

## THE ROLE OF PSALM 118 IN WORSHIPPING JESUS THE MESSIAH

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Psalm 118 was sung as part of the Passover “liturgy” by the time of Jesus. We know this from Jewish sources as well as from the New Testament. It was the last of six psalms (113-118) that were traditionally sung at the Passover meal. It was probably the hymn that Jesus and his disciples sang after his institution of the Lord’s Supper and just before leaving the upper room in order to go to the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:30, Mk 14:26). In addition, it (or at least a portion of it) was sung on Palm Sunday to Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem for the events of Holy Week. What I will demonstrate in this article is that the Jews recognized 118 as messianic by the time of Jesus, and that Jesus and those who sang the psalm to him sang it in order to acclaim him as the Messiah.

We’ll begin with the singing of the psalm during Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Though there are words that the crowd sang that day that are not found in Psalm 118 (or any other psalm), Matthew, Mark, and John all have in common in their record of the crowd’s words the first half of 118:25 (“Hosanna,” i.e., “save!”) and the first half of 118:26 (“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD”). In all three accounts these half-verses occur consecutively. The intriguing thing is that the second half of v. 25 (“LORD, grant us success!”), is missing in all three accounts. The question that immediately comes to mind is: Why are only the first halves of two consecutive verses sung by the crowd while the half verse in between them (v. 25b) is left out?

The rabbis in a *midrash*<sup>1</sup> on Psalm 118 offer an interesting insight into what might lie behind this. The *midrash* seems to indicate that there was a belief in Second Temple Judaism that the last portion of the psalm (vv. 25-29) would be sung on the day of salvation—the day when the Messiah would enter Jerusalem to deliver his people. Concerning the two verses that come before this section (vv. 23-24), the *midrash* says that the phrase “the LORD has done this” (v. 23) is referring to the Lord’s bringing Israel out of their slavery in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> It also

<sup>1</sup>A midrash is an early Jewish “exegesis” of a portion of Scripture.

<sup>2</sup>This interpretation makes sense since the overall context of the psalm is a celebration of the exodus.

says that the phrase alludes to the day when God made David king over Israel. But then in its exegesis of the phrase in verse 24, "This is the day the LORD has made," the *midrash* says that this is a reference to a redemption after which no enslavement will follow. The exact wording of the *midrash* is: "After all the redemptions that came to Israel, enslavement followed, but from now on no enslavement will follow."<sup>3</sup>

The rest of the psalm is then laid out antiphonally in the document. It speaks of two groups that will sing the psalm by the half verse, one group singing from inside the city and the other group singing from outside the city, on the day of salvation ("the day the LORD has made"). The *midrash* lays out the scene in this way:

From inside the walls, the men of Jerusalem will say,

"We beseech Thee, O Lord, save now." (v. 25a)

And from outside, the men of Judah will say,

"We beseech Thee, O Lord, make us now to prosper!" (v. 25b)

From inside, the men of Jerusalem will say,

"Blessed be he that cometh IN [emphasis original]  
the name of the Lord." (v. 26a)

And from outside, the men of Judah will say,

"We bless you OUT of the house of the Lord." (v. 26b)

From inside, the men of Jerusalem will say,

"The Lord is God and hath given us light." (v. 27a)

And from outside, the men of Judah will say,

"Order the festival procession with boughs,  
even unto the horns of the altar." (v. 27b)

From inside, the men of Jerusalem will say,

"Thou art my God, and I will give thanks unto Thee." (v. 28a)

And from outside, the men of Judah will say,

"Thou art my God, I will exalt Thee." (v. 28b)

Then the men of Jerusalem and the men of Judah, together, opening their mouths in praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, will say:

"O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good,  
for His mercy endureth forever." (v. 29)<sup>4</sup>

What is intriguing about the way the *midrash* lays out this portion of the psalm is that it assigns the two half verses that are quoted in the Palm Sunday Gospel accounts to the men of Jerusalem, who were to sing their half-verses from inside its walls. The latter half of each verse is assigned to the men of Judah who, according to the *midrash*, were to sing their half-verses from outside the walls. In the two snippets of the psalm that Matthew, Mark, and John quote, it's interesting

<sup>3</sup>W. G. Braude, trans., *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), vol. 2, 245.

<sup>4</sup>*The Midrash*, 245.

that both half-verses were to be sung, according to the rabbis, by the same "choir." Matthew 21:9 and Mark 11:9 say that these words were shouted by "the crowds that went ahead of [Jesus] and those that followed." This would not seem to reflect the way the *midrash* has it laid out. But John 12:12-13 says that the crowd that sang the psalm that day had already come to Jerusalem for the festival. They *came out* of the city when they heard that Jesus was coming and sang vv. 25a and 26a to him. It would seem then that it was a crowd streaming out of the city toward him that sang these half-verses.

Another touch from earlier in the Gospels seems to support this idea that it would be people of *Jerusalem* who would sing these words to Jesus. During his journey to Jerusalem Jesus, in one of his speeches, had addressed the city and said that it would quote the key phrase in v. 26a of Psalm 118 when he arrived there. As he laments to his hearers about the city of Jerusalem, he addresses the city, which he was no doubt not yet in sight of, with the words, "I tell you, you will not see me again until *you say*, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Luke 13:35). Was Jesus aware of the rabbinic interpretation that it would be the people of Jerusalem who would quote 26a at the Messiah's entry into the city on "the day the Lord has made?"

New Testament scholars have sometimes noted these connections between the rabbinic interpretation of Psalm 118 and these details of the Gospel accounts, and they have concluded that the Gospels reflect not only the common messianic interpretation of Psalm 118 in Jesus' day but even reflect the antiphonal rabbinic layout of the Psalm with its two key phrases to be sung by the inhabitants of Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to pin down the dating of the *midrash* quoted above. As with much of rabbinic literature, it is very difficult—many times impossible—to determine a date for the recording of a particular *midrash*. The very nature of rabbinic writings is that they are a collation of sayings of the rabbis stemming from a variety of centuries. However, it's likely that this *midrash* dates from before the time of Jesus' triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. In the centuries following Jesus' death and resurrection the rabbis were often reluctant to identify aspects of their Scriptures as messianic if the Christians saw such details as supporting the identification of Jesus as the Messiah. So it seems that this clearly messianic *midrash* is probably older than the quotations of Psalm 118 in the Gospels.

But more important than the "performance directions" of the psalm are the meanings of its words. The words of v. 26a (בְּרִידָה הִבָּא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה) are

<sup>5</sup>Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1964), 256-259.

were clearly intended as a messianic acclamation on Palm Sunday. The participle מְבָרַךְ alone was used as a messianic title in the days of Jesus. That's clear from the question that John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus with in Matthew 11:3, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" The participle there in the Greek of Matthew's Gospel (ὁ ἐρχόμενος) is clearly mimicking the Hebrew term מְבָרַךְ. It was understood as a messianic title. The crowds understood it that way on Palm Sunday, and not just the ones who professed Jesus as Messiah. It's no doubt the reason Jesus' opponents were so upset when they heard the verses of Psalm 118 being sung to him as Passover was getting underway. The Pharisees say, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" (Lk 19:39). They recognized what the crowd was saying about Jesus. And Jesus was not about to silence such words of confession about who he was. He responded, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Lk 19:40).

One other nuance of the phrase that exegetes like to point out is that the phrase "in the name of the LORD" does not appear to be modifying "the one who comes," but rather "blessed."<sup>6</sup> Although "the one who comes in the name of the LORD" might seem like an ideal way of describing Jesus' divine origin and mission, the acclamation appears rather to be saying "Blessed in the name of the LORD is the Coming One." The Masoretic accent seems to indicate this. The accent on מְבָרַךְ is a disjunctive one, linking the participle more closely with the preceding בְּרִיךְ than with the following phrase.

Verse 25 also has some interesting touches. You have to read it aloud in order to appreciate the assonance, rhythm, and parallelism. Though Hebrew poets in general love parallelism, this poetic line is definitely an "over the top" example of parallelism. You have to read it to appreciate it. Read it aloud a couple of times, and then shout it with passion, the way they would have on Palm Sunday:

אָנָּה יְהוָה הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא אַנְּנָה יְהוָה הַצְּלִיחָה נָּא

Can you hear it? Both half lines begin with the lengthened particle of entreaty (אָנָּה) and end with the regular particle (נָּא). The tetragrammaton is in second place in both phrases. And the verbs are both *hiphil* long imperatives that add another pair of "ah" sounds for a total of eight such long vowels, creating an open-throated chant that in our modern culture we might almost call a "cheer." This is a rare example of parallelism in virtually every syllable of the line. It simply begs to be shouted antiphonally by two groups. The first verb (root שׁע, from which Jesus' name is derived) was probably shouted in Aramaic (אָנָּה הוֹשִׁיעָה) on Palm Sunday.

<sup>6</sup>John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 73-150* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 331.

Matthew, Mark and John all preserve it in Greek spelling. Since the Greeks had no way to render the "sh" sound, the *shin* became an "s" sound, and thus we have received this exclamation as "Hosanna." It's one of those Aramaic words that was preserved in the Greek New Testament and seems to be testimony that the early church, at least for a while, spoke Aramaic. This particular word is interesting because it became part of the church's liturgical language. We use it so often in worship without defining it that I think sometimes people assume it means something similar to "hallelujah." But what it means is "Save!" It was a very fitting word to shout to Jesus on the day that he entered Jerusalem in order to fulfill the climax of his saving mission. The crowd that was there that day probably didn't realize the full import of the word they were shouting, but often in the Gospels those who were playing supporting roles around Jesus the Messiah seldom realized what he was doing until after his resurrection.

I have often wondered if part of the reason that the Christian church incorporated vv. 25 and 26 of Psalm 118 into the *Sanctus*, which we sing in anticipation of the Lord's Supper, is because these words are so fitting for that point in our worship of Christ. As Christ enters the gathering of his people in visible form in the Lord's Supper, his people cheer him on, begging him to save them. The *Sanctus* is an interesting combination of the song sung by the crowds on Palm Sunday together with the song of the angels heard by Isaiah in chapter 6 of his prophecy: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." In imitation of the threefold "holy" in the song of the angels, the *Sanctus* contains a threefold "hosanna," which is then followed by a threefold repetition of "Blessed is he, blessed is he, blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD." The church has melded these two biblical songs—one that the angels sing in heaven and one that humans sang to Jesus at the approaching climax of his ministry—to reflect the truth that the one holy Christian church on earth and in heaven joins together in worship of Christ, who is both God and man, both heavenly and earthly.

I will have to leave the history of the *Sanctus* to those who specialize in the study of worship, but from an exegete's point of view it's fascinating that the last portion of this psalm seems to reflect the climactic point of both Passover worship and Christian worship. Verse 27 of the psalm could be translated, "The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine on us. Bind the festival sacrifice with cords up to the horns of the altar." The Hebrew word אָלַף could be a reference to the Passover lamb. The NIV renders it "festal procession" ("Join in the festal procession"), but Brown-Driver-Briggs labels this particu-

lar instance of the word as “festival sacrifice.”<sup>7</sup> If this translation is correct, it could be a reference to how each household would bring their Passover lamb to the temple on the afternoon of the day that we observe as Maundy Thursday, where the lamb would be slaughtered.<sup>8</sup> So verse 27 could be referring to the bringing of the Passover lamb up to the horns of the altar for sacrifice. If that is the case, this verse could have had great significance on the night that Jesus concluded the Passover meal with the singing of Psalm 118. It could have been another Word of God that pointed to Jesus as the sacrificial victim, the fulfillment of the Passover lamb as type of Christ.

Could this last stanza of Psalm 118 have formed the basis for the Christian worship of Jesus Christ in the early church? Could the early church have recognized in this Passover psalm a pattern for worshiping Christ as the true Passover lamb? As I said, I would invite those much more conversant with the history of Christian liturgy to enlighten us on this point, but to me it is an intriguing possibility. Another feature of this last portion of the Psalm that is highly suggestive is the way it concludes. It ends with perhaps the most frequently reoccurring prayer in the entire Old Testament: “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his mercy is forever.” (This petition also occurs in Psalm 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 2 Chronicles 5:13 and 7:3; Ezra 3:11 and, in creative variations, in Psalm 101:5 and throughout Psalm 136.) What’s interesting about its use here is that in the Christian liturgy it is sung responsively by the pastor and congregation *after* the distribution of the Lord’s Supper. Could it be that it was preserved in this place because the Christians at the end of their sacred meal preserved the prayer that concluded the Passover meal? We would then have three important parts of the sacramental portion of the service echoing the last portion of Psalm 118:

- vv. 25-26 (“Hosanna, blessed is he . . .”) *Sanctus*
- v. 27 (“Bind the festival sacrifice . . .”) Distribution of Christ’s body and blood
- v. 29 (“Give thanks to the LORD . . .”) Post-supper thanksgiving

Whether there are any echoes of the Passover liturgy in the Christian order of service or not, there is no denying that the latter portion of Psalm 118 forms a link between the Passover celebration and Christ’s sacrificial death during Holy Week. At the time of Jesus, the Passover celebration not only looked back at the exodus but also pointed ahead to a greater deliverance, the coming of the Messiah. The Jews of Jesus’ day came to Jerusalem expectantly waiting for the Mes-

<sup>7</sup>Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 291.

<sup>8</sup>Anthony J. Saldarini, *Jesus and Passover* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 29-31.

siah to come. Jesus, in his final trip to Jerusalem for the Passover, showed himself to be that Messiah.

Although the final portion of the psalm is the key to identifying the link between the exodus and the salvation that Jesus won for us, the rest of the psalm also contributes importantly. Jesus quoted vv. 22-23 at the end of his parable of the tenants, which interestingly enough he told during Holy Week. (Were the strains of Psalm 118 still ringing in his ears from Palm Sunday when he told the parable?) He quotes these verses at the end of the parable, after he has made it obvious that the Jews of his day have rejected the prophets and are about to reject him, the Son, anticipating how they will put him out of the city later in the week and kill him. At the conclusion of the parable he quotes vv. 22-23:

The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
the LORD has done this,  
and it is marvelous in our eyes.<sup>9</sup>

Matthew tells us that the chief priests and Pharisees understood that he was referring to them as the tenants who were about to throw the son out of the vineyard and as the builders who rejected the stone that was to become the cornerstone. It was another of those moments when they wanted to arrest him but were afraid to because of the crowd. No doubt part of their indignation is that they realized that the “stone” in Psalm 118 was a reference to the Messiah and that Jesus was implying that he was that Messiah.

It’s interesting that the New Testament also quotes Peter twice, citing this verse as support for Jesus’ messianic claim (Ac 4:11 and 1 Pe 2:7). The one whom Jesus named “rock” recognized that the true Rock was Jesus himself, and he was apparently drawn to this verse as pointing to Jesus as the real rock that the church is built on. (The 1 Peter passage is particularly interesting since Peter sandwiches Ps 118:22 between two prominent Isaiah prophecies about the coming Stone/Rock—Isa 28:16 and 8:14.)

In addition to noting these unmistakable references to Christ in Psalm 118, it’s illuminating to read the psalm and imagine Jesus and his disciples singing it in the upper room on Maundy Thursday evening. So many of the references are extremely fitting for Jesus to be singing the night before his death, even though subsequent Scriptures do not explicitly mark them as messianic prophecy. Consider the following instances:

<sup>5</sup>When hard pressed, I cried to the LORD;  
he brought me into a spacious place.

<sup>9</sup>This and subsequent quotations of Psalm 118 are from NIV.

<sup>6</sup>The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid.  
What can mere mortals do to me?

<sup>7</sup>The LORD is with me; he is my helper.  
I look in triumph on my enemies.

<sup>8</sup>It is better to take refuge in the LORD  
than to trust in humans.

<sup>9</sup>It is better to take refuge in the LORD  
than to trust in princes.

<sup>10</sup>All the nations surrounded me,  
but in the name of the LORD I cut them down.

<sup>11</sup>They surrounded me on every side,  
but in the name of the LORD I cut them down.

<sup>12</sup>They swarmed around me like bees,  
but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns;  
in the name of the LORD I cut them down.

<sup>13</sup>I was pushed back and about to fall,  
but the LORD helped me.

The middle portion of the psalm was clearly written to commemorate the exodus. Verse 14 comes verbatim from the song of Moses (Ex 15:2), which the Israelites sang after crossing the Red Sea:

The LORD is my strength and my defense;  
he has become my salvation.

This verse is also quoted in the First Song of Isaiah (12:2), where it undoubtedly points forward to the greater future salvation of the LORD.

The next two verses are also reminiscent of the song of Moses in Exodus 15:

Shouts of joy and victory  
resound in the tents of the righteous:  
"The LORD's right hand has done mighty things!  
The LORD's right hand is lifted high;  
the LORD's right hand has done mighty things!"

The early Christians were no doubt aware of the connections between the exodus and the death and resurrection of Jesus. So verses like 17 have featured prominently in the worship music for Easter day:

I will not die but live,  
and will proclaim what the LORD has done.

The words of verse 18 are clearly fitting on the lips of Jesus on Maundy Thursday evening:

The LORD has chastened me severely,  
but he has not given me over to death.

Verses 19 and 20 would have been particularly meaningful if they were part of the song sung on Palm Sunday as Jesus rode into the city:

Open for me the gates of the righteous;  
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.  
This is the gate of the LORD  
through which the righteous may enter.

Would the people who were there on Palm Sunday have recognized the full import of these words? Jesus had proclaimed himself the gate through which the righteous enter the kingdom of God (Jn 10:7-9). This, like so many of the things that Jesus proclaimed about himself, was worded in a way that had verbal links to the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus spoke of his salvation in a language that would eventually awaken connections in the minds of the people to the prophecies that God had given about the Messiah in his inspired Scriptures, and in particular in the Psalms.

We do well to use the Psalms in our worship life. They contain many truths that we need to meditate on again and again if our dull minds are to become awakened to the depths of insight that God has buried in his Word. Psalm 118, the traditionally appointed Psalm for Easter, is a gold mine for worshipers of Jesus Christ to meditate on. It awakens us to the links that exist between God's rescue of Israel from Egypt and our deliverance from sin, death, and Satan. It is as fitting for use at our Easter and communion celebrations as it was for the Passover celebration of ancient Israel. It provides the worshiping community with outstanding words and concepts for meditating on Christ, who is the full realization of a salvation that the Passover lamb could only picture. The church throughout the centuries has seen the connections that lie between this Old Testament masterpiece and God's Masterpiece of a Savior. May the church continue to focus on gems like this in the centuries ahead, as it has for over 2,000 years, so that its worshipers remain focused on Jesus the Messiah.