

Exploring Rabbinic Approaches to the Psalms

GAVIN MICHAL (UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA)

ABSTRACT

Today, the Jewish world has adopted a popularist - if not theurgical - approach to the Book of Psalms, where the Psalms take on a mystical and almost magical function.¹ However widespread, this is only one facet of a kaleidoscope of multifaceted and divergent methodologies that lie within the rubric of rabbinic Psalm interpretation. This article looks at some of the theology underpinning the essential structures of the Psalms as seen through the eyes of the classical rabbis. The analysis begins with the overall edifice of the Psalter, its division into books and their order, discusses the nomenclature and the aspect of musicology, and rabbinic views concerning their authorship and provenance. The article proceeds to investigate diverse and sometimes mutually-exclusive rabbinic opinions regarding the essential intent, usage and status of the Psalms. In the final analysis, readers are left bewildered as to whether the Psalms hold the key to the secrets of the universe or whether Jews are even allowed to pray by using the Psalms because of their exalted spiritual stature, or on the contrary, whether the Psalms are merely human expressions of prayer and grappling attempts at making sense of a difficult world, and therefore, of diminished and mundane status.

KEYWORDS: Ibn Ezra, Saadia Gaon, Gigatila, Psalms, Authorship, Editing, Prayers, Rituals, Great Assembly

A INTRODUCTION

It was only during the 1920s that the Psalter entered the main arena of academic scholarship, due mainly to the work of Hermann Gunkel (who pioneered form-criticism) and his student, Sigmund Mowinckel. Gunkel introduced categories of Psalms, or "psalm types" such as laments, royal and wisdom Psalms, and tried to present the *Sitze in Leben* or *original life situations* that served as the springboards for the various Psalms. For Gunkel, the Psalms, as we have them, are later

* Submitted: 15/12/2021; peer-reviewed: 04/03/2022; accepted: 29/03/2022. Gavin Michal "Exploring Rabbinic Approaches to the Psalms," *Old Testament Essays* 35 no. 1 (2022): 84–110. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2022/v35n1a7>.

¹ These are approaches not only within the Breslov and Chabad (Chassidic) communities, but they are also found within the non-Chassidic and Chareidi (ultra-Orthodox) communities.

spiritual imitations of former types of Psalms, and the eloquent language of the psalmist represents a dead ritualism.

Mowinckel continued the work but emphasized the cultic background behind the Psalms, believing them not to be poetic fiction, but rather the actual worship language of the Temple settings of the pre-exilic period. Thus, began the scholarly interest in the Psalms and clearly, it revolved more around literary or form-criticism than historical-criticism.²

Nevertheless, scholarship relating to the Book of Psalms has drifted even further into the territory of literary-criticism since the 1970s. Today the Psalm texts are read more as a literary unit in their complete and final canonical form, and, under the influence of Gerald Wilson³, a more holistic position is adopted. No longer is the Book of Psalms considered a disjointed collection of mainly liturgical poetry, but rather something to be studied on a literary level within the context and final shape of the canon. And no longer is the Book of Psalms considered just the hymnbook of Second Temple Judaism, but most of the scholarly interest is now in the composition, editorial unity, themes or messages of the Psalms as opposed to tracing their provenance or prehistory.

Although modern (and generally secular) Jewish academic scholarship has adopted critical tools of biblical interpretation, within the Jewish religious world, shifts in scholarly focus have not been so fluid. This is because the rabbinic style of scholarship usually seeks precedent over innovation. However, the point must be made that rabbinic precedent is by its very nature extremely diverse, with seemingly mutually-exclusive poles (theoretically)⁴ united within one framework. We will explore some of the fluidity in the interpretation of the Book of Psalms within the world of classical rabbinic thought.

B STRUCTURE OF THE PSALMS

1 Origins of the title 'Psalms' and 'Tehillim'

The English word *psalm* comes from the Greek word ψαλμός (*psalmos*), which is a translation of the Hebrew *mizmor* (from the root זמר) which can mean both *to*

² William H. Bellinger, "Psalms and the Question of Genre," in *The Oxford Handbook of The Psalms* (ed. William P. Brown; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 313-15.

³ See his 1981 Yale dissertation: Gerald H. Wilson, "The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter," *SBLDS* 76 (1985).

⁴ I say "theoretically" because Judaism is a pragmatic religion where praxis, prevailing custom and authority of theological opinion have more purchase in its realia than hypotheses and speculation.

prune (as in a vineyard) and *to pluck* (as in a stringed musical instrument). Fifty-seven of the one hundred and fifty psalms begin with the title *Mizmor*. Another possible title for this book is *Tefilot*, or *prayers*. There are five psalms that begin with the word *tefilah* in the title, and Psalm 72 concludes Book II with the doxology:

בְּלוֹ תִפְלוֹת דָּוִד בֶּן-יִשָּׁי

End of the prayers (*tefilot*) of David son of Jesse.

Supporting this notion of Psalms being *prayers* is that most of the Psalms indicate that a worshiper is speaking to God and not that God is addressing humankind (as is often the case with other sections of the Bible).⁵ The title that gained dominance, however, was *Tehillim*, which means praises, as there is a "note of praise"⁶ in most of the Psalms, even though others may be classified as laments or complaints or curses. In the Psalter as a whole, almost a third of the Psalms are individual laments. Moreover, the literary trajectory throughout the book moves from lament to praise.

Amos Hakham⁷ mentions that it was the Masoretes⁸ who preferred the title *Tehillim* over *Tefillot* likely to avoid confusion with the official *Siddur* or *Prayer Book*.⁹ More importantly, Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles refer to the Levites who would "sing praise (הלל) by the ordinance of David" (Nehemiah

⁵ For a different view, however, see later in section F, where Rav Saadia Gaon specifically considers the Psalms as *not* being prayers.

⁶ Ralph L. Smith, "The Use and Influence of the Psalms," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 27 (1984): 10.

⁷ Amos Hakham, *Psalms: Jerusalem Commentary* 1 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2003), vi.

⁸ Masoretes or *Ba'alei haMesorah* (masters of the tradition) were groups of Jewish scribe-scholars active between the fifth and tenth centuries C.E. There were three primary schools of Hebrew text and vocalisation: One was in Babylonia, and another school was in southern Israel. (Both these schools placed the *nekudot* or markings *above* the letters. This method of supralinear vocalisation, however, was no longer in popular usage after the eleventh century.) The third and most authoritative school was in Tiberias which gave rise to the common system of vocalisation that we use today. Ibn Ezra writes that; "This is the manner of the sages of Tiberias, and they are the foundation, for from them were the Massorites, and from them we received all our vowel-points." See: The Massoreth Ha-Massoreth of Elias Levita, (Frankfurt am Main: Salzwasser Verlag, 2021), 131. The Tiberias school was dominated by two families, Ben Naftali and Ben Asher and they had worked on the accuracy of Torah texts for generations. Their slightly different styles are recorded in *Sefer haChilufin* or *Book of Differences*, showing 867 differences between them.

⁹ Again, see later Rav Saadia Gaon's view in section F, where Psalms are *not* to be classified as prayers.

12:24)¹⁰. Hakham also points out that some early commentators used a similar term *Tehillot* instead of *Tehillim* and that even where the title *Tehillim* was initially used, it was referred to as *Tillim* (since in rabbinic Hebrew, the letter ה is elided). *Tillim* is not a corruption of later generations (or a lazy pronunciation as is common today) but is an accurate and ancient pronunciation dating back to the rabbinic period. In rabbinic Aramaic, the Book of Psalms is also referred to as *Tillin* (תִּלִּין) and *Tillei* (תִּלְיָי).

2 Psalms as early liturgy

According to Jewish tradition, the psalms were used as the actual liturgy during Temple times. Fifty-five Psalms refer to לְמַנְצֵחַ, the Choirmaster in the Temple. However, the Book of Psalms, due to its universal language as is evidenced by its lack of specific and detailed requests, remained in use in liturgy for post-Temple times.¹¹ This is unlike the prayers contained within the rest of biblical literature which were composed for specific needs and occasions. The first complete recorded biblical prayer is that of Jacob as he is about to confront Esau.

Also, according to Jewish tradition, even before Ezra’s *Great Assembly* established the official order of the prayers, some Psalms related to auspicious or specific times of the day or year, and would have served as an ancient form of prayer book.¹² This highlights how various psalms correspond to sections of the prayer book known today variously as the evening *Shema* (Psalm 4), the morning (Psalm 5) and afternoon prayers (Psalm 141), an early form of the Passover *Haggadah* (Psalms 78 and 105), Grace after Meals (Psalm 111), a traveller’s prayer (*tefilat haderech*) (Psalm 121), and the confession of *Yom Kippur* (Psalm 106).

Hakham¹³ also points to another characteristic of the Psalms (and biblical poetry, and in fact biblical Hebrew in general), the flexible meaning of the verb tenses. An example of this is Psalm 30:11:

שְׁמַע־יְהוָה וְחַנּוּנִי יְהוָה הִיְהֶ־עֲרֹ לִי

Hear, Lord, and have mercy on me; Lord, be my help!

This sentence has dual meaning in that it may refer to a request for help in the future or it may be an expression of gratitude for the past, blurring the difference between supplication and a thanksgiving. Perhaps this flexible verb

¹⁰ See 1 Chronicles 23:5; 2 Chronicles 7:6, 20:21, 29:30, 30:21 and Ezra 3:10.

¹¹ Hakham, *Psalms*, xvii.

¹² Hakham, *Psalms*, xx, xxii.

¹³ Hakham, *Psalms*, xviii.

tense connecting past to present, reflects the psychology of human nature, which recalls the original distress of the past, at the same time as expressing gratitude to be relieved of it in the present.

3 Positioning the Psalms within the Canon

The Hebrew Scriptures are divided into Torah, Prophets (*Nevi'im*) and Writings (*Ketuvim*). In the current order, the Book of Psalms is the first book in the Writings. However, according to the *Talmud* (b. Bava Batra 14b) it is the second book in the Writings, after Ruth. The Masoretes in the Land of Israel also placed the Book of Psalms second, but after Chronicles, not after Ruth.¹⁴ According to rabbis like Gigatila, this positioning of Psalms within the Writings (and not Prophets) has some bearing on the (reduced) status of the Psalms within the hierarchy of the canon, as we shall see later in section G.

4 Indications of melody and the style of presentation

According to Hakham¹⁵ the psalms featuring the word למנצח (*Lamenatzeach*, "For the chief musician") followed by an expression like בגגינות ("with instrumental music"¹⁶)¹⁷, אל הנחילות ("to be played on flutes"¹⁸)¹⁹, בגגינות על השמינית ("on an eight-stringed harp"²⁰)²¹, as well as other eleven expressions containing the word על ("on"), and followed by a musicological reference indicating either the melody or the way in which the musical accompaniment was to be performed. Many of these technical terms remain untranslated as the exact details of the musicology are unknown. The rabbinic decree in the *Talmud* (b. *Sotah* 48a) against playing music in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple may explain why these musical concepts have subsequently been forgotten.

The Psalms with the name *Yedutun* in the title (Psalms 39, 62 and 77) may similarly indicate a style of musical delivery which was named after a particular Levite singer by that name. It remains, however, uncertain whether the name *Yedutun* referred to a person or an instrument²².

¹⁴ Hakham, *Psalms*, vi.

¹⁵ Hakham, *Psalms*, x.

¹⁶ Translation *Sefaria*.

¹⁷ Psalms 4, 54, 55, 67, 76.

¹⁸ Translation NIRV.

¹⁹ Psalm 5.

²⁰ Translation NKJV.

²¹ Psalm 6.

²² Hakham, *Psalms*, xi.

5 Meaning of the word 'Selah'

The word *selah* is only found in the Book of Psalms and in the third chapter of Habakkuk which is structured like the Psalms. In *Midrashic* literature the word *selah* is said to imply 'for eternity' but some interpretations claim *selah* means a pause or break and also that sometimes it is even used as a means of emphasising a point. However, Hakham²³ is convinced that the term *selah* indicates a form of vocal or instrumental delivery and that it was not an integral part of the original text. It was a cue to the singer or the musician. *Selah* is an unusual word and its form has no parallel. At best it may be related to the rabbinic expression סלסול בקול ("a vocal trill") and perhaps בערבות סלו לרוכב ("raise your voice to him who rides upon the clouds") as in Psalm 68:5.

6 Division into Sefarim (Books) and Sedarim (Orders)

Hakham,²⁴ in discussing the division of the Psalms into five books, refers to doxologies or "verses of blessing found at the end of each of them". This indicates a distinct separation within the collection. Seybold²⁵ makes the point that the book divisions do not really take care of any technical considerations as evidenced by the Qumran scrolls, and therefore they could just as well have remained on a single scroll. Others, however, see the division into books as part of a meta-narrative.²⁶

The Masoretes, according to Hakham, further divided the Psalms into nineteen *sedarim* (orders). In both the Aleppo Codex and Leningrad manuscript, these sections are marked by the letter "ס" in the margin. The subdivisions are generally related to verses of blessing found at various junctures throughout the text but are sometimes simply due to the psalms being particularly long.²⁷

²³ Hakham, *Psalms*, 12.

²⁴ Hakham, *Psalms*, vii.

²⁵ Klaus Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms* (London: T & T Clark, 1990), 16.

²⁶ Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, "The Meta-Narrative of the Psalter," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* (ed. William P. Brown; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 368.

²⁷ Hakham, *Psalms*, viii.

C MIDRASH TEHILLIM AND TARGUM TEHILLIM

1 Midrash Tehillim

Midrash Tehillim has only been known since around the eleventh century when it was first mentioned by a number of rabbis including Rashi (1040–1105).²⁸ It is also known as *Midrash Socher Tov*²⁹ or *Aggadat Tehillim*³⁰. The original *Midrash Tehillim*, which was likely authored by R. Matityahu Yitzhari of Zaragoza, in its first edition³¹ only deals with Psalms 1–118 whereas the second edition³² includes Psalms 119–150 (excluding Psalms 123 and 131). According to Leopold Zunz its final compilation would have been towards the final centuries of the *Gaonic* period (589–1038).³³

Midrash Tehillim contains stories, legends, parables, proverbs, with many ethical and *Halachic* teachings. Commenting on Psalm 1, *Midrash Tehillim* states:

Moses gave Israel the five books, and David gave Israel the five books of Psalms.

This appears to be in tension with the *Talmudic* teaching where David is said to have drawn from ten earlier sources for some of his psalms (see section D), thus excluding him from absolute authorship.

Along similar lines, attempting to equate the status of the the book of Psalms with the Torah, *Midrash Tehillim* comments on Psalm 78:

שלא יאמר אדם שאין המזמורות תורה אלא תורה הם ואף הנביאים תורה

One should not say that the Psalms are not Torah, for they are Torah, and so are the [books of the] prophets Torah.

²⁸ See Rashi's commentary on I Samuel 17:49 which references מדרש תהלים as a source.

²⁹ After its opening quote from Proverbs 11:27, שֶׁחָרָטוּב יִבְקֶשׁ רְצוֹן, "He who earnestly seeks what is good pursues what is pleasing."

³⁰ See Rashi's commentary on Deuteronomy 33:7, where he references אגדת תהלים as a source.

³¹ Constantinople 1512.

³² Thessaloniki 1515.

³³ Leopold Zunz, *Homilies in Israel and their Historical Development* (trans. H. Albeck; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1947), 131–132.

Rav Saadia Gaon (d.942) expanding on the idea that the Psalms are Torah³⁴, argues that they cannot be used as prayers (see section F). However, it is not clear if Rav Saadia Gaon influenced, or was influenced by *Midrash Tehillim*.

In a fascinating comment on Psalm 3, *Midrash Tehillim* discourages students from finding an order or sequence in the Psalms. For this it cites R. Eleazar who claims that were we to understand its “*seder*” or *sequence*, we would have “*the power of creation and the ability to revive the dead and work wonders*”. Furthermore, it cites R. Yehoshua ben Levi regarding who it claims was prevented from expounding on the sequence of the Psalms “*by a heavenly voice*”, which proclaimed:

אל תפוחו את הישן

Do not awaken that which sleeps.³⁵

This seems to be an injunction simply not to go down the road of any critical analysis of the provenance of the psalms and their positioning within the present order of the canon, which was a tacit suggestion to “let sleeping dogs lie”, as it were.

2 Targum Tehillim

Because Aramaic was the vernacular of the Jews during Babylonian and *Talmudic* times, the need arose to translate the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic. The *Talmud*³⁶ claims that the following Aramaic translations were accorded almost canonical status: the *Targum Onkelos*, the authorship of which is traditionally afforded to Onkelos the Convert (c. 35–120 CE), and *Targum Yonatan*³⁷, which

³⁴ Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 1.

³⁵ Translation mine.

³⁶ The *Talmud* in b. *Megilla* 3a, records: “The Aramaic translation of the Torah used in the synagogues was composed by Onkelos the convert based on the teachings of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. The Aramaic translation of the Prophets was composed by Yonatan ben Uzziel based on a tradition going back to the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.”

³⁷ *Targum Yonatan* must not be confused with *Targum Pseudo-Yonatan*, another Aramaic translation of the Torah, which due to a printer’s error was mistakenly also referred to as “*Targum Yonatan*”. The text was initially known as *Targum Yerushalmi*. *Targum Pseudo-Yonatan* was produced in the Land of Israel as opposed to *Targum Onkelos* and *Targum Yonatan* which were produced in Eastern Babylonia. See Beverly Mortensen, “The Priesthood in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Renewing the Profession,” *Studies in Aramaic Interpretation of Scripture* 4 (2006). Mortensen argues that *Targum Pseudo-Yonatan* was produced around the fourth century.

is traditionally believed to have been written by Yonatan ben Uziel (around the first century).

The lacuna with regard to an Aramaic translation of the Psalms was filled by the *Targum Tehillim* which was composed sometime during the first six centuries.³⁸ The *Targum Tehillim* survives in nineteen manuscripts but has received little scholarly attention. *Targum Tehillim* must not be confused with *Midrash Tehillim*. Regarding the two (*Targum Tehillim* and *Midrash Tehillim*) scholars are unsure about which work preceded the other.³⁹

Berkovitz⁴⁰ highlights that often the *Targum Tehillim* mirrors earlier *Talmudic* tradition in an example from the שיר המעלות or "Song of ascents" series (Psalms 120–134). The short title שיר המעלות ("A song of ascents") carries uncertain meaning⁴¹. But the Aramaic translation of *Targum Tehillim* is far more elaborate and colourful:

שִׁירָא דְאַתְאָמַר עַל מְסוּקִין דְּתְהוּמָא

The song that is said on the ascents from the abyss.

The original Hebrew version of these Psalms does not mention anything about abyss (*tehom*) Here, evidently, the *Targum Tehillim* drew on an earlier *Talmudic* legend⁴² where David, whilst digging the foundations of the temple, uncovered a potsherd which had acted as a seal for the abyss, and now the earth was in danger of being submerged by waters. David, however, was able to quell the rising waters by singing the *Songs of Ascent*.

On other occasions, however, *Targum Tehillim* seems to have ignored previous traditions of interpretation, and offered more novel and unique explanations of its own. Psalm 87:2 reads:

³⁸ "Aramaic Targum to Psalms." Online: https://www.sefaria.org/Aramaic_Targum_to_Psalms. Accessed 10 December 2021. According to Berkovitz *Targum Tehillim* was most likely composed in post-Talmudic times (i.e., after 500C.E.) See Abraham J. Berkovitz, "Parallelism and Beyond: The Relationship between Targum Psalms and Rabbinic Literature," *Aramaic Studies* 9/1 (2021): 72).

³⁹ Berkovitz, "Parallelism and Beyond," 94.

⁴⁰ Berkovitz, "Parallelism and Beyond," 75-6.

⁴¹ "Psalms 120:1 with Connections." Online: https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.120.1?ven=Tanakh:The_Holy_Scriptures_published_by_JPS&vhe=Miqra_according_to_the_Masorah&lang=en&with=all&lang2=en. Accessed 01 December 2021.

⁴² y. *Sanhedrin* 10.2 29a and b. *Sukkah* 52b.

אַהֲבַת יְהוָה שְׁעָרֵי צִיּוֹן מִכָּל מִשְׁכָּנֹת יַעֲקֹב:

The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.

The *Talmud*⁴³, cites Rav Chisda who interprets this verse to pit the rabbinic scholars (מְצוּיָיִם or *exceptional ones*⁴⁴) against "the dwellings of Jacob" (which he suggests represent the synagogues and houses of study) and the scholars win over both institutions. However, in this case, the *Targum Tehillim* does not rely on earlier rabbinic sources but instead translates and interprets the verse uniquely as follows:

רַחֵם הַ מַעֲלָנֵי בְּתֵי מְדַרְשֵׁיא דְקַבֵּיעֵן בְּצִיּוֹן מִכָּל בְּתֵי כְּנִישֵׁיא דְבֵית יַעֲקֹב

The Lord loves the entrances of the houses of study that are established in Zion more than all the synagogues of the house of Jacob.⁴⁵

This way *Targum Tehillim* does not pit *people against places* (like Rav Chisda did), but pits *places against places*. In the competition between houses of study (Torah academies) and synagogues, the houses of study emerge victorious. The institutions of learning trump the institutions of worship.⁴⁶ I would suggest that these are not just idle conjectures but indicate deep seated concerns over the social and theological structures of the Jewish communities. Do they just need scholars, or do they need official institutions? And if the latter, then which institutions offer the greatest prospects for religious survival - study centres or synagogues? According to *Midrash Tehillim*, study centres are more vital than prayer centres.

Perhaps most interesting is the Targum's translation of the word "sacrifices". Psalm 50:14a reads:

זָבַח לְאֱלֹהִים תּוֹדָה

Sacrifice a thank offering to God.

The Targum does not translate this verse as referring to an actual sacrifice as per its *sensus literalis*, but instead it states:

⁴³ b. *Berachot* 8a.

⁴⁴ A play on the word צִיּוֹן, Zion.

⁴⁵ Translation by Berkovitz.

⁴⁶ Berkovitz, "Parallelism and Beyond," 84.

כְּבוֹשׁ יִצְרָא בִישָׂא וַיִּתְחַשֵּׁב קֳדָם יי כְּנִבְסַת תּוֹדָתָא

Subdue the evil impulse and it will be considered before God like a thanksgiving offering.

Again, there is rabbinic precedent for this type of interpretation.⁴⁷ The *Targum Tehillim* translates “sacrifice” metaphorically as “subduing the evil inclination.” This metaphoric interpretation is repeated in Psalms 50:23 and 4:6 where sacrifices are mentioned. It seems clear that *Targum Tehillim* wishes, for some reason, to impose a non-literal interpretation upon the institution of sacrifices. *Targum Tehillim* thus emerges not just as a *translation* into the Aramaic vernacular, but as a theological *commentary* as well.

D AUTHORSHIP OF THE PSALMS

1 Ten sources, choirmasters or composers?

The concepts לבני קרח, “for the Sons of Korach” and לאסף, “for Asaf”, most likely refer to choral groups connected to the temple.⁴⁸ On this view, these Psalms were written for these choirmasters. The idea that Asaf is a choral group is reflected in a reference in Ezra 2:41 to המְשֻׁרְרִים בְּנֵי אֶסָף, “The singers: the sons of Asaph...”.⁴⁹

Smith⁵⁰ refers to Peter Craigie⁵¹ who says that the combination of the preposition *le* with personal names probably does not imply authorship. However, Kessler (2013:87) reads the title of Psalm 73, מְזֻמֹּר לְאַסָּף, as “A Psalm of [ל] Asaph” not “A Psalm **for** Asaf”, which implying that Asaph is not the choirmaster but the psalmist or composer. Sometimes the *lamed* is translated as not just *for* or *to*, but *by* or *of* which would dramatically change the meaning. In the title of Psalm 30, מְזֻמֹּר שִׁיר־הַנְּכִיחַת הַבַּיִת לְדָוִד, “A psalm of David: A song for the dedication of the House (Temple)”, the *lamed* is often translated as *by* or *of* which implies that David composed it. There are one hundred Psalms which contain

⁴⁷ Leviticus *Rabbah* 9.1, “he slaughtered his impulse like a thanksgiving offering”; and b. *Sanhedrin* 43b, “anyone who slaughters his impulse and confesses upon it, the verse equates him to one who honours God in two worlds, this and the next”.

⁴⁸ Smith, “The Use and Influence of the Psalms,” 5.

⁴⁹ See also Nehemiah 7:44 for exactly the same expression.

⁵⁰ Smith, “The Use and Influence of the Psalms,” 12.

⁵¹ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 35.

one or more personal names in their titles, and they are preceded by the prepositional *lamed*.⁵²

The *Talmud* suggests that they were, instead, one of ten sources from which the body of the psalm literature was drawn:

דָּוִד כָּתַב סֵפֶר תְּהִלִּים עַל יְדֵי עֲשָׂרָה זְקֵנִים עַל יְדֵי אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן עַל יְדֵי מְלֹכֵי
צֶדֶק וְעַל יְדֵי אַבְרָהָם וְעַל יְדֵי מֹשֶׁה וְעַל יְדֵי הַיָּמִן וְעַל יְדֵי יְדוּתוֹן וְעַל יְדֵי אֶסָף
וְעַל יְדֵי שְׁלֹשָׁה בְּנֵי קָרַח

David wrote the book of Psalms in collaboration with ten elders - with Adam the first man, with Melkizedek who composed psalm 110, **with Abraham**, who composed psalm 89, **with Moses**, who composed psalms 90–100, **with Heman**, who composed psalm 88, **with Jeduthun**, who composed psalm 39, **with Asaph**, who composed psalms 73–83, **with the three sons of Korah**, who composed psalms 42–49.⁵³

On this reading, the “Sons of Korach ” and “Asaf” would not have been choirmasters but originators and composers of these Psalms. However, Simon (1990:179) explains that the ‘*lamed*’ before a personal name in the title of a psalm can carry four interpretations which lead to six different understandings: it could reference the author, the descendants of the author, the musician, the descendants of the musician, the subject of the psalm, or the descendants of the subject of the Psalm.

2 Ezra as author of the Book of Psalms

Manuscript Oxford, Ms. Heb. c. 66 contains texts which were studied by Simcha Emanuel (2010:207) who identified some of them as coming from a hitherto unknown commentary on the Book of Psalms by R. Eleazar of Worms (1176–1238). R. Eleazar was the last of the mystical group of German Pietists known as *Chasidei Ashkenaz* who flourished during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The *Chasidei Ashkenaz* formed a significant mystical movement which went on to have some influence on the later *Tosafists*.⁵⁴ R. Eleazar wrote the *Sefer haR-oakeach* as well as extensive commentaries on the *Siddur* (prayer book), but until

⁵² Hakham, *Psalms*, xii.

⁵³ b. *Bava Batra* 14b–15a, Talmud Bavli, The Schottenstein Edition, Mesorah Publications Ltd., 2008. The bold font represents the literal translation while the plain font is explanative.

⁵⁴ *Tosafists* were exegetes and rabbis particularly from northern France and Germany between the twelfth and mid-fifteenth centuries. They are best known for their critical and explanatory glosses on the *Talmud*, which are collectively called *Tosafot*.

Emanuel's discovery, it was not known that he had authored a formal commentary on the Book of Psalms. According to Emanuel "the two pages at Oxford are the only extant remnant of this commentary".⁵⁵

This newly discovered commentary on the Psalms by an important member of *Chasidei Ashkenaz* ascribes the authorship of the Book of Psalms, not to King David (1010–970 BCE) but to Ezra the Scribe (480–440 BCE). This is a significant departure from the traditional rabbinic position.

3 Jeremiah as author of Psalm 137

Israel Ta-Shma⁵⁶ shows how an early anonymous French rabbinic exegete ascribes the authorship of Psalm 137 to Jeremiah and not to David considering the psalms' references to the Babylonian exile. This poem was later incorporated into the Book of Psalms by Ezra who acted as a general biblical editor:

נראה ... שלא אמרו דוד, כי אם, בבית שני כשגלו לבבל, אמרו ירמיה. וכשעלה
עזרא מבבל וכתב כל הספרים, כתב גם זה הספר, והוסיף זה שאמ' ירמיה ...
זכור ה' לבני אדום - ירמיה הנביא היה תובע עלבוננו לפני הק' מאדום, ששמחו
על מפלתן של ישראל. ובוזה תוכל להבין שירמ' אמ' על נהרות בבל, שהרי
מעניין אילו דברים אמר באיכה, שנא' שישי ושמחי בת אדום גם עליך תעבור
כוס וגו' ... עד כאן דבר ירמיה ועזרא כתבו בספר תהלים ומסרו ללויים לשורר
בבית שני

It appears ... that David did not compose it (Psa 137), but rather Jeremiah composed it in the Second Temple period (sic) when they were exiled to Babylonia. And when Ezra went up (to the Land of Israel) from Babylonia and wrote (=edited) all of the (biblical) books, he wrote this book as well and added this (work) that Jeremiah composed ... "Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites" (Psa 137:7)—Jeremiah the prophet brought a claim before the Lord against the Edomites, who rejoiced over Israel's downfall. And from this you can see that Jeremiah composed "By the Rivers of Babylon," since in Lamentations (4:21) he says something similar: "Rejoice and exult, Daughter of Edom ... to you too the cup shall pass, etc." ... Up to here (is what)

⁵⁵ Simcha Emanuel, "New Fragments of Unknown Biblical Commentaries from the 'European Genizah'," in *Genizat Germania – Hebrew and Aramaic Binding Fragments from German in Context* (ed. Andreas Lehnardt; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 209.

⁵⁶ Israel Ta-Shma, "על ביקורת המקרא באשכנז בימי הביניים משהו," in *המקרא בראי* (ed S. Japhet, 1994), 457-59.

Jeremiah composed, and Ezra wrote it into the Book of Psalms, and handed it over to the Levites to sing in the Second Temple.⁵⁷

What we see here is some attempt at eliminating anachronisms so that the texts need not be interpreted as being authored supernaturally by David but instead can follow some form of chronology.

E AVRAHAM IBN EZRA

1 Avraham Ibn Ezra on the Psalms

The Spanish exegete, R. Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1167) speaks of the Book of Psalms as written by David, with *ruach hakodesh* (a spirit of prophecy), even with regard to the anachronistic Psalms seeming to refer to events long after his time.

Richard Steiner⁵⁸ shows that certain patterns of thought become quite evident when examining the more conservative approach of Ibn Ezra apropos biblical texts, compared to his rabbinic contemporaries in *Ashkenaz* (northern France and Germany) who wrote openly about some form of redaction evident within the Book of Psalms (and biblical literature in general) by their bold references to a *Sadran* or *editor*. Many rabbinic sources from Palestine, northern France and Germany spoke openly of anachronisms, corrections and "Books found [after the destruction] in the Temple courtyard (בעזרה)" with different readings.⁵⁹ Where an odd number of sources was discovered, a simple majority determined the version that made it into the canon. Where an even number were found, both were sometimes recorded to form what is today referred to as "doublets". Some texts, though, record "Books found by Ezra (עזרה)",⁶⁰ and not "Books found in the Temple courtyard (בעזרה)",⁶¹ identifying the possible personality behind the anonymous *Sadran* as Ezra the scribe.

⁵⁷ Translation from Richard Steiner, "A Jewish Theory of Biblical Redaction from Byzantium: Its Rabbinic Roots, Its Diffusion and Its Encounter with the Muslim Doctrine of Falsification," *JSIJ* 2 (2003): 131.

⁵⁸ Steiner, "A Jewish Theory," 154-56.

⁵⁹ *Soferim* ch. 6. This *Talmudic* tractate is known as a 'minor tractate' and is thought to have originated in the eighth century in the Land of Israel.

⁶⁰ An example of this version is a manuscript of *Avot de Rabbi Natan*, MS *Neveh Shalom*, f. 45.

⁶¹ Steiner, "A Jewish Theory of Biblical Redaction from Byzantium," 136.

R. Avraham Ibn Ezra, however, as opposed to the rabbis of *Ashkenaz*, stands out as never raising the matter of any critical biblical issues such as anachronisms, and he generally assigns the *Great Assembly* of Ezra very little latitude in terms of editing authority. He also rejects the view that textual variants are due to multiple sources. Similarly, he makes no mention of the rabbinic ideas that Ezra found older "books" from which he based his reconstruction of biblical texts. Furthermore, Ibn Ezra rejects the notion of *tikkun soferim* (corrections of the scribes⁶²) and claims that it was never a widely accepted position, being merely a *daat yachid* (an individual view) and carried no real authority.

Steiner⁶³ refers to Talmage who gives a possible reason for Ibn Ezra's reluctance to discuss critical issues of biblical texts:

R. Abraham [Ibn Ezra]... spent much of his career in Muslim Spain, where the Jews were frequently accused of tampering with the biblical text for the purpose of obliterating alleged references to Mohammed.⁶⁴

Accordingly, because of the claim that was popular in Muslim Spain at that time that Jews had falsified the Bible, Ibn Ezra felt compelled to uphold its authority and was therefore reluctant to divert from his fundamentalist and non-critical approach to biblical study. The apparent conversion to Islam of Ibn Ezra's son, Isaac, may also have had some effect on his sensitivity to Muslim theology⁶⁵. Spanish Jews in general exhibited this same reticence to engage in these matters, compared to their brethren in northern France and Germany who openly spoke of the relative freedom of the *Sadran*.

It must be pointed out, though, that Uriel Simon⁶⁶ seems to take a very different stance on Ibn Ezra than Steiner does. Simon does not mention Ibn Ezra writing in reaction to the Muslim charge of falsification, and on the contrary, he states that Ibn Ezra "had no polemical axe to grind". Simon⁶⁷ claims that Ibn Ezra understood the origins of the Psalms as prophetic or sacred poetry because no other nation did so in regard to their poetry. As Simon claims, the Arabs love

⁶² According to rabbinic tradition there are eighteen instances where the scribes made (generally minor and grammatical) corrections to the biblical text.

⁶³ Steiner, "A Jewish Theory of Biblical Redaction from Byzantium," 157.

⁶⁴ Frank Talmage, *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries* (Harvard Judaic Monographs, 1975), 86.

⁶⁵ Francis Peters, *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians and Muslims in conflict and competition* (Princeton & Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2003), 56.

⁶⁶ Simon, Uriel, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra* (Translated from the Hebrew by Lenn J. Schramm; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 163.

⁶⁷ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 167.

poetry, the Christians love sagas of war and knightly valour, the Greeks love poems of wisdom and philosophy, the Indians love riddles and parables, but “only the poetry of Israel” is dedicated to “their God alone”. Commenting on Psalm 134, Ibn Ezra writes that Israel “will not have love songs, or martial epics, only poems about the ways of God...Eventually, יְדוּדָהּ הַ כָּל־מַלְכֵי־אֲרָץ ‘all the kings of the earth will praise You’ (Psalm 134:4) and they too will adopt this sacred poetry.”

Simon⁶⁸ explains how Ibn Ezra even criticised Hebrew poetry for lacking metrical theory and rhyme as developed by the Arabs. It seems that because Ibn Ezra could not extoll the *form* of Hebrew poetry, he had to compensate by praising its *content* and elevating it to the level of the prophetic and divine. Also, Ibn Ezra was able to claim that Jews had preceded the Arabs in their use and understanding of metaphorical language which is the basis of poetry. This way, Simon gives a very different explanation for Ibn Ezra’s prophetic and divine approach to the Psalms, as opposed to that of the Muslim charge as given by Steiner. Nevertheless, whatever his motivation, Ibn Ezra claimed a prophetic origin of the Psalms.

2 Avraham Ibn Ezra on the editing of the Psalms

Although Ibn Ezra spoke of prophetic origins of the Book of Psalms, he surprisingly dealt with the question of human editorship of the psalms which he took for granted by using the term *chibbur* or *edit*. He asks: “Who edited (*chibbruhu*) this book?”⁶⁹ And he replies to his own question: “There is no need to answer this, since the Sages...handed down to us that the men of the Great Assembly edited it, and this satisfies us.” This answer creates more problems than it solves because in the actual *Talmudic* source that Ibn Ezra references (b. *Bava Batra* 14b–15a), only the books of Ezekiel, the Minor Prophets, Daniel and Esther were edited by the *Great Assembly* – not to the Psalms! Additionally, the same *Talmudic* source goes on to explicitly state that David wrote the Book of Psalms drawing from the ten elders (see D1). Simon⁷⁰ writes that this question is “perplexing”. However, Simon’s solution is even more perplexing because he suggests that Ibn Ezra’s command of *Talmud* (particularly its *Aggadah* or non-legal sections) may not have been as thorough as it should have.

Either way, Ibn Ezra referred to an editing process as quite commonplace as we see in his commentary on Ecclesiastes 12:11 referencing “Those who

⁶⁸ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 168.

⁶⁹ See Ibn Ezra’s first introduction, lines 80–81 in Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 183.

⁷⁰ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 184.

gather from many books (*ba'alei asafot*) and write (*yechabruhu*) collections." Also, Ibn Ezra sometimes speaks of the *kotev* or the *writer* of the Psalms. Simon⁷¹ explains that the idea of some form of biblical redaction was not an issue for Spanish rabbis and did not interfere with claims of the divine origins:

The gap between original writing and editing did not loom so large to the Spanish scholars as it does to us, because of their different approach to the whole question of originality. Even an author-creator bases himself on older material, whether in raw or literary form, which he molds and works into a new entity. Like him, the author-editor gathers material and writes it down; Ibn Ezra designates both activities by the word *hibbur*.

For others, however, the question of redactional activity within Scripture poses more immediate and fundamental challenges.

3 Avraham Ibn Ezra on the chronology and structure of the Psalms

Although he considers the Book of Psalms to be of divine origin (even if there was some type of editing), Ibn Ezra does not believe there is a chronology or even a thematic link between the various psalms⁷². Unlike exegetes like Rav Saadia Gaon who tried to show such connections, Ibn Ezra dismissed those attempts as "homiletical".⁷³ He was not surprised by this lack of interconnectivity because, quoting the rabbis who claimed that there is no chronological order in the Pentateuch, there certainly was no such linear direction within the Psalms either. He believed that each Psalm stood on its own. And, unlike Saadia who saw the five books of Psalms paralleling the five books of the Pentateuch, Ibn Ezra simply believed they were written by many poets over some time and collated into five broad collections by the *Great Assembly* of Ezra who had forgotten the identity of all the authors.

Furthermore, Ibn Ezra believed that the editors wrote down the psalms as they came to hand – thus those which they found as a unit were preserved in a unit and those which they found in isolation remained in isolation (Simon 1990:219–220). Ibn Ezra neglects to inform us how the original poems came to the hands of the editors, and whether they were transmitted orally or in written form and why some would have been rejected. It was, apparently, enough for Ibn

⁷¹ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 183.

⁷² Hermann Gunkel expressed a similar sentiment: "[N]o internal relationship can be discovered between neighbouring psalms." See Hermann Gunkel, *An Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (trans. J. D. Nogalski; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 2.

⁷³ See Ibn Ezra's first introduction, line 103, in Simon, *Four Approaches*, 217.

Ezra to rely entirely on what he considers the exalted state of the men who made up that body of editors and his belief that they were all originally written with divine inspiration.⁷⁴ It is also likely that the perceived lack of a sophisticated order of the psalms endorsed his perception of the accuracy of the received tradition. This would also tie up with his argument of the superiority and authenticity of the Psalms over all the other poetry produced by the faiths and cultures of his time, as particularly in Spain, poetry was very well ordered and structured.⁷⁵

F SAADIA GAON

1 Rav Saadia Gaon: The Psalms are not prayers

Rav Saadia Gaon (882–942) was a philosopher and biblical exegete born in Egypt and died in Baghdad during the time of the Abbasid Caliphate. He adopted a fundamentalist approach claiming that the five books of Psalms served as a ‘Second Pentateuch’ revealed to David.

Saadia writes in his (short) introduction to the Book of Psalms⁷⁶ that the reader should not discriminate between the various sections of biblical literature (particularly the Psalms) and wrongly conclude that some were said and narrated by human characters while other sections were ‘purer’ having been spoken by God. Instead, Saadia writes that:

[w]e must realize that all of these were phrased by the Lord in the various forms of speech employed by his creatures.⁷⁷

In Saadia’s view, then, all the words expressed throughout the Psalms, even when they appear to have originated from human speakers, are indeed the words of the “Master and not the servant.”

Saadia takes his model from Moses’ song (*Haazinu*) in Deuteronomy 32:1–43, where it seems that Moses is writing but the text also incorporates God’s speech such as in verse 39 where it states “*See then that I am He*”. The smooth interchange between the speech of the ‘servant’ and the ‘Master’ (in the

⁷⁴ This is similar to Brevard Childs “canonical criticism” where he looks at the authority of the “final form” of the Scriptures after they were canonised. See John Kessler, *Old Testament Theology. Divine Call and Human Response* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 55.

⁷⁵ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 224.

⁷⁶ Saadia has two introductions to the Psalms, a short one and a long one. In the 1966 Kafih edition the short introduction is pp. 51–53, and the eleven times longer introduction is pp. 17–50.

⁷⁷ As quoted from Joseph Kafih (ed. and trans. into Hebrew), *Saadia Gaon, The Book of Psalms: Tafsir and Arabic Commentary* (Jerusalem, 1966), 53.

Torah and the Psalms) indicate for Saadia that: "all is the word of the Lord and nothing is human discourse, as the faithful transmitters of our tradition have attested."⁷⁸

Saadia does not, however, specify which rabbinic tradition he is basing himself upon. On the contrary, earlier *Talmudic* sources (such as b. *Pesachim* 117a) suggest that according to the rabbis, David himself, and not God, spoke the words of the Psalms: "all the songs and praises which David said in the Book of Psalms..."

Nevertheless, Saadia, in his (long) introduction to the Psalms goes on to criticise:

a few of our nation who imagine...that this book was uttered by David the prophet on his own... It seems to me that the cause of this delusion...is that they find many prayers in it [and thus conclude that the words must have emanated from a human rather than a divine source].⁷⁹

Simon⁸⁰ questions just whom Saadia is referring to by "*a few of our nation*" who believe the Psalms was an independent work of David and not revealed from Above. While it may refer to the rabbis (as we saw above in b. *Pesachim* 117a), Simon maintains that these words are directed specifically against the Karaites.⁸¹ The Karaites used the Psalms as their *prayer book* as they rejected the Rabbanite (rabbinical) prayer book known as the *Siddur* which originated with Ezra the Scribe at the time of the *Great Assembly*.

Simon⁸² explains that Saadia feels that the Karaites had erred in using the "*words of the Master*" (i.e., the Book of Psalms) for their prayers. Saadia writes

⁷⁸ Kafih, *Saadiyah Gaon*, 53.

⁷⁹ Kafih, *Saadiyah Gaon*, 24. Parenthesis is mine.

⁸⁰ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 5.

⁸¹ The Karaites were a large sect of Jews who disregarded the rabbinic or oral tradition, particularly the Talmud. Some historians trace them to the Sadducees from the end of the Second Temple era, but most consider their origins later at around the time of Anan ben David (c. 715 – 795 or 811). While there is some uncertainty as to the actual numbers of Karaites, at one stage the Karaites may have comprised almost half of the total Jewish population and they were regarded as a significant threat to Rabbanite Judaism. Saadia Gaon was known for his fierce anti-Karaite views. "*The dispute of the rabbanite Gaon Saadiyah and the Karaites helped to consolidate the split between them* (New World Encyclopedia, online source: Karaite Judaism – New World Encyclopedia. Online: https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Karaite_Judaism. Accessed 05 October 2021)."

⁸² Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 44.

in his introduction to the *Siddur* (p. 9–10): "the speech of servant to his Master must be different from the speech of the Master to his servant".

Simon⁸³ makes the point that it is only once we understand the Karaite and Rabbanite polemics on prayer, that we can comprehend Saadia's radical position on the divine origins of the Book of Psalms.

The Karaites, however, are just as willing to enter into the polemical fray as they accuse the Rabbanites, particularly on the Day of Atonement, of having "[p]laced in their mouths many words, liturgies in which there is no delight, instead of songs from Psalms."⁸⁴

The Karaite writer, Yakov al-Kirkisani, was Saadia's polemical contemporary and he puts the Karaite position on the Psalms and his criticism of the Rabbanites quite bluntly:

One [of the rabbis' mistakes] is that they stopped praying from the Book of Psalms and made [their prayers] from what they themselves composed. This contradicts Scripture: 'To give praise to the Lord as David had ordained' (Ezra 3:10).⁸⁵

Saadia's response to the Karaite counter-attack is swift and forthright. He defends the Rabbanite position by claiming that the Book of Psalms was never originally intended to serve as a prayer book, and that the Rabbinic prayer book is of ancient provenance ordained so by the prophets themselves. The function of the Book of Psalms is not for prayer but for moral and theological edification instead.^{86 87}

Saadia has to develop a complicated theory of the Psalms in order to explain away their obvious *sensus literalis*. To this end, Saadia tries to explain that the Five Books of the Psalms parallel the Five Books of the Torah. The Psalms were revealed at the precise moment in history when the *nation of Israel* had

⁸³ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 8.

⁸⁴ Mann, I. "Early Karaite Bible Commentaries," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 12 (1921/2): 474.

⁸⁵ A. Scheiber, "A Rabbinic Siddur Quoted by Kirkisani," in *Ignace Goldziher Memorial*, vol. 1 (Budapest, 1948), 27. (Hebrew)

⁸⁶ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 11.

⁸⁷ A similar idea is expressed by Clinton McCann: "Psalm 1 is...a Torah psalm...to orient the reader...to learn something...from the psalms themselves, as one might expect more readily to do from the Torah...In short, the psalms, which originated as liturgical materials, have become *tôrâ*, 'instruction.'" See J. Clinton McCann, "The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter: Psalms in their Literary context," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* (ed. William P. Brown; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 351.

attained its 'perfect number' with its sustainable expanse of knowledge, prosperity and heroes.⁸⁸ This, he claims, precisely parallels the revelation of the Torah during the time of Moses, when humankind had also attained its 'perfect number', in terms of population growth, stability and sustainability.

Saadia is even able to explain away anachronisms like Psalm 90 which begins with "A Prayer of Moses". This too, he claims, was written by David because (just like 1 Chronicles 6:34 refers to priests in David's time as "Aaron and his sons") the later generations are sometimes referred to by their important ancestors' names. This way, the entire Book of Psalms is a revelation to David equating and paralleling the revelation of the Torah to Moses. Both are the "Master's" word to the "servant" and not the other way round. The Psalms, therefore, cannot be used as liturgy. Psalms can only be used as part of ritual. This is why, on Saadia's view, the Psalms contain superscriptions and instructions to guide the practitioner through the process of the ritual which can only take place in the temple⁸⁹. Saadia, however, goes so far as to restrict and complicate that ritual, so that "every psalm that is designated to [specific] Levites, they are obligated to recite it; all others are forbidden to recite it except for reading."⁹⁰

Saadia, a page later, further restricts one Levite familial group from reciting a psalm which was the proclivity of another group. He found support for this notion from 2 Chronicles 35:15, where it states that "The Asaphite singers were at their stations." Additionally, Saadia specifies that certain Psalms may only be recited at certain places within the temple⁹¹ and they "should be said in that place and no other."⁹² Furthermore, he insists that the melodies (he used the Arabic term *lahn*⁹³) may not be changed or substituted either unless the psalm used the expression *bineginot* (with melodies) in the plural⁹⁴. Saadia also is of the view that any musical performance of the Psalms outside of the temple precincts, is strictly forbidden⁹⁵. His proof text for this is Isaiah 38:20 which states, "we will offer up music all the days of our lives at the House of the Lord". Even singing

⁸⁸ Saadia's proof text for this is 1 Chronicles 21:5; "All Israel comprised 1,100,000 ready to draw the sword." Although in 2 Samuel 24:9 the number is given as 800,000.

⁸⁹ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 15.

⁹⁰ Kafih, *Saadia Gaon*, 30.

⁹¹ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 22.

⁹² Kafih, *Saadia Gaon*, 33.

⁹³ Thus, for Saadia, *Shir haMa'alot* (a song of ascents), becomes "a high-pitched *lahn*" (Simon 1990:17). Also, *Al haSheminit* (Psalm 6), indicates "that the Levites in the Temple had eight *alhan*, one assigned to each group of them". See Simon, "Four Approaches," 18. This explanation differs substantially from the usual interpretation of *Sheminit* as some form of eight stringed instrument.

⁹⁴ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 16.

⁹⁵ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 21.

the (entire) Psalms outside the temple (without musical accompaniment) is forbidden as the Psalms may only be read and not sung outside the Temple⁹⁶. Saadia, in his commentary on the *Siddur* (128), similarly makes the distinction between praying the regular “standing prayer” in the *Siddur* known as the *amidah*, and reading the *hallel* (a collection of Psalms 113–118 inserted into the prayers during the festivals).

All these details coalesce around Saadia’s understanding that the Book of Psalms should only be used for ritualistic purposes and not *liturgical* purposes. In so doing, Saadia sought to erect the highest wall between these two forms of worship. The Book of Psalms is a “book of guidance” to be studied like the Torah, and is only used as a “book of praise” within the temple (or whilst encouraging the builders of the temple). Thus, one must conclude that Saadia’s unusual interpretation of the purpose of the Book of Psalms is directed against the Karaites who used the Psalms as their official liturgy, and also is in keeping with the Rabbanite custom of not replicating temple practices during post-Temple times. Nevertheless, Simon⁹⁷ concludes that Saadia took a “maximalist” approach when it came to his polemics with the Karaites over the use of the Book of Psalms as liturgy.

G MOSHE IBN GIGATILA

1 Moshe ibn Gigatila: The Psalms are just prayers

R. Moshe ibn Gigatila, born in Muslim Spain, authored an eleventh-century Arabic commentary on the Psalms. Unfortunately, as is common throughout Jewish history, only the works translated from the vernacular (which was often Arabic) into Hebrew have survived. Many commentaries⁹⁸ have been lost and only a few fragments have been found in the Cairo Geniza. Gigatila’s commentaries suffered that same fate, although fortunately, Ibn Ezra frequently quotes from him and thus, some of his ideas have endured.

Gigatila is highly praised by Ibn Ezra who calls him “one of the great commentators.”⁹⁹ Nachmanides, who is regarded as the ‘father’ of Jewish mysticism, viewed Gigatila as “the deceitful priest” (he was a *kohen*, or member of the priestly tribe) because of Gigatila’s view that some prophetic works (such as

⁹⁶ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 23.

⁹⁷ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 39.

⁹⁸ These include the commentaries by Samuel HaNagid, Judah Ibn Balaam, Isaac Ibn Samuel Al-Kanzi. See Simon, *Four Approaches*, 116.

⁹⁹ Cited by Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 113-14.

Isaiah 11) which describe events in the time of Hezekiah do not refer to a future messianic era. Abravanel also criticised Gigatila for his lack of faith as follows:

the lack of faith of that same Rabbi Moses ha-Kohen and those who follow him with regard to the coming of the Messiah, until they had to distort the words of the prophets and have them refer to the past, and make the signs and future wonders they were foretelling into events that had already happened.¹⁰⁰

But Simon¹⁰¹ points out that Gigatila does not deny the essence of the messianic belief, as he claims it is even rooted in Deuteronomy 30:3, where Moses is said to have foretold of a future era when God would “*return the captives*” and “*gather*” them “*from the nations*” where they “*have been scattered*”:

וְשׁוּב יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת־שְׁבוּתֶךָ וְרַחֲמֶךָ וְשׁוּב וְקִבְּצֵךְ מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפְּצִיךָ
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׁמָּה

Simon¹⁰² suggests that later, Ibn Ezra¹⁰³ may even have drawn upon this idea from his predecessor, Gigatila, when he writes:

There is no need for any prophet whatsoever [to expound on the Messiah]¹⁰⁴, given what Moses said, which is the cornerstone of the matter.¹⁰⁵

Gigatila makes frequent use of Christian biblical commentaries although he makes it clear that he does not follow Christological interpretations. Gigatila is also comfortable dating many of the Psalms to the Babylonian exile and not originating with David. Ibn Ezra quotes Gigatila as stating regarding Psalms 42 and 47, for example, that “*this psalm was written in Babylonia.*”¹⁰⁶ In contrast to Saadia, who regards Asaf and the Sons of Korach as singers during David’s time, Gigatila regards the titles as referring to the descendants of Asaf and the Sons of Korach who wrote about their ancestors¹⁰⁷. Again, in contrast to Saadia,

¹⁰⁰ See Abravanel’s commentary on Joel 3.

¹⁰¹ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 115.

¹⁰² Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 115 and 117.

¹⁰³ As evidenced from findings in the Firkovich collection by Eliahu Harkavy, others exegetes such as Ibn Balaam frequently based themselves on Gigatila on many matters, with and without attribution.

¹⁰⁴ Parenthesis is mine.

¹⁰⁵ See Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Numbers 24:17.

¹⁰⁶ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 120.

¹⁰⁷ However, “*For Yedutun*”, according to Gigatila, is not referencing the author, but instead means “*for Yedutun to perform*”. Gigatila understands Psalm 90, “*Tefilah le Moshe*”, as being authored by Moses, but “*Li Shlomo*” means it was *about* (not authored by) Solomon. See Simon, *Four Approaches*, 124.

who sees all the psalms as written by David, Gigatila sees (some of¹⁰⁸) the anonymous psalms as an indication that they undoubtedly cannot be ascribed to David¹⁰⁹. Gigatila has a novel interpretation as to why some psalms begin with the term *mizmor*, (usually rendered as a *song of praise*). He suggests that because *mizmor* could also mean to 'prune' or 'detach', the Psalm simply indicated it has been 'severed' from its place in an original collection of Psalms during some editorial process.¹¹⁰

In keeping with Gigatila's more rational approach, Gigatila regarded psalms only as prayers or poems but without any deeply mystical or prophetic significance. His argument is essentially a literary argument, as the Book of Psalms appears to address God (unlike Saadia, who sees them as the words of the "Master"). Also, once the Psalms were canonised, they were included in the biblical category of *Writings* and not *Prophets*, emphasising their more mundane status and function. As Simon¹¹¹ puts it, "the essence of prayer is the aspiration to deflect the future in the direction desired by the worshiper"; hence, to conflate prayer with prophecy would require a redefining of the notion of prayer. According to Gigatila, if Psalms are indeed prayers and not prophecy, they have to reflect the simple and existential infallibilities of the human being without overstating the supernatural and the divine.

H THEURGY

No discussion on the psalms in Judaism would be complete without referencing the popular belief in the theurgical value of their recitation. An extreme example of this would be the work *Sefer Shimush Tehillim* (The Book of the Usage of Psalms) attributed to the last of the Gaonic rabbis, Rav Hai Gaon (939–1038). This work lists specific psalms that are to be recited to affect various pragmatic ends, such as protection from demons, evil spirits, wild dogs, thieves, storms, unhelpful authorities, imprisonment and even drunkenness to name just a few. A typical example would be the suggestion to recite Psalm 93:

” מלך גאות לבש. טוב לאומרו לנצח בעל דינו צג

¹⁰⁸ Not all anonymous Psalms are considered by Gigatila as being authored at a later date. Psalms 20 and 110 were, in his view, written by David in his lifetime. See Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 144 (note 54).

¹⁰⁹ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 124-25.

¹¹⁰ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 225.

¹¹¹ Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms*, 137.

*It is good to recite this [Psalm] in order to gain victory over one's legal adversary*¹¹²

Bill Rebigier¹¹³ explains that *Shimush Sefer Tehillim* not only requires the recitation of the specific psalm but the additional performance of some magical act. This moves the Psalms away from theology and liturgy, and places it squarely within the realm of magic and theurgy.

I SYNTHESIS

I have sought to demonstrate some of the depth and breadth of the theological spectrum within which the classical rabbis operated. We have seen how some of their opinions are not only diverse, but indeed mutually exclusive. In the final analysis we are left with more questions than answers: Is there theurgy in the Psalms? Did David write the Psalms? Were they edited by a *Sadran*? Do the rabbis view the Psalms as being prophetic and of divine origin or is their provenance more human? Are the Psalms prayers or rituals? Are they to be prayed or is it forbidden to use them as prayers and therefore, permitted only to be read?

Of course, today, most practicing Jews adhere to the dominant view that psalms are indeed powerful prayers and that they even carry some degree of theurgic value because this is how contemporary Judaism has come to understand the book of Psalms. But one can and should still argue that the views of the classical rabbis still stand regardless of popular perceptions.

Ultimately the question is whether there really is such a thing as a rabbinic approach to the Psalms? And the answer is no. There is no *one* approach but there are *many*.

J BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berkovitz, Abraham J. "Parallelism and Beyond: The Relationship between Targum Psalms and Rabbinic Literature." *Aramaic Studies* 9/1 (2021): 69–103.
- Bellinger, William H. "Psalms and the Question of Genre." Pages 313–325 in *The Oxford Handbook of The Psalms*. Edited by William P. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Craigie, Peter C. *Psalms 1–50*. Waco: Word Books, 1983.
- deClaissé-Walford, Nancy L. "The Meta-Narrative of the Psalter." Pages 363–376 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*. Edited by William P. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹¹² *Sefer Shimush Tehillim*, Klein Eliás of Békéscsaba, 1936, 10. (Translation mine.)

¹¹³ Bill Rebigier, "A Magic Touch: Performative Haptic Acts in Biblical and Medieval Jewish Magic." in *A Touch of Doubt: On Haptic Scepticism* (ed Rachel Aumiller. Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 114.

- Emanuel, Simcha. “New Fragments of Unknown Biblical Commentaries from the ‘European Genizah’.” Pages 207–215 in *Genizat Germania – Hebrew and Aramaic Binding Fragments from German in Context*. Edited by Andreas Lehnardt. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010.
- Gunkel, Hermann. *An Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*. Translated by James D. Nogalski. Mercer Library of Biblical Studies. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998.
- Hakham, Amos. *Psalms*. Jerusalem Commentary 1. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2003.
- Kafih, Joseph., ed. *Saadiyah Gaon, The Book of Psalms: Tafsir and Arabic Commentary*. Jerusalem, 1966.
- Kessler, John. *Old Testament Theology. Divine Call and Human Response*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013.
- Mann, Jacob. “Early Karaite Bible Commentaries.” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 12/4 (1921): 435–526.
- McCann, Clinton J. “The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter: Psalms in their Literary Context.” Pages 350–362 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*. Edited by William P. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Mortensen, Beverly. “The Priesthood in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Renewing the Profession.” *Studies in Aramaic Interpretation of Scripture* 4 (2006).
- Peters, Francis, E. *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians and Muslims in conflict and competition*. Princeton & Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Rebiger, Bill. “A Magic Touch: Performative Haptic Acts in Biblical and Medieval Jewish Magic.” Pages 104–121 in *A Touch of Doubt: On Haptic Scepticism*. Edited by Rachel Aumiller. Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2021.
- Scheiber, A. “A Rabbinic Siddur Quoted by Kirkisani.” Pages 27–40 in *Ignace Goldziher Memorial* vol. 1. Budapest, 1948. (Hebrew)
- Seybold, Klaus. *Introducing the Psalms*. Translated by R. Graeme Dunphy. London: T & T Clark, 1990.
- Simon, Uriel. *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiyah Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra*. Translated from the Hebrew by Lenn J. Schramm. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.
- Smith, Ralph L. “The Use and Influence of the Psalms.” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 27 (1984): 5–16.
- Steiner, Richard C. “A Jewish Theory of Biblical Redaction from Byzantium: Its Rabbinic Roots, Its Diffusion and Its Encounter with the Muslim Doctrine Of Falsification.” *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 2 (2003): 123–167.
- Ta-Shma, I. M. “על ביקורת המקרא באשכנז בימי-הביניים משהו.” Pages 457–459 in *ספר זכרון לשרה קמין*. Edited by S. Japhet, 1994.
- Talmage, Frank. *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries*. Harvard Judaic Monographs. Harvard University Press, 1975.
- Wilson, Gerald. H. *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 76, 1985.
- Zunz, Leopold. *Homilies in Israel and their Historical Development*. Translated by H. Albeck. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1947.

Rabbi Gavin Michal, postgraduate student and Research Associate in the Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria. E-mail: baalshem@global.co.za, ORCID: [Michal Gavin \(0000-0003-3069-806X\) \(orcid.org\)](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3069-806X).