

Psalms Session 3 Hymns

One of the most prominent types of psalms is the hymn. A hymn is, essentially, a song of praise for Yahweh. Often, though not always, these are marked by the key word “Hallelujah,” in its English rendering. In Hebrew, this is in fact an imperative: *hallelu yah*, “Praise Yahweh.” A collection of these hymns is to be found at the very end of the Psalter, in Psalms 146–50, all of which begin with “Hallelujah.”

Hymns tend to center around three main themes, which are often intertwined: creation, nature, and kingship. In Psalm 146, we read of Yahweh that “He made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them.” In this we can see the hymnic emphasis on creation, the ultimate expression of divine power. Creation is central in large part because it elevates Yahweh over any other possible deity, over any deities that are worshipped by other nations. It does not necessarily eliminate the possibility that other deities exist, but it does relegate them to a lower order. The creator God is, by definition, the greatest and most important.

A good example of this is in Psalm 148:

Hallelujah! Praise Yahweh from the heavens, praise him on high.

Praise him, all the angels, praise him, all his hosts.

Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all bright stars.

Praise him, highest heavens, and you waters that are above the heavens.

Let them praise the name of Yahweh, for he commanded that they be created.

Although we think of creation primarily in terms of earthly creation, the bringing into being of the world that we see, this psalm focuses instead on the creation of the heavenly world, including the other divine beings. While there was in ancient Israel, and in the ancient Near East more

generally, an accepted view that each nation had its own national deity, here Yahweh is elevated to a higher plane of existence, as the sole deity who created the supernal world (as well as the earthly one).

In many ancient Near Eastern cultures, especially those with a pantheon of various deities, the creator role was assigned to the highest god, often a deity who was understood to operate in the past more than the present: in essence, a god emeritus. The active divine role was turned over to a different god, often the son of the chief god. We can see this in the well-known Greek mythology, where Zeus is active in human life, but his mythical ancestors, such as Kronos, are not. So too we find it in cultures closer to those of ancient Israel, notably in Canaanite mythology, in which El was the head of the pantheon, but his son Baal was the active deity in the world. In the Hebrew Bible, because the ancient Israelites had only a single god, Yahweh, these various divine roles were conflated and combined into a single divine person.

It is for this reason that Yahweh can be seen to have the characteristics of both El and Baal, and the latter nowhere more clearly than in the hymns that focus on Yahweh's power over nature. Baal, in Canaanite religion, was the storm god, and the deity responsible for everything climatological, including agricultural success. We see the Israelite version of this in works such as Psalm 29:

The voice of Yahweh is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, Yahweh, over the mighty waters.

The voice of Yahweh is power; the voice of Yahweh is majesty;

the voice of Yahweh breaks cedars; Yahweh shatters the cedars of Lebanon.

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion, like a young wild ox.

The voice of Yahweh kindles flames of fire;

the voice of Yahweh convulses the wilderness; Yahweh convulses the wilderness of Kadesh.

Here the “voice of Yahweh” is thunder, and the “flames of fire” are lightning. What is portrayed here is Yahweh as storm god, moving inland from the Mediterranean, down through the northern hills of Lebanon and Sirion and further into the wilderness to the south. This is a comprehensive picture of divine destruction by means of a storm, illustrating Yahweh’s power over nature: the wilderness itself convulses as he passes through. For anyone who has been in Israel during one of its relatively rare thunderstorms, the attribution of such powerful climatic events to a divine being is readily understandable. One of the interesting aspects of this particular portrayal of that power is that it seems largely to relate to areas that were not Israelite: the coast, and the northern hills, that for much of Israel’s history were held by other peoples (Philistines, for example). It has long been observed in scholarship that this psalm is deeply indebted to the typical Canaanite descriptions of Baal—so much so, in fact, that if one were to simply replace “Yahweh” with “Baal,” it would be no surprise to find exactly this hymn coming from a purely Canaanite context. And, for some scholars, that is just about what happened: they see this as an Israelite version of an originally Canaanite hymn of praise for Baal.

Regardless of whether that reconstruction is true or not, it is certainly the case that Israel borrowed much of the storm and natural imagery in its hymnic psalms from its Canaanite context. In some places, we can see how this sort of natural theology was combined with the more specifically Israelite concept of Yahweh’s working through history on behalf of his people. So we may think of Psalm 114:

When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech, Judah became His holy one, Israel, His dominion.

*The sea saw them and fled, Jordan ran backward,
mountains skipped like rams, hills like sheep.*

*What alarmed you, O sea, that you fled, Jordan, that you ran backward,
mountains, that you skipped like rams, hills, like sheep?*

*Tremble, O earth, at the presence of Yahweh, at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turned the rock into a pool of water, the flinty rock into a fountain.*

Although there are clearly some elements of Israel's communal history alluded to here—the Exodus event in particular—this psalm moves rather quickly to broaden God's power beyond the merely historical, and invoke again the sort of power over nature that we saw in Psalm 29.

When hymns invoke Yahweh's power on earth, they often do so in terms of divine justice. Psalm 146, after mentioning Yahweh's creative power, goes on immediately to say, "He secures justice for those who are wronged." This idea is quite common in hymns, and quite often, as here, is aligned with the idea of Yahweh as creator. The pairing of these concepts is intentional. It was understood in ancient Israel, and in its Near Eastern context more broadly, that creation and justice are deeply linked: part of creating the world is establishing its firm foundations, the bedrock on which we all live and move. That bedrock is understood to be founded in justice: if there is no justice from the divine sphere, then all of existence seems to be slipping. So Psalm 96: "The world stands firm, it cannot be shaken; he judges the peoples with equity."

These hymns are not, however, concerned for the most part with the question of Yahweh's justice—for that the psalms of lament are more appropriate. Justice is raised, essentially, as a side effect of Yahweh's creative power. It also dovetails with another major theme of the hymns in the book of Psalms: the presentation of Yahweh as king. In the ancient

Near East, it was usually understood to be the role of the king to administer and maintain justice, and thereby to keep the social peace in his dominion. This can be seen, for instance, in the prologue to the famous Code of Hammurabi. One of the innovations of Israelite theology was the removal of that role from the king to the deity—and, in fact, the general downplaying of the centrality of the king in favor of seeing Yahweh as the one true monarch.

Many biblical hymns thus praise Yahweh in explicitly royal terms. Psalm 97: “Yahweh is king! Let the earth exult, the many islands rejoice!” Or, more famously thanks to Handel’s *Messiah*, Psalm 93: “Yahweh is king, he is clothed in majesty.” Often the image of Yahweh’s throne is evoked. Psalm 93 again: “Your throne stands firm from old.” It is not only Yahweh’s kingship, but the permanence of that kingship that is highlighted here and elsewhere.

A number of these hymns of divine kingship seem to celebrate not only Yahweh’s eternal rule, but the moment of his enthronement in his holy Temple. Psalm 24:

O gates, lift up your heads! Up high, you everlasting doors, so the King of glory may come in!

Who is the King of glory? Yahweh, mighty and valiant, Yahweh, valiant in battle.

O gates, lift up your heads! Lift them up, you everlasting doors, so the King of glory may come in!

Who is the King of glory? — the Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory!

Psalms like this are generally known as psalms of enthronement, and, more so than some others, these have what appears to be a clear liturgical function. It is not at all difficult to imagine this psalm being recited in the Temple. Similarly, we may point to the end of Psalm 29, which, after the reckoning of Yahweh’s power over nature, goes on:

While in his temple, all say, “Glory!”

Yahweh sat enthroned on the Flood; Yahweh sits enthroned, king forever.

May Yahweh grant strength to his people; may Yahweh bestow peace on his people.

The reference to the Flood here is not to the story of Noah, but to the mythic primordial waters, probably picking up on the Canaanite myth of the battle between Baal and the sea god, Yamm (which is also the Hebrew word for sea, *yam*). Of interest to us here is particularly the first line quoted above, which again we can imagine as being a response from the gathered community, something akin to our modern “Amen.”

Because the liturgical function of enthronement psalms is so pronounced, some scholars have attempted to reconstruct the festival that stands behind such hymns. It has been conjectured that there must have been an annual celebration of Yahweh’s kingship, sometimes associated with the festival of Sukkot, although there is no clear evidence for this. Given ancient Near Eastern parallels, however, especially from Mesopotamia, where the statues of the deity were annually taken out, paraded through the city, and then returned in triumph to the temple, it is not beyond the realm of consideration that Israel might have had some sort of equivalent ceremony.

A nearly complete picture of the typical hymn can be found in Psalm 96, part of which was quoted from earlier. It is worth quoting in full here, however, because it brings together nearly every aspect that we have discussed so far: creation, nature, history, justice, kingship, and enthronement:

Sing to the LORD a new song, sing to the LORD, all the earth.

Sing to the LORD, bless His name, proclaim His victory day after day.

Tell of His glory among the nations, His wondrous deeds, among all peoples.

For the LORD is great and much acclaimed, He is held in awe by all divine beings.

All the gods of the peoples are mere idols, but the LORD made the heavens.

Glory and majesty are before Him; strength and splendor are in His temple.

Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name, bring tribute and enter His courts.

Bow down to the LORD majestic in holiness; tremble in His presence, all the earth!

Declare among the nations, "The LORD is king!" the world stands firm; it cannot be shaken; He judges the peoples with equity.

Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult; let the sea and all within it thunder, the fields and everything in them exult; then shall all the trees of the forest shout for joy at the presence of the LORD, for He is coming, for He is coming to rule the earth; He will rule the world justly, and its peoples in faithfulness.

Questions for Discussion:

In what situations, ancient or contemporary, is a hymn to God's power called for?

How do these psalms describe the breadth of God's earthly power?

To what extent does the image of God as king still resonate today, and how might it have changed since these psalms were written?