

International Conference „Psalms in Rituals“ – Report

The conference took place from October 24-26 at Bildungshaus St. Ursula in Erfurt. A Gesprächskonzert featuring the works of Leo Ornstein and Ursula Mamlok that were presented by Jascha Nemtsov (piano) and the Klenke-Quartett accompanied it. The conference also included a time for junior scholars who were invited to present their work to a large audience and were integral part of the conference discussions.

During the conference, four questions were prominent in the lectures and the subsequent discussions.

The first question raised was: Are the psalms unique expressions or do they stand within a line of tradition? This question was answered in unison. Jörg Rüpke, in his introduction, already mentioned that the Research Centre investigates both the interconnectedness of traditions and the specificities within individual traditions. Erhard Gerstenberger suggested that biblical individual complaint psalms have connections to Babylonian healing texts thus emphasizing that the psalms may be seen in the context of the Ancient Near East. In what way these traditions might have traveled via cultures and times, however, is not always known. Beate Ego gave examples of psalm-like material from extra-biblical sources that served the purpose of creating and strengthening community. Ophir Münz-Manor convincingly showed how psalms and *piyyutim* are related but also how they differ.

The second question that occurred several times was: Are the psalms purely literary texts and / or are they expressions of lived religion? Here, the opinions varied. This was probably due to the fact that the participants in the conference all had different definitions of ritual and of liturgy. Clemens Leonhard pointed to the fact that biblical psalms feature no liturgical rubrics, and there is often a lack of evidence for ritual use. Angela Kim Harkins mentioned that psalm language slows people down, which is important in ritual activity. Using a quite different approach, Erhard Gerstenberger laid out that many psalms express wide human concerns and are, for that reason, especially suited to appear in rituals. One detail that was emphasized quite frequently, most memorable in Ruth Langer's presentation, is that one should not only look at whole psalms being or becoming part of ritual but at individual lines or phrases as well. Along those lines, Rebecca Sebbagh discussed a selection of psalms that were used in rituals and investigated why these choices might have been made.

All of the participants seemed to agree that psalms or psalm passages were considered to have been part of the temple liturgy in most traditions. But, as Jörg Rüpke pointed out, one needs to distinguish between actual temple ritual and interpretations of temple rituals even the ancient understanding/interpretations of temple ritual.

If one presupposes ritual contexts for the psalms, related issues arise. Who spoke (or even sang?) these texts or included larger or shorter portions of them in ritual? It was ritual

healing experts who lifted up their voices to speak psalms for participants said Erhard Gerstenberger. Harald Buchinger showed for the Roman contexts that the inclusion of the psalms into the Christian liturgy was a matter of religious specialists, as did Jürgen Bärsch. Isaac Kalimi spoke of ritual specialists working on medieval Jewish Psalm commentaries. On the other hand, psalms could also be part of pious expressions of everyday life and faith, even of work, as AJ Berkovitz impressively showed. Susanne Talabardon underlined that the psalms in her corpus of interest were intended for the use by the uneducated.

Within this theme, several questions remain. Can we actually pinpoint the location and the time when a psalm passage or line became part of a specific liturgy? Is there one specific time when this happened or were there specific times when this happened more frequently? And if so, what were the reasons for that? Günter Stemberger poignantly asked: “The biblical psalms are an integral part of Jewish prayer, but for how long has that been the case?” Alternatively, to quote Ruth Langer and Rebecca Sebbagh: “When were they chosen and why were they chosen?” Would it be fruitful to distinguish between official liturgy or ritual on the one side and folk rituals or lived religion on the other? Mika Pajunen raised an interesting question when he suggested – at least for Qumran literature – that liturgical pieces could also be used in other contexts such as in educational settings. Alan Cooper found evidence for this educational use outside of Qumran and at different times as well. Under what circumstances can ritual itself be a teaching event for those who participate?

A third theme appearing in many of the lectures was the observation that the psalms easily adapt themselves to new contexts. This might be due to the very human concerns they address but also, as Angela Kim Harkins pointed out, to the ingenious way in which they connect the lips that speak these texts to the minds and bodies of these individuals thus connecting past events with present experiences. Mika Pajunen investigated how psalms and prayers were easily re-applied to new contexts at Qumran. Vered Kretzmer showed how Palestinian liturgy wanted to include what they thought was temple liturgy into their liturgy and included the Songs of Ascent into the Palestinian Morning Service. Bill Rebiger also underlined that psalms easily lend themselves to other contexts, in his case, magical contexts.

The fourth and final theme had to do with the human response that can be observed when psalms are said, read, or prayed. This theme first appeared in Angela Kim Harkins’ contribution that dealt with the question how flesh-and-blood ancient people experienced the reading of Ps 106. Erhard Gerstenberger’s paper laid out how words spoken by ritual professionals were actually thought to bring healing to human bodies. AJ Berkovitz’ contribution convincingly showed how the mantra-like citation of psalm lines, which moves text from lips and mouths into minds and bodies, in the end moves the individual to greater piety. This final theme provides great potential for further study as it lends itself easily to interdisciplinary work connecting Biblical Studies, Ritual Studies, Brain Studies, maybe even Anthropology.

Claudia D. Bergmann