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The Liturgical Use of Psalm 29

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AS THIS VOLUME DEMONSTRATES, THE SCHOLARLY LITERATURE ON Psalm 29 is extensive and based on a large body of psalm studies from the previous half-century. Scholars such as Mitchell Dahood, Peter Craigie and Carola Kloos have focused on the relationship between the biblical text of Psalm 29 and other ancient Near Eastern texts, especially those from the Canaanite region into which the Hebrews settled after their exodus from Egypt. The highly symmetrical use of the terms “Lord” and the “voice of the Lord” in this psalm has fascinated scholars for years. David Noel Freedman and C. Franke-Hyland are representatives of those who have put this psalm text through a rigorous structural poetic analysis, while Pieter M. Venter, more recently, updates such an analysis with special attention to the physical and symbolic places mentioned in the body of the psalm. Less attention has been paid to the liturgical functions of Psalm 29 in the Judeo-Christian tradition and it is this latter topic that is the focus of this specific chapter. How was and is Psalm 29 used in Jewish worship past and present? And how do the various Christian traditions (Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant) make use of this psalm text in traditional and contemporary worship?

Psalm 29 in Jewish Worship

Numerous scholars have categorized Psalm 29 as a victory hymn, analogous to the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–18; also called the Song of Moses), the Song of Deborah (Judg 5) and the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1–10). Are these early song examples from the *Book of the Wars*

of the Lord mentioned in Numbers 21:14? And was Psalm 29 actually initially a part of that otherwise virtually unknown collection? Why was the Exodus 15 hymn not incorporated into the Book of Psalms? Were such songs used in the Tabernacle during the Hebrew desert travels, or at least prior to the installation of temple worship in Jerusalem? These are fascinating questions, but they remain unanswered and unanswerable given the absence of sufficient details.

Equally evocative, but also inconclusive for the question of how Psalm 29 was used in early Jewish worship, is the relationship between the Hebrew text of this psalm and that of other ancient Near Eastern texts. Carola Kloos argued that the Hebrew God YHWH was assigned the traits of the Canaanite god Baal from earliest times, as in well before the prophets' denunciations of the Baal religion (Kloos, 124). This could presume an early dating for Psalm 29. However, Craigie claims that this psalm is strongly polemical, presumably contemporary with the later Hebrew prophets' attack against Baal. He suggests that Psalm 29 not only affirms YHWH as the Lord of nature and of the natural forces otherwise attributed to Baal, but that the text actually mocks those Baal powers (Craigie, 249). As the geographic origin of this psalm text is thought to be northern Canaan (given its references to Lebanon and Sirion [Mount Hermon]), there are speculations that the psalm may have its antecedents or analogues in Baal worship at Dan which was located just south of Mount Hermon in northern Canaan, but that this text was written or adapted for use in the orthodox worship of YHWH in Jerusalem's temple, possibly under the prodding of a "righteous" king such as Hezekiah or Josiah.

Equally elusive is the conjecture that Psalm 29 was used in a specific festival in the practices of Judean pre-Jewish worship related in the Hebrew Bible. The great form-critical scholars of the psalms, Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel had proposed an Autumn Festival or an Enthronement Festival in which they located the *Sitz im Leben* ("situation in life") of many psalms in the cultic rituals and festivals of Judean worship. In their view Psalm 29 becomes a royal psalm in which YHWH is the king. Similarly, Arthur Weiser proposed an annual Covenant Festival in which he claims many of the psalms find their function; he suggests Psalm 29 is a "theophany" psalm that signaled the appearance of God at such a festival. While most modern scholars of the psalms readily admit their profound debt to these form-critical

scholars, there is a growing consensus that the evidence for such specific festivals is either exaggerated or certainly elusive and thus that any role that Psalm 29 may have had in such presupposed Enthronement or Covenant festivals is highly conjectural.

The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible by the “Seventy” (thus LXX, or “Septuagint”) adds a phrase to Psalm 29’s customary superscription, “a psalm of David,” concerning “the conclusion of Tabernacles.” Various early Talmudic commentaries show that Psalm 29 was allied to the Feast of Tabernacles, *Sukkot*, either as one of the psalm readings for the opening of this autumn harvest festival or for use on the last day of this festival, typically sung at the dramatic moment in the service when the Torah scroll is returned to the Ark after the congregation has read from it. *Sukkot* celebrations focus on thanksgiving for the harvest (and by extension, how God took care of his people during their desert journey), and include prayers for rain (for which the thunderstorm in Psalm 29 fits well). The seven occurrences of the “voice of the Lord” in the body of the psalm are thought to correspond to the pouring of water on the seventh day of this feast, to the seven-day length of this event, and to the seven processions around the altar that occur during this time. The Septuagint’s addition of “the Tabernacles” phrase presumably reflects contemporary Jewish practices of the Second Temple up to the time of its destruction in 70 CE. One may conjecture that Jesus would have been familiar with the use of Psalm 29 during his participation in the Feast of Tabernacles as recorded in John 7. While various Jewish sources attest to the use of Psalm 29 during the autumn Feast of Tabernacles, the important *Soferim* treatise (±600 CE) assigns Psalm 29 to the late spring Festival of Weeks, *Shavuot* or Pentecost (Elbogen, 115), which is the earlier of the two big harvest festivals. It is this *Shavuot* tradition which the great eleventh-century Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (known as Rashi) follows when he interprets psalm 29 with reference to the giving of the law by God to Moses, which is a central theme of *Shavuot*; however, he makes no reference to the Feast of Tabernacles (Solomon ben Isaac, 150–52).

Modern Jewish use of Psalm 29 continues in the annual Feast of Tabernacles and in the weekly *Kabbalat Shabbat* (“Welcome to the Sabbath”) which occurs each Friday in the late afternoon or around sundown as a precursor to the regular Friday evening service. The *Kabbalat Shabbat* service originated among Jewish mystics or kabbal-

ists in the sixteenth-century. The contents of this service varies from one region and/or style of Judaism to another (Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Orthodox, Reform), but it is common for this part of the normal synagogue service to involve the readings of Psalms 95–99 and Psalm 29. These royal psalms emphasize the reign of the Lord and the six psalms together are thought to correspond to the six days of creation or to the six weekdays.

Among the usual components of the evening [*maariv*] or morning [*shacharit*] services are the *Shema* (Deut 6:4), with its blessings of creation, revelation and redemption; the series of *Amidah* prayers (which can be as many as eighteen “Benedictions,” the first three of which are related to phrases in Psalm 29; the mourner’s *Kaddish*; and several songs, including the famous kabbalists’ hymn, *Lekhhah Dodi* (“Come, My Friend”) which welcomes the Sabbath as a bride. In addition, all of Psalm 29, or the “voice of the Lord” segments thereof, are often featured during the processing of the Torah in conjunction with the reading of the Jewish Scriptures.

Psalm 29 [28] in Eastern Orthodox Worship

The many translations into vernacular languages of the book of Psalms used in Eastern Orthodox Christian services derive from the Septuagint Greek translation. Since the Septuagint used a slightly different numbering system than the Hebrew Bible, Psalm 29 in the Hebrew text is Psalm 28 in most Bible versions used in the Eastern Orthodox churches. In the following section on Orthodox liturgy “Psalm 29” will be used in conformity with the Hebrew and Protestant Bibles numbering system; however, in the Orthodox traditions themselves this psalm is numbered “28.”

As in Jewish tradition it is customary that portions of Psalm 29 are used as psalm verses [*prokeimena*] in the Divine Liturgy and in the Matins of the Orthodox Church. Most common are verse 1: “Ascribe to the Lord . . .”; verse 3: “The voice of the Lord is over the waters . . .”; and verse 11: “The Lord will give strength to his people . . .” Such verses usually precede the reading of a portion of Scripture and function much in the same way as the gradual does in the Roman Catholic mass.

But the most notable place for Psalm 29 in Orthodoxy occurs during the “Great Blessing of Water” (*megas agiasmos*), which is part of the Feast of Theophany or Epiphany. Since the early period of the

church, Eastern Orthodoxy celebrated the baptism of Jesus on the day of Epiphany, January 6. That festival commemorates the manifestation of the Holy Trinity in that baptismal event: God the Father spoke “this is my Son” as Christ was baptized by John in the Jordan River during which time the Holy Spirit was symbolized by a dove descending on Jesus. Orthodox liturgy does not only emphasize the Trinity in the feast, however, but also focuses on the sanctification of water by the Spirit of God as explained by such church fathers as Saints Basil and Ambrose. According to Orthodox theology all creation is sanctified in Christ’s baptism and thus it is fitting that a creation psalm such as Psalm 29, with its imagery of a storm, is an important part of the liturgy of Epiphany.

The “Great Blessing of Water” is held on the eve of the Feast of the Epiphany, during the “third royal hour” and has roots that date back to the compilation work of Saint Sophronius (560–638), who was the Patriarch of Jerusalem in his final years. The liturgy consists of Isaiah 35 and 55; 1 Corinthians 10:1–4; Mark 1:9–11; Psalms 29, 42 [=41], and 51 [=50]; and a number of prayers, including a special prayer for the sanctification of water by the Spirit of God. Because many more people are present for worship on the day of Epiphany, this service of the “Great Blessing of Water” is often repeated following the Divine Liturgy for Epiphany. After the solemn blessing the holy water is distributed to the church members for them to drink as a memorial of their own baptism and to be taken with them as blessing for their homes. With the words of Psalm 29 ringing fresh in their ears, Orthodox Christians practice what Saint John Chrysostom (347–407) taught in a sermon on the Epiphany: “For this is the day on which he was baptized and sanctified the nature of the waters. Hence for this reason during this feast at midnight we all, having drawn the water, deposit the streams at home and we keep it there for a whole year, in as much as it was on this day that the waters were sanctified.” [*In homiliam de baptismo Christi et de epiphania* 2 [Migne PG 49.365–66], translated by Margaret M. Mitchell).

Psalm 29 in Western Christianity

As noted, the Eastern Church celebrates the baptism of Jesus on the Feast of the Epiphany. By contrast, the Western Church observes the coming of the Magi on Epiphany and celebrates the Baptism of the Lord on the Sunday after Epiphany. Also, note that the Vulgate Bible was

based on the Septuagint and until modern times the Catholic Church has, like Orthodoxy, numbered Psalm 29 as Psalm 28; the most modern English Catholic Bibles have, however, adopted the Hebrew Bible numbering system.

While the medieval church in the west also assigned Psalm 29 to the service that focused on the baptism of Christ during the Epiphany season, it is the weekly chanting of this psalm that stands out in the medieval Roman Catholic tradition. In the monastic breviary (that is: the liturgy book of the daily Offices) of the later medieval times, Psalm 29 is one of a dozen psalms appointed to Matins for each Sunday morning in the ferial psalter, that is for ordinary week-days, not during the festive seasons (Harper, 259). In the ferial psalter for use outside of monastic institutions (for secular use), Psalm 29 appears among the psalms appointed for Matins of each Monday morning (Harper, 258). Reforms of the breviary in the sixteenth-century, in 1911 under Pope Pius X, and following the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s have produced changes in which psalms are assigned to which of the daily Offices, but the practice of reading or chanting the entire psalter in a week has continued largely unabated. Imagine singing Psalm 29 once a week throughout a person's entire adult lifetime!

Judiciously adopting and adapting various Roman Catholic and some Lutheran sources, Thomas Cranmer prepared the *Book of Common Prayer* for the young Anglican Church in 1549. Abandoning the weekly singing of the psalms during the eight daily Offices, he assigned the entire psalter to a monthly cycle, divided between Matins and Evensong. Psalm 29 was the third psalm appointed to Evensong on the fifth day of each month, following Psalms 27 and 28 (Harper, 265). The order of singing the psalms in the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* was retained in the tables in the 1552, 1559, and 1662 editions, and survives largely unchanged in modern versions of the *Book of Common Prayer*. The various prayer-books that are used in Anglican churches world-wide today contain similar charts that promote this practice of singing all the psalms every month, including Psalm 29 in its appointed sequence.

John Calvin's emphasis on congregational singing of psalms produced the "Genevan" Psalter in 1562: *Les Psalmes mis en rime française par Clement Marot et Theodore de Beze*. Various charts are available from Calvin's church in Geneva which show the psalms, paraphrased in French, assigned to be sung on Sunday mornings and evenings and at Wednesday prayer meetings. The 1549 chart, when the "Genevan"

Psalter was still incomplete, covers some 50 psalms on a 17-week cycle and does not contain Psalm 29. Psalm 29 does appear on the 1553 chart that covers 83 psalms on a 28-week rotation; it is assigned there for Sunday evenings in the sixth week. Upon completion of the “Genevan” Psalter, the 1562 chart covers all 150 psalms on a 25-week cycle. In it Psalm 29 is now appointed to be sung early Sunday mornings (“at the ringing of the second bell”) in each third week of this semi-annual rotation (Pidoux, 2.135).

The various *Kirchenordnung* (church order) documents of early Lutheranism appointed psalms to be sung in Latin or German for Matins and Vespers. Early Methodists tended to use the order of psalms assigned in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Without monastic institutions, however, only the Offices of Matins and Vespers, with their respective repertory of psalms, have prevailed among Protestant Christians and certainly not uniformly among them. While some local churches faithfully continue the practice of morning and evening Offices for the handful of people who come for such corporate daily worship, for many Christians the daily Offices have become simplified to their personal or family devotions. To that end various modern prayer-books and hymnals include charts and assign the psalms to be read daily at home, in various sequences, as a domestic or personal imitation of the traditional ordering of singing the psalms in corporate daily worship at church or monastery/convent. Any Christian who accepts that discipline of daily devotion will be confronted regularly with “the voice of the Lord” as Psalm 29 purports.

Psalm 29 in the Modern Ecumenical Lectionary of the West

Following the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church produced a new lectionary in 1969. It was soon adopted and altered by Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Lutherans, as well as adopted for trial use in several other denominations in North America and, to a lesser extent, in other English-speaking countries. A process towards lectionary consensus was begun in 1978 by the Consultation on Common Texts. This resulted in the three-year *Common Lectionary*, published in 1983. After two cycles of use and many suggestions and criticisms, *The Revised Common Lectionary* was issued in 1992. Though *The Revised*

Common Lectionary is a widely accepted ecumenical text, there are still minor differences between *The Revised Common Lectionary* and the actual lectionary systems that prevail among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists.

The Revised Common Lectionary includes 105 psalms and 10 canticles as the responses to the first reading for each Sunday and feast-day, which is typically an Old Testament reading. As was noted in the descriptions above for the association of Psalm 29 with the baptism of Jesus, *The Revised Common Lectionary* appoints Psalm 29 among the following readings for the Epiphany Sunday devoted to the Baptism of the Lord:

Year A: Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34–43; Matthew 3:13–17

Year B: Genesis 1:1–5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1–7; Mark 1:4–11

Year C: Isaiah 43:1–17; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14–17; Luke 3:15–17,
21–22

In addition, Psalm 29 is assigned to Trinity Sunday in Year B in *The Revised Common Lectionary*; the usage of this psalm for the Trinity Festival was inherited from earlier Anglican traditions, though the relationship of Psalm 29 to the Feast of Trinity is clearly rooted in Eastern Orthodoxy's ancient emphasis on the Trinity at the baptism of Jesus.

Conclusion

Psalm 29 continues to hold an important place in both Jewish and Christian liturgies. Select portions of this psalm have found their appointed places in a variety of worship orders. The entire psalm has an honored place in the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*) and in the various Christian celebrations of the baptism of Jesus. And thus, “the voice of the Lord” continues to sound “upon the waters.”

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