzas. At the close of the last stanza was written the refrain, to be used after each stanza: "Arise, Yahaweh, save me, O my God," the place for its use after the other stanza being indicated by *selah*. Later a fourth stanza was added, and the use of the refrain after that also was indicated by a *selah*, the refrain itself remaining as before after the third stanza.

¹¹ Among its numerous headings Ps. 88 has one, לְמִנְחָה, which indicates its use as a penitential hymn.

6. *Maskil*.

In Psalm 47 8 we have a unique use of the word מִשְׁכִּיל (*maskil*), evidently as a *terminus technicus*. It has commonly been supposed by commentators to have here the same meaning which it has as the title of certain Psalms, and so s b. is rendered by them "make melody with a *maskil*," or a "meditation," or whatever may be the interpretation which they have given to *maskil* as a Psalm heading. This Psalm is a ritual hymn, sung originally in connection with the "going up" of God (vss. 6, 10).¹² After a stanza, ending with a *selah*, of general praise of the might of God, who has given to Jacob, whom He loves, his heritage, comes a refrain or chorus (vs. 6):

Make melody to God, make melody;
Make melody to our King, make melody.

Then follows our verse (7):

For God is king of all the earth;
Make melody, *maskil*.

Then follow three verses which, commencing with a reassertion of His kingship over all peoples, represent Him as seated on His throne, with the princes of the nations gathered about Him, and the people of the God of Abraham; the whole closing with the words מֵאֵד נִלְלָהוּ, literally "exceedingly is He gone up," or "has He been brought up," indicating the close of the ceremony of His "going up" or "bringing up." A study of the rhythm of this Psalm shows at once that vs. 7 b. is truncated. Briggs has recognized this and cut out of whole cloth and inserted, to complete the meter, the words "to Yahaweh"; and he accordingly translates: "Make melody to (Yahaweh) with a *maskil*"; which would be certainly a unique use. I think it is clear that what we should expect here is a repetition of the refrain or chorus immediately preceding this part of the Psalm, accompanying the actual ritual act of the "going up" with a loud and repeated chorus of praise. The word *maskil* is, I think, a

¹² Cf. the appropriation of this Psalm in 1 Chron. 16 22 to the bringing of the Ark to Jerusalem by David.

rubric or direction to indicate the repetition one or more times of the refrain at this point. Vss. 6 ff. would then have been sung in actual use somewhat thus:

God has gone up with a shout;
Yahaweh with the sound of the horn.

(Chorus:)

Make melody to God, make melody;
Make melody to our King, make melody.

For God is king of all the earth.

(Chorus:)

Make melody to God, make melody;
Make melody to our King, make melody.

Thus the kernel of this Psalm was a great outburst of melody, accompanying the central ritual act, preceded and succeeded by more regular stanzas declaring the honor and power of God and His love to Jacob. The *selah* at the close of vs. 9 may be regarded as indicating the introduction at that point of such an outburst of praise as we actually have in the middle verses, 6-8.

It must be confessed, however, that this is also a unique use of *maskil*; and yet it is one for which we can find, I think, some support in a study of the uses of the word elsewhere. In general, the root meaning of שָׁכַל appears to be "cleverness," "knowledge." In connection with the *hiphil* forms the Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius remarks, however: "meanings hard to classify: scholars differ greatly." Similarly, the noun שָׁכַל (*sekel*) means, as shown by its parallelisms, "prudence," "understanding," etc. But in the later use of Chronicles and Nehemiah, which is the use nearest in time and sense to the ritual and musical annotations of the Psalter, both the verb (*hiphil*) and the noun come to be used in a different sense. In 1 Chronicles 28 19 and Nehemiah 8 13 it has the same meaning as the Aramaic *sakal*, viz. "teach"¹³ or still better, perhaps, "repeat," which may be

¹³ Cf. also Dan. 11 28. 28 probably "teachers"; and Dan. 9 18 where the verb with שָׁכַל gives the best sense if rendered "execute," "practice," "perform." Neh. 8 8 שָׁכַל seems to mean "interpretation," or "teaching." In

said to be a development of "teach," i.e. the repeating over and over again. In 1 Chronicles 26 14 and 2 Chronicles 30 22 it has become a *terminus technicus*, as has also מִשְׁכִּיל (*maskil*), applied to skilled musicians, who "execute," "perform," "render," "conduct," "repeat" (or whatever the correct rendering may be), musical compositions.

This technical use of שֶׁבַל (*sekel*) and מִשְׁכִּיל (*maskil*) in connection with the lists of singers, and particularly Korahite singers, in the Book of Chronicles suggests also the interpretation of the term *maskil* in Psalm headings, where it has commonly been rendered "meditation," although the Psalms having that heading are not meditations in any sense of the word common to the English language. The Psalms thus headed are 32, 42-45, 52-55, 74, 78, 88, 89, and 142.¹⁴ Of these thirteen Psalms (or fourteen, 43 is really a part of 42, and hence has no separate heading), it will be observed, three (or four) belong to the Korahite collection proper, two (88 and 89) to the Korahite supplement, two to the Asaphite collection, and four to the Prayers of David, son of Jesse, the collection next most closely related to the Korah and Asaph collections. Eleven (or twelve) out of the thirteen (or fourteen) belong to the middle books of the Psalter, one to the great David Psalter, book 1, and one to that puzzling little David Psalter of the 5th book (Psalms 138-144) which alone of all the collections of the last two books is provided (very imperfectly, it is true) with musical annotations. In contents, and in meter, these thirteen Psalms are very various. In this only they agree: they have been arranged for musical rendition, and are provided with refrains, either fully expressed or indicated. This suggests that the meaning of the heading *maskil* is similar to the meaning of *maskil*

Ps. 101 : אֶשְׁלִיכֶּה אֶת לִבִּי אֶתְּרִידָה at the commencement of one verse follows immediately אֶתְּרִידָה at the end of the preceding verse, a juxtaposition somewhat like that in Ps. 47 : suggesting at least a possible allusion to or consciousness of a technical musical sense.

¹⁴ To the LXX Greek translators the technical sense of *maskil*, as of the musical annotations of the Psalter in general, was unknown, and the word is rendered according to its root sense, *σύνεσις*, "understanding." This heading is wanting in Psalms 45 and 56 in the LXX.

and *sekel* in the musical lists of the Chronicler, indicating a Psalm prepared for musical rendition. *Maskil* would have, therefore, very much the same meaning as *למנצח* (*lammenassehah*) so common in the first book, the one being used in one musical circle or period, the other in another, just as we find Psalms designated in different circles and periods by the titles, song (*שיר*), psalm (*מזמור*), prayer (*תפלה*), and praises (*תהלים*).

NOTE. — Psalm 46 of the Korah Psalter furnishes another similar example of the use of *selah*. This Psalm consists of three stanzas, one, vss. 2-4, two, vss. 5-8, and three, vss. 9-12. The refrain, which occurs in connection with stanzas two and three, consists of the words "Yahaweh of hosts is with us, our refuge, the God of Jacob." This refrain is not written at the close of the first stanza, but merely a *selah* which indicates the place of the refrain. To this extent the arrangement in this Psalm differs from that in Psalm 4: that at the close of stanza two and three the *selah* is added after the refrain. Psalm 84 vs. 5 gives a slight variation of the use of *selah* as a ritual direction, but one very suggestive as showing its value. It follows an imperfect half verse (vs. 5 b.) which ends with the word: "They shall praise thee, *selah*" (*יהללוך סלה*), the *selah* marking the *hallel*s or praises which are to be sung at that point.