THE WEEKDAY *AMIDAH* AND BIBLICAL PSALMS

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The Book of Psalms is aptly called the "prayer book of the Hebrew Bible" and the "prayer book of Israel."[1] The individual psalms span some six centuries, and include a variety of prayer-types suitable for many occasions. It is unlikely that any of the 150 psalms were composed after the fifth or fourth centuries BCE, and their influence on Israelite piety is seen in disparate books of the biblical canon (e.g., Ex. 15:1-18; Deut. 32:1-43; Judg. 5:2-31; II Sam. 22; Jer. 11:18-23; Hab. 3). Opinions about the liturgical uses of psalms in ancient Israel vary; but it is almost certain that Levitical choirs sang some (if not all) of them in the Second Temple.

The pervasiveness of psalms extended beyond the Temple. It is reasonable to assume that early synagogues, which emerged both in Jerusalem and elsewhere during the Second Temple period, used psalm or psalm-inspired liturgy at their gatherings. It is likewise no coincidence that strong affinities exist between the *Amidah*, the paradigmatic rabbinic prayer, and biblical psalms. In creating a liturgy that both paid homage to the Temple's sacrificial rite and existed independently from it, the rabbis devised a prayer that was structurally based on psalms – a hymnbook tied to cultic sacrifice – but with significant alterations.

This paper seeks to uncover the relationship between psalms and the Weekday *Amidah*. It proposes a reading of the *Amidah* as a rabbinic psalm (or set of psalms).

PSALMS AND THE WEEKDAY *AMIDAH*

"Attempts to reconstruct [the *Amidah*'s] origin are numerous despite the fact that the paucity of primary data seems clearly unable to support with any surety the details of any theories to date."[2] Lawrence A. Hoffman made this observation in 1979 and it still holds. The genesis and development of the *Amidah* remains shrouded in mystery. Although Rabban Gamliel II is credited with the institutionalization of the statutory prayer at the turn of the second century CE in Yavneh (TB *Megillah* 17b), it is unclear what exactly this

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means.[3] Did the prayer exist in a rudimentary form before Yavneh? Did Gamliel II and his colleagues invent the prayer from whole cloth as a replacement for the sacrificial rite? Does the *Amidah* as it exists today contain a mixture of earlier elements and later ingenuity? Was obligatory daily prayer a part of synagogue ritual during the late Second Temple period?[4]

Whether the *Amidah* developed contemporaneous with Second Temple worship, came later as its replacement, or something in between, its authors were clearly in dialogue with the biblical psalms. In creating a liturgy that would function independently from priesthood and sacrifice, yet aspire for the same authority as those hallowed institutions, the architects of the *Amidah* simultaneously modeled their prayer on cultic hymns and diverged from those hymns in important ways. This process would have had equal effect in any of the time frames proposed above, as the Psalter was revered on par with Torah and Prophets,[5] and was thus a necessary reference point for competing and/or developing liturgies.

DIVERGENCES FROM PSALMS

The need to separate from the Temple apparatus is apparent in the *Amidah*. The agenda is set forth with a quotation from Psalms, which introduces the *Amidah* proper: *O Lord, open my lips, and let my mouth declare your praise* (Ps. 51:17).[6] Rabbinic liturgy was performed in the absence of animal (or grain) offerings, which served as focusing agents in the Jerusalem Temple. In that setting, prayerful songs were sung as an auxiliary to the chief activity of sacrifice.[7] Without the physical/visual display of piety, the verbal/invisible took center stage. Accordingly, instead of preparing animals for slaughter, the mouth had to be prepared for utterance.

The *Amidah* also reveals a shift from priestly performance to the more democratic setting of the synagogue. According to Ismar Elbogen, the recitation of the *Amidah* began with the precentor (*sheliakh tzibbur*) intoning the entire prayer, and the congregation reciting "amen" after each benediction.[8] However, R. Gamliel II ruled that members of the community must take an active part in the prayer, so as not to diminish its public character. Thus began the custom of repetition: The congregation would first recite the prayer in silence, and the precentor would repeat it aloud. This format distinguished the *Amidah* from Temple worship in which Levitical choirs sang the liturgy

and the assembly occasionally chimed in with formulaic responses, such as those preserved in Psalms 41:14, 72:19, 89:53, and 106:48.[9] In musicological terms, this is the difference between "music of performance" and "music of participation"[10] – a distinction that encapsulates the movement from priests to laity.

The communitarian focus is further stressed in *R'fuah* (eighth benediction), which transforms a personal lament of Jeremiah – *Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me, and I will be saved* (Jer. 17:14) – into a collective petition: "Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed; save us, then we will be saved." Adjusting scriptural language in this way was a borderline-desecration; but it was approved in order to situate Jeremiah's words within the framework of collective prayer (Tur, *Orakh Hayim* 116).

Another significant departure from the Temple rite is the substitution of the *Hodu* formula ("Praise the Lord") with *Barukh atah* ("Blessed are You, Lord") at the conclusion of each benediction.[11] *Hodu* is a common psalmic injunction (e.g., Ps. 105:1; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29; 136:1, 26), and was indicative of the top-down ethos of Levitical prayer. Whereas the Temple choir presumably sang "*Hodu*" as a directive to the assembly, the rabbinic replacement is phrased in the dialogical second person, connoting intimacy and self-directedness.

Likewise, the rabbis were not content with the bare recitation of the Priestly Blessing (Num. 6:24-26) at the conclusion of the *Amidah*. Originally a rarified blessing reserved for the *Kohanim*, the three-fold blessing was appended with a petition for peace that conforms to the rabbinic benedictional structure.[12] It was also deemed permissible for a lay prayer leader to chant the previously Kohanic blessing, regardless of lineage.[13]

CONVERGENCES WITH PSALMS

References to individual psalms are found throughout the *Amidah*. This owes largely to the ubiquity of the material. The Psalter was, after all, a compendium of culturally prized liturgical lyrics. It also demonstrates that, in order to be taken seriously, the contents of the *Amidah* had to be at least somewhat familiar to its users. This is a feature of religious ritual to this day, where a level of conformity is essential to mark a practice as legitimate.[14]

The *Amidah* includes several direct quotations and paraphrases from the Psalter. These include, but are by no means limited to: *The Lord shall reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Hallelujah* (*Kedushah* and Ps. 146:10); *Selah*[15] (*Kedushat Ha-shem* and *Hoda'ah* and seventy-one times in the Psalter); *tell Your praises* (*Hoda'ah* and Ps. 79:13); and *Evening, morning, and midday* (*Hoda'ah* and Ps. 55:18). Moreover, the Talmud cites Psalm 29:1 as the basis for the two opening blessings, the *Avot* and *G'vurot*: *Ascribe to the Lord, O you sons of mighty* [*Avot*]. *Give to the Lord glory and strength* [*G'vurot*] (TB *Rosh Hashanah* 32a; TB *Megillah* 17b).

The *Amidah* also uses theological characterizations parallel to various psalms. For instance, God is depicted as King (e.g., Ps. 93), Father (e.g., Ps. 89:27), Redeemer (e.g., Ps. 19:5), Listener (e.g., Ps. 5:2-4), Destroyer of Enemies (e.g., Ps. 143:12), Rock (e.g., Ps. 144:1), and is imbued with lovingkindness (e.g., Ps. 25:10).

On an elemental level, the *Amidah* borrows its primary poetic device, parallelism, from the Book of Psalms. Following the psalmic pattern, the *Amidah* frequently presents an initial statement (A) followed by a seconding line (B). The relationship between A and B is one of deepening, rather than restatement: "A is so, and what's more, B."[16] These couplets are so abundant in both liturgies that any random comparison illustrates the effect. For example, *O God, deliver me by Your name/by Your power vindicate me. O God, hear my prayer/give ear to the words of my mouth* (Ps. 54:3-4), and "Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah/Draw us near, our King, to Your Service. Lead us back to You in perfect repentance/Blessed are You, Lord, who desires repentance" (*T'shuvah*).

FORM-CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Less explicit, but arguably more important, are structural similarities between the *Amidah* and biblical psalms. The rabbis did not reinvent the liturgical wheel; it was not in their interest to do so. Their project is best understood as a reformulation of content and focus within a preexisting rubric, based on verses from the Bible, and Psalms in particular. This becomes clear when viewing the *Amidah* through a form-critical lens.

Hermann Gunkel pioneered the form-critical method of psalm analysis, which brings together psalms according to their genre (*Gattung*), rather than

the order in which they come in the Psalter. He grouped the Psalms' 150 chapters into categories and subcategories determined by theme, form, language relationships, and (hypothetical) usage in the cultic setting (*Sitz im Leben*). There is not space here to outline the characteristics of each type. It will suffice to note that Gunkel identified five major categories – lament (which we can also call *bakasha*, a request or petition), hymn, thanksgiving, wisdom, and royal – along with a few minor genres and mixed types.[17]

The Weekday *Amidah* fits neatly within Gunkel's framework. If we read the nineteen sections as a single unit, then the entire prayer resembles a request psalm, complete with a summons to God (praise), complaints of misfortune, reasons for God to intervene (reminders of God's attributes), entreaties, and confidence that the prayer will be heard. Of the 150 psalms, nearly half are requests, roughly forty are hymns, and thanksgiving, wisdom, royal, and the "other" psalms comprise much smaller genres. This also fits into the conventional breakdown of the *Amidah*, where the petitions predominate, with much fewer praise and thanksgiving blessings (3 each). The abundance of petitions and smaller representation of other psalm-types resembles the numerical divisions in the Psalter.

While the petitions of the *Amidah* contain appeals to God, they are significantly shorter than those found at the beginning of biblical psalms. These abbreviated calls can be attributed to the sequential format of the *Amidah*, since the opening praises are, in essence, an extended opening to the entire liturgical unit. Because of this, most benedictions do not "re-initiate," but instead launch directly into imperatives ("Bring us back," "Forgive us," "Heal us," etc.).

There are many similarities between the structure of the blessings of the *Amidah* and the psalms. The first benediction, *Avot*, is structured as a hymn of praise, similar to many psalms (cf. Ps. 8; 19; 29; 33; 65; 67; 68; 96; 98; 100; 103; 104; 105; 111; 113; 114; 117; 135; 136; 139; 145-150). The sixth benediction, *S'likhah*, takes the form of a confessional (a request subcategory), which concludes with an appeal for God's grace: " . . . the gracious One who repeatedly forgives" (cf. Ps. 51; 78; 81; 106; 130). The ninth benediction, *Ha-shanim* – follows the form of a trust psalm (request subcategory). It concludes with a conviction of being heard: "Blessed are You . . . who blesses the years." This follows the form of many trust psalms, which shift focus

from request to trust, while still pleading for something (cf. Ps.. 4; 11; 16; 23; 27:1-6; 62; 125; 131). Similarly, the twelfth benediction, *Ha-minim*, a curse on enemies, concludes with the conviction of being heard: "Blessed are You . . . who destroys enemies . . . " similar to what is found in psalms (cf. Ps. 69:22-28; 109; 137:7-9). *Birkat Kohanim* follows the form of a liturgical psalm with a call-and-response blessing. Psalm liturgies are characterized by an antiphonal structure (cf. Ps. 15; 20; 24; 14; 53; 66; 81; 82; 85; 95; 107; 115; 118; 121; 126; 132; 134).

CONCLUSION

Traces of biblical psalms are found throughout the Weekday *Amidah*, which was composed in a psalms-saturated milieu. While carving a path away from the Temple system, with its elitist presentation and sacrificial centerpiece, the *Amidah* nevertheless retains various linguistic, thematic, and structural affinities with psalms. One overlooked connection is genre, specifically as classified by Gunkel. By applying his form-critical method, this paper has sought to frame the Weekday *Amidah* as rabbinic psalm literature.

NOTES

1. L. P. Glavich, *The Hebrew Scriptures: Called by the Father* (Zurich: Benziger, 1992) p. 10. "Old Testament" in the original.
2. L. A. Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979) p. 50.
3. The Talmud also includes legendary ascriptions, including to the Patriarchs (TB *Berachot* 26b), Moses (TJ *Berachot* 7), the 120 Elders (TB *Megillah* 18a), and the Men of the Great Assembly (TB *Berachot.* 33a).
4. Different answers to these questions are given by J. Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977); E. Fleischer, "On the Beginnings of Obligatory Jewish Prayer" *Tarbiz* 59:397 (1990) pp. 414, 416-417; and J. Penner, *Patterns of Daily Prayer in Second Temple Period Judaism* (Boston: Brill, 2012), among others.
5. See Luke 24:44.
6. This verse has prefaced the *Amidah* since Talmudic times.
7. See I Chronicles 16:1-36. According to E. Werner, Temple music "was nothing other than an accessory to its sacrificial rite." *From Generation to Generation: Studies in Jewish Musical Tradition* (New York: American Conference of Cantors, 1967) p. 6.
8. I. Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. R. P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993) p. 25.

9. These verses conclude the first four books of the Five Books of Psalms, as they are canonically divided. Ps. 41:14, 72:19, and 89:53 use the phrase "amen and amen"; Ps. 106:48 uses "Amen. Hallelujah."

10. See M. Slobin, *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 215-279.

11. L. A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 59.

12. *Birkat Shalom* exists in two forms: *Sim Shalom* for the morning and *Shalom Rav* for the afternoon and evening. These are the only surviving variations of possibly many that circulated during *tannaitic* times. Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service*, p. 51.

13. Ibid. p. 54.

14. See J. L. Friedmann, *Synagogue Song: An Introduction to Concepts, Theories and Customs* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012) pp. 34-36.

15. *Selah* was likely a musical cue for the Temple choir director (perhaps to break between sections or change tempo), and probably was not chanted as part of the psalms in which it appears. Its presence in the *Amidah* presumably serves no other purpose than imbuing it with psalm-specific language.

16. J. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

17. H. Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1967) [*Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart,* 2nd ed., 1930]; and H. Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, comp. J. Begrich (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998) [*Einleitung in die Psalmen: die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels,* 1933]. For an excellent summary of Gunkel's findings, see T. F. Williams, "A Form-Critical Classification of the Psalms According to Hermann Gunkel," *Resources for Biblical, Theological, and Religious Studies* (October 2006). The smaller genres are pilgrimage psalms, legend psalms, psalm liturgies, "miscellaneous," and "mixed."

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