Psalmic Recitation as a Performance of Memory and Hope in Jewish and Christian Prayer

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Introduction

In his 4th-century “Letter to Marcellinus,” Athanasius observed that each book of the Bible is like a garden that grows its own fruit, but that the Book of Psalms is a garden which yields the fruit of all of the other gardens as well as its own unique fruit.¹ According to Athanasius, the psalms reflect nearly every part of scripture and speak to virtually every aspect of the experience of faith. The text of the psalms is thematically dense and can be interpreted as alluding to many events of the biblical narrative, expressed in the first-person voice of the psalmist which voices intimate hopes and fears that reflect a broad range of theological issues. Yet the plenitude of themes in the text of the psalms is enriched further when the psalms are performed liturgically. In liturgical recitation, the polysemous character of the psalms becomes even more multidimensional; they take on shades of meaning particular to the liturgical contexts and communities where they are performed. In this paper, I propose that, given the memorial and eschatological orientation of Judaism and Christianity, the liturgical recitation of the psalms found in these two traditions engages both memory and eschatological anticipation, recollecting the biblical past while also appealing to eschatological hope. In short, the recitation of the psalms becomes a performance of memory and hope.

In the following pages, I trace how the polysemy of the psalms allows them to conform to their settings and how, in liturgical performance, the psalms come to reflect the theological meanings communicated by their liturgical settings. In this study, I take into account that the meaning of any scripture shifts in relation to its interpretive context; likewise, the meaning of the psalms in liturgical settings is dependent upon the interpretive lens of the liturgical agents. Because liturgical performance is experiential, the meaning of the psalms is largely determined by the experience of the community performing the liturgy. Therefore, a clarification of the nature of experience is included in the discussion of the liturgical transformation of the psalms.

To demonstrate how the psalms take on specifically memorial and eschatological meanings in Jewish and Christian liturgies, I offer an overview of how Jewish and Christian theological traditions envision the past, present, and future by taking into account that divergent interpretations and narratives arising from shared biblical roots lead to different emphases of memory and hope. This is followed by an examination of how time is experienced liturgically, particularly within the Jewish daily services and the Christian practice of the Liturgy of the Hours, the liturgical texts of which each incorporate the psalms. A brief textual study follows, exploring how select psalms function in liturgical settings. By bringing these various foci together, I demonstrate how the liturgical recitation of the psalms performs the memorial and anticipatory orientations of both Judaism and Christianity.

The Experiential Nature of Liturgical Performance

A scholarly consensus holds that the psalms refer to liturgical actions and that they were

¹ Athanasius of Alexandria. “The Letter of Athanasius, Our Holy Father, Bishop of Alexandria, to Marcellinus on the
composed to be performed. It is only to be expected, therefore, that the already significant semantic breadth of the psalms as literature increases when the text is performed. When a psalm is recited liturgically, it is transformed, given form in the body and voice of the reciter. As the text is performed, it becomes enriched by the complex layers of experience that the liturgical agents bring into prayer. A Gadamerian merging of horizons occurs, as the world of the reciter meets the world of the text. Each is transformed by the other. The text of the psalms, containing in Athanasius’ imagery the fruit of all the gardens of scripture, develops and expresses a set of meanings particular to the liturgical context and theological tradition in which it is performed. Likewise, the liturgical community that recites the psalms is transformed through the liturgical engagement with the text, which awakens in the community a depth of religious experience that goes beyond the purely textual content of the psalms.

This investigation moves beyond the most readily studied elements of the liturgy, such as the history of liturgical development or the particularities of rubrics, and enters into the subjective realm of experience, which offers no clear platform for observation and interpretation. It asks how the experience of reciting the psalms is connected to memory and eschatological anticipation, and also how this experience contributes to the formation of our experience of time itself. It approaches the experiential through the study of liturgy as it is embodied and enacted in performance and experienced by the liturgical agent.

It becomes helpful to clarify what this study means when it uses the term “experience.” The understanding of “experience” that undergirds this study is indebted to George Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory, particularly as it concerns the formation of the individual by the framework of tradition. Lindbeck claims that religion exerts a formative influence on subjectivity, shaping the experience of the person. He writes, “Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.” The cultural-linguistic model serves here as a basic theoretical foundation inasmuch as it addresses the process by which a person’s experience and understanding of reality are formed by religious tradition. In short, experience is understood to be subjective, yet also communal, as it remains shaped by tradition.

Christian and Jewish Visions of Time

Christianity and Judaism were each born out of the shared landscape of the biblical narrative, and each is shaped by a biblical understanding of time. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks proposes that the Hebrew Bible introduced a new sense of time as an ongoing continuum of great breadth. He notes that while a sense of cyclical time is innate to animals, the sense of a distant past and a distant future is unique to humans. It is this sense of the broad reach of past and future that he claims was

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3 The specific way in which the liturgy is transformed is particular to the liturgical community; the transformation is the result of the interaction of the psalms and the tradition, contextualized within the particular concerns and experience of each community.

introduced and developed in the Hebrew Bible.\(^5\)

The notion of the Bible as the source of the idea of time and history is suggested by the very first word of the Scriptures, *bereshit*, which opens the sacred text with an introduction to time. The narratives that follow this opening line of Genesis then develop the idea of time. Light is created out of darkness, the day is divided from the night, and each portion of the act of creation is marked by the day in which it occurred. Here, the categorization of time is celebrated; time is divided and put in order. No longer a meaningless void of timelessness, the world is encased in an ordered system of days and nights, and this order redeems it from the chaos from which the world was created.

The biblical narrative paints a temporal landscape in which the unfolding of history is itself of utmost importance, and the element of time is introduced as a medium of God’s work in the world. In this biblical conception of time, a particular time can be quantitatively like any other time and yet qualitatively different, as through the intervention of divine action it can be transformed into something entirely different. It is no longer seen as an endless cycle, mirroring the cycles of the seasons, nor is it seen as simply a meaningless stream of events moving forward in a linear motion, in which each moment disappears into the past without leaving a mark. Rather, in the biblical landscape, the progression of time is given direction and meaning.

This meaning is found in the history of divine intervention, but it is also forward-looking, as the idea of time indicates that the historical precedents point to future events and a future goal. In the biblical narrative, God’s action in history functions as a promise that God will act in the future. The history of divine intervention, as it is preserved and kept alive in memory, indicates that the future is no longer entirely unknown and shapeless; religious memory provides a shape for the future. In this way, the religious imagination is anchored in both the past and the future.

Despite the biblical roots shared by Christianity and Judaism, each tradition possesses a distinct temporal narrative, and the past, present and future is articulated differently in each. Judaism is widely acknowledged to be highly memorial, largely centered on the ritual remembrance of the biblical narrative of the past. The memory so central to Judaism is rooted in the narrative of the escape from Egypt, the time in the wilderness, and the entrance into the land of Israel. Building on this is the memory of two Jerusalem Temples, the destruction of the second of which led to the development of Rabbinic Judaism.

The nature of Jewish memory is developed in depth by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, who notes that to the formative rabbis of Rabbinic Judaism, the Bible revealed not only the narrative of the past, but also the pattern of history as a whole.\(^6\) This means that the ritual engagement with memory is not simply a memorial, but an engagement also with the present and the future. This notion is augmented by Marc Brettler, who argues against the common notion that Judaism is a historical


religion and claims that the rabbis were not concerned with history per se; rather, memory was the primary concern.\footnote{Marc Brettler. “Memory in Ancient Israel.” In Memory and History in Christianity and Judaism. Edited by Michael A. Signor. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 2.}

The Christian sense of memory is also rooted in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible, but it understands these narratives to be preparatory, setting the foundation for the narrative of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which serves as the primary focus of Christian memory. A disparity is also seen in the eschatological visions of the two traditions: Judaism envisions a messianic future yet to come, while the Christian eschatological vision is understood to be already partially inaugurated through Jesus, with the final completion of time still yet to come.\footnote{The above discussion on time and memory in Christianity and Judaism is merely a brief introduction to a highly complex topic which cannot be fully addressed within the constraints of this short study.}

**The Liturgical Experience of Time**

While the idea of linear time with a distant past and distant future was introduced and developed in biblical literature, time is not just an idea; time is experiential. The biblical vision of time is not a simple linear progression, but is multidimensional due to the great emphases it places on the past and the anticipated future. These emphases are not inherent in the concept of time, but are exercised and developed in the experience of time. Because memory and eschatological anticipation are integral elements of both Christianity and Judaism, the orientation toward the past and the future shapes the experience of time. Each tradition envisions a religiously informed structure of time, in which the person of faith is situated in a temporal landscape formed by the contours of the religious tradition.

The religiously formed experience of time is an integral part of the experience of faith, and this temporal orientation is enacted through liturgy. The experience of time through liturgy differs notably in Judaism and Christianity, which maintain very different liturgical traditions as well as divergent understandings of time and redemption. The degree of variation within each tradition also must not be underestimated. Yet, across this diversity of liturgical and theological traditions, time is experienced through liturgy. In the rituals of daily prayer in both Judaism and Christianity, time is liturgically marked day to day and hour to hour, informing the way in which the traditions theologically understand their own temporal situation between memory and hope.

In a number of Christian traditions, the hours of the day are divided by the recitation of psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours. Whereas the feasts of the liturgical calendar celebrate seasons and times of the year, the Liturgy of the Hours marks the passing of hours in each day; i.e., it marks time itself. For communities that celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours together, particularly in monastic settings, the liturgy shapes the structure of each day. In many monastic communities, the office of Matins becomes the first words spoken upon wakening. Throughout the day, the daily work is scheduled around the offices and divided into short periods punctuated by prayer. At the end of the day, the office of Compline marks the beginning of the Great Silence, during which no words are spoken until Matins the next day. The hours of the day become so formed by the liturgical celebrations that the shape of time seems to resemble the shape of the Liturgy of the Hours.
A similar division of time is found in the daily services of Judaism. The services of Shacharit, Mincha and Maariv mark and celebrate the transition from morning to afternoon to evening. Whereas the text of the Liturgy of the Hours is built around the recitation of psalms in their entirety, the Jewish daily services are a rabbinic composition comprised of multiple scriptural fragments woven together. The psalms occur in great frequency in these services, both in fragments and in their entirety, particularly in the morning service.

The liturgical shaping of the experience of time bears significance for the temporal and eschatological orientation of the religious community. The celebration of daily liturgies heightens the consciousness of time, which allows the experience of daily time to be religiously formed. For communities that experience time liturgically in this way, the sense of orientation within time reaches from the time of primordial biblical history, through the present, and into the envisioned eschatological future. Because of this eschatological focus, the temporal orientation also points to what lies beyond time. That is, the intrinsically temporal nature of the liturgies is intimately related to the extra-temporal vision of the eschatological future, and so the connection to time held by the liturgies is complemented by a connection to eternity.

Texts in Context

When the psalms are recited in the context of Jewish and Christian daily prayers, they take on shades of meaning that reflect their liturgical context, and the engagement of memory and hope in Jewish and Christian daily liturgies lends the psalms a wide range of temporal associations. The evocation of memory and anticipation in the liturgical recitation of the psalms occurs with psalms which directly address the themes of time, memory and hope, as well as with psalms that do not directly express these themes but give rise to these associations in liturgical performance.

Psalm 90 is an example of the former, as a psalm that speaks directly of the passing of time and of the contrast between the eternality of God and the transiency of humanity. When prayed in the contexts of the Jewish and Christian daily liturgies, it lends the services an even greater focus on the phenomenon of time. In this psalm, the theme of eternality and transiency is presented in the context of a meditation on time and on the transience of humanity in relation to the eternality of God. The opening two verses of this psalm establish the eternality of God, who existed before the mountains were brought forth (v. 2), in contrast to the temporality of humanity, which relies on successive generations for its survival (v. 1). Verses 5, 6, and 9 speak of the inevitability of death, comparing humans to grass that quickly sprouts and dies. The temporal contrast develops a further dimension in v. 4: “For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday,” suggesting that even the human conception of time differs radically from God’s perception of time. The literary structure of the psalm is oriented away from narrative, favoring philosophical statements over the narration of a story and allowing the literary gaze to be directed beyond the historical and into a sense of...

9 In the Liturgy of the Hours of the Catholic Church, the Psalter has traditionally been recited in its entirety on a weekly schedule, and only since Vatican II has a four-week cycle of the Psalter been introduced. In Divine Service of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the weekly cycle of the Psalter is still maintained.

10 The Jewish daily services include many Psalmic passages woven into other scriptural and rabbinic texts, but also maintain a number of psalms in their entirety. The pesuqei d-zimra, recited before Shacharit, includes psalms 100 and 145-150 in their entirety; Kabbalat Shabbat includes the full recitation of psalms 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 29; and psalms 19, 34, 90, 91, 135, 136, 33, 92, 93 are recited on Sabbath and festivals.
timelessness. The psalm views all of humanity in a sweeping glance, mirroring the divine perspective that sees a thousand years to be like yesterday (v. 4). The meditation on time in Psalm 90 reaches a high point in verse 12: “Teach us to count our days so that we may have a heart of wisdom.” In this verse, wisdom is portrayed as something which is gained through an awareness of the timespan of life. Even more significantly, it suggests that it is the consciousness of time itself that leads to wisdom.

Psalms 148-150 provide an example of psalms that do not directly address temporality, but which take on these traits in their performance. The liturgical occurrence of these psalms in Jewish and Christian daily services exhibits a remarkable similarity, as they are routinely recited in the morning prayers of each tradition. They occur every morning of the week in the office of Lauds in the Roman rite monastic office, as well as in the service of Shacharit every weekday morning as part of the continuous recitation of Psalms 145-150. The text of these psalms is an extended call to praise, and as a whole, the psalms enumerate the works of creation, calling on each element of creation to praise God. When prayed on a daily basis in the morning, the voice of the reciter, chanting the list of all the elements of creation that praise God, becomes one of these elements. The reciter becomes situated in between the creation of the primordial past evoked by Psalm 148, and the redeemed future anticipated by each tradition. This is experienced while reciting in the transient present moment of morning, perhaps at that moment when hearing the birds also singing a morning song. The past, present and future are summoned to awareness in the act of praying these psalms.

The regular recitation of these psalms in the morning liturgies of Lauds and Shacharit lend the texts complex layers of associations and meaning. Louis-Marie Chauvet discusses the power of liturgical repetition in Symbol and Sacrament:

Ritual’s regular repetition has an initiatory effect of the greatest importance. Reiterating the same gestures and the same formulas in identical circumstances and following a fairly regular periodic rhythm, it implants the values of the group into the body of each member, in the end ‘sticking to the skin’ (for here also—here especially—everything is in the ‘skin’) so that the values appear completely ‘natural.’

In this passage, Chauvet suggests how it is that the liturgical repetition of texts is theologically formative for the religious community, as well as formative for the subjectivity of the reciter.

Similarly, when Orthodox nun Sister Thekla writes of the power of liturgical repetition in the office of Vespers, she speaks from experience on the way in which that recitation bears a formative influence on the reciter, bringing to light the activities of memory and anticipation as well as the consciousness of time: “The repetitive rhythmic reiteration takes us up into the flow of tradition, out of the past into the present, and out of the present in to the future. And, with this sense of timelessness within time, we are naturally drawn into the awareness of the transcendent, into the incomprehensible no-time of God.”


The formative capacity of repetition is also experienced in the recitation of the doxologies with which many psalms conclude. A large number of psalms conclude with a doxology referring to eternality, most frequently in the form of a declaration that God’s love or guidance will endure forever. A few phrases recur in these passages: the most common phrase expressing God’s eternality is me’atah v’ad’olam, which literally means “from now and to the universe” and is translated in the NRSV as “from everlasting to everlasting.” Another frequently occurring phrase is l-dor v-dor, which the NRSV translates as “from generation to generation.” In the regular recitation of the psalms, the repetition of the same phrases creates a pattern that stands out significantly. The repeated reference to an ongoing succession of future generations, and to a vision of eternity expressed by the image of the universe, draws the attention of the liturgical community to the consciousness of time.

A very abbreviated list of some of the concluding verses of psalms that most directly evoke an awareness of time is offered here, in the NRSV translation. The textual excerpts cannot communicate fully in this form the same effect they communicate in regular recitation. It is suggested, therefore, that the reader exercise a bracketing of the critical lens usually employed for exegesis and employ a mode of reading sensitive to the life the texts may take on in repeated liturgical performance.

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 41:13).

For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations (Psalm 100:5).

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever (Psalm 118:29).

The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore (Psalm 121:8).

Our help is in the LORD, who made heaven and earth (Psalm 124:8).

O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time on and forevermore (Psalm 131:3).

O give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever (Psalm 136:26).

The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD! (Psalm 146:10).

I do not claim that the text alone makes a statement about the consciousness of time, eternity, or memory and hope, but rather that the recitation of the text awakens these functions. The emphasis is not on the text alone, but on what it engenders in the communities that perform it. Because the printed texts alone do not convey the fullness of meaning developed in the subjectivities of the persons and communities that recite them, the textual examples of the functions of memory and hope and the phenomenon of time-consciousness are by nature limited. Consequently, only a few brief textual examples are offered. Furthermore, because this study is a
secondary reflection on an aspect of liturgical performance, it cannot recreate the liturgical phenomenon but is categorically capable of only pointing toward it.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, we return to Athanasius’ vision of the psalms as a tree that bears the fruit of the entire scriptural tradition. The psalms lend themselves to a wide spectrum of expressions of faith, and the content of the psalms is enriched and transformed by the context of the theological traditions in which they are read, as they become expressions of the elements of faith particular to the traditions. When recited in the memorial and eschatological liturgical traditions of Christianity and Judaism, the psalms perform the temporal orientations of these traditions.

The psalms have a great capacity to conform to the setting in which they are read or recited. At the same time, they also function formatively, as the person who recites the psalms becomes conformed to the voice of the psalms. Psalmic recitation invites the reciter to speak in the first-person voice of the psalmist, expressing the sentiments of the literature as if they were unique to the person praying them. In the same letter, Athanasius speaks of this formative capacity: “It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed, and seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given...You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries.” The reciter embodies the psalm and in doing so becomes clothed in the religious narrative spoken by the psalm.

Athanasius promotes the usefulness of the psalms in addressing a wide variety of spiritual conditions and needs. In his letter, he groups psalms according to their associations, and enumerates specific functions of various psalms. Here, however, Athanasius’s interpretation of the psalms departs from the claims made by this study. Athanasius focuses on specific functions attributed to each psalm, which suggests that the psalms have static meanings that may be mined and then applied to a variety of needs and conditions. In contrast, this study proposes that the liturgical contexts and theological conditions in which the psalms are recited lend the psalms multiple layers of meaning. In other words, while in some cases the psalms may be applied to conditions, it is more significant that the meaning of the psalms is also shaped by the conditions in which they are recited.

Having the capacity to both form and conform, the psalms express the theological foci of the traditions in which they are read, as the polysemy of the psalms heightens their tendency to conform to their liturgical settings. When performed in the context of Christian and Jewish daily prayer services, the psalms celebrate the passing of time and reflect the highly memorial and eschatological orientations of each tradition. In this way, the recitation of the psalms in daily prayers becomes a celebration of memory and hope as well as a celebration of time itself, as the medium through which God has acted, acts now, and will act in the future.

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